SYNNOVATE

MARKET READINESS GUIDE

The Japan Discovery Checklist

Ten questions to evaluate your readiness for the Japan market.

A market that rewards preparation

Japan is one of the world's largest and most sophisticated consumer economies. A free market under rule of law, with retail, logistics, and digital infrastructure built to a standard few markets can match.

It is also a market with its own logic. Most brands that struggle here made the same assumption: that distribution comes first and awareness follows. In Japan, it tends to work the other way around. Brands earn awareness, build trust, prove themselves in trial, and distribution grows from there.

Get that order right, and Japanese customers are famously loyal, and resistant to the next competitor with a louder campaign. Get it wrong, and even a genuinely good product can struggle to find its footing.

> **The good news:** none of this is guesswork. It is knowable, plannable, and it starts with an honest look at where you stand today. That is what this guide is for.

Ten questions, three areas

We built the Japan Market Situation Discovery Checklist to help brand leaders and founders take that honest look, on their own, before the first call with anyone.

It is not a compliance audit and it is not a pass or fail test. It is a starting point, the same one we use with every brand before we start working together. The ten questions fall into three areas that, in our experience, determine whether a Japan launch works: how well you understand the market and the customer, how clearly you have thought through competition and entry strategy, and how ready you are to execute once the plan is set.

The next few pages walk through each area. Answer honestly as you go. Wherever you find a gap, that is simply where the conversation should start, not a reason to hold back.

AREA A

Market & Customer

Do you understand the opportunity and the customer behind it?

AREA B

Competitive & Entry Strategy

Do you know who you are up against and how you will get in?

AREA C

Execution

Are you ready to localize and reach the customer where they are?

Market & Customer

Everything else in a Japan launch rests on this. Get the market and the customer right, and the rest of the plan has something solid to stand on.

1. **Do you actually have product-market fit in Japan, or did you assume it?**

   What works at home, or elsewhere in Asia, does not automatically carry over. Real fit comes from validating demand against Japanese consumer behavior, not extrapolating from another market.

2. **Do you know your real target customer here, or just translated your persona from home?**

   Japanese customers research heavily and decide carefully. They expect brands to show up at the discovery stage, not just at checkout. A persona built elsewhere rarely holds up unchanged.

3. **Do you know how Japanese customers actually decide to buy?**

   Trust is earned before trial, largely through peer reviews, influencer opinion, and a demonstrated understanding of the customer's life. Brand recognition and authority alone tend to persuade far less here than elsewhere.

4. **Have you sized the real opportunity here, TAM, SAM, SOM, not borrowed numbers?**

   Japan-specific market sizing tells you what is actually attainable, and over what timeline, rather than what a global market report implies.

Competitive & Entry Strategy

Once you understand the customer, the next question is how you reach them, and who is already standing in the way.

5 **Do you know who your real competitors are, including the ones you've never heard of?**

The competitor set here is rarely the one you know from other markets. Local players you have never encountered may already own the customer relationship you are targeting.

6 **Have you found potential local partners, and do you have the patience their decision process takes?**

Japanese decision-making runs on consensus. Internal alignment (nemawashi) and formal sign-off (ringi) can make a sales cycle two to three times longer than you are used to. That is not a red flag, it is how trust gets built on their side too.

7 **Have you chosen the right entry model for where you are?**

Cross-border sales, a sole distributor, licensing to a local partner, a partner for entry services, or your own subsidiary each suit a different stage and risk appetite. The right one depends on your resources and timeline, not a default choice.

8 **Do you know which regulations apply to your product, and who can guide you through them?**

Electronics, cosmetics, food, each category carries its own regime, from the PSE mark to the PMD Act to JAS labeling. A qualified import or regulatory partner turns this from a guessing game into a manageable checklist of its own.

AREA C

Execution

The last stretch is turning strategy into something a Japanese customer actually encounters and responds to.

9

Have you mapped what localization actually means for you beyond translation?

Branding, packaging, messaging, and positioning all need to be rebuilt around the Japanese customer, not simply translated for them. Cultural adaptation, not word-for-word conversion, is what actually lands.

10

Do you know which channels actually reach your customer, and how they rank?

LINE, Amazon, Rakuten, Yahoo! Japan, ZOZOTOWN, and Qoo10 each play a different role in a customer's journey, and each carries different weight. Knowing which ones matter for your category, and in what order, is part of the plan rather than an afterthought.

Where this comes from: these ten questions are drawn from the same thinking behind the Synnovate Japan Market Entry Guide, our fuller look at what it takes to evaluate, enter, and grow in Japan. Ask us for a copy any time.

Where do you stand today?

Work through the ten questions once more, and check off what you can already answer with confidence.

MARKET & CUSTOMER

- [ ] Do you have real product-market fit in Japan?
- [ ] Do you know your real target customer, not a translated persona?
- [ ] Do you understand how Japanese customers actually decide to buy?
- [ ] Have you sized the opportunity with Japan-specific TAM, SAM, SOM?

COMPETITIVE & ENTRY STRATEGY

- [ ] Do you know your real local competitors?
- [ ] Have you found potential local partners, and planned for their pace?
- [ ] Have you chosen the right entry model for your stage?
- [ ] Do you know which regulations apply, and who can guide you?

EXECUTION

- [ ] Have you mapped localization beyond translation?
- [ ] Do you know which channels reach your customer, and how they rank?

> Checked most of these? You are further along than most brands we meet. A few gaps? That is completely normal, and exactly where a good market entry partner earns their place.

SYNNOVATE

READY WHEN YOU ARE

Let's find out together

Synnovate has spent over 30 years helping foreign consumer brands evaluate, enter, grow, and succeed in Japan. We combine AI-powered market intelligence with the local relationships and execution experience that turn a plan into results.

PHASE 1

Market Entry Assessment

Market evaluation, consumer validation, and a clear-eyed read on readiness.

PHASE 2

GTM Strategy & Execution

Positioning, localization, and a commercial strategy built for how Japan actually works.

PHASE 3

Launch & Expansion

Visibility, trial, and distribution, with ongoing optimization as you grow.

Wherever you landed on the checklist, we would be glad to talk it through. No pressure, no pitch deck required on your end, just an honest conversation about where you are and what a realistic path into Japan looks like for you.

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