

# EXECUTIVE IMPACT

*Executives on the Cutting Edge of Japanese Business*



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## 10-SECOND BRIEFING

**INDUSTRY:** Catering & Events

**LOCATION:** Tokyo, Japan

**ESTABLISHED:** March 2002

**OWNER:** Corrine Smith

**COMPANY TYPE:** Yugen Gaisha

**REVENUE 2004:** JPY 60 million

**EMPLOYEES:** 3 F/T, 20 P/T



## Cooking up a Storm!

*Let's be honest*—the big question on most peoples' minds at functions and official events—whether they'll admit it or not—is, "What's for dinner?" Yes, dining at functions is always a pleasure, but what about the people behind the scenes who put food on tables and transform a rather ordinary affair into a gourmet feast?

**Jonathon Walsh** peered into the kitchen and discovered how an ambitious small business owner with a taste for fine food launched a growing catering industry player that turned over more than JPY 60 million in 2004 and is now the caterer of choice for more than 100 private and corporate companies in Japan.

In Japan's culinary capital, the person behind the next function you attend could well be Australian entrepreneur **Corrine Smith**, owner of **Corporate Gourmet**, a growing service business specializing in corporate and social catering events. Since its launch in March 2002, Smith's business has taken on three full-time and around 20 regular part-time staff and catered for a host of clients

### CORE SERVICES:

- Off Premises Catering Services
- Event Management
- Service Staff Hire
- Equipment Rental
- Food Consulting, Promotion and Import

### KEY ACHIEVEMENTS:

- 1) Catered for 1,000 VIP guests at VIP warehouse opening party for Costco Wholesalers.
- 2) Arranged food and beverages for 3,000 guests at a Fashion Show Charity event.
- 3) Served food and beverages to 50 Cadbury staff for 4 days straight.
- 4) Catered the opening party for Microsoft Japan's new Shinjuku office.



Corrine Smith assessing her latest smorgasbord.

including embassies, global corporates, chambers of commerce, PR agencies, production and modeling agencies.

### Planned for win-win outcome

What special ingredients were stirred into the mix to cook up this sizzling hot business? Smith first set foot in Japan in 1994 after completing a one-year course in Hospitality Management in Australia. On her arrival, she immediately fell in love with the country, culture and way of life, and six months later she returned to Australia and completed a Bachelor of Commerce degree majoring in Marketing and Japanese. Through some fortunate connections, Smith eventually returned to Japan, followed her passion back into the food industry and established Corporate Gourmet.

*The biggest burdle* was finding somewhere to cook. "There are huge upfront costs when opening a commercial kitchen and I could not get a decent loan," she recalls. "It was such a 'catch 22' situation—we had to prove we were profitable in order for a bank to lend us money, but how could we prove that without being given the opportunity? I finally approached a restaurant with my idea

PTO...



## INSIDE INFORMATION

- Establish win-win outcomes with Partners.
- Find clients through networking and word of mouth.
- Staff can be sourced for little or no cost.
- Good business gets business.
- Risk taking can be an effective growth strategy.
- Treat any business as your own.

and we set up a kitchen and chef-share agreement arrangement. This was not ideal but served us well for the first year in business and got us started.”

*Language differences* can wreck havoc on a business, especially in the high-speed service industry where every second counts. How do staff cope with language differences? “Most of our staff are bilingual. The working environment in the kitchen is in Japanese predominately, with written instructions in English. Most of our clients speak English though, so a large majority of the office work

is done in English. It really all depends on the situation and staff member; a bilingual environment is essential!”

*Clients are found* through networking and often approach Corporate Gourmet directly through word of mouth. “Many clients that attend our events will use us at their events in the future,” proving that good business gets business.

### Good business gets business

*The major highlight* to date for Smith was when her company catered an event for 1,000 guests at the Costco VIP opening party in late 2004. “When the catering request came in we had never worked on an event of that size before—not even close—and it was such an accomplishment to do something on that scale,” she says. “We received such good feedback from the client. It proved that after a lot of hard work, organization and preparation, we are able to do anything.”

“I’m not afraid to take chances,” Smith says about the *key entrepreneurial qualities* she possesses that are crucial to running her business. “Regardless of whether a business was mine or not I would always treat it as my own. I instill this mindset in my staff—this is crucial in the catering business.”

With her eye on opening a cafe with a catering kitchen and becoming the No.1 caterer of choice in Tokyo, the potential future of Corporate Gourmet, Smith believes, is turning from savory to simply scrumptious.

## SOLUTION SPOTLIGHT

### SETTING UP A KITCHEN-SHARE ARRANGEMENT

Smith approached several restaurants with her business idea. “I determined which establishments weren’t being used very much at the times we would need to use their premises and offered them the appropriate monetary incentives for a win-win outcome. One of the restaurants also imported raw food produce from the U.S.A, and we were able to utilize these products in our menus which was a further benefit to them.”

### SOURCING AND HIRING STAFF

“My full-time staff approached me directly, while many part-time staff have been introduced to me through friends. I have also used means such as [www.gaijinpot.com](http://www.gaijinpot.com), *Tokyo Notice Board* and *Metropolis* magazines.”

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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