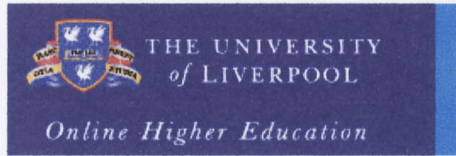


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**Ion power: chant the mantra: minus ions good—positive ions bad—minus ions very, very good for business - minus ion equipment**

[Japan, Inc.](#), [Dec, 2002](#) by [Gail Nakada](#)

"RIGHT NOW, IF IT doesn't have the term 'minus ion' attached to the appliance, it's not selling," laughs Hitachi spokeswoman Setsuko Minamikawa. Minus ions, called negative ions in the West, occur naturally in forests and streams, anywhere the water runs pure and the air is clean. Despite being unsupported by definitive medical evidence, the very presence of minus ions is widely believed to reduce stress and bring about positive feelings of well-being.

The particles can be reproduced artificially by passing air over a strong electric current or through the breakdown of crystals like tourmaline. In the quest to de-stress, Japanese are currently sticking, breathing, wearing and walking on as many minus ion products as possible. Minus ion air filters, minus ion garbage liners, pet toys, mouse stickers (the electric variety), muscle plasters, bracelets (color coded, Hello Kitty and plain), key chains, hair brushes, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, air conditioners, desktop computers, panty hose, clothes and hair dryers, cloth ("muddattack" from Toray Industries) and even a toilet from Inax that spreads ions where the sun don't shine. All this and more can be found everywhere from Akihabara chain stores to Shibuya's ever trendy Tokyu Hands. Forget ubiquitous computing, what Japan is caught up in is ubiquitous ionizing.

Toshiba kicked off the trend in 2000 with the introduction of a minus ion air conditioner. The product promised not only to purify air, reduce bacteria and odors, but also to "refresh" you through the scientific magic of ion particles. The public was sold, the media intrigued, and Toshiba had an unqualified hit. Other manufacturers rushed to introduce their own version of the minus ion air conditioning system as well as other minus ion products. "All the electronic makers have fallen in line to meet the demand," says Hideki Ban, associate manager for Hitachi's public relations.

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"Minus ion" and "refresh" became firmly linked in the public mind. "Japanese want to relax," says Yoko Fukusaki, a member of the Planning and Special Projects Global CC Group for Matsushita Electrical Industrial. "We are seeing that trend in the growth of massage therapy, aromatherapy and aroma goods. There's a desire for more tranquility. Combine this with a strong concern about personal health issues and you can see why minus ions would interest a cross section of consumers--both men and women in all age groups."

Health is definitely a powerful sales tool. Research from the Hakuhodo Institute of Life and Living, tracking lifestyle priorities from 2001 up to August 2002, shows an overwhelming interest in the subject. Compiled monthly on a scale of 100, health consistently ranked between 80 and 90 percent in the survey--taking precedence over both "life with your family" and "personal relationships."

The popularity of air cleaners and new wave air conditioners can be directly linked to some specific health factors as well. Thanks to the cedar pollen plague that exploded with the maturing of cedar trees planted in huge government-sponsored programs, spring is welcomed first not by cherry blossoms, but by daily pollen counts on the news. "People with allergies to airborne pollens and pollutants shut their houses up tight," says Hitachi's Ban. "This results in poor air quality indoors, which isn't healthy either. Minus ion air products can refresh air, removing odors and bacteria, plus the technology behind ion motors removes pollens more effectively, whether it's an air conditioner or vacuum cleaner."

The second ion product to hit it big was all about hair conditioning not air conditioning. Hitachi debuted its [yen] 15,000 minus ion hair dryer, IonCare, in November 2001. The product smoothes and conditions hair by pushing minus ion micro-particles directly into the hair cuticle; paired with a minus ion brush, the unit promises even better results. (Hitachi's minus ion styling brush retails for [yen] 8,000, though Tokyu Hands features a rack of knockoffs front just [yen] 450). Despite the high price tag, IonCare dryers have consistently doubled Hitachi's sales projections every month since their debut. The Nihon Keizai Shimbun, Japan's leading business daily, estimated that the company sold 100,000 units between November and March. Unofficially they are rumored to be moving 10,000 units a month. Matsushita, through its National electronics brand, followed suit in March 2002 with the release of the Ionity dryer, also retailing for [yen] 15,000. The company says its unisex styling of the product has the dryer selling equally well to men and women.

Tokyo homemaker Yumi Sudo happily embraced the new technology when she received a National minus ion Ionity dryer as a gift. "There's a definite difference," she says, running her fingers through her long hair. "The negative ion dryer helps keep my hair smoother, especially when I wash and dry it at night before bed. I wake up and it brushes much more easily than before."

Manufacturers divide minus inn products into two distinct categories. The first is the "health benefits" (real or imagined) group, which includes ionizing air cleaners, ion bracelets and just about any product using tourmaline crystal power. The second incorporates minus ion technology to produce a better motor. Makers claim minus ion pulse engines in washing machines use the particles to better penetrate dirty laundry as well as reduce static electricity; the same technology in refrigerators keeps food fresh longer; and minus ion vacuum cleaners have better pulling power. None of these particular household appliances has anything to do with health, though the public is probably largely unaware of this fact, grasping as they are at the minus inn "refresh" tag line.


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