

Top Marks for Kevin

Interview by Alya Raydan Baradhi

When Kevin Roberts CEO Saatchi & Saatchi first released Lovemarks, many eyes rolled, many noses were lifted, and many sarcastic sighs were exuded. Most of us who visited the website on Lovemarks or read about it thought: “Tell us something we don’t know,” and considered Roberts a master of branding an idea, and gave him no credit for creating one. But that was then.

After watching Roberts give his presentation on Lovemarks at the 38th IAA World Congress in Beirut, all present rolled their eyes in disbelief, lifted their noses to suppress a snuffle of emotion, and sighed at so many years lost working with people who just don’t understand the importance of creating a unique relationship between a brand and a consumer in today’s over saturated world.

To say that Roberts is a master speaker who can capture and hold an audience would be very true, but also very condescending. To say Lovemarks is a brilliant idea (and a lucrative one), is also true, but the fact that Saatchi & Saatchi isn’t guarding it with their lives (quite the opposite they are telling it to everyone who will listen, and haven’t even tried to copyright it) proves that that’s not the USP either. So just what is it? Undeniably, Roberts has managed to focus on that special something that everybody secretly wants, but over the years has given up on – to feel special, unique, loved, respected. He’s not only determined it, he lives it. It’s obvious he treats his co-workers this way (they are not subordinates). It’s equally obvious he treats his clients the same, his family, his brands, his consumers, and even the student (not necessarily his) who needs help with his/her thesis.

In the following exclusive interview with ArabAd, Kevin Roberts talks about the Publicis Groupe merger, creativity in the Middle East and the way creativity is heading on a global level. Most importantly, Roberts hands us on silver platter the only tangible solution today to handle globalisation, and that is to give each brand a Lovemark, and each consumer the feeling that they can relate to a special something in a brand that describes the most important thing to them, themselves.

ArabAd: How has the Saatchi & Saatchi/Publicis Groupe merger affected your position?

KR: It’s a merger that I chose, because I realised that two years ago the world of communications was moving into consolidation. That clients were really concerned about agencies’ ability to recruit the best people to resource their business to handle complete integration, so I decided that for Saatchi & Saatchi the critical thing was to become part of the top four or five outfits. I believed that

joining Publicis would give us a big “difference” because I didn’t want to be part of another big American conglomerate, and just be one of an Omnicom, or just be another BBDO or DDB. I wanted to retain the individual identity of Saatchi & Saatchi, and Maurice Levy had the same vision.

Publicis are a very different company to Saatchi & Saatchi, they’re French, and we are of Anglo Saxon roots. We have a strong presence in the US, where most of our business is, Publicis are number one in Europe. Really, I just fell in love with Maurice Levy, I just think he’s a fantastic guy, he promised me unconditional love and that he admired our creativity and support, and that he’d always really looked at Saatchi & Saatchi over twenty five years, and thought our work was great.

So, Publicis and Saatchi merged two years ago, we didn’t lose a single client, we didn’t lose a single person, we haven’t had a single fall out. If you look at what happened with Young & Rubicam and WPP, that’s quite challenging. For us it’s been a beautiful experience, especially if you’ve seen what other companies that have merged went through.

AA: What is your vision for Saatchi & Saatchi since the merger with the Publicis Groupe? Will both companies eventually assume the same creative identity?

KR: Absolutely not. Publicis have a proud tradition, they believe in ‘holistic difference’. Saatchi & Saatchi want to be revered as the hot house for world changing creative ideas that transform our clients’ businesses, brands and reputation. We want to be in the top three at Cannes every year creatively. We want to be an ideas company. But we also have some conflicting clients. We have Toyota – Publicis, Renault. We have General Mills – they Nestlé. We have Procter & Gamble – they have L’Oréal. So, Maurice’s view is that we want to be one of the top four, and we want to offer different brands with different rationales with different cultures. So we’ll stay completely independent. “I’m on the management board of Publicis with Maurice Levy, with Roger Hault. And now hopefully in September we’ll have some new cousins with D’arcy, Leo Burnett and Dentsu, so that will be a terrific deal. We’ll become the fourth biggest company: number one in Europe, number two in the US. There’s a lot of opportunity in the Middle East where Leo Burnett are very strong. So, it’s going to be an exciting ride.

A: Have you been leaving your Lovemarks on the style of creativity used within Publicis Groupe. Are their creative teams adopting it?

KR: No, Lovemarks is a Saatchi & Saatchi idea. I’m sure that Publicis have their own ideas, they’ve done some wonderful work for L’Oréal, some great work for Renault. Our focus for all our people is to create and perpetuate Lovemarks through selling the most highly valued ideas. That’s what we want to do, we

want to transform our clients' brands into Lovemarks. Toyota have really bought into it, P&G think it's a fantastic idea. I've yet to meet a CEO when you say: "Do you want your brand to be respected, or loved and respected?" Every single CEO I've ever met says give me love and respect. Why wouldn't you? But in fact, we've got case studies now of the top 100 brands, when a brand becomes a Lovemark, we can prove that it then has loyalty beyond reason with its consumers. If consumers are loyal beyond reason that means they're going to pay whatever price, find it wherever it is, which means you are going to make bigger margins and bigger profits.

Whilst Lovemarks is an emotional idea that I think most of us aspire to as people, because we all want to love our parents, our family. We want to love the place we work really, and we want to love certainly our partners, as well as respect them. I think as well as the emotional side of it, Lovemarks are a financially lucrative idea too.

AA: How do you rate creativity in the Middle East?

KR: I think that you have got to stay in touch with the local and you've got to stay in touch with your own roots. The Middle East has a history of strong calligraphers, fantastic writers, great authors, wonderful poets, and magnificent artists. So, why isn't this seen in the work more? I think the reason is clients are too traditional, too conservative, too bureaucratic, too hierarchic.

Many clients in the Middle East, I believe, are characterised as the 'abominable no-man', they can say no, but they can't say yes, and they want advertising that is formulaic, that is process driven, that is category safe. So I think the creative talent is here in the Middle East, the history is here, the heritage is here, but the recession, tough clients, aggressive clients, are stifling it at the moment. What I hope is that the creatives who were there today (World Congress presentation) are more inspired to follow their instincts, to follow their emotions, and to use mystery, sensuality and intimacy in their work. They can do it.

AA: Do you consider the Middle East to be at a world standard in creativity?

KR: I think Cannes is the one show where the standards of creativity are judged globally. We can see improvement there I think because if the trend becomes more local, if the work becomes more local, if the work becomes braver, then I think you have the talent here. What it needs is freedom and courage and some clients to have both, to express it more.

AA: How do you see creativity making progress on the Internet?

KR: We live in the age where no one medium will replace another, so the Internet is here to stay. Right now the Internet is a fantastic medium for

information and it is being used creatively in a really poor mediocre way. Banner ads are like the most revolting things I've ever seen. That's really partly the agencies' fault, because in many ways, in the US and in the UK, they gave the Internet to 23 year old crazed, blonde beach boys, who knew how to use the technology, but didn't understand how to make emotional connections with consumers, and it's not about the technology, it's about the emotional equities. So, I think once it goes back into the creative department, to the people who really best understand emotional connections, it will work. It's a very intimate medium, it's one on one, it's very personalized, you can now hear music pretty well on there, so there are more senses being engaged – but it doesn't have the drama of the big screen. It doesn't have the drama of television, yet. But I think creativity will grow, and it needs to.

AA: You've been a regular visitor to Lebanon, have you seen any fundamental changes since you were last here?

KR: Yes, I have, and I think that Lebanon and the Lebanese people are just going through a little bit of a tough time. I think morale is down, the economy is tough, politically it's a really tough time. There's a lot of uncertainty, a lot of fear. Budgets have been slashed, a lot of young people are questioning whether there is a future here for them. There's a little bit of despondency. I'm used to seeing optimism, joy, independence, and a 'nothing is impossible' attitude, where Lebanese really say "You know, I don't really care what all these other people are trying to do to us, but we have the will and the history to prevail". But you know, its now 30 years that people have been suffering, and I've just felt that this time, it's in one of those troughs of despair. I really hope that they can find some inspiration within themselves, because no one else is going to help them. I hope they don't give up, because what Lebanon has to offer has been and is and will be unique, but they've certainly got it tough now.

AA: You do a lot of work with students throughout the world, have you considered working with and teaching students from the Middle East?

KR: Yes, I just was asked today by the AUB (American University of Beirut) whether I could come back and speak to them, and I said yes. So I'm going to give that a crack, and go and lecture at the AUB. It's a famous place, and I've never been there. Many famous people have graduated from AUB. I was just teaching at Stanford, a few weeks ago. I'm the CEO in residence at Cambridge University, so the AUB for me when I was growing up was a pretty groovy place, so I'd like to go there.

AA: The US had a very weak presence at the World Congress in Beirut, this is strange as the September 11th disaster was one of the main themes. What's your opinion in regard to this unofficial boycott?

KR: I don't think it's a boycott, I just think that in the US, they've got a lot of priorities since September 11th. It was the first time really that the war came to America, and Americans were feeling very secure – that they couldn't be violated, and that war and terrorism was something that happened to other people. I was there on September 11th, and watched everything from my offices. We watched people jumping from the windows. I had 500 people watching it, and they were shocked. So, I think America is recovering slowly and they are confused, concerned, and worried.

You've then seen Colin Powell come here with Arafat and Sharon, and I think that proved more difficult than he could have imagined. So, I guess Americans just took one look at this now, and said boy that's a big commitment to make in terms of timing and other priorities, you know the recession is still tough out there. So, I don't think it was a boycott, I think it was just unfortunate timing, confusion and uncertainty.

I know James Stengel, the global marketing officer from Procter & Gamble is talking to the Congress today, and he and I were together a week ago and I told him I was coming down. He's going to talk a lot about how P&G sees the Middle East, and what P&G thinks about local brands and Lovemarks and stuff. I'm pretty sure he would have liked to have been here, but I don't think he was asked till quite late in the piece, quite frankly, and he had a bunch of stuff that he couldn't cancel. So, he's taking the time out to do a video conference, which I think is pretty cool. The world's biggest advertiser, and he's the chief of their whole marketing operation, and he's going to do a Q & A as well, and he's committed to the Middle East.

AA: Clients around the world are becoming more demanding and focused in terms of targeting, the use of so many different media vehicles, and globalisation. In your opinion are creatives getting stuck with limitations because they now have to appeal to many different markets all in one blow?

KR: There's no point in being brilliant at the wrong thing, and clients are asking for the wrong thing. What creatives are here to do is to build an emotional connection and a Lovemark between a client's brand and a consumer. The way they do that is really irrelevant, creatives will just find what it is about the brand that makes it special for the consumer and then transfer it across every medium, so no, I don't think that it is a problem.