

## Bridging the cultural gap

**Sacramentan tutors business people in the ways of Japan**

By Michael Stroh  
Bee Staff Writer

As Olympic athletes are discovering, Japan is a nation riddled with subtle and labyrinthine social rules. When local business leaders need help in fording these tricky cultural waters, the man they turn to is Douglas Lipp.

The Sacramento native has been on the business end of many cultural misunderstandings. In fact, these misunderstandings *are* his business.

Lipp earns a living by helping U.S. and Japanese companies understand each other. His clients include such companies as NEC Electronics, Toshiba America Inc. and Universal Studios.

The boyish 42-year-old got his first taste of the culture while a student at Del Campo High School. On a lark, Lipp started taking night classes in Japanese.

"People hardly knew what sushi was at that time,"

"Doug (Lipp) is more than a translator or cultural liasion. Some deals I know I couldn't have pulled off without him."

Al Gianini, Sacramento Area Commerce and Trade Organization



Douglas Lipp of Sacramento has studied in Japan, written books about the country and even worked with the Disney corporation to help set up Tokyo Disneyland

said Lipp.

After several lessons, he was hooked. He got a marketing degree from Long Beach State, studying Japanese on the side. Then he spent two years at a Japanese university studying language and culture before finishing up his master's degree in international business from Sacramento State.

After school, he landed a job at the Walt Disney Co.,

where he first learned how little Japanese and American business people knew about each other's business culture.

It was the early 1980s and Disney was working with Japanese executives, trying to build Tokyo Disneyland, the company's first foreign venture. Lipp was put on the Disney team as a translator. It would prove a valuable case study in how cultural differences



## Lipp: Even Disney had troubles (Continued from page 1)

can hurt business.

"Disney was so arrogant back then," said Lipp.

"Questioning the Disney philosophy was like questioning the Bible."

Arguments flared over details as seemingly innocuous as employee name badges. Company founder Walt Disney had always wanted everyone at his company to go by their first names. But Japanese only use last names. It took nearly six months to settle the tussle.

Another cultural misunderstanding cropped up just hours before Tokyo Disneyland was scheduled to open, when Lipp got a frantic late-night phone call from one of his colleagues.

"It's clean!" cried one of the American Disney managers, who had just finished a final inspection of the new park.

Lipp was confused. The park was opening the next morning. Wasn't that a good thing?

He soon learned what the man meant. The Japanese cleaning staff had misinterpreted their marching orders and cleaned *everything* in the park. Even the Haunted Mansion, with its strategically placed cobwebs and rust spots, was shinier than a hospital room.

The lessons he learned

with Disney have helped him in his present work advising the Sacramento Area Commerce and Trade Organization on its biannual junkets to Japan. Thirteen years ago, when the journeys began, there was only one Japanese company in Sacramento. Now, there are close to 30.

"Doug is more than a translator or cultural liaison," said Al Gianini, SACTO's executive director. "Some deals I know I couldn't have pulled off without him."

Before leaving each year, Lipp runs an informal boot camp to prepare local business leaders for the cultural minefields they might encounter.

"The American way of doing business is so simple compared with the Japanese way," said Shoichi Toda, president of Gekkeikan Sake in Folsom and one of Lipp's clients. "He helps build a bridge between the two countries."

He drills his students on some basics. In Japan, does one hand over a business card with the left hand or right? (Answer: It's the right, with your name facing the recipient.) If a Japanese executive visits your office, where do you seat him? (Answer: Facing the door, historically an assurance no samurai could pull off a

surprise attack.)

Still social gaffes happen, even to seasoned Japan hands like Gianini.

On a recent trip to Japan with Lipp, Gianini thought he would score some points with Japanese executives at dinner by ordering a round of local beer in Japanese. Lipp taught him the word: *ji-biiru*.

But when the time came, Gianini, in his eagerness, spat out the word with a little too much oomph. In a subtle, vowel-sensitive language like Japanese that can spell trouble. And it did.

"Instead of asking for a 'local' beer, I actually asked for a 'hemorrhoid' beer," Gianini said sheepishly. "Everybody laughed."

But Lipp said that many Japanese are forgiving.

"There's a famous expression in Japanese: 'Even monkeys fall from trees,' " said Lipp. "Most Japanese are impressed when a foreigner tries to make an effort to learn their customs. Even if they make a mistake."

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