Disposable cameras defy film's march to obscurity

By Brent Kininmont

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TOKYO (Reuters) - Sayaka Masuda's face was a picture of frustration when she realized she would have to buy a disposable camera in Kyoto, Japan's photogenic ancient capital.

"After I got on the bullet train from Tokyo, I realized that I'd forgotten my digital camera," said the biology student. "I was really annoyed at myself."

Thanks in no small part to the forgetfulness of consumers, disposable cameras still earn a place on kiosk and convenience store shelves 20 years after the first model was sold in this click-happy country.

Across the Pacific, a heartier appetite for disposables -- little more than a film coiled behind a lens and a flash - has provided some relief for a film market trampled by galloping demand for cheaper and sharper digital cameras.

In the United States, the world's largest photo market, about 202 million disposable cameras were sold last year, according to the U.S.-based Photo Marketing Association.

That is down from the record 218 million gobbled up in 2004 but defies the more than 20 percent annual shrinking of the color film market as consumers go digital.

Thanks to digital cameras, gone are the days of faces out of focus and wasted shots of eyes caught mid-blink. If you don't like a photo, just erase it from the screen and snap another one.

So deep is the rot in global film sales that the world's third-largest maker of camera film, Japan's Konica Minolta, decided this year to pull the plug on making color film, while AgfaPhoto of Germany went bankrupt, sinking the once-famous Agfa brand.

But digital cameras are susceptible to theft, loss and damage and that has been another key to the longevity of disposables -- serving as a stand-in at the beach, say, or amid the cacophony of celebration and inebriation at parties and rock concerts.
Nor are disposables restricted to mere domestic duties: Oscar-winning director Ang Lee wielded one on Academy Awards night this year, and they are a staple of care packages sent to U.S. troops in Iraq.

"There's no real device that's simple, cheap and effective enough to supplant it yet," said Christopher Chute, senior analyst at U.S.-based IDC, a technology research firm.

"It's something people are very familiar with. It's an ingrained behavior."

NO LONGER SMITTEN

One of the few countries to see a significant denting of sales is Japan, the world's second-largest photo market, where once-smitten consumers helped to ignite a global infatuation with disposables.

Domestic shipments slipped to 48 million in 2005, according to Japanese imaging group Photo Market, nearly half the number shipped a decade earlier when Sayaka Masuda took her first disposable on an elementary school trip to Tokyo Disneyland.

Single-use cameras are losing ground in a country famously quick to bin old technology in favor of the new, and where the incidence of theft is comparatively low.

The ubiquitous camera phone, just an arm's length away in bags and trouser pockets, is the latest predator on disposable's diminishing turf in Japan, where around 90 percent of mobile phones can take photos.

But camera phones won't really encroach on the territory of single-use cameras until the printable image is sharper, said Ken Sugiyama, a spokesman for Fuji Photo Film, which introduced the first disposables to the world in 1986.

"The influence of the camera phone is very limited toward the single-use camera," he said, noting that camera phones have no flash.

"Digital cameras -- that's the killer."

STILL A NICHE

Given disposables' unique role as instrument of last resort, and their popularity among people shy of fiddly electronics, a shrunked niche should be maintained in Japan.

Certainly Eastman Kodak and Fuji, the world's top two makers of photo film, aren't shying away from inventing new flavors of disposables amid long-running shake-ups of their businesses due to the death rattle of film.

The latest single-use camera from Fuji features speedier film for taking clearer photos at night, adding to a range that has included models for taking underwater, panoramic and black-and-white photos.

"The move to digital cameras and the market growth of camera phones threaten sales, but there will continue to be a particular need for disposable cameras," said Masahiro Nakanomyo, a market analyst at Mitsubishi UFJ Securities.

The boom in U.S. demand for digital cameras and lately camera phones may have taken a cue from Japan, but the gouging of disposables' sales may not be mimicked in the United States any time soon.

http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20060608/tc_nm/cameras_disposables_dc_1
U.S. consumers tend to embrace products based on price and are more likely to use disposables, which sell for as little as $5 for 27 shots on both sides of the Pacific, as their only camera, said Chute at IDC.

"There's still a base of consumers who either can't afford digital, only own film cameras, or respond to this kind of spontaneous nature of needing a camera," he said.

"You open the box and 'bang' -- you can start taking pictures. And that's probably really saved the photography industry ever since they came out in the mid- to late-80s."