



News

UK
Europe
World
Business
Digital
People

Sport

Cricket
Fishing
General
Golf
Motor Racing
Rugby League
Rugby Union
Sports Politics
Tennis
Football

Argument

Leading Articles
Commentators
Have Your Say
Podium
Regular Columnists

Education

News
Business Schools
Careers Advice
Clearing
Higher
Schools
Student Money

Money

Property
Personal Finance

Travel

News & Advice
UK
Africa
Americas
Australasia & Pacific Rim
Europe
Middle East & Asia
Themes

Enjoyment

Books
Crosswords
Film
Food & Drink
Music
Photography
Theatre

29 September 2002 10:05 BDST

Home > [Independent](#)

Battle cry in adland: Saatchi's man in black blasts the 'abominable no-men'

He preaches love but hates management; he wants ideas but not information. Yet after achieving five years of profit growth in an ailing industry, Kevin Roberts must be doing something right. The advertising supremo talks to Leo Lewis

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Standing outside a sumptuous Barcelona penthouse hotel room, Kevin Roberts' PA gives fair warning that he tends to dress informally for interviews. Sure enough, when the chief executive of Saatchi & Saatchi opens the door he is standing grinning in boxer shorts and a T-shirt.

The colour scheme of this costume – all black – is part of the show. As well as a professional history with massive corporate names such as Pepsico and Gillette, Roberts' directorships – and life passions – include the New Zealand rugby union team. It is largely his promotional efforts that have built the All Blacks into a huge global brand.

Logic would suggest that an interview covering the current state of the advertising industry would have a similarly dark feel to it. The September results season has come and gone, and left media stocks nursing an even worse battering than the rest of the market. The share price of Publicis, the French parent company of Saatchi & Saatchi, has dwindled more than 60 per cent over the past couple of years, and it's exactly the same story at WPP and the rest of the giants in the advertising sector. Other chief executives are reluctant even to guess when the advertising downturn will end.

None of this, however, bothers Roberts, who dismisses the issue with a smirk and a wave of the hand: "I'm an optimist and what the world needs most of all right now is bucket loads of optimism. The role of business is to make the world better for everyone. There is no solution except capitalism, but it has to be inclusive or we're all screwed."

Since taking over Saatchi & Saatchi five years ago, Roberts has made it his mission to recast perceptions about the company, whose famous heyday was in the boom years of the 1980s.

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"I'm not in the advertising sector," he says. "I don't give interviews to Campaign where I talk about the industry. S&S is about ideas and I want it to be revered as a hothouse of ideas."

Pressed on the subject of grim-sounding analysts' reports and economists' predictions of further recession, Roberts leaps noisily out of his seat to perform what looks like a series of practice golf swings. "It's the pendulum society, you see? Analysts and markets are all part of this terrible herd mentality. They make their predictions, but I don't really care about that. Analysts? These were the guys that brought you the dot con – don't let us forget that."

But Roberts' obsession with ideas is based on more than just a desire to come up with a gimmick that sets Saatchi & Saatchi apart from its rivals. He launches into an explanation of why the economy has moved into the age of ideas.

"People get all excited, saying we now live in the age of information. That's a load of bull; we've lived in it for years. Parts of it are great. Yesterday I was in Capri reading online a copy of the Dominion [a New Zealand newspaper] that had been published four hours earlier," he says.

He then stretches his arms out over a giant desk covered in heaps of official-looking reports, faxes and other paper. "Look at all this crap," he groans. "Information on its own doesn't give us a competitive advantage. So now companies have realised this and started talking about the 'knowledge economy', about how they now employ a 'chief knowledge officer'. But that is also a load of bull. Everyone knows how to apply information – most companies are now full to the brim with tertiary-educated brains. What we actually live in is the age of the idea."

With the Roberts-led Saatchi & Saatchi now recast as an ideas company, the big question for its chief executive is how to keep coming up with the goods. So far, things seem to be going well. Under Roberts, Saatchi & Saatchi has delivered five straight years of profits growth, thriving on a number of big clients like Toyota and Sony that love the approach, and bucking the general trend of the past two years.

This focus on ideas has been behind numerous high-profile campaigns in which products or organisations have tried to transform the way people see them. With Carlsberg, for example, the commercials work round the idea of "If Carlsberg did ...", with one ad featuring female workers on a building site. Meanwhile, the agency broke new ground for the NSPCC with a shocking TV campaign using the idea of a cartoon child suffering abuse.

The concept of an "ideas drought" is clearly not something that keeps Roberts awake at night: "Run out of ideas? No way. It's the singer not the song. The reward will always go to the genius who plays it in a way it hasn't been played before."

To illustrate this point he produces a white, top-of-the-range I-pod – the Apple Macintosh device that plays music downloaded from

the internet. "You see this? Pure sensuality," he says, turning up the volume and letting it play Jeff Beck's "Hi-Ho Silver Lining".

Roberts is convinced, though, that the utmost care is needed in bringing ideas out. One of his biggest moans – and the subject of countless speeches he has made to a vast range of industries – is that, as he sees it, society is geared towards stamping on ideas. He uses as an example Procter & Gamble, the sprawling consumer products group of which he was once the marketing manager. Getting into P&G, he points out, is 10 times harder than winning a place at Harvard Business School.

"But the minute they get them in, they set about making them average," he says, "What I want to do is to move away from command and control and move towards unleash and inspire. You're a journalist, just look at newspapers," he says. "You're either a tabloid or a broadsheet – very limited. Ooh, the FT say they'll be pink because that'll stand out. Bring me the bucket please. Our whole system strangles ideas at birth."

Roberts places the blame for all this squarely on the shoulders of management – the various layers of corporate control that he finds his ideas constantly bashing against. He describes management as a horrible wedge of people who are all given enough authority to sit on an idea before it grows, but not enough to push through an idea that might change the way they do business for the better.

His pet name for these people, uttered with a voice of true disgust, is the "abominable no-men", and his public speeches provide regular opportunities for him to lambast their influence and praise any company that has managed to see beyond them.

Nor is he particularly impressed by the other current corporate buzzword of "leadership": "The trouble with that whole thing is that leaders need followers," he says. "I bet if I lift up that nice suit of yours, I'm not going to find the words 'born to follow' tattooed on your chest."

This attitude was at the heart of Roberts' attempts to revive the fortunes of Saatchi & Saatchi, which was, when he took it over, still reeling from the many issues that had arisen from the departure of founders Maurice and Charles Saatchi and the reorganisation of the agency.

As his reconstruction efforts began, he realised that the business of selling ideas to companies took his agency's remit beyond that of a standard advertising firm.

Roberts' controversial pronouncements on the state of management and marketing mean that his biggest challenge is to effect a change in the way his clients see both themselves and the rest of the world. It was with this in mind that, three years ago, he looked very carefully into a merger with the global consultancy firm McKinsey. "That company has two core competencies," he says. "One is the ability to stay in there with a client, and the other is the ability to bill. I mean, those guys really know how to put

together an invoice."

The merger idea did not come off, so Roberts has concentrated on building his company's selling point round his unique take on the world. All his business efforts now focus on one word: love.

To help his clients understand this, Roberts came up with the concept of "Lovemarks" – a term devised over "a number of beers". This has become the centrepiece of his lectures and business plan, and he eagerly points people in the direction of a website – lovemarks.com – where the concept is laid out. It is clearly popular: after proselytising about love in his lectures, he always ends up swamped by people desperate to make their brands lovable. The basis of the idea is that most products have now become commoditised, and companies need to be loved in order to stand out from the competition. "There's no such thing as a crap detergent or a crap car", as Roberts puts it.

While trademarks are useful to a company, Lovemarks go one step further, representing the ideal of a product or service that scores highly on a graph of love versus respect. He draws up this graph with little hearts along the "love" axis, and goes on to explain that if you love something, you happily pay a premium for it, and uses his wife as an example. He is so confident in his ability to define love that he lays out the criteria on another piece of paper, writing the words "mystery, sensuality and intimacy" in block capitals.

"Pick any one," he challenges. "Mystery? Take Red Bull. My kids talk all kinds of crap about how it has bull semen in it and how it was used in CIA thought experiments. And the official website just fuels all this mystery by denying none of it."

When it comes to his own loves, the All Blacks again figure centrally, though he does express a fondness for a large (black) Mont Blanc pen: "I love it: it really suits my big clumsy hands."

As he prepares himself for a lecture to a conference of market researchers, he breaks the habit of a lifetime to pronounce on the industry. "Look at it like this," he says, "P&G and Toyota have both increased their ad budgets. They believe a depressed economy is the best time to advertise. I like the Chinese proverb: 'in times of hurricanes, build windmills'."

Now fully clothed, Roberts is driven off to the lecture, muttering darkly about market researchers and their incessant use of charts and numbers. When he arrives, sure enough, two researchers for P&G are holding the stage backed with gigantic screens full of graphs and statistics. As Roberts prepares his head mike – to allow him expansive use of hand signals – his PA leans over: "Perfect start. He's going to destroy all this bullshit."

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