

# Inside the Shikumi “仕組み”: How a Japanese Automotive Group Adapts Across Global Markets

By Bernard Thompson and Lisa Kayastha



“Shikumi flexes across markets and conditions.”

**Nobuya Yamanaka,**  
Founder and President, Optimus Group

Rooted in Japan and with its strongest foothold in Oceania, one automotive services group is expanding onto the global stage, largely out of the spotlight. At a time when Japan’s automakers, which have long been the backbone of the global industry, face intensifying competition from emerging players, the group’s annual sales have increased fivefold over the past five fiscal years.

Founded in Japan in 1988, Optimus Group now operates 62 subsidiaries worldwide. More than 90 percent of its 2,500 employees are based outside Japan, while the vast majority of its revenue is generated offshore. Its rise is most visible in Oceania. In New Zealand, with over 35 years of operations, the group has established itself as a dominant force in the imported used car market. In Australia, a series of major acquisitions has brought the company into sharper focus within the local automotive industry. More recently, it has begun extending its footprint into Europe and South Asia.

What does the rise of a Japanese automotive services group operating across such different markets reveal? And what enables it to scale at all? According to the company’s founder and president, Nobuya Yamanaka, the answer lies in its Shikumi. “We do business through Shikumi,” he says. At its core, Shikumi refers to how a mix of businesses comes into alignment with market realities and, in doing so, supports one another across borders. At first glance, it may appear to be a practical mechanism. Over time, however, its broader implications begin to emerge.

## New Zealand: A Cross Border Shikumi for a Used Car Market

New Zealand is one of the world’s most car-reliant countries. Low population density, limited public transport and the absence of domestic vehicle manufacturing make imported vehicles, new and used in almost equal measure, essential to daily life. The country also enforces some of the world’s strictest import and biosecurity

regulations, creating a demanding environment for cross-border vehicle movement that underpinned the group’s first global Shikumi.

The Shikumi takes shape thousands of kilometers away, in Japan’s auction houses. In a market where importers cannot physically inspect vehicles themselves, the risk of ending up with a “lemon” is real. To manage this, the group relies on in-house appraisal specialists who assess vehicles in person with expertise refined over decades, applying the Mekiki discipline, an experienced ability to evaluate vehicle condition in its market context, which underpins the group’s core strength.

Once sourced, vehicles move to the group’s Japanese inspection operations, where they undergo safety, quality and quarantine checks conducted under New Zealand’s stringent biosecurity requirements. These inspections draw on proprietary, in-house methods protected through intellectual property and recognized by multiple authorities, addressing compliance before vehicles ever leave port.



Vehicles then enter the group’s logistics network for marine transport. Drawing on long-standing relationships and export scale, the company moves cars by car carriers, containers and charter services, adding resilience to its supply chain. In some cases, reefer vessels with excess southbound capacity are utilized, turning underused routes into efficient, relatively lower-emission pathways.

Upon arrival in New Zealand, vehicles undergo a second inspection for registration and roadworthiness. As the country’s only fully digital inspection provider, the group offers a transparent, auditable process trusted by regulators and embedded in the nation’s mobility infrastructure.



The final link in this Shikumi connects vehicles to drivers through dealer networks and an integrated auto-finance platform supporting

both dealerships and consumers. Within this Shikumi, different stages of the vehicle journey are organized in a way that reduces cross-border risk and supports consistent standards. Today, Optimus Group touches one in every five vehicles on New Zealand roads. What began as a response to regulatory complexity has evolved into a durable framework built on trust, precision and operational discipline.

## Australia: Reshaping the Shikumi for a New Car Market

Australia posed a different challenge. With no domestic manufacturing, the market relies almost entirely on imported new vehicles and spans a continent-sized geography, serving populations with sharply different mobility needs. As a result, the market is shaped by the influx of vehicles from a wide range of global brands, creating one of the most competitive new-car environments in the region. These realities shaped the group’s onshore Shikumi.

Rather than extending an export-driven model, Optimus Group built scale locally around two complementary pillars. The first is land logistics. Through the acquisition of Australia’s second-largest automotive logistics company, the group gained the capacity to distribute imported vehicles efficiently across vast distances. The second is retail scale: a multi-brand dealership network representing more than 40 automotive brands, designed to reflect Australia’s regional diversity.



Beyond its core new-car activities, the group also operates across related areas, including used-vehicle retail and automotive data services. Together, this breadth gives the Australian Shikumi a distinctive shape under local conditions. It maintains a presence across nearly the entire automotive value chain, allowing the group to support partners across the supply chain in a market shaped by distance and regulation.

Following these acquisitions, the Australian business delivered an average annual revenue growth of 47 percent over four years at the group level, reflecting momentum as the Shikumi takes shape within a single, highly competitive market. Each pillar operates independently, yet its presence within the same group provides a foundation for future synergy.



### Europe and Beyond: Extending a Proven Shikumi

Building on the cross-border model refined in New Zealand, the group has begun extending that framework to right-hand-drive markets such as the United Kingdom and Ireland, drawing on pre-owned Japanese and European vehicles sourced from Japan. Japan's used vehicle market offers qualities highly valued by European buyers: vehicles benefiting from favorable road environments, showing low corrosion and subject to rigorous inspection regimes.

These characteristics make Europe a natural extension of the New Zealand Shikumi. Although still an emerging region for the group, Europe illustrates the portability of the Shikumi and hints at a broader global pattern. Beyond Europe, inspection standards developed under New Zealand's regulatory environment are being referenced in several developing markets, reflecting broader expectations around vehicle quality, safety and compliance.

### Beneath the Shikumi: The Human Architecture

Beneath the operational Shikumi lies a deeper organizing principle that helps explain why Optimus Group adapts so effectively and why its model is difficult to replicate. At the center is a leadership structure rarely seen in Japanese multinationals. Regional leaders operate with a high degree of autonomy, supported by frequent cross-border communication and a shared understanding of the group's long-term vision. Even with the governance requirements of a public company, this distributed authority gives regional leaders greater discretion to act. The organization functions less as a hierarchy than as a federation: independent leaders moving quickly within a shared frame of reference. That balance between autonomy and alignment is what makes the model resilient across different markets.

This approach is evident across regions, where leaders within different business segments regularly exchange insights and align on operating principles. Each business retains independence within clear governance boundaries, while collaboration emerges naturally where it strengthens the whole. This federated structure is creating the conditions for leadership renewal, while allowing the organization to respond to shifting local realities and scale sustainably. It is the human architecture beneath the Shikumi.

### A Global Shikumi: An Architecture That Travels

Across New Zealand, Australia, Europe and beyond, the Shikumi emerges not as a simple collection of businesses but as a transferable architecture that holds together across markets. Designed to flex without breaking, it allows the organization to operate across borders, regulatory regimes and economic cycles. For the organization, this approach has provided a resilient foundation for growth across diverse markets.

As global mobility becomes more fragmented, shaped by electrification, shifting supply chains and rising regulatory complexity, the importance of architectures that connect markets rather than operate in isolation is growing. The Shikumi is one such architecture. Rooted in New Zealand's cross-border environment, reshaped for Australia's continental scale and extended into Europe through longstanding networks, its expansion reflects structural fit as much as ambition.

In that sense, Optimus Group is not simply entering new markets. It is extending an architecture that has already proven resilient, adaptable and quietly influential. As market conditions shift, the Shikumi scales—revealing an architecture with applicability across borders.

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