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(Excerpts taken from an article by Sam Westmacott)

Seeking cash to help his handicapped son, a Japanese shop assistant hit on the idea of putting magnets in shoes – and created a business empire.

At Japan's Fukuoka Airport a brilliant neon sign dominates the skyline. "Because you are you," it reads, "you are irreplaceable in this universe. All I want to see is your smile."

This caring message comes courtesy of Nikken, a multinational corporation created by Isamu Masuda after he had the brainwave of putting magnets in people's shoes...

Magnets? It all sounded so weird, as strange stories spread about astronauts using magnets in outer space to stay healthy, and self-styled experts peddled fanciful theories about why magnets have healing powers. It turned out that NASA really does put magnets in astronauts' suits, and magnets have been used therapeutically for thousands of years...

Intrigued, I went to Fukuoka to meet Isamu Masuda in his simple wood-lined office overlooking the sea. As he did not speak English, his son Koji, a New York University graduate, interpreted.

Isamu Masuda is a thin man in his 50's who glows with health and exudes warmth – but it was not always so. "I was a sickly child," he says. "I had chronic hepatitis, and I longed for good health."

His family was not rich. His father died in the Second World War and his mother managed a small shop. At 18, Isamu found a job with a bus company and over the next few years worked his way up from washing buses to being a desk clerk. He met Fumie, who was working as a travel guide, and when he was 27, they married. Obsessed with health, he worked part-time in a health shop, and the chances are he would have continued in this ordinary anonymous way, had not his son, Koji, been born with a tragic handicap.

Isamu was devastated. Doctors couldn't explain why Koji had been born with this extreme defect. In Japan, not so long ago, imperfect babies were killed at birth. For his first-born son to be so afflicted galvanized Isamu Masuda, still sickly himself, into action.

He decided, simply, that he had to make lots of money. "The doctors said it would be very expensive for Koji to have an operation and I had nothing."

But he also wanted to do it in a way which would help others too. “I started thinking about how we use pebbles in our public hot baths. When you walk on them they stimulate the soles of your feet. I know magnets were therapeutic. In Japan we’ve used them for thousands of years to help healing. I put the idea together and made an insole for a shoe.”

There was immediate success. His customers claimed they felt better: their circulation improved, they had fewer illnesses, even chronic insomniacs began to sleep through the night.

“There were many problems and difficulties to face but what drove me on and gave me courage was Koji. I had a vision. I was 100% certain that one day, people everywhere in the world, would be walking on my insoles. I knew I could do it, but I had no idea how.” He approached Katsumasa Isobe, a financier, who remembers those early meetings. “Isamu was not well. He coughed and looked awful but he had a good idea so I supported it.”

By the time Koji was two, Isamu could afford to help his son with his handicap.

As part of the Japanese tradition of holistic medicine, Isobe and Masuda expanded the business without bothering too much about why the insoles helped people to feel better. They were circumspect, making no medical claims, and never saying they could cure the sick – only that their magnets would give energy, and promote health and well-being.

For three years Isamu sold only insoles. But in 1975, Nikken was launched formally and the product line extended. Trail-blazing independent distributors took the insoles into Taiwan, China and Thailand, swiftly followed by management staff setting up offices and factories. By 1993, Nikken had moved into 12 countries.

The strange thing is that Isamu’s son, Koji, had no idea that his father invented the first insoles because of him; that it was his birth which changed an ordinary man into a courageous inventor.

“Why on earth didn’t you tell your son?” I asked Isamu. “I didn’t think it was important,” Isamu said, and smiled.

As Nikken expanded, Isamu mused that physical health was not enough on its own. “There are five pillars of ‘wellness’,” he says. “You must also be healthy in your mind, in your close relationships, in finances and in your connections with your community to experience total ‘wellness’.”