

## 【Series FUKUBITO】 Eiko Akiyama, Expert of Sales

### Episode 3: Intense spartan education at CELINE

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#### Continued from Episode 2:

In 1980, at the age of 27, Eiko Akiyama started to work as salesperson for the import brand "CELINE". Akiyama spent hard days with the intense spartan education by the store manager and thought "I want to quit" many times. However, as she learned from the store

manager how to improve herself and the store, including thorough customer management and counting management, the store eventually rose from the bottom of the sales nationwide to the top, and she herself became the top salesperson in Japan. On the other hand, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake and the acquisition of the brand by LVMH changed drastically the environment surrounding Akiyama. —

Eiko Akiyama, a store management consultant who knows thoroughly the keys of successful sales and serves as Chairman and CEO of BRUSH, looks back on her half-life. **Episode 3 of Series “FUKUBITO” Eiko Akiyama, Expert of Sales.**

## **"Be beautiful as a person of the brand"**

When I joined CELINE, the age of 20s was generally considered too young to be a salesperson at imported luxury brands. Since the main customers were those who had a certain social status and wealthy, sophisticated manners and delicate care were required for customer service. Therefore, at first, I was not allowed to serve customers, and my main role was to follow up with my seniors, clean up and do odd jobs. Ms. Tennoji, the store manager, was strict anyway. The first thing that she taught me thoroughly was to "be beautiful as a person of the brand." "Your makeup is not good", "your hairstyle is not good", "the way you walk is not beautiful." I was strictly instructed on how to speak, how to behave, how to put on makeup, and also that we need to keep the store clean for customers including the cash register, the phone, and the floor.



Ms. Tennoji and colleagues at CELINE. Akiyama in the center of the front row (1982)

Image by: Eiko Akiyama

In the days just after joining, I was constantly scolded, so to be honest, I wanted to quit almost every day. However, when I thought "I'll quit if I feel the same way tomorrow" and calmed down after one night, I realized that I was scolded because I did not do my job. It was already scary to even say "I'm quitting." I turned my competitive nature into power and kept going. "I'll do my best until I can do the job better than her and until she says "Please, stay!"

As a result, I learned a lot from Ms. Tennoji such as her thorough management of numbers with "not having a number is the same as having no face," and brand loyalty such as "I don't wear clothes other than CELINE" and "I don't waste even a single piece of wrapping paper." I was not just a salesperson who was good at selling, and that's why I am where I am today. I think it is definitely thanks to Ms. Tennoji's teachings.

## From the lowest sales in Japan to the best store in the world

The Kobe Tor Road store where I worked was later relocated to Daimaru Kobe. At first it was the store with the lowest sales in Japan. However, with skills of Ms. Tennoji in thorough customer management and counting management, and also the bubble economy, the import brand boom in Japan, our customer base gradually expanded in the mid-1980s. Our sales increased greatly, and we became the best one store in Japan. Since then, we maintained the number one sales in Japan, and in the early 1990s, our store became the number one seller in the world.



In New York, where Akiyama visited to study window displays (1988 年)

Image by: Eiko Akiyama

Since I liked working as a salesperson, I was always thinking about how to satisfy our customers and what I should do for them. At that time, CELINE was a so-called "B.C.B.G.\* (Bon Chic, Bon Genre)" brand that was designed by the brand's founder, Celine Vipiana. Although nowadays there are sizes fitting Japanese body shape, before, clothes made mainly to fit Western body shape were directly imported. Therefore, when a Japanese customer, petite and thin, wore such clothes as it was, it would not look beautiful.

\*B.C.B.G.: A term used to refer to the chic and tasteful fashion and lifestyle of the French upper class.

I felt the need to learn dressmaking and took time out of my work to go the class in my neighborhood at my own expense or asked to an atelier I knew to teach. I worked hard to learn where and how to fix clothes so that customers could wear them beautifully. Thanks to this, I have acquired the techniques and knowledge of repair and pinning, which have become my skills. I was happy when the teacher of the dressmaking class reduced the monthly fee by saying, "It's amazing to spend your own money to learn like this, you will be great."



Work tools that Akiyama has been using since her days at CELINE

Image by: FASHIONSAP

## **The Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake**

### **Major turning point for both professionally and privately**

In the early 1990s, Daimaru Kobe store rose to become the number one seller among CELINE stores around the world, but it was destroyed at the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995. Since the original store was not possible to operate for the time being, alternate store of only about 33 m<sup>2</sup> was opened in Shinsaibashi Daimaru. At that time, Ms. Tennoji was already the supervisor, and I was the store manager. We restarted so small store that Ms. Tennoji apologized to me for the first time in 15 years we've been working together. However, we made steady progress toward the renovation plan of the department

store, which was scheduled for three years, and at the time of the renovation, we were able to move to the best location on the floor, which was four times larger than the original.

My house was also destroyed in the earthquake. It was the first time in my life that I had seen so many people who had died at once. Many people told me that it was hard, but I still remember thinking, "It's not hard because I'm alive." It was also during this time that I got divorced. I can't say that it was a good experience by any means, but this earthquake was a major turning point for me, both professionally and privately.



Ms. Tennoji (Center right) & colleagues at CELINE (1996)

Image by: Eiko Akiyama

**From "Scary and hateful person" to "Perfect combination"**

At first, I was scared and hated her, but by the end of the 1990s, when we had worked together for nearly 20 years, Ms. Tennoji and I made a "Perfect combination." We had built a trust relationship such as I could guess what she was thinking and she wanted me to do, and she couldn't do her job without me.

At that time, Ms. Tennoji was overseeing all CELINE stores in Japan as a director and supervisor of JCC. Under her direction, I sometimes went to stores with stagnant sales nationwide to prop it up. We operated with the same products and in the same way. Therefore, if I, the manager of the bestselling store, go there, I can immediately find and fix what is not going well. Just by teaching how to clean up, how to organize stock, how to make window displays, and how to arrange equipment efficiently for customer service, their sales went up. That was the most rewarding for me, and that experience is the basis of my current work.

In 1996, LVMH acquired CELINE, and in 1997, the management of CELINE in Japan changed from JCC to CELINE Japan. Then, organizational changes began under the leadership of the head office, and its upper management came to Japan, unexpected personnel changes were made. I felt uneasy atmosphere. At that timing, I was approached by "GIORGIO ARMANI". In preparation for the opening of a flagship store in Shinsaibashi, they wanted to hire Ms. Tennoji as the store manager and me as the manager of Donna (Italian for "women" ). —**To be continued in Episode 4**



Text: Erika Sasaki

Planning & Production: FASHIONSAP

**【Series FUKUBITO】 7 episodes of “Eiko Akiyama, Expert of Sales”**

Episode 1 —” This is the only thing I can do”

Episode 2 —” OK, that's where my life started”

Episode 3 - Intense spartan education at CELINE

Episode 4 – What can only I do?

Episode 5 – Decision in 50s and Transition to Jewelry

Episode 6 – HERMÈS, the memento of a customer for 40 years

Episode 7 – Aiming to improve the status and value of salespeople