

TRADEMARKS IN JAPANESE

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The Japanese language uses three scripts: hiragana and katakana (both syllabic scripts), and kanji or Chinese characters. Hiragana is the most versatile script as it is used both for substantive words and grammatical prefixes and suffixes; while there are over 2,000 kanji which can be pronounced in countless, unpredictable ways it is mainly used for words from foreign languages.

When European or other western companies try to translate their trademarks into Japanese, the standard option would be to write them phonetically in katakana. But hiragana can also be used. The use of hiragana for foreign words is unusual in Japan so in doing so you will create an additional impact with the local Japanese population. Also because of the rounded shape of the script, you could also create a softer brand image (Katakana is much more angular and masculine in appearance).

Outside of this each kanji character has an individual meaning and it would be very difficult to use this script for translating words from foreign languages.

There are other issues that need to be taken in consideration when translating a trademark in Japanese.

- Japanese language does not recognise the difference between 'R' and 'L' and so these two sounds are represented by the same symbol; for example, the words "Reader" and "Leader" would be transcribed as identical words in Japanese.
- "O" in front of any noun is very common and the most natural form of colloquial nouns in Japanese languages.
- In Japanese nouns are often shortened. For example, "Muji" is the shortened form of the brand "Mujirushi" which means "no brand or no mark".
- It is also very important to know that American English is more commonly used than British English. If the mark says "football" in Japan it means "American football", while British "football" is "soccer".