

I don't want to pretend it never happened.

By Sanae Ochiai

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Prologue~Phone call from Kanda Police Station

October 1, 2017.

Midnight on Sunday. By the date, it was already midnight on October 2. I noticed two missed calls on my iPhone.

What was that? Did the phone ring?

An unknown number with an incoming call history after 10:00 p.m. on Sunday. At this hour?

Could it be the wrong number? But the voicemail was left.

“This is the Kanda Police Station, Criminal Investigation Division. Is this Sanae Ochiai's cell phone?”

Kanda Police Department?

“I want to ask you a few questions about one of your employees, Taizo Shiozaki.”

About Shiozaki?

“Could you please call me back?”

Feeling bad, I fumbled for my pencil and notepad to write down the recorded phone number.

The messages were the same in both cases. After replaying the messages several times and noting the extension numbers, I checked my call history again.

It was the same phone number as the one given, with the 0110 ending. Ah, yes. This was a call from the 110 number.

I wonder what happened to Shiozaki.

Criminal Investigation Division. Don't tell me he's involved in something.

He was once my business partner in the company of which I was president.
Hon.jp Inc.

Founded in March 2004, MBO is a small company providing e-book search services. In May 2009, Shiozaki and I conducted an MBO (Management Buyout) to become independent from the Impress Group. In May 2009, Shiozaki and I conducted an MBO (Management Buyout, a buyout of management rights by the management team from shareholders) and became independent from the Impress Group. Then, in June 2015, I resigned as president of hon.jp and established a new company, O2O Book Biz Co.

So, he was no longer an employee of my company.

And why were the police calling my cell phone number? Did Shiozaki have trouble finding an underwriter and give my name or?

It was late at night, but it was the police on the other end. Without hesitation, I called the Kanda police station and gave the extension number and name of the person in charge left in the message. The person on the other end was not available. I gave a brief description of my requirements, and the call was transferred to a substitute police officer.

The first thing he confirmed was the reading of "hon.jp" and the address.

"I would like to talk to you about an employee of hon.jp, Taizo Shiozaki."

"No, I am not the president of hon.jp. No, I have resigned from hon.jp. There was a time when I was the president of hon.jp, but I stepped down about two years ago, in 2015, and now I am the president of another company."

"Then, Taizo Shiozaki is"

"He is the president of hon.jp."

"Then he's not an employee of Ms.Ochiai's company?"

"When I was president of hon.jp, he was an employee, but not anymore."

"I see."

The police officer's voice toned down and after a short silence,

"I understand. Thank you very much for your cooperation at this late hour."

He told me, "What? That's all?"

"Wait a minute. What's wrong with him? Did something happen to him?"

The police officer, however, sounded as if he was in a hurry to cut the conversation short, saying things like, "The officer in charge may call you later," or, "It's late tonight.

What happened to him?

Did he get into a personal accident on the subway? Or was he involved in a fight?

I reached for my iPad, accessed Google, and typed in "Taizo Shiozaki" (properly, "Shiozaki");

the "澤" should be "大", not "大"). (The "崎" is not "大" but "standing.") I do a news search using the keyword "Taizo Shiozaki. Fortunately, no worrisome results were displayed.

This time, I tried typing in "Jimbo-cho subway.

No information on accidents or delays is found.

I entered the ominous keywords into the Google search window and squashed my fears one by one.

It would be enough to call Mr. Shiozaki in the morning.

I encouraged myself, but at the same time, I could not escape the thought that he might no longer be in this world.

The next morning came and I went to work on foot that day, trying to calm myself down. When I got to the Kanda police station, I finally decided to call Shiozaki on his iPhone.

But - he was talking.

I felt relieved and scared

Walking along, I hit the redial button every few minutes.

I had a glimmer of hope that the caller might be having some kind of trouble, and might be talking to his family all the time, but every time I heard the busy tone, my heart sank more and more. The phone was disconnected by the time I arrived at the office.

When I called the Kanda Police Station again, the person in charge of last night's call was again unavailable. When I finally received a call back, I was told that the police could not talk to him and that I should talk directly to his son, since the family had given their consent.

I was then informed by his son that he had died the night before at work.

Subsequently, hon.jp Inc. resolved to dissolve at an extraordinary general meeting of shareholders on January 22, 2018 and posted a public notice the following week on January 29. Finally, the e-book search site hon.jp, which was practically operated solely by president Shiozaki, was also closed at the end of January.

Chapter I~ Founding of the Company

Job Interview with Keiichiro Tsukamoto, Founder of Impress, Inc.

January 15, 2004.

I was at Impress in Ichigaya for a job interview with the president.

I had left the publishing world after resigning from Mikasa Shobo in June 2001 and had been working in call center operations, mainly in the telecommunications and IT industries. In November 2003, I joined an e-book company, PUBLISHER, which was established by Sony and a major publishing company. In November 2003, it was announced that Sony and a major publishing company would establish an e-book company, Publishing Link, and my career aspirations shifted from the vague idea of the "Internet" to a more concrete focus on "e-books." I did some research and found that the same thing had happened earlier. My research revealed that Matsushita Electric Industrial Co., Ltd. had announced its e-book terminal "Book (Sigma Book)" in March of the same year, and I found some news that the e-book era would not be far behind. There was no reason for me to continue working in a call center, which had always been just a transit point for "online" work. I immediately began looking for a new job.

While searching for e-book-related companies, I came across advertisements for positions at three companies: Digibook Japan (decided to start special liquidation in 2013), Music C.O.JP (now Mobile Book JP), and eBook Initiative Japan. However, none of them were able to get me to write a resume.

I wondered if any of the publishing companies had an e-book division

Thinking about this, I suddenly decided to look at the website of Impress.

I remember my boss calling the support center when I was at Mikasa Shobo, holding an Impress computer-related book in his hand. Paper publications and telephone support. Neither is new as a tool, but I found the combination of the two very innovative.

Even for such an impressive, I could not read from their website that they are seriously working on e-books. However, I was convinced that this company must be starting an e-book business soon.

In addition, since my supervisor, who had been involved with the company since February 2003, was the person in charge of opening the call center for Impress, I was confident that I would not be unreasonably deterred from applying. I was ready to change jobs, even though I had not yet even applied for the job.

I sent my resume and curriculum vitae in the meantime to the open call for a book editorial position posted on their website.

I was 38 years old at the time. I had worked as an editor for about six years at a small publisher before joining Mikasa Shobo, but five years had passed since then. Although I knew it would be tough to function as an immediate asset, I filled out the "Reasons for applying and selling points" section of my resume with enthusiasm and managed to get through to the first round of interviews. A few days later, I received an e-mail with the standard "Unfortunately, we are unable to meet your request"-but there was more to it.

The letter went on to say that although they were not looking for an editorial position, Impress was looking for someone in the bookstore sales and e-publishing departments and that if I was interested, I could have another interview.

After the second round of interviews, the third round was an interview with the president.

While I was waiting in the space in front of the conference room, I looked at the shelves displaying the new Impress books without looking. The standard "Can Do" series and the vendor exam "Thorough Strategy" series, which seemed to have been written by the editorial department to which I had sent my résumé. Among them, an A4-size, on-demand publication that looked somewhat different caught my attention.

E-book Business Research Report 2003.

I didn't know they published such a book.

Flipping through the pages, one finds that the e-book market in Japan is worth about 1 billion yen, and citing estimates by Nomura Research Institute and Adobe, the report shows the growth potential of the market. The report included examples of efforts by publishers such as Shinchosha, Kadokawa Shoten (now KADOKAWA), and Kodansha, as well as actual sales figures from e-bookstores such as e-bookstore Papiless (now Renta!) and e-bunko Publi.

This is the prototype of the industry standard report that I have been primarily responsible for writing since the 2013 edition.

Soon after, the interviews began.

It was a four-on-one interview.

Keiichiro Tsukamoto, the founder and president of Impress, was a very pleasant man.

He asked, "Are you interested in e-publishing?"

That much was expected. But immediately, he said, "That's strange."

This was followed by the surprising word, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. It was not the atmosphere of a pressure interview, but rather the impression of someone truly wandering from the bottom of their heart.

For a moment, I wasn't sure how to respond, but then I mentioned my surprise when I discovered "Deep Love: A Story of Ayu" (Yoshi/Starz Publishing) in a bookstore, and how I felt new possibilities in things like cell phone novels.

'So, you read it?'

"Yes, I read it. Yes, I read it."

"On your cell phone?"

I was surprised. I realized for the first time that I had never read an electronic publication, despite my interest in e-publishing.

"....., no, in a book."

"What?"

Tsukamoto voiced his disappointment, and in my mind, I lightly regretted that I should have at least read the "Shincho Keitai Bunko" that I had found on the official keitai website. But it's horizontally arranged with lots of line breaks, so I could picture how it would have looked on a keitai screen."

What do you think?"

When I read it in a book, I feel that the same words are repeated too often, but on a cell phone, I don't think I would feel that way.

"Ho-oh."

Tsukamoto leaned forward and we continued discussing cell phone novels as if we were making small talk.

I'd like you to keep this between us.

Tsukamoto's tone changed.

I'm thinking of starting an e-book company.

My reading was right. And what timing to be already in the planning stage.

What kind of company is that, exactly?

"I haven't decided yet. When we try to do something like this, some people are against it, such as distributors and bookstores. I need to persuade them.

The explanation was so abstract that I could not imagine what the job would be like.

I used to work with bookstores and book distributors, so I think I can make some proposals to them," he said.

When can you come?

What? Out of the blue?

I was taken aback. Of course, I had been asked when I could start working during mid-career interviews. However, the question came after I was told that I was thinking of starting up my own company.

I answered that it would take a few months, considering the time required to take over my current position. The human resources manager took me at my word.

He said, "Of course, the establishment of the new company is not immediate, so we will wait until Ms. Ochiai is ready."

The notice of employment arrived immediately. The hiring was based on the premise that I would be transferred to the new company after it was established.

What was different from what I was told at the interview was that the establishment of the new company had been moved up and they wanted me to come as soon as possible. After coordinating with the company, I was working for at the time and the contractor, I joined Impress on March 1.

This new company was to become hon.jp Inc.

Establishment of Leading Style Inc.

The establishment of the new company was a top-secret project at Impress. This was no different when I joined the company, which was in the process of registering itself. On the day I joined the company, I was introduced to a small group of people from the president's office, the human resources department, and the general affairs department, and taken to the establishment preparation room, the existence of which was not yet known within the company. There I was greeted by Katsuji Hamasaki, who had served as my interviewer during the second and third rounds of interviews. I would be working under him.

For the time being, I was to use the business card of the "IMPRESS CMCC Department," which stands for Cross Media Content Coordination, a division set up to promote the digitization of IMPRESS publications. I was told to use this business card until the new company was established.

My first job was to draft a release for the establishment of the new company, choose a company logo from several design proposals, and prepare a PowerPoint presentation of the new company's business plan, so I had little opportunity to interact with Impress employees at this point.

On March 22, 2004, Leading Style Inc. was established.

The company is a wholly-owned subsidiary with a capital of 20 million yen, all of which is invested by Impress, and is headed by Keiichiro Tsukamoto, the same director at Impress. In addition, two other directors have supported the company since its founding and serve concurrently on the boards of other group companies. Katsuji Hamasaki is a full-time director. Leading Style was established with these four directors and myself, who had just been hired as an Impress employee on the assumption that I would be transferred to the new company in a managerial position.

It was on the day of the press release that information about the new company was released within the group. This was even though we had leaked the information to media outlets such as "Nihon Keizai Shimbun" and "Shin Bunka" as part of our public relations strategy as a listed company. The only exception was the editorial department of "Impress Watch," which was not so much a part of the group as an attempt to gain exposure.

Impress was just on the verge of a V-shaped recovery when it reported its financial results in March 2004. Immediately after going public, the company fell into the red, and as a result, it had to take severe measures and even cut personnel at times. The investment in the new company after these events had been made with caution and with consideration for the feelings of the employees.

After this period, however, Impress began to invest more in its electronic publishing business. Soon after the new company was established, Tsukamoto invested in Voyager and Digibook Japan, and within a few years had also invested in Papiless and Mobile Book JP.

Tsukamoto has foreseen the coming of the electronic publishing era since the 1980s and was deeply involved in the establishment of the Japan Electronic Publishing Association (JEPA) and the Electronic Book Consortium. The reaction must have been quite strong because after going public and finally being in a position to raise funds, the company was immediately forced to tighten its belts.

The year 2004 was also called "the first year of e-books" in Japan for the first time. In February, Matsushita Electric Industrial (now Panasonic) released "Book" and in April, Sony released "LIBRIé", two e-book devices in rapid succession.

Articles about the release of Japanese e-book devices began to appear around the fall of the previous year, and many of them were written in a manner reminiscent of the video wars of the past. The Publishing Link, established the previous year by Sony and 15 other major publishers, began full-scale operations in April of the same year.

Expectations for e-books for cell phones were also growing. Shinchosha's "Shincho Keitai Bunko," Kadokawa Digix and Bandai Networks' "Unlimited Bunko Reading," Music C.O.JP (now Mobile Book JP)'s "Kaiyomi! When KDDI released CDMA 1X WIN in November 2003, Toppan Printing's Bitway Division "Handy Book Shop" was launched on the official au website. The publishing industry has also been involved in the e-book business. It was a time when the publishing industry was in the mood to strategically tackle the e-book business, and in retrospect, it was a pioneering period that laid the foundation for the e-book business as we know it today.

The new company was positioned as a "planning company" that would conduct research and promotional activities for the e-book market. The press release stated, "After studying the business model, we will solicit investment from the publishing industry and plan to establish

the company as an enterprise within a year. It is customary for a wholly owned subsidiary of the Impress Group to be called "Impress xxx" with "Impress" in the name, but the new company will not follow this practice but rather will be called "Yomiuri Yomiuri" to show its neutrality by diluting the "Impress" color as a publishing company. The new company did not follow this practice. Rather, it was probably derived from the word "reading" to show its neutrality by diluting the "Impress" color as a publishing company.

The "E-Book Business Research Report 2003" was compiled into one volume based on the market research conducted in the previous phase of the project.

This research report has since acquired the status of an industry-standard report and continues to be published annually, with the 2020 edition being the latest. In 2004, this project was taken over by Impress, not by Reading Style, and only the reader survey was supervised by Reading Style.

In 2002, the e-book market was still around 1 billion yen, but despite its size, there were about eight major e-bookstores alone, and the file formats for viewing e-books were complex. There was a mountain of issues in this business area, but it would be beneficial to find solutions to the inconveniences felt by the people working on the front lines, and it was likely that some of these issues could be converted into business opportunities.

The new company was to preside over the "Next Generation Reading Forum," which would bring together such parties for discussion. As a venue for such activities, it was also stated that the company would promote e-books both online and in real life. The idea was that the new company would explore how to effectively develop these activities through the "forum," rather than proposing them as a new company.

When we began making the rounds to all the companies involved before and after the establishment of the new company, we heard from all kinds of people. By far, the two most common requests were "standardization of formats (file formats for browsing)" and "the need for a distributor for e-books as well. Voyager was developing the format, and Digibook Japan was providing an aggregation service (an integrated service from file production to distribution to digital bookstores, which is essentially the same as an agency business. Digibook Japan had already started offering an aggregation service, which is essentially the same as an agency business. Although Impress had already decided to invest in these two companies, both Tsukamoto and Hamasaki felt that the standardization of file formats was premature, and when it came to the electronic intermediary business, Music C.O.J.P., which was responsible for the e-bunko publicity background, and Toppan Printing's bit In the case of the electronic bookbinding business, Music C.O.J.P. and Toppan Printing's Bitway Division, which had been in the background of e-bunko publishing, were about to enter the bookbinding business.

The meet-and-greet also allowed us to sense the different temperatures each company was taking about the e-book business. This was especially true of the publishers. Some are actively engaged in the development of electronic content, such as so-called "bone digital" and micro-content, while others are only moderately involved in the e-book business as a promotional tool for paper books. The motivation of the staff in charge of the project varied widely. In the publishing industry at that time, there seemed to be an invisible pressure that simply mentioning e-publishing or e-books would affect sales of paper books. Many publishing houses had conflicts with their sales divisions, and many e-publishing divisions were organized as separate unit from the editorial divisions. At the very least, there was still a dominant feeling that e-publishing was outside the "mainstream" of publishing. Even within Impress, the editorial department did not have the necessary cooperation for the production of e-books, and the previous year, when a title was released simultaneously in paper and electronic format, complaints were immediately received from the distributors.

In such a situation, it must have been important for Tsukamoto to seek an understanding of the e-book business within the industry as well as among general readers, at least as a measure for the new company, and it must have been a much more realistic new business than the standardization of formats and development of the agency business. Tsukamoto's question to me during the interview about whether I could do it was based on this still vague image.

Tsukamoto seemed to have high expectations for the new company and would show up at the office every morning to check on the progress of preparations with Hamasaki and me. When Tsukamoto was out of the office without telling us where he was going, we would get an extension from the president's office asking, "Is Mr. Tsukamoto there?" was often received from the president's office in a leading style.

Hamasaki once told me, "There is no normal environment where Mr. Tsukamoto shows up at the office every morning. Having been hired as a new company employee with no prior Impress experience, I had never thought about what Tsukamoto meant to the general employees of the Impress Group, nor did I realize how fortunate I was to be able to talk with him face-to-face daily. In later years, I would hear several Impress Group employees say, "Tsukamoto-san is a man above the clouds," and I would always be surprised at the gap between the two.

Tsukamoto's passion for the new company was that great. Under the president's enthusiastic approach to new business, the promotional planning proceeded steadily.

A New Friend Returns from Silicon Valley

Leading Style used the name "eBookSpot" as a place to provide readers with an e-book experience, both in real life and online.

In April, the month after its establishment, it was decided to set up an "eBookSpot," an e-book experience corner at the Maruzen Marunouchi main store scheduled to open in the fall of the same year.

However, the planning stage for the construction of eBookSpot, an e-book portal site "eBookSpot.jp," which was expected to be the most effective if successful, stumbled at first.

A brief list of major e-bookstores for PCs in 2004 includes, in no particular order, Papiless "e-Bookstore Papiless (now Renta!)," e-Bunko Publishing Society "e-Bunko Publi," eBook Initiative Japan "10DaysBook (now eBookJapan)," Toppan Printing "Bitway Books" (integrated into "BookLive!" in 2013), "Web no Shousai (currently "honto")" by Dai Nippon Printing, "Sharp Space Town (SpaceTown Books" since 2006, service ended in 2011)" by Sharp, "Music C.O.JP. JP (service ended in 2015), Rakuten Rakuten Download (integrated into Rakuten Kobo in 2018), and Timebook Town (service ended in 2009), which Publishing Link began offering in April 2004 as a rental book model. Leadingstyle has invited these e-bookstores to provide rankings and news releases and has received cooperation from many of them. In addition to the material provided by the e-bookstores, we also planned to include a section introducing book recommendations by the staff in charge of each bookstore.

The bottleneck was the search function.

In April, interviews were held with major bookstores regarding the format of bibliographic information, and it appeared that the bibliographic information itself could be mapped. The problem, however, was that the definition of what constitutes a work, which is unique to e-books, was not fully defined.

In some cases, two file formats, the Dot Book format (e-book file format developed by Voyager) and the XMDF format (e-book file format developed by Sharp), are provided for a title, or the same file format is provided for a PC and a PDA. case, are they "the same thing" or "different things"? In such cases, it will eventually become necessary to assign a common code such as ISBN. I wanted to avoid that kind of trouble as much as possible.

What was even more troublesome was that full-text search engines like Google (a system that searches for specific character strings in multiple files) were still minor at the time, and searching by item specification was the most common way to find work. For example, when searching for "Keritai senaka" ("Keritai back" by Risa Wataya, Kawade Shobo Shinsha) by specifying the "title" of the work, some e-bookstores did not include "yomigana" as a searchable field or did not return any hits even though the work had been distributed by the publisher.

In principle, paper books can be ordered even if they are not available at the bookstore, as

long as they are not out of stock. In the electronic world, however, the fact that a book is not available means that it cannot be purchased. Therefore, as a portal site for e-books, we had to avoid a situation in which a title that should be "available" at each e-bookstore was not found.

The quality of each e-bookstore's search engine varied. The shortest way to solve this problem as a portal was to create our database.

Although Reading Style is a wholly owned subsidiary of Impress, it did not rely on Impress' resources to build the site. The only exception was to put the "eBookSpot.jp" domain of Net eBookSpot on an Impress server. In addition to not wanting to project an "Impress" color, the Impress Group was behind the curve in mobile support. The official carrier-oriented reading sites for cell phones were growing, and existing operators were beginning to enter the official sites one after another. It was a common understanding within Reading Style, including myself, that the e-book market would grow even more on cell phones than on PCs and reading devices. For this reason, we decided to seek outside help from a company with a certain track record in providing services for mobile phones, rather than from within the group, which had too much experience in providing successful services for PCs.

However, the cost of the "e-book database" system included in the proposal was so large that it would have cost the majority of the company's capital. We obtained quotes from other firms, but we could not expect to see a large reduction in the cost. If we were to place an order, we would have to consider increasing our capital.

In the end, Leading Style, a planning company that had declared its goal of becoming a business corporation within a year, decided to shelve the database construction project, saying that Net eBookSpot would be operated as a beta version until then and would be fully operational when the company became a business corporation. The site was redesigned to be more content-oriented rather than system-oriented, and a customized version of Google Free Search (a free service provided by Google that allows both web search and site search) was introduced to make it as inexpensive as possible. This was a drastic downsizing.

Nevertheless, at the first "Next Generation Reading Forum" held in July, we reported the management policy of "eBookSpot.jp," which is similar to a curation site today, as well as the installation of eBookSpot at the Maruzen Marunouchi Main Store for a limited period of three months, and were able to gain the support of the concerned parties. We were able to gain the approval of the concerned parties.

In the early days of Leading Style, meetings called "brainstorming sessions" were frequently held to discuss these new projects. However, there were only three participants: Tsukamoto, Hamasaki, and myself. If the number of participants is limited, the ideas that emerge will be limited. To break out of this situation, Tsukamoto would occasionally bring in people from inside and outside of Impress to brainstorm and stimulate us.

Shiozaki, who would later form a long-lasting partnership with me, was one such person Tsukamoto brought in.

Shiozaki was one of the people Tsukamoto brought in. He has been studying electronic paper in Silicon Valley and just came back last week.

Impress had a study-abroad program at Stanford University, and Shiozaki had just returned from participating in the program. It was already August, and he planned to launch Maruzen eBookSpot and eBookSpot.jp on the Internet the following month. With the launch in sight, work was not progressing as smoothly as expected, and everyone was beginning to get frustrated.

A few days later, he became the third Leading Style employee, following Hamasaki and Ochiai. He was treated no differently from the rest of us in that he was on secondment from IMPRESS.

Shiozaki had been working for one of the Impress Group companies, MDN Corporation, before his study abroad, but he was not sent back to MDN after returning to Japan, but was instead assigned to the Impress Corporate Planning Office, where he was to be involved in new business development. Tsukamoto was probably just the right person for the job.

He also had a part-time job in the editorial department of BN's "MACLIFE" while he was a student at Keio University. After graduation, he once joined a securities company, but later returned to the editorial department of "MACLIFE" as an employee, serving as editor-in-chief when the magazine was discontinued. The editor-in-chief of a personal computer magazine may not necessarily be an IT expert, but in his case, after returning from Silicon Valley, he was fully equipped with the knowledge necessary for the business domain that Leading Style was trying to tackle.

While both Hamasaki and Shiozaki had experience as magazine editors, I had long experience in book sales in the publishing industry. Also, while Hamasaki and I believed that "the future was in cell phones," Shiozaki had a firm grasp of the trends in the Internet industry in the United States. With Shiozaki's addition to the team, we were able to evolve into the smallest unit of the organization, where we could complement and follow up on each other's deficiencies.

I was in charge of eBookSpot, which was already scheduled to be developed at the Maruzen Marunouchi main store, because of my intimate knowledge of the real bookstore scene, and Shiozaki, who had a concrete vision for eBookSpot.jp, including its future design. As director, Hamasaki was able to take a step back from on-site work and devote himself to overseeing the entire project.

At the second "Next Generation Reading Forum" in September, a report was given on the progress of both real and online eBookSpot, which is now about to go live. Maruzen

eBookSpot did not receive any questions that were difficult to answer, as specific trial reading contents had already been decided and a perspective drawing had been prepared for easy visual understanding. However, there was a string of questions about how eBookSpot.jp is displayed in the search results. That is why there was so much interest.

In the end, the response was the same: we did not create a database but crawled the site. The search engine used was not Google, but "Site Navi" from Newswatch (merged by SCARA Communications in 2012). At the time, there were several options for search engines, even though Google is now the dominant search engine. Accuracy was reasonable, and Site Navi offered an option to avoid "N/A" even when there were no matching keywords. At the time, the number of e-book titles was still around 20,000 to 30,000, and it was necessary to devise a way to avoid disappointment among users.

The number of e-book users was probably at the same level. We had estimated the size of the 2003 market, which was to be published in the "E-book Business Research Report 2004," to be 1.8 billion yen, a 180% increase over the previous year. Although this was a 180% increase over the previous year, the population itself was small, and the people involved in the e-book industry were almost unanimous in their view that the focus should be on growing the market itself, rather than on competition among companies at this time.

Against this backdrop, the reading style seems to have been received relatively favorably by those involved.

A charismatic manager finds a domain

Meanwhile, political moves toward the establishment of an electronic intermediary business were in full swing among the parties concerned.

Digibook Japan had already started a substantial intermediary business, but Music C.O.J.P., which was responsible for the background of "e-bunko publicity," and the Bitway Division of Toppan Printing were also seeking investment from publishing companies to start an intermediary business. Since Impress invested in Digibook Japan, a leading operator, there was an air of checks and balances being exerted by them against the Impress Group. The fact that Hamasaki is now a director not only at Reading Style but also at Digibook Japan has made all concerned more wary. Some people told me to my face that Impress was trying to dominate the e-book industry.

Even Leading Style Inc. was not happy with Impress's M&A (Mergers and Acquisitions) strategy. Even Leading Style was part of Impress's M&A (Mergers and Acquisitions) strategy, and a merger with a company in which we had a stake was a possibility. Tsukamoto would sometimes ask us for a plan for collaboration with our investee, but we did not know if it was

simply to create group synergies or if an absorption merger was waiting in the wings. At the time, I was still only a manager and had no sense of management. And that is why I felt uncertain and uneasy about the future of the company, even though it had just been established.

In an attempt to distract myself from these feelings, I put aside my business plan and devoted myself to practical work on the front lines. I rarely discussed these matters with Shiozaki, who was my colleague at the time. He was a man of few words and casually handled his work, and since our areas of expertise were different, we did not communicate very closely with each other.

In December 2004, the eBookSpot contract with Maruzen ended and the exhibit was withdrawn. The milestone at the time of establishment was when a business plan had to be solidified, but it was significantly delayed. There were not enough indicators to be able to formulate a hypothesis for commercialization.

Fortunately or unfortunately, Tsukamoto and Hamasaki were tolerant in this respect and seemed to be waiting for our business plan proposals, creating an environment in which we could proceed with our on-site work. Finally, with this in mind, I began designing a mobile site, this time vaguely considering a promotion using cell phones for a chain of cafes. Shiozaki was immersed in revamping eBookSpot.jp.

At the time, I think Leading Style as a company as a whole was at a bit of a low ebb.

One day, Tsukamoto arrived at the office first thing in the morning, as if to clear the air. He said, "I found a great domain."

It had been quite common for Hamasaki, myself, and Shiozaki to be missing due to direct attendance, but on this particular day, all three of us were there by coincidence. Without a pause, Tsukamoto continued,

Hon.jp. There was such a domain name.

We were so overwhelmed by the momentum of the conversation that we were at first unable to understand what Tsukamoto was saying.

It's the perfect domain name for a portal site, isn't it?

Shiozaki was trying to figure out how to take eBookSpot.jp from a beta version to a full-fledged operation. His words finally made sense.

Tsukamoto excitedly called the general manager of the General Affairs Department and the technical manager at Reading Style and gave them clear instructions on their roles in the hon.jp domain acquisition project. Negotiations would be led by the General Affairs Department, and after negotiations were concluded, the Technical Department would be responsible for support around the servers. Leading Style, the party involved, was told to wait and see for now until the hon.jp domain belonged to Impress.

However, after purchasing the domain, Tsukamoto had already decided in his mind that the new company's main business would be the operation of the portal site. In particular, he insisted on developing his search engine, which he had once abandoned.

During this period, we had several discussions about commercialization, but Tsukamoto rejected every plan we proposed, such as an advertising agency-style business plan or a plan to digitize content owned by publishers for use in other industries, and by the end of the meeting, we had decided to land on a "search site" as our intention. At the end of the meeting, the plan was intentionally landed on a "search site."

E-book search was indeed an area that no one had yet tackled. There is no centralized database of e-books, and if it were possible to build one, it would certainly be an asset.

The problem was monetization. The site had difficulty in drawing up a business plan. In the end, commercialization within one year, promised at the time of establishment, was not realized and carried over to the next year, and Leading Style received a loan from Impress Holdings to prolong its life.

The conclusion of the project was held in abeyance until the "hon.jp project," which Tsukamoto was directly directing, was completed.

We survived. Leading Style, which had started with practically no plan and was almost only a cost in 2004, finally began to generate a steady monthly income in 2005.

March 8, 2005. The delayed mobile-oriented portal site was launched. The service was named "My Café eBookSpot" with the help of a café to promote the opening. hon.jp domain was obtained, but the direction of the portal site has not yet been decided at this stage.

The mobile version was my area of responsibility. The promotion of the site at the time of its launch was also planned for me.

The top page of the site features a newly written novel by Mika Naito, the queen of keitai novels, whose breakthrough came with "Shincho Keitai Bunko. I designed the first part of the story as a coaster and distributed it to more than a dozen cafes in Harajuku, creating an emotional touchpoint that could be accessed through a QR code printed on the back of the coaster.

Although the number of accesses was modest, numerous media outlets picked it up, and the exposure effect was substantial. The fact that the parent company was listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange was also a blessing. In the newspapers, in addition to solid articles in "Nihon Keizai Shimbun" and "Nikkei Sangyo Shimbun," "Nikkei MJ" carried it on the front page along with other e-book-related topics. Although there was only one magazine, "OZ Magazine," it was picked up by "Keitai Watch," "asahi.com," "Web DAVINCH," and "Cafe Globe" on the Web. Although we would have liked to have had more media with a large number of female users, this contributed in some small way to raising awareness of the Reading Style company

name and business, as well as e-books readable on cell phones. In April, KDDI was able to obtain sales promotion funds from a few e-bookstores.

Then in April, KDDI's official portal "EZ Book Land! The Hamasaki-Shiozaki line also began to receive orders for the planning and operation of some of the sections of the site. This was not a direct contract from KDDI, but an outsourcing project from Mediba, an affiliate of KDDI, which was entrusted with the operation of EZ Book Land!

The year 2004, touted as the "first year of e-books," ended before it dawned on us. The e-book device, which was initially thought to be the trigger for the e-book boom, was a hot topic and did not lead to any real benefits.

On the other hand, e-books began to show dramatic growth in the market for feature phones (cell phones, so-called "Galakaye"). It is no exaggeration to say that KDDI was the catalyst for this growth, and with its CDMA 1X WIN device released in November 2003, KDDI realized high-speed communications and made it possible to download large content files. It also introduced the telecommunications industry's first fixed packet rate system. It adopted a strategy of promoting killer content such as full ringtone songs and comics to encourage customers to switch to 3G services.

In 2004, the e-book market was worth 4.5 billion yen, a 2.5-fold increase from the 1.8 billion yen in 2003. Expectations for the cell phone market were high, given that 1.2 billion yen of that amount came from cell phones, and the previous year's sales had been only 100 million yen. At such a time, it was very encouraging for a new company that had only been in business for one year to have a pipeline to such central players in the market as KDDI and Mediba.

E-books are now available at hon.jp.

In September 2005, the Digital Comic Association was established.

Around this time, Hamasaki rapidly approached Shueisha. Shueisha had not yet entered the mobile comic market at this time. It was natural for those in the industry to try to take advantage of Shueisha's production and distribution of comic content, and it was only natural that the Impress Group, with its aggressive stance in the e-book business, joined the competition.

The problem was that the executives of the company, which was required to be neutral and impartial in the portal site business it had already started, were also executives of Digibook Japan, the leading company in the intermediary business, and were attached to a particular publisher that was the target of fierce competition.

This was on the eve of the birth of the electronic intermediary business.

In January 2005, the e-book division of Music C.O.J.P. became independent and Mobile Book J.P. Inc. was established, and in October 2005, the Bitway division of Toppan Printing was spun off as Bitway Inc. with investment from publishers. Mobile Book J.P. was also moving toward a third-party allocation of new shares in preparation for its entry into the agency business. With several new companies trying to enter the official carrier website market, and the need for electronic intermediary services increasing, the question of whether or not they would be able to hold onto and procure comic content from Shueisha, which has the Jump brand, would have had a major impact on their future as an intermediary business. "My Café eBookSpot" continued to do well with a summer campaign linked to cafes in the Shonan area, and in September, the service name was changed to "Keitai Yomitosho Café" to reflect the transfer from "eBookSpot.jp" to the new "hon.jp" domain name. However, by the time of the third campaign project from late October, which attempted to develop the service in cafes in the Waseda area based on the concept of a school festival, the company began to encounter situations where sales efforts to obtain sponsorship were turned down because they were wary of Hamasaki's moves.

A large corporate entity might be exempted from this problem by saying that it is a different business unit, but there is no such escape route for a small company with only three members, including the board of directors, that has emerged in a small market of less than 10 billion yen.

Tsukamoto, too, was focused on a new plan to distribute comic content that would generate greater sales, but those of us who had already begun work on the portal site business and found it rewarding in our way were left behind.

While Shiozaki was steadily making preparations for the development of the hon.jp site, I was growing frustrated. I confess that perhaps because they could not see me like this, they asked me to join Mobile Book J.P., a competitor of the Impress Group, which would go on to invest in Mobile Book J.P. the following year. Although I was even interviewed by President Ryuichi Sasaki and offered favorable terms, I postponed my decision because of my attachment to the mobile site I had launched myself.

On December 19, 2005, "hon.jp" was launched.

It is an e-book search site with the lead "If you are looking for e-books".

There was no trace of the static "eBookSpot.jp" that had operated as a portal site, and it was more appropriate to call it the launch of a new site than a renewal. Although the design was very Google-like, a free word full-text search function was implemented, and the search behavior was stable and comfortable.

The "what counts as one work" that had been the subject of much debate up to that point seemed to have been resolved, at least on hon.jp. When the user selected the list of titles displayed in the search results and the device associated with the title, JavaScript (a

programming language often used in web development) was executed and a sub-window appeared, displaying the site name, the product link, and in the case of cell phones, a QR code, and the user could be transferred to the product page with as few as three clicks. The site name, product link, and in the case of mobile phones, the QR code were also displayed. While this dynamic design was innovative, the Web API (API stands for Application Programming Interface, a specification provided to external developers, and is also called "Web API" in Japanese) was also used. The site also foreshadowed the arrival of the Web 2.0 era (a next-generation Internet concept that became popular in 2005) by disclosing Web API (API stands for Application Programming Interface, a specification provided to outside developers that allows them to call specific applications to operate on the Web).

A mobile version was also integrated. The mobile version of the site identifies the accessing carrier and displays only those works that can be read in that environment. For example, if the site was accessed from an au device, only sites distributed by au would be displayed, and sites compatible with Docomo and Vodafone (now Softbank Mobile) would not be displayed. This is an obvious feature nowadays, but it would never have been possible with a static site, and the site was supported by the latest technological trends. It was the result of Shiozaki's knowledge on his return from Silicon Valley.

The database, which was designed based on an understanding of the characteristics of e-books, was the driving force behind the site, and it has since become an asset of hon.jp. The data at the start was still only about 10,000 works. In the press release, the company declared that it would increase the number to 30,000 by March. At that time, the number of e-book titles was growing steadily from 40,000 to 50,000 and hon.jp set a goal of over 80% coverage of all titles.

Based on the idea that the number of accesses would be limited by the search function alone, SEO (Search Engine Optimization). As a search engine optimization (SEO) measure, only "eBookSpoe.jp News" was retained and renamed "hon.jp DayWatch".

On this day, Tsukamoto updated the "President's Blog" and distributed the hon.jp release to everyone in the Impress Group by e-mail.

The next day, I received an e-mail from Akihiro Sekimoto, CFO (Chief Financial Officer) of Impress Holdings, who is also Tsukamoto's right-hand man. The next day, I received an e-mail from Akihiro Sekimoto, CFO (Chief Financial Officer) of Impress Holdings, who is also Tsukamoto's right-hand man, congratulating me on the opening of the site. Sekimoto started Impress Holdings after Tsukamoto died in 2007 and succeeded Tsukamoto as CEO (Chief Executive Officer). He is the person who succeeded Tsukamoto as CEO (Chief Executive Officer).

It was a short email. It was only four lines long, and depending on how you look at it, it was

a simple model sentence, with a congratulatory message, his impressions of using the site, and finally, his expectations for hon.jp.

I vividly remember how happy I was to receive it. It was a time when I felt that Reading Style was an outsider company that was not a mainstay of the group, given my history at Impress, which included being transferred to a new company as soon as I was hired. I was encouraged by the fact that someone was paying attention to me.

I was determined to stay with the company.

In February 2006, on the premise of a deal with Shueisha, Impress Holdings established Impress Comic Engine (now ICE), a company whose main business is manga distribution services for cell phones. Tsukamoto was appointed as representative director and Hamasaki as one of the directors. There was some debate among the management of Impress Holdings as to whether to retain Hamasaki as a director at Leading Style and how to place him. As a result, Hamasaki was removed.

In March, after taking five days off with pay, I came to work and opened my mailer to find an e-mail from Shiozaki informing me of his absence, including a message to take over the job. I checked the scheduler and remembered that he had a business trip scheduled for today and tomorrow. But when I got to the end of the sentence, I found myself tracing the same text over and over again. It was not the kind of thing I would write in passing, and it took me a while to understand what it was about.

Yesterday, Mr. Tsukamoto called me over for dinner and asked my opinion about the RS (note: abbreviation for leading style in the Impress Group) personnel after April, when Mr. Hamasaki will be gone. I suggested that Ms. Ochiai should be the president, and Mr. Tsukamoto said, "Well, let's hear what Ms. HaOchiai has to say. So, there may be a call soon.

Shiozaki @ Haneda