

TRENDS!

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TRENDS!



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How the traditional Japanese storytelling and presentation format

KAMISHIBAI

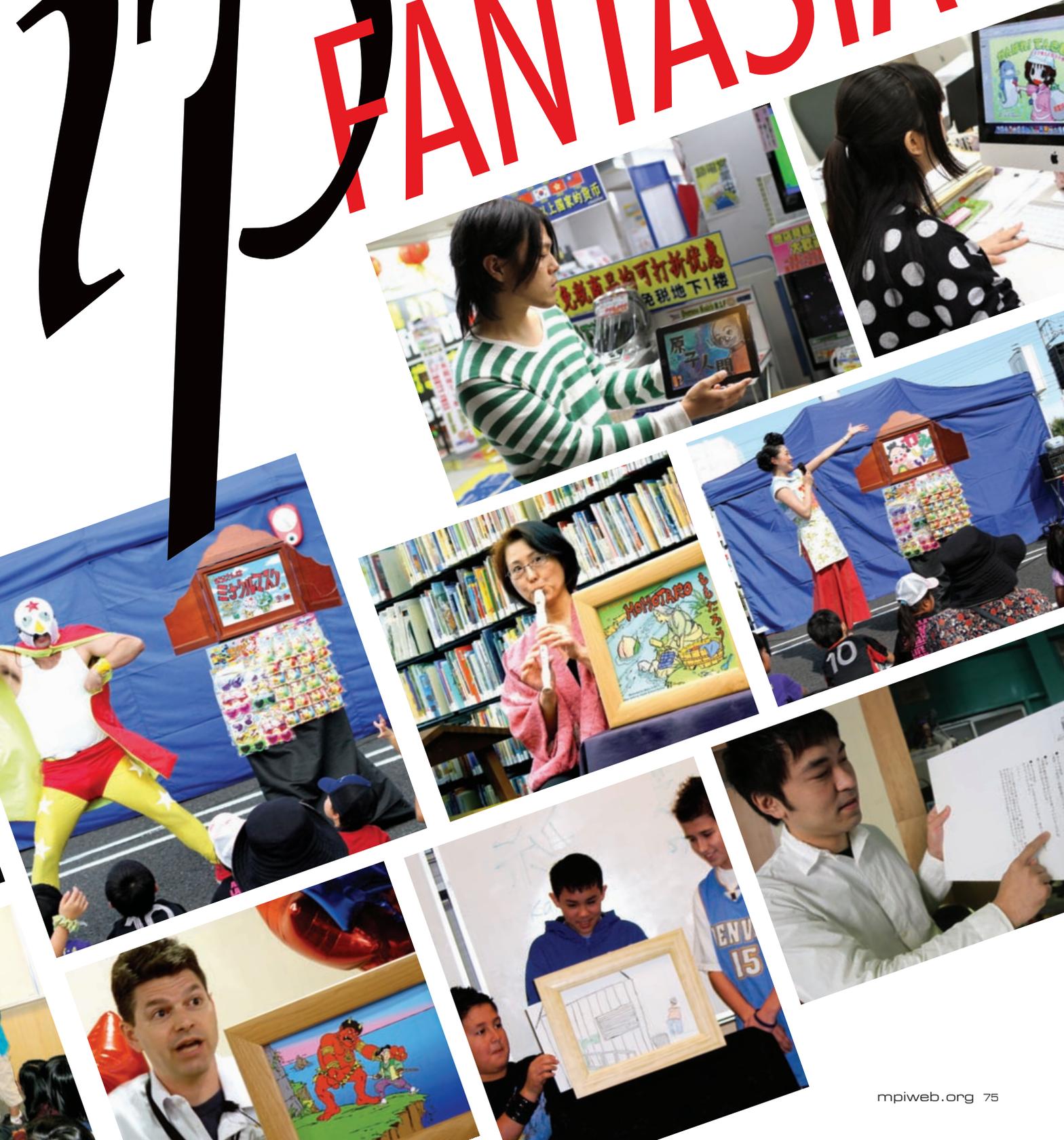
creates unique audience engagement.



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BY BRETT BULL PHOTOS BY STORYCARDTHEATER.COM and BRETT BULL

FANTASIA



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Developing an understanding of the present global financial debacle has perplexed experts and laymen worldwide. One difficulty is that obscure topics such as “sub-prime loan” and “sovereign risk” make little sense without a detailed explanation. Another challenge lies in comprehending the mechanics for how these elements came together to fuel the crisis.

The October 1 issue of Tokyo-based weekly business magazine *Shukan Diamond* took a unique approach to simplify things. For more than 10 consecutive even-numbered pages, the publication printed a single descriptive phrase above a half-page cartoon, each representing a stage in the crisis, to accompany the charts, tables and main text of an article about the problem.

In the first drawing, a sharply dressed banker is seen handing over home loan agreements (stamped “sub-prime”) to citizens atop a stick of lit dynamite; next, U.S. President Barack Obama, former Japan Prime Minister Taro Aso and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao drop armfuls of cash from the basket of a hot-air balloon floating just beneath a darkened sky and so on. The idea is that a reader will turn each page, almost like a flipbook, and easily comprehend how, for example, the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers influenced the lowering of Japan’s credit rating.

The arrangement is rooted in the Japanese practice of *kamishibai*, or storybook theater, which, in its most recent incarnation, began in Japan before television and serves as a way for a stand-up performer to concisely tell a tale with a series of illustrated notebook-sized cards over a brief time period.

“We have tried to explain to readers, in simple terms, what happened around the world so that they can understand in 20 minutes,” explained *Shukan Diamond* Editor Tsuyoshi



Maeda. “Our readership is mainly businessmen who commute for roughly an hour on the train. Of course, not everyone reads for that full period, so we targeted 20 minutes.”

Maeda reports that the magazine’s readers loved it, praising its simple format in explaining a complex topic. The example illustrates that, even though it historically targets children, the *kamishibai* technique can potentially offer a different means of engaging an audience—it’s all in the hands of the presenter.

BACK TO BASICS

Manga Artists Network, a company dedicated to the preservation of *kamishibai*, began dispatching professional entertainers to perform shows a year after its founding in 2008 as a means of assisting companies in their desire to enhance public relations. Thus far, its client list includes, among others, the Yomiuri Giants baseball team, a Loft department store in Tokyo and the Imperial Hotel Tokyo.

The approach of Manga Artists Network, located in Tokyo’s Arakawa Ward, follows the style popularized starting around 1930, when the stories were mainly adventurous and gruesome. Thousands of storytellers canvassed the nation by bicycle to earn a living selling candy.

“It is nostalgic,” said Kazushige Yamada, 32, a *kamishibai* performer and former comedian. “Older people can look back to the old days, and children are amused.”

Kamishibai reached its peak in the 1950s and, though never fully disappearing, subsequently declined in popularity after



The default presentation tool in a business setting is PowerPoint. It's no secret that slides with many lines of text will cause audiences to nod off or begin tapping on their smartphones. THIS IS WHERE THE KAMISHIBAI TECHNIQUE CAN TRULY EXCEL.



Scan this tag with your smartphone to watch a Kamishibai performance from David Battino and Hazuki Kataoka and get a greater sense of this Japanese presentation format.

moving pictures on television became more favorable. Manga Artists Network is spearheading something of a revival, today employing a few dozen performers who largely target audiences of children.

In a traditional *kamishibai* show, the performer is positioned next to a stand about the height of a tripod that holds a wood case with flaps on hinges. (For some, the box is still mounted on the back of a shopping bicycle, just as it was for easy transportation decades ago.) When the flaps are folded outward, the first card in a stack of about 10 appears before the seated audience.

Each story will have a theme, perhaps love or honor. The

script is written on the backs of the cards, colorful illustrations by a manga artist on the front.

To move the story along, the performer pulls out the top card and inserts it into the back. The backs are prepared such that the text of the card appearing in the case will be on the opposite side of the last card inserted behind and visible to the performer.

For his performances, Yamada created the character Minakuru Mask, a professional wrestler who “welcomes everyone.” At a show in the parking lot of the Hey World shopping center in Kitamoto, Saitama Prefecture, about an hour north of Tokyo by train, Yamada, outfitted in a white mask, red cape and yellow tights, used kamishibai to express the value of friendship: Minakuru Mask overcomes a poisoning attempt by the opposition and courageously assists his tag-team partner.

With kids, he says, there are two things to keep in mind: “The presentation must be short and interesting.”



COMMUNICATING

To watch a performance by Yamada or his colleague, Masako Nojima, is to witness true audience-performer interaction. Not only do they amuse the children by squatting, pumping their arms, raising their voices, staggering the cards when pulling them from the holder and flipping some upside down, they also ask questions—“What do you think?” “What’ll he do?”—and receive many answers.

“*Kamishibai* allows the performer to get close to the audience,” explained the 29-year-old Nojima, a part-time announcer whose *kamishibai* character is a housewife named Sazae-sun. “It is about communication.”

At a seminar in late November in Tokyo, a network of foreign language instructors known as the Teacher Education & Development Special Interest Group (TED SIG) utilized digital presentations in the *kamishibai* technique to offer anecdotes that have led to “development of expertise in the university classroom.”

Peter Hourdequin, the TED SIG program chair, was seeking to create a participatory forum for attendees whereby presenters brought their own digital media to use when giving their talks.

“Five or six people can easily gather around a laptop or tablet, so we thought this might be a neat approach,” the 36-year-old Hourdequin said.

Such a premise heralds back to *kamishibai*’s true beginnings more than 1,000 years ago, when Buddhist priests used illustrated scrolls and narratives to pass on their teachings. It was in later centuries that pictures were added and the performers hit the streets.

“I think sharing pictures with smaller groups encourages a different type of storytelling and interaction,” Hourdequin said. “It is less didactic, and more about sharing experiences. When people share pictures from a photo album, for example, they convey a lot of information, but it feels less like a presentation. This is what we’re aiming for: teachers sharing their experiences in order to encourage dialogue and discussion.”

Yuta Sasaki also takes a digital approach, entertaining audiences with an iPad once a month at the Shitamachi Museum in Tokyo’s Taito Ward. The 29-year-old, whose main job involves animation programming and IT consulting, likes the versatility of the computer tablet; he is to *kamishibai* what an improvisational jazz musician is to music. For his shows, he will have a set of cards loaded on his machine, but he will also download images from the Internet as the performance moves along or snap photos with his mobile phone—the input is up to the audience’s reaction.

Sasaki emphasizes that he is a street performer in the spirit of those who traveled between villages in days past—in fact, he usually mounts his iPad inside a regular *kamishibai* wood case. “Using an iPad for *kamishibai* offers flexibility,” he said. “The space is open, and we can try anything.”

CAPTIVATING AN AUDIENCE

The default presentation tool in a business setting is PowerPoint. It assists users in creating slick slides that include text, graphics and photos. However, it is no secret that slides with many lines of text will cause audiences to nod off or become distracted and begin tapping on their smartphones. This is where the *kamishibai* technique can truly excel.

Firstly, *kamishibai* artwork is simple; it is intended to be clear from across a room, with the card’s space dominated by large characters, high contrast and vivid colors.

Though they might seem similar, images in picture books are different.

“In picture books, there are details,” explained Hiroyoshi Togawa, a manager in planning and production at Osaka-based Cut Box, a toy company that sells *kamishibai* display cases. “But in *kamishibai*, the basic background will be repeated. The artist has to design the pictures for easy understanding in just one glance.”

Attracting attention is one thing, but keeping it is something else altogether. In 2006, Bill Scott, senior director in web development at PayPal, was enthralled by a *kamishibai* presentation at the Foo Camp conference in California.

“It allows you, the storyteller, to stay engaged with the user,” he wrote on his “Looks Good Works Well” blog. “Making eyes with the audience is a powerful principle. Think of how many times you have seen a presentation where the presenter is constantly twisting their neck or turning their back to the audience to see the presentation.”

AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

The *kamishibai* presentation at Foo Camp that day was given by author David Battino, 46, the operator of www.storycardtheater.com. He billed it as “PowerPoint for people,” whereby he highlighted a seminar on presentation skills and better data

visualization with a *kamishibai* performance of “Momotaro,” a folk tale about a young boy who was discovered inside a peach and eventually matures into a powerful warrior.

Battino and his wife, Hazuki Kataoka, a 50-year-old Tokyo native, have been publishing *kamishibai* story kits targeting children since 2003. Not only is eye contact a plus, Battino says, but there is also more potential to get creative with transitioning between cards.

“The control is certainly greater than you get with PowerPoint, where your transition choices are slow, medium, fast or goofy,” he said. “When we perform for large audiences, we put our artwork on PowerPoint, and we miss the ability to slowly tease out the next card.”

Scott found the *kamishibai* transitions enjoyable, noting that if there were a quick sequence of action, Battino would rapidly switch the card; if trouble were brewing, the cards would be slowly pulled.

This type of showmanship is an important element to note—*kamishibai* stories are often structured to include suspense. Indeed, in the final *Shukan Diamond* page, the world’s leaders are seen trudging up a mountain slope. At the top is a flimsy-looking wood bridge leading to nowhere.

“Each scene leads into the next with a bit of mystery,” Battino said. “And in the leave-the-audience-wanting-more tradition, classic *kamishibai* tales were told as serials—the storyteller would stop at the most exciting part, jump on his bike and ride away. The audience would have to come back the next day and buy more candy to find out how the story ended.”

OUTSIDE THE BOX

Like “Momotaro,” the story of “Urashima Taro” is a folk tale widely known in Japan. A fisherman travels 300 years into the future after meeting a turtle. When the fisherman returns to his village, he discovers that his family has vanished and he is but a vague memory. He then decides to open a box that he was clearly instructed to keep shut.

Ryuji Inoue is a business management consultant in Tokyo. In search of a creative way to teach presentation skills for a class last June, he asked his students to give *kamishibai* performances of either folk tale.

“I wanted to explain that the story is one thing, but interesting content presented in an uninteresting way will not reach an audience,” Inoue said.

Inoue stressed fluctuation in voice tone for each character and the use of pauses, much like those used by Battino.

“Most students later said that it was the first time they had ever had to think seri-

ously about how to read something,” Inoue said.

In a similar fashion, Togawa from Cut Box attempts to expand the possibilities of *kamishibai* with salesmen who come to see him. He realizes that for them it is standard practice to pull documents from a briefcase at meetings.

“But what if you were to put a *kamishibai* display case on the table instead?” he might ask. “Won’t the client wonder what will happen next?”

So the fisherman flips open the lid of the box and...

“At that point, you have their interest,” Togawa said. “The rest is up to you.” **one+**

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MEET & GREET

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