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Interview

I believe business is sexy and fun

BY DES DEARLOVE

Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, talks about his work guiding MBA students at Cambridge

Kevin Roberts is worldwide CEO of the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi. In October 2001, he became the inaugural CEO in Residence at the Judge Institute of Management at Cambridge University, the only position of its kind at a UK business school.

Roberts started his career in London in 1969 with the fashion designer Mary Quant and worked as a senior marketing executive for Gillette, Procter & Gamble and Pepsi Cola. He joined Saatchi & Saatchi as New York-based CEO in 1997. Today, the agency employs 7,000 people in 90 countries and has annual billings in excess of £4.5 billion.

Roberts lectures to business students on leadership, marketing and business practices. Co-author of *Peak Performance*, a study of the business lessons of successful sporting organisations, he is also a Senior Fellow of the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

You've been involved with MBAs in New Zealand for some time, but how did the Cambridge appointment come about?

Because Sandra Dawson, who runs the Judge Institute, is open, relentless and innovative. We met at a CEO summit hosted by Sandra at the Judge Institute for Procter & Gamble and their leading trading partners.

Sandra and I hit it off and she invited me back to Cambridge to talk to the MBAs.

I was intrigued by Cambridge as an idea and by the Judge as a new, aggressive business school with an historical icon (Cambridge — not Sandra!). From there, Sandra came up with the idea of establishing a CEO in Residence position and it appealed to me.

Why does a busy CEO like you want to be involved with teaching MBAs anyway?

That comes from my belief that the role of business is to make the world a better place for everyone. Business uniquely creates jobs, choices, opportunities and self-esteem. MBA students will impact business appreciably and quickly, so impacting MBAs seemed a grassroots way of helping. Frankly, I'm also disturbed by the amount of process and analysis that goes into MBA teaching so I felt a small dose of inspiration and imagination might help to redress this.

What exactly does the CEO in Residence role involve? Is it a

paid position?

It is not paid. The role involves my teaching MBAs, hosting think-tanks for interested students and faculty, mentoring MBA students and flying the Cambridge flag among key corporates. It also involves a dialogue with students over the internet and via the Judge Institute newsletter.

How does the mentoring scheme work?

I've been helping students with career choices, advice on how to prioritise their next five to ten years, and counsel on how to build on their strengths.

Three examples. Charlotte Read graduated and came to visit me in New York for advice on what kind of job she should apply for, how to leverage her MBA and how she should best make an impact during the interview process. We spent a couple of hours in New York talking about her strengths and her dreams before developing a suggested approach. She e-mailed me a few days ago to say she had made shortlists in three target companies.

Rina Tan just completed a research programme on Peak Performance in Saatchi & Saatchi as part of her MBA thesis. We have offered her a job as an HR director.

Tim Wharton just graduated. We are interviewing him at S&S London.

In a recent presentation you talked about mystery, sensuality and intimacy as words not usually heard at management school. How important is the emotional dimension in business today?

Mystery, sensuality and intimacy are at the heart of turning great brands into what I call Lovemarks — brands that have moved from a place in a market to the heart of a culture. We are overloaded with information and knowledge. As coaches and teachers, it is our responsibility to ensure we unleash and inspire our students to be the best that they can be. This involves providing them with the right tools, but it also involves building their connecting and emotional intelligence.

You've also said that rational man is a myth and good riddance to him. What about the rational manager?

Management is a necessary tool. To win today, you have to be fast. This means you need a couple of simple processes, which work in time, every time.

Learning management discipline is vital. But this does not provide competitive advantage. The companies that will win will be those that can uniquely inspire their people to perform at peak in driving the company's purpose. What we need to improve upon is inspiring the emotional side.

Can managers be created in the classroom?

Managers can be coached, led and inspired in the classroom. In fact, it is a terrific environment to develop in.

What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of MBAs?

Smart MBAs come with a great attitude, a disciplined approach, a rigorous work ethic and good working knowledge of teams. They are also financially and commercially literate. New programmes need to focus on what I call the I and the E words: inspiration, intuition, imagination and innovation; enchantment, empathy, energy and edge.

Is managing the Cambridge University MBA brand any different to managing the Pepsi brand?

It is important for Cambridge to manage its brand. It must compete with Harvard, Stanford and London for recruits, teachers and funding. It needs, therefore, to be marketed internally and externally in the same way as Manchester United, British Airways or Ariel.

What have you learnt from the MBA students you've met?

I use the MBAs to trial-run new ideas and new thinking revolving around culture and branding. They provide instant feedback in an innocent, unconstrained way.

What do you think they've learnt from you?

Business is meaningful; business is fun; advertising is a great field; it's OK to be different; emotional connections are what counts; and Saatchi & Saatchi is a great place to work if you're an ideas person!

What are the most important qualities CEOs needs?

They need to be competitive, passionate, and restless ideas people who can inspire highly- talented creative people to be the best they can be.

How many MBA graduates does Saatchi & Saatchi hire?

We don't measure our recruitment in numbers. We like emotional, creative MBAs. I hope that we can attract the brightest from Cambridge every year.