

japan network

Belgian-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce's Fabrice Tilot's time abroad 'Zest for life' shapes over 30 years of work, play in Japan

Name: Fabrice Tilot

Title: President, Belgian-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce in Japan
URL: www.blccj.or.jp
Hometown: Brussels
DoB: Aug. 24, 1960
Years in Japan: 32

The Big Questions

ARI SHARP
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Tokyo has its own Tintin! He may be older than Herge's beloved character, and his cheeks ruddier, but Fabrice Tilot shares the same spirit of adventure and zest for life as his fellow Belgian.

The son of a diplomat, Tilot was born in New York and spent his formative years in Belgium, France and Senegal, before settling down in Tokyo in his 20s to build a life in Japan. Along the way he's built connections, done deals and sailed waters in a way that would make for grand stories told over the Belgian beers of which he is fond.

"Once you go abroad, it's difficult to come back to a more restricted world," he said from his Yotsuya office. "You feel it's a bit narrow, especially in a small country."

Now, he splits his time between Triple A Management, the trading company he established in 1993, and the Belgian-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce in Japan, where he has served as president since 2008.

Tilot moved to Tokyo in the heady days of Japan's economic boom, when he was asked to represent Tractebel, the Belgian industrial holding company where he started his

career. The opportunity coincided with the Executive Training Program jointly sponsored by the European Union and Japan, which supported managers to learn Japanese language, culture and business.

By the time his company sought to send him elsewhere, Japan had its claws into Tilot and he opted to stay and establish the Japan office of a Dutch company. Three years on, he decided to do it alone.

Putting up ¥10 million in capital, he established Triple A and sought clients among European metal and chemical exporters keen to gain a foothold in Japan. The first year was rocky — he recalls losing ¥6 million — but soon after that the company broke even and posted a profit.

"I never slept badly because I feared a customer wouldn't pay me," he said. "In Japan, I've had five or six thousand contracts, and had zero letters of credit. The word here is honesty. It's important when you set up a small company to feel like you're in a safe environment."

With the business growing, Tilot was keen to support his compatriots in Japan. He put his efforts into the Belgian-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce in Japan, where he has overseen a busy schedule.

"Networking, networking, networking," he said of the chamber's main function. "Lucky it works very well for us, thanks to the small size of our community and the complete cooperation and support of both our embassies."

Many people's impressions of Belgian exports do not extend beyond beer, chocolates and diamonds. But its ¥339 billion in exports to Japan are led by chemicals, pharmaceutical products and automotive parts,

with major companies here including biopharma companies UCB and GSK, and food sciences business Puratos and Godiva. Meanwhile Luxembourg's ¥9 billion in exports to Japan are led by machinery makers (Paul Wurth), air cargo (Cargolux) and financial services.

Beyond the trade in goods, Tilot is keen for Belgium to serve as the European headquarters for Japanese companies. As he notes, Belgium and Luxembourg are famously multilingual, just a few hours from several European capitals and offer a favorable tax environment. With Brexit making the U.K. less appealing, the two countries are sharpening their pitch.

Tilot argues that Belgium's outsized impact of culture and politics is due to its position at the crossroads of European cultures. He says the country mixes the seriousness and efficiency of Germanic culture with the inventiveness and dynamism of Latin culture. "As a tiny country right in the middle of many other countries, we speak (many) languages, are used to exports — we have to — and are perceived as nice fellows. And the same goes for our sister country Luxembourg," he said.

Businesses across the chamber have been impacted by COVID-19 and government response. Issues include cash flow, fulfilling employer obligations and understanding how they will benefit from the government's claimed ¥108 trillion stimulus package. To help its members make better sense of the challenges, the chamber is organizing information events — via webinar, frequent newsletters and discussion platforms, of course. Tilot said the fallout from COVID-19 eclipsed anything he had experienced in his



SATOKO KAWASAKI

International trading among business roles

Born in New York, Fabrice Tilot grew up in Belgium, France and Senegal. He served as a NATO army officer before studying engineering, international trade and finance at the University of Brussels.

While still studying, the Belgian worked for the Tractebel Group, later moving to Tokyo to be the company's chief representative in Japan. After two years with Tractebel and a further three with Hoogovens Group, he established his own business, Triple A Management, in 1993.

Triple A undertakes its own trading activities, mainly in nonferrous metals, and offers management, marketing and representation services for foreign firms. With €5 million in annual turnover, its clients include Germany's Alanod Group, France's Orelis Environnement and Belgium's Coil.

Since 2008 he has served as president of the Belgian-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce in Japan. Tilot speaks French, English, Dutch and Japanese.

"Orders are all expected to slow as companies and local authorities are strapped for cash," he said. "Realistic forecasts are gloomy for the next 12 to 18 months, in my humble opinion."

The affable Belgian is a keen mentor of students and young professionals, including those from his alma mater, the University of Brussels. Although he's been spending more time indoors as of late, Tilot is a fan of golf (Chiba Prefecture's Eagle Lake is his preferred club) and sailing in Hayama, Kanagawa Prefecture.

But perhaps Tilot's greatest sporting passion is for Belgium's national men's soccer team. The Red Devils have sat atop FIFA's global rankings for more than a year, and when play resumes after COVID-19, Tilot will be among the team's most ardent supporters. The Belgian commitment to excellence — on the pitch or off it — is one Tilot hopes many more Japanese will experience.

four-decade business career, having a financial impact greater than the Lehman shock of 2008 and a greater social impact than the Tohoku triple disaster of 2011. For his own

business, selling aluminium semi-products for manufacturing, he said he was feeling the impact of the broken supply chain, first in China and then in Europe.

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