



Yu Kobayashi, global affiliate manager for Outech

luxury service expanding in land of the rising sun

Yu Kobayashi has made it his mission to bring chauffeured transportation back into the spotlight for a new generation.

By Lexi Tucker, LCT senior editor

All Photos courtesy of Outech



TOKYO — Yu Kobayashi, global affiliate manager for Japan's Outech, was born in America. His first experience with a limousine was actually rather humorous.

"I was traveling in Miami with my family when I was in elementary school, and I saw a stretch limo. I couldn't get the word 'limousine' out of my mouth and said 'lemonade' instead. Since then, I've felt a strong connection to that memory."

When he was older and looking for a job, he came across Outech's website. It was then he realized limousines weren't just cool to look at — they were fun to work with, too.

Parts of a Larger Puzzle

Outech is split into four key branches: Global Operation Service, which deals with reservations; Outdoor Planners, which is how they refer to their chauffeurs; the Sales Team, which is



1. Outech chauffeurs must pass rigorous driving standards. **2.** Outech chauffeurs feel they are ambassadors of Japan, and love exposing clients to their culture. **3.** Staff are fluent in English, which helps make communication easier when doing affiliate work.

comprised of two affiliate managers (one for Japan and one for global partners); and the Safety Team, which includes the mechanic and dispatch team.

"When the Global Operation Service receives a request from a new client, they ask the Sales Team if there are any specific rules or pricing they have to be aware of before arranging the vehicle and confirming. Before the day of service for all trips, the Sales Team checks the reservations and tells each chauffeur what to be ready for," he says.

Not only does the Sales Team check this, but the Outdoor Planner and Global Operation Service do as well. The company always checks multiple times before a trip. The Global Operation Service tries to find out as much as possible about the passenger so they can properly cater to their needs.

After the ride, the Safety Team checks telematics information — like the route taken, the way the chauffeur drove, and speed levels — so they can advise them if needed. "Our chauffeur might be the first Japanese person the passenger meets in this country, and we do not want them to feel unhappy about Japan because of us. Our goal is to always provide perfect service and make the passenger feel Japan was a great place. We all work as if we are representing Japan. If all our team doesn't share the same ideals, our service might suffer because of it."

Remember Culture

An interesting cultural difference between North American and Japanese chauffeurs is in Japan black ties are only worn during funerals. They are never worn for fashion or any other reason.

Kobayashi was also surprised at the number of U.S. companies that have their own app. "I think we don't have apps in Japan because the market for limousine service is on the smaller

side, and many of our customers are older and have trouble working new technology."

Beyond Tokyo, Outech provides service in Osaka, Kyoto, and Nagoya. These three cities are major business hubs as well as popular sightseeing destinations. "We are now trying to make more affiliate connections all over Japan, but some areas just don't have limousines. I think this is also a major difference from the U.S., because in the U.S. you can find limousines anywhere. In some areas of Japan, it can even be difficult to find a taxi."

Overcoming Challenges

Matching the correct kinds of vehicles with English-speaking chauffeurs can be a challenge in Japan.

"We've found it difficult to find the correct executive sedans like the Mercedes-Benz Viano or S-Class. In Japan, there are now many new limousine companies, but they do not have any of the executive sedans or other vehicles that typically get requested; they only have the Toyota Alphard (minivan) and Hiace (executive van)." This can make affiliate work more challenging.

Outech runs a fleet of 30 vehicles, including the Toyota Crown, Toyota Alphard, Toyota Hiace, Nissan Fuga, Mercedes-Benz S-Class, Mercedes-Benz V-Class (also known as the Viano), BMW 7 Series, and the Lexus LS Series. The company takes care of clients from foreign countries and aims to provide the vehicle model nearest to what they are most comfortable with.

"We have the LS series and Hiace for travel agencies in Japan, since Lexus is a high-end vehicle for the Japanese, and Japanese people typically travel with four or more when they come to sightsee in Tokyo."

When Outech sends an English-speaking chauffeur, they can communicate fluently, Kobayashi says. "Other companies may say their chauffeurs can speak fluently, but they usually can just introduce themselves but have trouble communicating any further information."

Before the company hires a potential chauffeur, they must pass an interview in English.

"Yes, qualifications and skills are important, but so is being able to properly communicate with international travelers," he says. It's easy to fake it in a written exam, but real skills shine when put to the test in actual conversation.

When they are brought on, they undergo training for tightening up proper English, ensuring they understand the right manners and customs, and defensive driving skills. In Japan, chauffeurs need a special license to drive a limousine. Before taking the exam, they are introduced to Outech's vehicles

FASTFACTS

OUTECH

LOCATION: Tokyo, Japan

OWNER: Takanobu Kusunoki

YEAR FOUNDED: 2002

VEHICLE TYPES: Toyota Crown, Toyota Alphard, Toyota Hiace, Nissan Fuga, Mercedes-Benz S-Class, Mercedes-Benz V-Class (Viano), BMW 7 Series, Lexus LS Series

NUMBER OF VEHICLES IN FLEET: 30

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 50

WEBSITE: www.outech.co.jp/en

PHONE: +81-3-6880-1290





Outech picks vehicles that are closest to what foreign visitors are used to in terms of luxury feel.

and how to use them correctly. After they learn, they practice at the company's garage. When they have exhibited proficiency, they go to the road to practice.

After about two months, chauffeurs take the exam for the driving license and will have to pass a chauffeur exam to show they are up to the company's service standards. Out of

Outech's 30 chauffeurs, 15 are women, which is rare in the limousine market in Japan.

Uber Who?

Japan is widely known for its top-notch public transportation system, so Uber isn't that popular. "In Japan, Uber only provides limousine service, and isn't really considered an equivalent of a taxi. Taxis are actually starting to copy Uber by providing their own apps. However, it's still not popular since we can catch a taxi anywhere easily except around midnight; if you go to the train station, you will find one with no issue."

Kobayashi also cites his company's flexibility in meeting demand. "People have told me the Japanese are smart but not flexible enough. I believe being flexible has been the key to our success."

Since traveling to the U.S. alone for a month, he has learned much from the companies he's visited and applied it to how

Outech does business. He credits industry tradeshow with giving him the chance to meet new operators and form relationships with them over dinner and drinks. "I really appreciate the people who spent time with me during my travels. They taught me so much about the market I didn't know before because I'm the company's first global affiliate manager.

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If I hadn't met them, I wouldn't have the success I do today. I'd like to thank them all."

He hopes Outech can change expectations about service levels in Japan and lead the market. Kobayashi embraces change and believes he can persuade a culture resistant to it. Creating an app and being able to provide service anywhere in Japan are just a few steps he's working on to help take the company to the next level.

What He's Learned

To avoid any issues, Kobayashi says to trust industry colleagues to guide you down the correct path. "Trust the people who send you work. They know what kind of service level you provide and expect from other companies. When I started to farm out work, I asked my friends in the industry to introduce me to some good companies and I've never had an issue."

He also says it's important to ask for details. Meeting locations for airports in different cities around the world have different procedures and specifying vehicle types can save you many headaches down the road. "Sometimes it's difficult to find a vehicle when you receive a specific request. In some countries, they may not even sell it."

Let the Games Begin

Japan will be hosting the Summer Olympic Games in 2020, so



Out of Outech's 30 chauffeurs, 15 are women.

the company is ramping up to be able to handle all the work coming their way. "Please feel free to contact us if you need an affiliate in the area. I may be young, but I can tell you our chauffeurs and office staff are reliable, professional, and used to talking with businesses in foreign countries." In fact, about 80% of their passengers come from outside of Japan. **LCT**

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