

PROMOTING INDEPENDENCE: Yokohama firm provides income boost to disabled sales reps

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Atsushi Tadokoro checks the inventory of Oral Peace teeth-brushing gel at his home in Yokohama. (Hideo Sato)



rejected by several real estate agents.

Tadokoro was finally able to rent his present apartment.

He had never thought he could make it in sales, but living on his own spurred him to try working as a sales agent. He began selling Oral Peace about a year ago.

“My mother is in her 60s, so there is no telling when she could suffer from an illness,” Tadokoro said.

Tadokoro receives about 100,000 yen in monthly income from pensions and other subsidies for disabled people. Although his mother also chips in, he does not have much left over after paying for his monthly expenses, including 64,000 yen in rent.

Editor's note: This is the first of a three-part series on the integration of business and social welfare.

Atsushi Tadokoro moves in his electric wheelchair to meet potential customers of an oral hygiene gel. But born with cerebral palsy, he has difficulties delivering his sales pitch.

For every tube he sells for a tax-inclusive 1,080 yen (\$9.50), he takes home 350 yen.

The teeth-brushing gel, called Oral Peace, is a product of Yokohama-based Trife Inc. Daisuke Teshima set up the venture firm to promote self-reliance of disabled people who may lose a guardian to take care of them when their parents die.

A growing network of individuals, such as Tadokoro, and facilities supporting disabled people serve as sales agents for Oral Peace, whose sales started about four years ago.

Tadokoro, 35, of Yokohama's Tsuzuki Ward, has no regular job and required almost around-the-clock care from helpers.

He was raised by his mother, and when he decided to find a way to live on his own, he was

Tadokoro was persuaded to sell Oral Peace by Yukitaka Suda, 72, who heads Tsubasa, a nonprofit organization in Yokohama that serves as an adult guardian for people with disabilities and other problems.

Tadokoro at first used Facebook to publicize his sales venture. He now sells about 10 tubes a month, mainly to acquaintances.

While that only translates into about 3,500 yen a month in income, Tadokoro said, "I find it interesting to think about ways to get people to buy the product."

Oral Peace was created to help people such as Tadokoro increase their income. Trife developed the product in cooperation with scholars at Kyushu University and others.

Unlike regular toothpaste, Oral Peace does not have to be spit out. Made of natural substances, Oral Peace can be swallowed safely but it still has the ability to disinfect the mouth.

That makes the product well suited for elderly and disabled people who have problems gargling or brushing their teeth.

"Sales agents," in the form of disabled people and the facilities where they work, have sold Oral Peace to hospitals and elderly care facilities.

Between 200 and 350 yen a tube goes to the sales agent as that person's income.

In the three years since the product hit the market, about 300 facilities around Japan that provide working opportunities for disabled people have become sales agents. Similar facilities have been commissioned to manufacture and ship the product.

For the most recent year, Trife recorded annual sales of 65 million yen, about three times the figure for the first year after Oral Peace went on sale.

Teshima, 46, learned about the tough realities facing disabled people--many receive only about 10,000 yen a month for their work--after his oldest son was born with a disability 16 years ago.

After working for a trading company, Teshima joined a venture firm and started a new cosmetics brand. While he contributed to that company's listing on the stock exchange, he left the company in 2006 to establish Trife.

He then became involved in creating jobs for disabled people.

Teshima was concerned about whether his son would be able to live on his own after his parents were no longer around.

The father was shocked by a newspaper article he read five years ago about a mother in her 70s and her severely disabled son in his 40s who lived together fairly close to Teshima's home.

They were both found dead at their home. The mother apparently died first from an illness. The son, who had difficulty walking and eating by himself, died about a week later, also from an illness.

When the two bodies were found, rice in a cooker and food in the refrigerator had been left untouched.

About 7.9 million disabled people live in Japan. A big concern among their families is what will happen to them when their parents die.

Using the experience he gained in the business world, Teshima wanted to create a business model that would create jobs for disabled people and increase their income. He came up with the idea of having disabled people sell “a radically new product.”

That was when Teshima remembered an e-mail he had received from an unknown researcher.

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