

Big antenna shops spotlighting local regions

Record 55 locations in Tokyo

By Tamotsu Saito
Yomiuri Shimbun Staff Writer

Antenna shops, run by local governments from around the country to sell local products, offer tourism information and attract new residents, continue to rise in popularity. As they grow in size, antenna shops are actively courting foreign tourists and expanding their roles as symbols of local regions.

Antenna shops representing local areas across Japan have been popping up, mostly in Tokyo, ever since Okinawa Prefecture's Ginza Washita Shop became a big hit when it opened in 1994.

There were a record 55 antenna shops in Tokyo as of April 1, 2015, three more than in the previous year, including 42 run by prefectures and 13 run by municipalities, according to research by the Japan Center for Regional Development, a Tokyo-based foundation that supports local economic development nationwide. In fiscal 2014, four stores each welcomed more than 1 million visitors, including Hokkaido Dosanko Plaza Yurakucho, and a record 29 stores had annual sales exceeding ¥100 million.

Bigger and better

Recently opened stores have been in-

creasing in size. Seven stores had a floor area of at least 500 square meters, two more than the previous year.

One of the larger new stores is Tottori Okayama Shimbashikan, which opened in September 2014. Nearly 1,000 square meters in size, the store is jointly run by Tottori and Okayama prefectures, which are neighbors in western Japan. Rather than divide the store into separate areas for each prefecture, products are mixed together and marked by a pear symbol for Tottori or a peach symbol for Okayama.

Naomi Nakayama, executive director of the store's management council, said: "The two prefectures have different climates, and the opportunity to select between a wide variety of products from both areas makes for an enjoyable shopping experience. We exceeded our goal of 500,000 annual visitors."

The store is also developing new retail strategies, such as individually selling stick cakes that are normally sold in big packages in Tottori, a move that proved to be a big hit. Yunosuke Izawa, director of Prema space, the company that manufactures the cakes, said, "Previously we did not have a way to sell in Tokyo, but now we can try various strategies at the store."

Contributing to the popularity of antenna shops is a rise in interest in local regions.

Chizuru Hatada, PR manager of the Japan Center for Regional Devel-

opment, suggests that "the widespread popularity of local delicacies and yurukyara [mascot characters] has helped to make antenna shops the face of their regions."

International appeal

Some shops are also working to attract the growing number of foreigners visiting Japan.

More stores are employing staff who speak foreign languages

Sixteen stores, including those run by Iwate, Ishikawa and Oita prefectures, made an English-language pamphlet together that introduces each store's maps and products with photos. The idea is for foreigners to be able to enjoy taking a virtual tour of Japan's regions while in Tokyo.

More stores are employing staff who speak foreign languages, as well as translating homepages and restaurant menus into multiple languages.

Antenna shops are also on the rise outside of Tokyo. A total of 57 stores



The Tottori Okayama Shimbashikan antenna shop in Tokyo, which displays a wide range of products from Tottori and Okayama prefectures

operate outside the capital, including 10 in Osaka Prefecture, seven in Hyogo Prefecture, and six in Fukuoka Prefecture, an increase of 11 from the previous year.

Shigeru Tamura, a professor in the Faculty of Law at Niigata University and an expert on local economic vitalization, said: "The stores create an atmosphere that reminds visitors of

traveling or going back home, and they are getting better at increasing sales. Attracting foreigners should help to promote the diversity of Japanese culture."