

Who loves you baby – Kevin does, grrrr

Rochelle Burbury

Mr Kevin Roberts, the colourful chief executive of Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide and former chief operating officer of Lion Nathan, is in love.

He's in love with all his clients, he's in love with brands that show him love, and he's in love with his theory on love – because love is everything in the battle for brand supremacy.

Mr Roberts wants to "pump emotional juice" into brands and have a primal, lustful, sensual, intimate experience with them.

If this sounds like something from an Austin Powers movie, you better believe it. Mr Roberts, 50, who eschews suits for a lot of black attire, peppers his conversation with not only his favourite expletive but "like, man" and "baby".

But Mr Roberts is dead serious when he talks about love and brands in the same breath. A good proportion of his personal website is devoted to what he sees as the holy grail for marketers – making brands "lovemarks".

At a dinner on Monday night with a few Saatchi clients – Mr John Comoros from Toyota, Mr Skip Tylman from Procter & Gamble, Mr Nick Whitlam from NRMA and Mr Peter Wilkinson from David Jones – Mr Roberts espoused his theory of lovemarks. He says the group was "all over this like a rash".

One could understand falling in love with a car, a department store or even NRMA's roadside assistance, but a washing powder?

"There's a very intimate relationship between a woman and the laundry," Mr Roberts counters. "It's a haven for women and it makes you a better mum and partner."

In the past two years at Saatchi, Mr Roberts, along with Mr Bob Isherwood, the global creative director, has redefined the agency as an "ideas shop" in order to compete in a marketing landscape where power firmly resides with consumers. He believes advertising on TV is "shit", brands are commodities and advertisers are information, not relationship, obsessed.

The idea for lovemarks came from Mr Roberts' fascination with the impact of the "love bug" computer virus. He was struck by the power of love and its potential to form an enduring emotional connection with consumers while allowing companies to charge and sustain a premium for their brands.

"In the beginning there was a product with a function. In the late 1800s, trademarks were formed to protect consumers, and products started to charge a premium and built value into the trademark. Then P&G invented the brand – products with 'er' words – bigger, whiter, faster. The competitive advantage was built on one word – information," he said.

"In the '80s and '90s there were emotional benefits. Then in came the information economy and we got information overload and incredible numbers of parity prod-

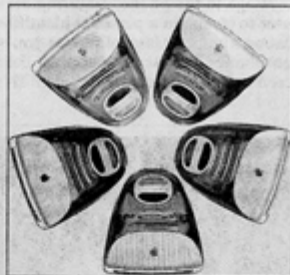


Ideas man: Mr Kevin Roberts knows a potent lovemark when he sees one.

ucts and all the blood was squeezed out of brands... We say now that brands have to evolve into 'trustmarks'... Most brands live at a very high respect level, if you can make the move to trust, it's a better relationship.

"But a trustmark is not enough – then you've got to turn trust to lust and to 'lovemarks'. The ultimate relationship is love."

The Roberts philosophy contends that a lovemark "irrevocably binds



you with the desires and aspirations of your customers, your members, your believers. It's the emotional connection that lets you go out and conquer the world."

Mr Roberts has thrown the work-in-progress concept open to the world at the lovemarks.com website. It asks visitors to rate brands and experiences based on their level of mystery, sensuality and intimacy to which Mr Roberts applies a 'lovemark' rating. To date, attending the

Olympic Games has achieved the highest rating of 8.6, while four brands – Coca-Cola, Disney, Mercedes and Sony – make the list. But Mr Roberts insists that brands need to score between 10 and 12 to reach true lovemark status.

The site is open to scrutiny and has invited responses ranging from "Kevin genius! Someone's finally got the guts to say it like it is and not worry about what the world's going to think. You are so right and eventually all those crets will get it. You are paving the way for the rest of us. Way to go Kev!" to "I too spent 15 minutes on this crap. Are we completely naive little flubbers in desperate need to love THINGS? Is that what love is about? I'm not buying. Not love. Squeaking that word into nausea and indifference, until it has lost its meaning completely, will not help anyone. Go do something useful for the world!"

Undeterred, Mr Roberts cites Tide, Zippo lighters, Red Bull, Harley Davidson, Lego, Burton Snowboards, Apple's iMac, Coca-Cola and McDonald's as true examples of lovemarks. He says iMac is "the most sensual product since the dildo".

"Look at how they advertise it... It stimulates taste. I saw a billboard in LA which had five Apple computers and one word – 'Yum'. I went out and bought three iMacs for my kids."

In Australia, Mr Roberts says, Saatchi will focus on turning clients NRMA and the National Rugby League into lovemarks.