

PRODESIGN

THE MAGAZINE FOR PROFESSIONAL DESIGNERS AND THEIR CLIENTS

december 2004 / january 2005



KEVIN ROBERTS AND THE BRANDING DEBATE • WIN THIS OTIS FRIZZELL PAINTING
NEW VIDEO GAME BY BINARY-STAR • PETER BROMHEAD'S MODERNIST MISSION
JACK YAN'S PC FASHION MAGAZINE • THE UNUSUAL INTERIOR OF MAORI TELEVISION
GULLIVERS TRAVEL GROUP'S OFFICE REVIVAL • PANPRINT CALENDAR PREVIEW
32-PAGE RETAIL DESIGN SPECIAL • AN AWESOME GIVE-AWAY FOR TASCHEN FANS

HOW DEEP IS YOUR LOVE?

THE IDEALISM OF LOVE IS THE NEW REALISM OF BUSINESS... OR SO KEVIN ROBERTS HAS WRITTEN. BUT SHOULD BRANDING STRATEGISTS REALLY BE ATTEMPTING TO EVOKE OUR DEEPEST HUMAN EMOTIONS? WE ASKED ROBERTS ALONG WITH TWO OTHER INDUSTRY PLAYERS TO DEBATE THE MATTER



THE PANEL

KEVIN ROBERTS IS CEO WORLDWIDE OF SAATCHI & SAATCHI. HE'S THE AUTHOR OF **LOVEMARKS, THE FUTURE BEYOND BRANDS** (REED, 2004) IN WHICH HE WRITES THAT "BY BUILDING RESPECT AND INSPIRING LOVE, BUSINESS CAN MOVE THE WORLD". ROBERTS TRAVELS CONSTANTLY, OVERSEING A TEAM OF MORE THAN 7000 PEOPLE. HE HAS HOMES IN NEW YORK, ST TROPEZ AND AUCKLAND. (WWW.SAATCHIKEVIN.COM)

JOHNNIE MOORE JOHNNIE MOORE IS A UK-BASED FACILITATOR AND CONSULTANT WITH A STRONG BACKGROUND IN ADVERTISING, MARKETING AND BUSINESS. IN RECENT YEARS HE HAS WRITTEN AND SPOKEN WIDELY ON "PUTTING THE HUMANITY BACK INTO BRANDING" AND, WITH 14 OTHERS, HE CO-AUTHORED **BEYOND BRANDING** (KOGAN PAGE 2004) WHICH PRESENTS "IDEAS FOR HOW BRANDING CAN MOVE BEYOND ITS CURRENT LIMITATIONS, SO THAT IT TRULY MEETS THE NEEDS OF SOCIETY." HE LIVES IN LONDON. (WWW.JOHNNIEMOORE.COM)

GAIL ANDERSON WORKED AS A GRAPHIC DESIGNER/ART DIRECTOR FOR OVER 20 YEARS AND IS NOW THE HEAD OF FACULTY OF DIGITAL MEDIA STUDIES AT THE DESIGN AND ARTS COLLEGE OF NEW ZEALAND. SHE IS ALSO AN ARTIST/DESIGNER AND EARLIER IN 2004 SHE HAD AN EXHIBITION CALLED **UN=BRAND YOURSELF** WHICH EXPLORED ANTI-CONSUMERISM MESSAGES. SHE LIVES ON THE EDGE OF A VOLCANO IN BANKS PENINSULA. GAIL.ANDERSON@DAC.AC.NZ

PRODESIGN Is it right to link deep emotions such as love with brands of products? Shouldn't these emotions be reserved for relationships and fellow humans?

KEVIN ROBERTS Love is the highest order emotion, with a myriad of nuances and interpretations. You can love your family. Your dog. Your cat. Your house. Your car. Your holiday. Your local pub. Your rugby team. Your mobile. Your morning espresso. Your evening shoes. And not always in that order. They all have meaning. They're all relationships. They can be deep, shallow or mellow. They can be organic, electric or plastic. And their owners don't suffer outsiders ranking them, prioritizing, excluding them. Love is a force without boundary or category. It transcends everything.

JOHNNIE MOORE I think commercial efforts to invest products with human qualities are at best a form of poetic licence. At worst they trivialise the rich possibilities of human experience. I may talk of "loving" a product or service, but only in the sense of "liking a lot". If that sense of the word is confused with deep human love, we get into all sorts of trouble. Deep love is for living creatures not for objects and abstract ideas. In marketing-speak, I fear that the word love is getting confused with mere lust and addiction.

GAIL ANDERSON I liken the wanton exploitation of our emotions by the giants of global consumerism to the exploitation that these same power brokers extend to the work forces of the third world. These global business powerhouses see the planet's natural resources in pretty much the same way – use the people till they drop, use the resources till they dry up – so what? As long as we make plenty of money for the faceless wealthy who reside in the sacred land of shareholders-ville, where the living is easy, the gates are high, the money endless and where consideration for the rights of fellow human beings is represented by a small annoying voice whispering in the back of some distant Sunday school memory.

So if global business can reap havoc on human and natural resources what's the problem about it getting stuck into our most intimate emotions. And, I ask myself, why the hell not? It's open slather on everything, isn't it? With a divorce rate of 40 per cent clearly relationships with our fellow human beings

aren't what they're cracked up to be.

In fact, relationships are pretty much like those new jeans you whacked on the credit card last month – remember the ones you just loved, made you look thinner, younger and hipper and just had to have. The first couple of times you wore them they lived up to the carefully crafted logo and flatteringly cool positioning statement but once they had been through the electronic mastery of your washing machine they kind of never felt as good again. They were then relegated to the 'just something to wear' end of the wardrobe until they limped towards the 'didn't remember I had them' dark recess of your mind. Not unlike many relationships – was that my partner, the person I vowed to love until the end of time, or the other person that helps pay the Visa bill and keeps me awake snoring like a band saw.

I ask myself endlessly, does the advertising industry own the problem or has our lust for self indulgence rendered precious emotions such as 'love' into a banal form of introspective obsession that is conveniently fed by the endless wash of media messaging? Is it a case of the chicken and the egg – do we consume to feed our egos or do our egos feed our consumption?

PD Isn't linking emotions with brands a cost-free way of adding non-existent value to products?

KR Try telling an iPod user they're buying a functional product not a life-enhancing experience. They wouldn't believe you. There are no brands without emotion. No emotion, no relationship. No relationship, no purchase. Offer a transaction? You're dead. We're in a commodity blizzard. Consumers have seen it all before. They don't care about transactions, commodities, information or rationality. We're 80 per cent emotional and 20 per cent rational. What interests consumers are deep relationships. Brands that understand them that belong to them. Brands that enhance their experience.

JM Actually, it's mostly very expensive. Countless millions are spent on advertising in an effort to create some kind of emotional value for consumers. I'd prefer that money to be spent on service and on product innovation. I hope and believe that as the world becomes more connected and transparent, it's getting harder to create pseudo-value through advertising and spin.

GA Branding is not about making a cell phone that doesn't give you brain cancer. They don't focus on that because the sector of the population that's concerned about their health is not as big as the portion of the population who want to look good and have the latest brand.

PD Kalle Lasn, editor of *Adbusters* has likened the ubiquity of branding in our culture with the pollution in our environment. He writes "we have absolutely no idea what this constant advertising babble is doing to us." What do you think of that stance?

KR It's skewed. Yes there's an advertising avalanche. But as David Ogilvy said, the consumer is not a moron. She can spot a lie a billion miles away.

The consumer is in charge. She's fully empowered. She's not cynical or duped. She's totally into her world of incredible choice and she knows that advertising connects her to that world; she's aware that all these messages lead her to products, services and experiences that can make her life a little bit better.

The idea that advertising is morally bankrupt is hopelessly wrong. First, bad advertising (95 per cent of it) gets ignored. Second, advertising turns enterprise into progress. Third, advertising that misleads or exaggerates today is commercial suicide. Consumers are savvy, networked, proud and brutal. Anything inauthentic and you get nailed. Plus, have you dropped by an anti-brand wrangler's ranch lately? You'll find he's wearing Levis, sipping Beaujolais, surfing Google and listening to I-Tunes.

JM I think the level of marketing messaging – ads, mailers, product placement etc – has become a form of pollution. I think it tends to demean the quality of our lives in a series of small bites.

Although I defend the right of organisations to advertise their wares, I give my own support to those that focus on delivering service efficiently, with respect for the community they operate in – without excessive bragging.

GA We have a far greater understanding of the damaging effects of good old-fashioned pollution than we have of the communication pollution that attacks our psyche at every turn. The insidious and insatiable determination global business has to

luring us to consume thoughtlessly has provoked a truly concerning twist to the consumerist story. Young people have begun to build filtering mechanisms that seem to subconsciously sift through the deluge of messaging forced upon them, rendering them able to only digest what they want to digest. This censoring of messaging has provoked the race to develop strategies like Kevin's *Lovemarks* in the attempt to chip away remorselessly at these self-imposed barriers to communication receptivity. What needs to be remembered is that these censorship mechanisms are an attempt to limit the damage over-messaging is having on over stretched minds. It's a case of the marvel of human adaptation rising to the fore attempting to minimise possible psychological melt down.

So what does the advertising industry do to turn up the volume on the 'babble', it gets up front and personal, Love yourself, love that shampoo. Be yourself, be that brand, it's you, it fits your like a well-worn emotion only more reliable. The babble tells us to indulge ourselves and we feel comfort side stepping the guilt indulgence lays on our over polluted minds, Give me a break, I love my Alfa, It never asks me to take out the trash, has premenstrual tension or wants to talk deep and meaningful when the AB's are thrashing the Aussies, I love that baby and it loves me too – we have the perfect relationship. But sadly that deep and meaningful talk you really want to avoid is just on hold, it's waiting to jump on you when you least expect it and demand that you put your life into some sort of perspective. It's possible to tolerate the babble for a while but like chewing gum on the pavement eventually it just gets annoying trying to avoid it and the rubbish tin is the best place for it. The babble ends up in the psychological trash leaving us uninformed, confused and frustrated by the fact that even though the media is shouting at us we can't seem to hear a word they are saying.

PD Can branding be used in a positive way – beyond selling products? How can the cultural and creative skills of advertising companies be used to make the world a better place?

KR What is the role of business? Of course, it has to make money. But that's about validity, not rationale. The role of business is to make the world a better place for everybody. Brands are at the heart of this not just because they meet needs, fit values, respond to desires and deliver dreams. They represent who we are, what we stand for and all that we can be. With consumers in power, advertising has never been more

important. Consumers want a better life and they'll reward it with loyalty beyond reason. So advertisers who want to stay around have to shift from making mind-numbing ads to delivering world-changing ideas. It could be anything from a bed you float on to a campaign that fights AIDS. Creative execution and cultural knowledge are signature strengths in advertising. We're going to see these taken to a whole new level.

JM Branding has become a dirty word in many circles because of some of the nonsense done in its name. I hope the future will not belong to the brands that shout the loudest but those that treat stakeholders with integrity. I would like the advertising industry to rethink its approach so that it stops playing the role of cunning manipulator of public opinion. Instead of creating implausible ideals, it could support more authentic communication. That may be too much to expect of some agencies but I believe it will be increasingly effective.

GA Like litter on the foot path one day we all got sick to death of standing on the chewing gum and we all decided to stop spitting out of the car window and put it in the rubbish tin instead. Maybe this will happen with communication pollution as well. Maybe the skills of the creatively talented will give us all recycling bins we can fill with nourishing emotions like empathy, self responsibility, honour and respect for our fellow human beings. The skilled creative minds that fill the hallowed halls of the advertising industry are well versed in delivering the 'doctrine', whatever that 'doctrine' maybe. When the same old song of capitalism no longer gets radio play and the public find the babble too tedious to bother ingesting, the way may clear for brand to ease up on the emotional manipulation and get back to its roots. I don't know if it will make the world a better place, but it sure will be less highly strung, paranoid and down right neurotic.

PD Kevin, you write in *Lovemarks* that "humans are natural consumers". Is there a limit to consumerism though? Can there be too much consumerism?

KR No. But there are limits to unsustainable consumerism. Do the French eat and drink too much? Yes. American's? Yes. Is France obese? No. America? Affirmative. Excess is fundamentally a question of quality not quantity. In an uneven market reality, the critical solutions are in

calibrating individual lifestyle and behaviour not closing down production and enterprise. Solutions, policies. Incentives and conditions for responsible choice are incredibly important. What you can't do is restrict personal, individual choice. If it's out there and a consumer decides she wants it, she'll have it. In the consumer republic you can't impose your morals on someone else's trip to the supermarket.

JM There's a big difference between a natural desire to eat food, build shelter and climb up the hierarchy of needs, and an endorsement of a particular system for meeting those needs. Rampant consumerism is unsustainable and fails to create the satisfaction it appears to promise.

GA Too much of a good thing can make you sick, the first few wines went down real easy but after too many the hangover the next day made you seriously consider ever drinking another drop in your life. Humans are most definitely natural consumers, so are earth worms – all they do is eat earth, eat earth then die. Apart from the obvious differences between your average human and average earth worm, our ability to decide when enough is enough is the big one. When the cost of consumerism is fraught with personal compromise then perhaps consumerism will be slotted back into the realms of a 'healthy interest' rather than obsessive compulsive self gratification. A few million people are starting to get the sneaking suspicion that all our consuming is doing dire things to the planet, to the global economy, to the poor souls that make all the 'stuff' and to our collective state of mental health.

When even the wealthiest countries owe trillions in national debt and the average household owes way more than it earns, the warning bells are starting to cut through the consumerist babble. Maybe the limit to consumerism will manifest itself as a collective 'burnout' of the endurance required to finance it. When I say finance I mean more than just the money – it's the whole deal, the emotional bank balance is in the red and many of us have the nasty feeling the bank manager is about to put a limit on our overdraft. Call it self preservation, call it human resilience, call it whatever you like but when sociological indulgence teeters on the brink of madness history shows us that collapse is generally around the corner and those that keep their heads down long enough to avoid the blast are there to pick up the pieces and start all over again.