

Whither the big brand?

By Gary Silverman, Financial Times
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Kevin Roberts, chief executive of the Saatchi & Saatchi advertising agency, can barely control himself when he flips through the pages of fashion magazines. All the ads featuring pouty young models in moodily lit locales just drive him wild. It's not that Roberts finds the enticements particularly alluring. Rather, he sees the ads as expensive evidence that the fashion industry is falling behind the times. In his view, the revolution in communications symbolised by the rise of the Internet has created a different kind of consumer who must be approached in a different way.

It is no longer enough to get respect from consumers, he says. To succeed, marketers need love; yes, really - his new book is called *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands*, and there is not a tongue in his cheek.

"There is a whole intimacy thing happening in fashion now," he says. "Consumers have said, 'Enough is enough. I want to express myself with a brand that empathises with me - that understands me. If you read *Vogue* or *Glamour*, or even *Vanity Fair*, there are a hundred pages of fashion ads and they all look the same," Roberts says.

"Consumers have taken charge of their own destiny; they have moved away from being spoken to and being dictated to," he says. "The fashion industry needs to reestablish emotional connection to the consumer rather than distancing themselves.

Roberts says the goal of any company should be to become a "Lovemark" - which means it has won love and respect from consumers. In his view, brands are products that win only respect; fads win only love.

Without either, a product is a commodity. With both, a product has an emotional connection that leads to a long-term relationship with consumers. In short, they'll keep buying, no matter what fashion does.

There are some Lovemarks in fashion already. In the UK, Roberts believes Burberry has probably achieved this status thanks to its "liberating" chief executive, Rose Marie Bravo.

Gucci was close to being a lovemark when Tom Ford served as its creative director, Roberts says, but it is a brand for now because without Ford it earns only respect.

Other high-fashion brands who need to boost themselves to Lovemarks, he says, are Chanel, Christian Dior and Dolce Gabbana.

Roberts says Tommy Hilfiger demonstrates the difficulties in keeping love alive - it had it all for a time and lost it. Hilfiger went from being a brand to a lovemark when it was adopted by the hip-hop crowd. But when the rappers moved on and the label embraced a red-white-and-blue theme, it became a commodity.

He believes the challenge for fashion labels is to develop connections with consumers through a variety of channels - not only advertising or design. Case in point: the Christian Dior store in St Tropez. Roberts gives Dior high marks for re-inventing itself.

In terms of design, moving from high-end haute couture to more street-wise fashion. "They are trying to connect," he says. "The product is sexy, hip, urban, clubby, European and young." But the whole effect is wasted when a consumer enters the store, he says. "The people are, let's say, 'professional', but somewhat on the arrogant side. They changed their product but they haven't changed their experience. That is really typical of the industry."

Just like the models in the magazines, it sends the wrong message, Roberts suggests. Being a lovemark means never saying you are untouchable.