

Uniqlo wisdom

The pride of Ariake is its on-site Customer Center. "It looks like a call center, but we don't call it a call center," Conway said, stopping next to a closed door. "We don't outsource." Last year, Customer Centers worldwide took in thirty-one million "pieces of information," fielding telephone inquiries, answering e-mails, monitoring conversations on social media, and gathering in-store feedback. "A lot of it's gold," Conway said. Call centers typically enforce strict time limits, but Uniqlo encourages its operators to keep engaging for as long as a customer wants.

It was one such conversation, with a Japanese housewife, that alerted Uniqlo

to the fact that customers often wore the brand's Ultra Light Down Jackets indoors, to save on heating, and that they wanted the sleeves to be snug enough that, when pushed up to the elbows, they wouldn't slip down while washing dishes. The company applies a sociological attention to the gestures and dilemmas of people's daily routines; once harvested, these insights are quickly incorporated into product designs. After noticing that more people were commuting by bicycle, designers tweaked the brand's windproof jacket, shortening its length and tightening the sleeves to prevent air from blowing up a rider's arms. If Uniqlo's ideas about virtuous design cycles hold true, these improvements should facilitate even more two-wheeled commutes. Waight Keller told me that Uniqlo's "favorite term is V.O.C., which means 'voice of customer.'" She admitted that she often lurks online, reading customer comments on the brand's site.

This practice dates back to the nine-

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