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Business - Canadian Press

'Cool hunter' finds plenty in Japan to inspire businesses around the world



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YURI KAGEYAMA

TOKYO (AP) - Loic Bizel leads visitors through alleys packed with wild-haired youngsters, makes his way into tiny boutiques tucked beneath stairwells and points out fatigue-inspired jackets, handpainted sneakers and plaid miniskirts.

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Part tour guide and part business consultant, the 32-year-old Frenchman is a "cool" hunter, with a mission to uncover the ever-changing street fads of Japan and translate them into a language the rest of the world can understand. "The people in the streets are very creative," Bizel said, pointing to a young man wearing baggy shorts on top of long pants, a look that's all the rage in Tokyo. "The search to be unique, to be different, creates style."

Bizel's expertise is in demand because Japan has shifted from being a powerhouse of manufacturing to an exporter of culture, including "manga" animation, gourmet sushi and now fashion tastes.

Global businesses eager to get a glimpse of what's in store for the future are sending their executives here just to hang out with the cool hunter and absorb what's hip.

In Bizel's world, parodies of hip-hop clothes are mixed with school uniform slacks altered to sag. The stereotypical Japanese "salarymen," with their look-alike drab suits, are nowhere to be seen. And hair is dyed in so many shades you almost forget most Japanese have black hair.

"Japan is advanced. What will happen 10 years from now is already in Japan," Bizel said.

Fake-fur trims, oversized sunglasses, dogs dressed to the T, chains and gemstones embedded in shirts and hats of all shapes are "in," according to Bizel, a slight man who dresses sedately compared to the people he studies.

Bizel, who began his cool-hunting business three years ago after initially working as a manager for a French company, made \$95,000 US last year, showing executives and other visitors the ways of the streets.

Besides his fashion tours, which cost about \$600 a day, Bizel also does consulting for fashion houses trying to expand sales in Japan, buys clothing samples for designers searching for cool ideas and takes snapshots of glamorous pedestrians to post on his website, www.fashioninjapan.com.

"It's important for French brands to understand the Japanese market," said David Jeannerot of Palladium, a French shoemaker, who has gone on Bizel's tours. "And the Japanese people can love a brand like a rock star."

The shopping scene here is so intense that people line up before stores open to buy limited-edition merchandise. Demand is artificially increased by selling goods only at select shops that vanish after a few months.

The latest trend is what matters.

"How good you look defines that person," said Tsurayuki Hosono, 18, walking around the chic Harajuku district with a shopping bag. "This is about fads."

One of the big fads these days is "anti-marketing." One boutique has walls painted black with empty window displays and not a sign in sight, making sure any uncool person would walk right past it. Those in the know find out through magazines and word of mouth.

A Bathing Ape, a line of sweat shirts, baggy pants and T-shirts sporting a logo of a gorilla head is one of the biggest fashion empires to emerge recently from the Tokyo street scene, exploiting what some westerners would marvel as sheer genius in brand-building and gimmicky anti-marketing.

The company's president, a soft-spoken man who goes only by the name of Nigo, said he wasn't even thinking about marketing when fame landed in his lap without a single promotional ad. Nigo, 33, who favours knit hats and tired jeans, is planning to open his first store in New York this summer.

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