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# Coronavirus-wary Japan tries to take business card ritual online

By Linda Sieg  
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TOKYO (Reuters) - Japan's time-honoured ritual of exchanging business cards face-to-face is under pressure as the government promotes a "new lifestyle" to combat the coronavirus.

Experts this week updated recommendations including frequent hand-washing, social distancing, off-peak commuting, video conferencing - and the exchange of "meishi", or business cards, online.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Monday extended a nationwide state of emergency to fight the virus through May 31 but said some areas with fewer infections could begin to ease restrictions.

Exchanging business cards in Japan is a well-choreographed ritual that foreign executives are often advised to get down pat to avoid unintended offence to potential customers or partners.

The practice involves extracting a pristine card from a card holder - not a pocket or wallet, then exchanging cards with the right hand, and finally, scrutinising the received card while making small talk, often about the information contained.

People depend on business cards to exchange contacts "and start conversation", said Chikahiro Terada, CEO of cloud-based business card management service, Sansan Inc.

"It's ice-breaking," added Terada, whose company will offer an "online meishi exchange" for business customers from June.

Japan has not had the explosive surge of infections seen in many other countries, but as of Thursday, it had nearly 15,500 confirmed cases including 578 deaths, according to public broadcaster NHK.

The coronavirus outbreak is increasing pressure to change many traditional practices long been criticised as inefficient.

Abe recently told cabinet ministers to overhaul regulations and identify burdensome procedures with a view to scrapping or simplifying them, among them the stamping of paper documents with traditional “hanko” seals.

The coronavirus “is changing the work culture in Japan in many different ways”, said Jeff Kingston, director of Asian studies at Temple University’s Japan campus. “It’s not like turning a light switch off and on, but reforms have been accelerated by the pandemic.”

Reporting by Linda Sieg; editing by Nick Macfie