ADVERTISING

Winning is everything

When Kevin Roberts, CEO of the worldwide Saatchi & Saatchi advertising group, talks of "winning ugly", he's not just talking about business. Hours after the *FM* interviewed him in Johannesburg last week, he flew to Paris, then took a connecting flight to Manchester, to watch Vale of Lune, the English rugby union club he sponsors, in a national promotion play-off.

Their opponents, Widnes, are younger and faster, he tells me, so his prematch pep talk will be brutally frank. "I'll tell my players to hurt the opposition, to tread on their hamstrings, to make them afraid to play. I want them to keep the ball in the opponents' 22m area by kicking into the corners. Then we can win 6-0 with two penalties. I don't care if we win ugly, as long as we win."

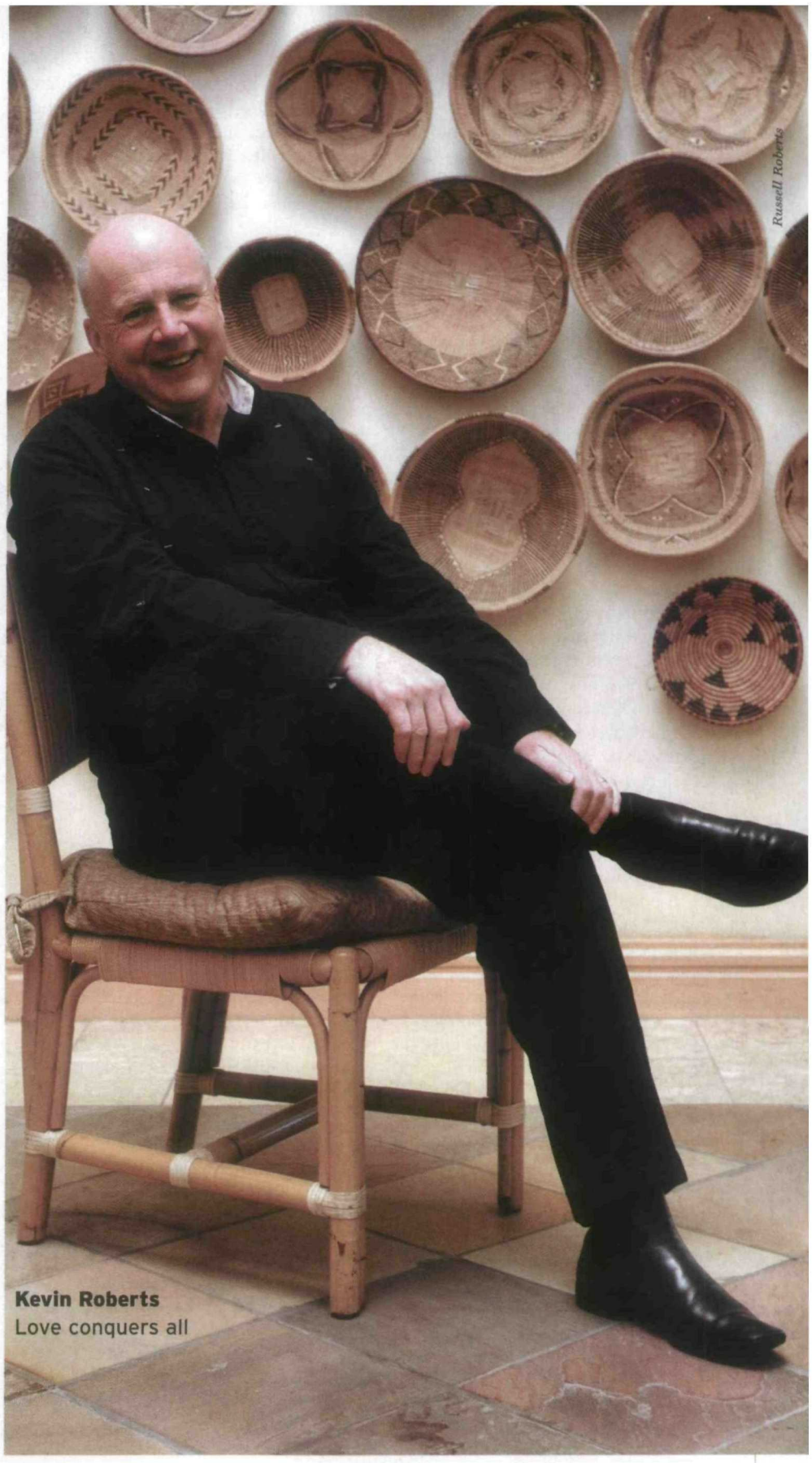
Success in business, as on the rugby field, is achievable only with a totally winning attitude, says Roberts, who has headed Saatchi for 11 years and recently signed a five-year extension.

The global economic crisis — he calls it "a financial catastrophe of the highest order" — requires a new attitude from business.

"People who think there are lessons to be learnt from prior recessions are indulging in fantasy. We have never seen anything like this before. Governments around the world are lurching about in disarray. Their bailouts and economic revival packages are knee-jerk, senseless actions. They are taking advice from the people who got us into the jam in the first place."

Companies are also behaving inappropriately. "They are doing what they did in past recessions: freezing headcounts, laying people off, closing offices, reducing layers, freezing salaries, having staff stay in cheaper hotels . . . they are cutting, cutting, cutting."

Worst of all, they are hacking marketing budgets at precisely the time they should be shouting their messages louder than ever. By all means refocus and consolidate, but don't waste opportu-



Kevin Roberts
Love conquers all

nities, says Roberts.

Many of the world's top corporations were forged in recessions. "It's the best time to start something because it's cheaper and you can hire more talent because there's so much available in the market. And consumers are desperate for a lift, because their life is crap. It's a bloody good time to zig when the rest of the world is zagging. Start something up. Everyone else is retrenching. It's a fantastic opportunity."

Nowhere is that opportunity more evident than in advertising, which "was made for moments like this". Roberts says: "We're in the ideas business, the imagination business. The role of agencies today is to provide a voice of optimism and to generate ideas that will emotionally connect with consumers to rebuild consumer confidence. We are the only people that have ideas in our genes, that have the talent to develop those things.

"The creative and ideas industry is the one bastion of radical optimism that can rebuild confidence. The media won't because they are commentators of what's happening, and therefore purveyors of doom and gloom. Their role is to report and commentate. Ours is to see a future and to inspire clients and consumers."

It was Roberts who came up with Saatchi's "Lovemarks" advertising model, which is based on the creation of an emotional bond between consumer and product. The aim is to create "loyalty beyond price, beyond attribute, beyond benefit," says Roberts. "Particularly at times like this, people don't trust anything any more. They don't trust government, they don't trust the banks, they don't trust companies. They are looking for emotional attachment. People will stay loyal to something they believe in, where they believe it offers more than just a functional benefit."

But can you really develop emotional loyalty to an antidandruff shampoo, to a chocolate bar, to a cigarette? "When we started Lovemarks, we were pilloried by people who said you couldn't bring love and emotional marketing into the boardroom. Seven years, lots of books and countless account wins later, that attitude has changed."

The loss of trust in governments and politicians doesn't stop Saatchi from trying to recreate it. The agency — started by British brothers Maurice and Charles Saatchi in 1970 and now part of the global Publicis media group — made its name by helping bring the UK Conservative Party to power under Margaret Thatcher. These days the agency's UK operation represents the ruling Labour Party.

"Politics is our heritage, our brand," says Roberts, "I encourage our offices to get involved, but we're not tied to a particular message. In the US we've done work with Barack Obama; in Australia with the Left; in New Zealand with the National Party, which is on the Right."

Roberts' own heritage is rugby — not surprising for a New Zealander. A former board member of the New Zealand Rugby Football Union, he is on first-name terms with many of the world's top administrators and players. These include several members of the British & Irish Lions touring squad due soon in SA for a test series against the Springboks.

Roberts is an occasional lecturer at Limerick University, where one of his students is Lions captain Paul O'Connell. Roberts also works with the Munster club, which is the favourite to retain the Heineken European club championship. The club has provided several Lions players, including O'Connell.

Roberts warns against Springbok complacency. "The cry of Munster is 'Stand up and fight!' and the Lions have picked a side that will stand up and fight. The Munster contingent know how to win. O'Connell is a real leader. The Lions have won here twice before, when they were captained by Willie John McBride and Martin Johnson — both big locks who knew how to stand up to the South Africans. O'Connell is in that mould, and so are the men around him."

Roberts adds that current Springbok players, who have not experienced a Lions tour before, should not under-estimate the experience. "There is no conflict in rugby like the All Blacks against the Springboks, but we play one another too often now. It cheapens the rivalry. The Lions are coming here for a real tour. This is not Tri-Nations rubbish. The world will be watching. This is proper rugby."

PS: Vale of Lune evidently weren't impressed by Roberts' "win ugly" pep-talk. They beat Widnes 52-41 in a 13-try thriller to win promotion. **David Furlonger**