



Yuko Nakazawa, President of UPQ Inc., with some of her company's products. Left, a bluetooth-enabled LED lightbulb, the color and brightness of which can be controlled by smartphone; center, an electric stabilizer for video cameras and smartphones; right, a clear glass keyboard that doubles as a touchpad.

Photo: Tadashi Aizawa

# For the Love of Making Things

**A young female entrepreneur is breathing new life into Japan's world-renowned home appliance manufacturing sector.**

**TAKASHI SASAKI**

**A** SMALL venture firm is performing well and attracting attention in the Japanese home

appliance industry, where leading manufacturers compete. UPQ Inc. (pronounced "up-Q") was founded in July 2015 by a

young woman, which is why it is often referred to as "a one-woman home appliance maker."

One of UPQ's features is that it does not have any factories and warehouses of its own unlike general home appliance manufacturers. It outsources manufacturing to overseas companies and directly delivers goods to domestic business partners. The firm can quickly handle operations ranging from product development to sales by removing logistics management from the manufacturing process. Twenty-four products

in seven categories, such as smartphones and 4K displays, that were released by the firm shortly after its foundation, took only two months from planning to product release.

Yuko Nakazawa, President of UPQ, says, “I think the primary reason why UPQ’s products received favorable responses from many users is because I enjoy manufacturing from the bottom of my heart, more than anything else. I singlehandedly grasp all major streams ranging from product planning to development to manufacturing to sales. As I manage all of these processes by myself, not only do I have ‘freedom,’ but also bear the heavy ‘responsibility.’ Therefore, I can seriously work hard on a job without sparing time for sleep.”

Nakazawa studied economics in university and after graduation she worked hard on product planning for mobile phones at CASIO Computer Co., Ltd., a leading electronics manufacturer. But when CASIO withdrew from the mobile phone business, she left the company and founded UPQ, running a café in Akihabara, Tokyo.

Nakazawa says, “Fundamentally, I joined CASIO because I wanted to engage in mobile phone development. The decade from when I first got a mobile phone as a seventh-grader to graduation from university was

the period when mobile phones became quite popular and their performance progressed remarkably. I was also a heavy user of mobile phones and bought about forty, one after another. I was determined to utilize that experience in my job.”

In the workplace, where there were many male engineers who had studied science and were older than her, she was the only female employee that had studied the humanities. Her position was so close to that of general users, her opinions and ideas played a very important role in product development. The five years she spent in the manufacturing field laid the very important foundation for the next step in her life.

The café that she opened with her retirement bonus became popular with an original pancake and had long queues. But she was not satisfied and hoped to return to the manufacturing field. The trigger came suddenly. She became acquainted with several entrepreneurs from venture firms through the café and gained an opportunity to learn from them. Her strong wish came true when she founded a small home appliance manufacturer.

Nakazawa says, “When most people hear that I founded a home appliance manufacturer after opening a café, they are

surprised. But for me, they are not very different in that I plan, manufacture and sell new things. What is always important for me is that when someone shows a product to a consumer, he or she will instantly want it. This feeling is no different whether it be pancakes or home appliances.”

UPQ’s products fully focus on specifications and prices as well as usability, functionality and user-centered design, and were highly evaluated immediately upon their release. Nakazawa received the “Woman of the Year 2016” award in the “Next Generation Monozukuri (Manufacturing) Category” organized by Nikkei Woman, a women’s career and lifestyle magazine. Following this, her company marketed new products that go beyond the categories of existing home appliances, one after another, such as a folding electric motorbike and a rechargeable backpack.

Nakazawa says of her future goals, “I want to develop UPQ into a brand that makes consumers wonder what product will be marketed next.”

A young female entrepreneur’s success in planning from the user’s perspective not only promises exciting new products, but also suggests new models for the Japanese manufacturing industry. ■