

ITALIA ECONOMY

SAATCHI & SAATCHI / CEO KEVIN ROBERTS SPEAKS OUT

THE ADMAN WHO SELLS EMOTIONS

He runs a network with clients all over the world, but he's against globalization. He flunks Europe and the USA, but passes Italy, France and Ireland. And he criticises creatives who debase women. "They're the most influential social group and have the greatest buying power," he says. His weak point? New Zealand.

"Having reached the age of 53, I want to dedicate all of my energies to convincing people that the real mission of business is to improve the world. My role today is that of an inspirer: I inspire people to give their best at all times."

Arduous as the task may seem, Kevin Roberts can point to his results as CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi. Entering to head the network in crisis in 1997, with declining earnings and clients on the run, he brought one of the noblest names in world advertising back to the top. And he's become a celebrity, spreading his message summed up in the word "lovemarks" - which means brands with emotions and a heart, able to set up positive relationships with consumers.

Born in the UK but resident for years in New Zealand, Roberts teaches in three universities and travels around the world holding conferences. On his way through Milan on September 1, he granted *Economy* this exclusive interview.

Don't you think the world's headed in a direction opposite to the values of love, respect and harmony that you preach?

The Americans are, certainly. Or at least the exclusive an profit-seeking policy of George Bush is. The Americans don't give a hoot about Europe, China, the planet's millions of poor. Globalization has really been Americanization, which meant that McDonald's appeared in all countries. But local communities rebel now and vindicate the right to have their best local production alongside the global trademarks.

Europe doesn't make it as a "lovemark" either.

Of course, because Europe doesn't exist: it's merely a commercial idea to contrast the power of the United States. Strictly speaking, there isn't even an "Italian," only a Roman or a Milanese. Or maybe only an Inter FC fan or a Milan FC fan.

But you still include Italy in your gallery of "lovemarks."

Yes, because Italy has mystery, sensuality, feeling. Only two other countries in the world can be considered "lovemarks": France and Ireland.

Looking around, don't you think that "lovemarks" have a tendency to become "sexmarks"?

Counting on sex for sales is a mistake. Sex is only part of the greatest human emotion, which is love. Sensuality is important for its mystery. Advertising today carries too much informative content. In a world pervaded by information, the most interesting thing is what isn't known, mystery. And in this sense, 90% of Italian advertising is wrong.

Why?

Because it debases women, for example; it considers them stupid and makes them appear as such. But women are the future: they're way ahead of advertising, and they're the most powerful social group in the world. Eighty percent of new businesses in the US are founded by women who, thanks to Internet, can work from home. Women sign 86% of all checks and purchase 70% of all cars sold.

On the subject of cars, how do you see the Fiat crisis.

Fiat's paying a high price for the mistake of losing touch with its clients to privilege engineers. I'm very sorry, because it's a brand I like: thirty years ago my wife and I made love for the first time in a Fiat 500. I don't think Fiat's going to make a comeback. But I hope I'm wrong.

From an economic standpoint, advertising's been losing ground for quite a while - and not only in Italy. Is it time that companies begin investing again?

Tough times are the best times for intelligent and creative agencies. One thing has to be understood: the era of information is over, because today everyone can access information. The era of knowledge is over, too, because highly qualified resources can be found on the market at any time. Today we're in the era of ideas. Ideas will be the most valuable currency of the future.

Which mediums will be most important?

In terms of numbers, the main medium will remain TV. But the greatest growth potential will be that of the pos, where the purchasing decision takes place and where it's possible to offer people truly involving multisensorial experiences. Italy is definitely behind in this.

Why is Internet advertising so uninteresting?

Because Internet's a source of information used in a private and individual way when we're not receptive to advertising messages. Then, because of its unfortunate dimensions. And for its sound quality, which is terrible.

Which economic sectors need most to invest in communication?

First of all distribution, because it's advantaged by emotional contact with its clients, who are mostly women. Instead, it's still focused exclusively on prices. Second, products of daily use: these should invest in communication, because they operate in a highly competitive scenario. Last on the list, telecommunications, that address only our rationality and do it in a loud and irritating way. Among the emerging sectors, genetics and bioengineering are about to become an industrial sector capable of exceptional development.

In Italy over recent weeks there's been a debate on the "Yellow peril." How is it that no-brand low-cost Asiatic products are a threat for Western economy?

It's possible, because Western brands are dead. They haven't known how to transform themselves and create strong bonds with consumers. They've offered functionality, service -all of the rational values- but they haven't been able to reach consumer's hearts and create loyalty. As a result, they've become vulnerable to price.

You've recently published a book called *Peak Performance*, in which you hold that the most powerful generator for a company's success is "inspiration." What does that mean?

Any company today has to have a leadership able to define strategies and a management able to do the right things, but these are no longer competitive advantages, they're prerequisites. The difference is made by "inspirational" people, those you turn to when you have a problem, the ones who know how to appreciate ideas and how to create sharing. In Saatchi & Saatchi 65% of our personnel are women: because they're curious, they know how to listen and they know how to share.

Are you born "inspirational," or can you learn to be?

Not counting exceptional cases, such as Jesus Christ, Ghandi or Mandela, inspiration can be learned, and in fact we teach it. The theory of "Peak Performance" is based on the analysis of some great sports teams who realized excellent results in different disciplines.

Yes, such as Team New Zealand, who lost the America's Cup to the Swiss...

Kevin Roberts collapses on the couch and throws his head back. Then he admits: "They were superior in everything: boat, crew, organization. Three to nothing without hope. Fantastic Alinghi!"

by Elisabetta Grandi.