



The founder,
Tomijiro Kobayashi

Preface

Contributing to society through business

– The story of the founding of Lion –

Lion's efforts to promote oral health are born of founder Tomijiro Kobayashi's passion to "serve the world and serve humanity." This chapter introduces the stormy life of Tomijiro Kobayashi and the roots of Lion's social contributions.

The Kobayashi family when it was in the sake-brewing business. Tomijiro is in the middle row, third from the left.



Bad luck and good luck intertwined

Navigating through turbulent times

Tomijiro Kobayashi, the fourth son of the Kobayashi family, was born in 1852. Although he was a hard worker by nature and blessed with business acumen, he lived in turbulent times and experienced continuous hardship. When he was just 20 years old, the Edo shogunate, desperate for military funding, levied a hefty tax that caused the downfall of the family business. Heading to Tokyo with empty pockets, he threw himself into the soap business, which was new at the time. For a short time, he was a company manager, but the Meiji government's financial reforms led to a recession that bankrupted the firm. After that, while working at the company of an acquaintance, and with an eye on the future of the match business, he built a factory next to the Kitakami River in Miyagi Prefecture. However, in 1890 he lost it all in a flood that also washed away a lot of timber that had been purchased to make matchsticks. Worse yet, claims that the timber destroyed bridges and homes brought him to the brink of throwing himself into the river, but he suddenly recalled a bible verse that a clergyman had told him two years earlier: "For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but it later yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been shaped by it." He took the words to heart to gather his strength for one more try.



Tomijiro Kobayashi & Co., the predecessor of the Lion Group, in what is now Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, 1891.

Tomijiro Kobayashi & Company is founded

Lion Dentifrice goes on sale

After the tragic flood, Tomijiro worked to rebuild the factory, but became ill with anxiety. Together with his wife, he reluctantly returned to Tokyo. Then, an old acquaintance learned of Tomijiro's distress and offered assistance enabling him to begin trading in raw materials for soap and other goods. Even before recovering from his illness, he threw himself into the business, and consequently made many acquaintances. Tomijiro's abundant knowledge led to steady sales growth, and eventually, the opening of Tomijiro Kobayashi & Co. in 1891. Later, while he was searching for ways to expand the business, tooth powder was introduced to the market. Although there were already several competing products, he thought that if many more people would try using tooth powder, then the market would expand many times over. He decided to enter the market, but with no expertise, he fumbled at first. However, after poring through specialized books, learning from a clergyman how tooth powders were manufactured overseas, and working so hard that he often forget to eat and sleep, his first tooth powder went on sale in 1896. Using German-made ingredients and British-made flavorings, the product was named Lion Dentifrice after the king of beasts. Thanks to Tomijiro's tireless marketing efforts and imaginative advertising, sales increased steadily year after year.

Tomijiro Kobayashi & Company's tooth dentifrice bag with charity coupon printed on the back went on sale in 1900. A donation would be made to charity for each empty bag returned to the company.



Man shall not live for greed

The Saint of the Abacus

At age 39, Tomijiro had finally found success, but did not get carried away by it. One clergyman called him "The Saint of the Abacus" in reference to his passions for business and charitable activities. Warmhearted and easily moved to tears, Tomijiro was very sympathetic toward unfortunate orphans and elderly people he came in contact with, and donated large sums to charitable institutions such as orphanages.

In 1900, after miraculously surviving a severe case of typhoid fever, Tomijiro said "I will dedicate the rest of my life to God and humanity, and try to serve society's well-being." However, his experience as a donor to orphanages made him acutely aware of one's limited power to serve society. Wondering whether there was a way to join others of good will in contributing to society, he recalled a newspaper article about an American company that had issued charity coupons, and came up with the idea of attaching such coupons to his own company's products.

This creative use of coupons brought instant fame to Tomijiro Kobayashi & Co. and was the start of Lion's activities to "contribute to society through business" and promote oral health, which continue to this day.



The director of Okayama Orphanage named the new facility Lion Hall in gratitude for Tomijiro Kobayashi & Co.'s charitable contributions that enabled the orphanage to the point that it was comprised of 10 buildings.

About 7 billion yen go to charitable institutions throughout Japan

Bags of Lion Dentifrice with charity coupon go on sale

Quickly expanding the charity coupon concept to medical treatment for typhoid, Tomijiro released the bag of Lion Dentifrice with charity coupon including a ¥20 coupon, each priced at today's equivalent of about ¥600. Buyers were to send the coupons to any charitable institution of their choice, for that institution to receive a donation from Tomijiro Kobayashi & Co. according to the number of coupons received. Inevitably, some of the coupons would be discarded, but the company still converted uncollected charity coupons into cash for beneficiary institutions throughout Japan.

While the charity coupon scheme was widely praised, some critics claimed the company's sale of the bags was self-promoting and that "the quality of the product decreased to account for the donations." To counter these perceptions, the company announced that each ¥20 coupon contribution was offset by cost savings in product packaging, rather than in the product itself. For 20 years after their introduction in 1900, the charity coupons fed a huge amount of donated money – the equivalent of around 7 billion yen today – to institutions countrywide, including orphanages and childcare facilities, testifying to Tomijiro's altruism.

Many mourners attended Tomijiro's funeral. These events appear in Japan's oldest original negative movie film, presently stored at National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo.



There is life after death

Furthering the founder's aspirations

Tomijiro's philanthropy was not directed solely toward charitable institutions; he also cared deeply about his company's employees. At the time, many female workers at the factory had only elementary school or pre-school educations, so he opened a night school so they could study general subjects and sewing before getting married. He also sent young factory workers to a night school run by the Tokyo Christian Youth Association, to learn English. Employees were pleased with these arrangements, and supposedly no one ever quit Tomijiro Kobayashi & Company, unless it was unavoidable.

In 1910, 10 years after the sale of bags of Lion Dentifrice with charity coupon began, in Yanagihara, Kanda where the company was founded, the beloved Tomijiro passed away at age 58 in a second-floor tatami room surrounded by his family and 50 employees. The funeral procession was led by a two-horse carriage carrying Tomijiro's coffin. More than 100 wreaths were sent by charitable institutions around Japan. The column of mourners was supposedly hundreds of meters long.

Tomijiro's deep spirit of charity lived on in his son, Tomijiro Jr., and employees who carried on and evolved oral health promotion initiatives.

Advertising fertilizes product growth

● The first advertising song performed in Japan

Referred to as the King of Advertising, Tomijiro was always an innovator at capturing attention and driving a response. In 1896, when Lion Dentifrice went on sale, he put on distinctive parades with Lion Dentifrice banners raised and marching bands playing popular songs with lyrics altered to advertise the product. Crowds of people, many of which had never heard a band perform, were often so dense that it was impossible to proceed at times. Such publicity helped make Lion Dentifrice popular nationwide.



● Fans buy tooth powder to attend sumo wrestling events

In 1900, Tomijiro Kobayashi & Company invited customers who purchased three large bags of Lion Dentifrice to watch sumo wrestling for free. This chance to see popular wrestlers compete brought a rush of sumo fans from near and far to the event, which drew around 20,000 people over two days. Such bold, imaginative promotions effectively drove steady sales growth at the company.



A wish for happiness unchanged for over a century

1891, the year Tomijiro Kobayashi Sr. founded the company, was a major turning point for Japan in becoming a modern nation, and many Japanese wondered what to do in the new era. Tomijiro forged his path out of a passion to serve society through business, with great sympathy for the underdogs of the world. This bold spirit inspired the company to promote oral health and community service activities, which still continue to thrive over 100 years later.
