

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

### Episode 5 : Decision in 50s and Transition to Jewelry

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Image by: FASHIONSAP

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Wanting to create a successful store that only she can do, Akiyama decided to leave PRADA. She decided to move to the brand she had been invited to, but Shigehiko Yarita, who was an executive at LVMH at the time, recommended her to switch to the jewelry industry, saying, "As you get older, it will be difficult to work as a salesperson of luxury fashion." In her 50s, she stepped into a whole new world "Tiffany & Co." Akiyama re-learned

the products from scratch and was entrusted with the first flagship store in the Kansai region, as well as a region with 16 stores. —

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 5 of Series “FUKUBITO” Eiko Akiyama, Expert of Sales.**

To the jewelry industry to continue sales job for a long time

When I left PRADA, I thought, "I want to join a good company with a good boss like I have in the past." I heard that my boss at ARMANI was going to be the president of a certain brand and applied for this company to be hired. I waited for a while to join the company in time for the opening of a new store that was scheduled for a little later.

During this period, I received an enthusiastic offer from Tiffany & Co., but I didn't want to join because my salesperson soul wouldn't allow me to sell to my customer something I didn't know.



With Mariko Tokuno (left), vice president of Tiffany & Co. at that time

Image by: Eiko Akiyama

Later, when I had the opportunity to meet Mr. Shigehiko Yarita, a member of the board of directors of LVMH at the time, whom I had known for a long time, he suddenly asked me during the conversation, "By the way, Ms. Akiyama, how old did you get?" I said, "50 years old," and he said, "Well, why don't you work for that new brand for another five years and then go to Tiffany?" For my question to ask the reason, he answered, "With jewelry, you can continue sales job regardless of your age even when you get older."

Hearing his answer, I thought, "I want to continue to be involved in sales, and if I have to change in five years, I need to start to study now." Finally, I chose to join Tiffany & Co.. Therefore, I politely apologized to the boss of the brand I was planning to join, and told "I want to continue sales job for a long time. Considering my age and future career, I want to start selling jewelry from now on." The boss agreed with very warm words.

## The happiest moment of my life with long-time customers

At Tiffany & Co., I was tasked with launching the first large-scale flagship store in the Kansai region and generating billions of yen in annual sales. However, at that time, Tiffany & Co. was a brand with a strong image of silver and bridal, so the idea of "creating customers" was not pervasive among the sales staff there. Of the 35 opening staff, 10 of them didn't know how to create customers, and the remaining 25 are new employees, including myself. In such an environment, the company asked me to do so-called "customer business as a flagship store."



With the opening members of Tiffany & Co. Osaka Street Store (2004)

Image by: 秋山恵倭子

We hold a pre-opening party for customers ahead of the opening of the flagship store, and the day of the party was the happiest day of my life. I usually meet with customers one by one, but on that day, many of the customers that I had built relationships with over a long period of time came to the store. Some of the customers came wearing clothes of ARMANI that I served. "Because it's a celebration," all the customers who came on the day of the event purchased the jewelry. At the party, all the customers were seated while sending me a warm look of "congratulations". I've never been so happy in my life, and my heart was so full that I couldn't give a good speech.

The staff were very happy to see such a scene, and were curious, "How can you have so many customers?" It helped that I could instill my store management and customer management methods and tools very quickly among them. They took it positively, saying, "It's easy to understand" and "we should have done it this way." Everyone learned it right away, and our store has become really excellent.

## **A new world that I jumped into after the age of 50**

I jumped into the new world of "jewelry" over 50 years old, so I had both difficulty and joy to work. What was difficult was that there were so many things I didn't know. I used to talk about materials, patterns, collections, and anything else, and could serve customers with full confidence. But I didn't know anything about jewelry. If I can't talk about the products I'm selling, I can't be called a salesperson.

So, in my third year at Tiffany & Co., I studied so hard about jewelry to obtain a diplomat of the GG (Graduate Gemologist®) \* and the Jewelry Coordinator Test Level 3. Even though customers had financial resources for jewelry worth millions or tens of millions of yen, I couldn't recommend a highly rare piece because of lack of knowledge. "I'm sorry for the customer," I felt very uncomfortable. That's why I told the staff, "Don't sell jewelry in such an embarrassing way like I did. You should study," and encouraged them to get a qualification in jewelry.

\*GG : An international title given to gemological experts who have acquired gemstone knowledge, business know-how, grading and identification techniques, etc., with a sense of ethics and have been trained as specialists. In Japan, it can be obtained by taking the GG program offered by GIA JAPAN and passing the final exam.



At the after-party of the 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary event of Tiffany & Co. Osaka flagship store

Image by: Eiko Akiyama

On the other hand, what I learned after switching from fashion to the jewelry industry is that the method of managing a store is the same whether we are selling clothes, jewelry, or buns. At Tiffany & Co., in particular, after working at the flagship store, I managed the largest number of staff I have ever done as a regional director, so I could establish a more logical method of store management and human resource development. I conducted "store manager training" to teach them my method and unify the methods and tools. As a result, it became easier for everyone to operate, and sales of stores in my area increased significantly. I use the method established at that time also in my current work.

But at Tiffany & Co., there were three regions in addition to the one I was in charge of, and each was managed by a different person in a way tailored to each situation. Therefore, when the person in charge changed, the way changed, and it had no small impact on store management and human relations. I was frustrated by the situation where this was repeated so often.



Message card given to Akiyama by a board member when I retired from Tiffany & Co.

Image by: FASHIONSAP

At that timing, I received a call from my former boss at Tiffany & Co., Ms. Mariko Tokuno, who was the CEO of Ferragamo Japan at the time. While talking with Ms. Tokuno, who has known me well, I thought for the first time that it was time for me to use my experience to become independent. —**Continued in Episode 6**

Text: Erika Sasaki

Planning & Production: FASHIONSAP

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



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

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