

Quattroruote Magazine – March 2005

Kevin Roberts - The Guru Who Invents Emotions.

Cars have to win people's hearts: a communication wizard says so. And who also explains why the auto industry risks ending up under accusal like the tobacco industry.

To see him arrive in the lobby of a great London hotel, you wouldn't say that Kevin Roberts is the top manager of one of the world's largest advertising agencies (Saatchi & Saatchi has 7000 employees in 90 countries); rugby shirt, jeans and multicolored shoes that frankly clash with the image people usually have of a successful businessman. But a few minutes are enough to realize that Roberts' force - a point of reference in today worlds of design, media and brands, resides in ideas and in the rousing enthusiasm he shows in explaining them.

Does design have to stir emotion? And if so, what future are we moving toward?

First of all, let's move from a fundamental concept: the car is part of popular culture because it represents freedom and independence. Also, cars have become the best way to express one's individuality in an increasingly conformistic and globalizing universe. On this score it's hardly casual that the trend today in the USA is toward personalization, thanks also to the boom of car brands like Scion that make the possibility of setting up the car as you please, its strong point. It goes without saying that cars have made great technological progress over the past 10 years; even in developing countries an acceptable level of basic engineering, made of quality, durability and dependability is taken for granted.

Then what direction should car development take? From a technical standpoint, the manufacturers concentrate on environment, developing alternative means of propulsion. But in my opinion the big battle will be waged in the area of personal expression; the target will be hit when the interior of the car has the same contents as the home livingroom. The basic design of the driver and passenger compartment has been the same for 50 years. In less than five years the instrument panel will no longer be at the center of the dash, driver and passenger will no longer be divided and interiors will be designed by Mark Newson or Philip Starck.

From the original concept of form and function the trend will move toward daily pleasure, an element that's now beginning to be faced. Masao Inoue, the man who designed the Toyota Prius, talked to me about the feeling that's generated by silence: it's a sensation that brings tranquillity, and the entire car is created around this idea.

Can design cover the defects of bad planning?

In our world there's no space left for mistakes. Any product has to be well thought-out, have the right price, an adequate sales and assistance network, a clear idea of positioning. But the "only" quality will no longer be sufficient. The future will be in the way this product makes me feel: they all should target emotions. From the time he was an unknown manufacturer, Enzo Ferrari always understood this very well: his cars are technically the ultimate, but above all they're an anthem to the sensuality inherent in a mechanical device.

How can you reconcile emotion with the desire many manufacturers have to excessively widen their product offer?

Badly. In my opinion the choice of elite producers like BMW and Mercedes to widen their product offer disproportionately is senseless: they're diluting their brand value. The proliferation of models, the attempt to please everyone, the intention to produce Mercedes for everybody, are mistaken and contradictory ideas. From a marketing standpoint, all of this leads to watering down the brand. And I don't seem to see similar intentions at P & G or Coca-Cola. The multiplication of model types is fine for generalistic producers, but for luxury brands it's extremely risky. If the quality of Mercedes is plummeting, it's not by chance.

Your book "Lovemarks" is dedicated to brands. One of the tenets of your philosophy is the respect that companies must demonstrate toward their customers: but how can respect be combined with profit?

It isn't all that hard. Just construct a good product, one that always works, and sell it at a reasonable price. The real problem is creating a loyalty that goes beyond "simple" rationality. I buy a certain thing because I trust it, but this isn't enough. To make an auto-example: I'm willing to pay more for a Pirelli tire than for a Bridgestone of equal performance. Why? Because I grew up looking at its calendar, because the name of the company is on the Inter jerseys, because now Pirelli has a line of sportswear that I like.

The same holds true for Ducati or for Vespa: I don't care whether Honda or Suzuki make better bikes: Vespa reminds me of my youth, of Quadrophenia, of The Who, of the Italian movies of the '50s. You have to realize that consumers make decisions based on emotions. I believe this also holds true for a magazine like "Quattroruote": you can't reasonably think that a magazine like yours is so deeply rooted in the culture of a country without an emotional content that goes beyond simple information. In your opinion, when I bought a Ferrari could I afford it? No. Was it a good investment? No again. But I bought it anyway, and it was an experience that's remained with me all these years.

What are you favorite "Lovemarks"?

Italy's Brembo is incredible: how can a brake, a component so apparently heartless, become a brand? And yet it's become one. But "my" brand's Apple: the iPod is a perfect object: beyond having mystery, it's a perfect example of usability.

Do you share the impression that many car manufacturers snub the desire for simplicity that's asserting itself in many fields?

The buzzword today is "Less is best." Why's the iPod so successful? Because it's simple. It has many functions, but not too many, and they're all easily intuitible. In many electronics companies, it's a fetish: the idea is always 'the more the better', while what consumers want more than anything else is easy use. Simplicity's the key.

You often say that Italy is the Mecca of design. Why?

Not only for cars, but also for fashion, and for soccer... Italy's the global leader in design. In my opinion one of the reasons for this role is that 92% of Italian companies have less than eight employees.

Small is still beautiful, therefore?

Exactly. You always return to the concept of simplicity. Design doesn't come from committees or groups of people, but from individual inspiration. Italy doesn't have America's desire to be a great and powerful community, but the Italian wants to be individually grandiose.

Who designs beautiful cars today?

Renaults are very interesting, a few even fascinating. They can be liked or disliked, but they have a basic idea, they say something, they're recognizable. Nissan's also done some excellent things over the past four or five years: the Audi "TT" wasn't bad. But my favorite is the "Prius," which is the best example of how to make refined technology of excellent design available to the public. As for negative judgements, I think the Volkswagen Phaeton was a bizarre idea, that Mercedes' Maybach sends a completely mistaken signal in times like these and the Fiat also leaves me rather disappointed.

Saatchi & Saatchi handles the worldwide advertising for Toyota: are you obliged to admit that the Japanese -in terms of design- have fallen behind?

I don't deny it, but wait and you'll see something new. When the Japanese made their debut in the sector back in the '70s, everybody made fun of their utilities: now they're in the lead. And when Toyota launched the Lexus in the '90s, nobody in the US thought it would last. Today that brand has gone past all of the Europeans. Now that they've asserted themselves technically and commercially, even Tokyo's beginning to work on style. As someone who knows them well, I know they're betting heavily on a design oriented toward the user; more, they want to overcome the "world car" concept, developing targeted solutions for each of the world's four basic markets.

What do you think of the insistent use of vintage design. Does it show a lack of originality?

Vintage as such isn't a bad philosophy; in the long run it's a way to link past, present and future. Faithful copies of old lines are a mistake, though; intelligent use has to be made of the stylistic features of the past, as a few people are now doing. The Chrysler PT Cruiser, for example, has been a simple and nostalgic homage to the past. To the contrary, it seems to me that Fiat's Trevi says something: it's wanted to create a clear link with the past, pointing toward the future at the same time. From this point of view, the Volkswagen New Beetle wasn't bad either.

As an expert, who does the best car advertising?

Most car advertising stinks. You always see the same things: cars that race through an imaginary world. Not counting the typically commercial messages completely focused on price and dealer's offers.

If I really have to name names, I think Volkswagen does great advertising around the world. So does Audi, if only occasionally

Do you love cars?

Of course! And I think that anybody should have a Ferrari at least once in his life. It isn't easy, I concede but it's worth it. Even the brakes are sexy on those cars. At the moment, I have two Priuses. Respect for the environment and sustainable development represent the new challenges for the automobile industry - if it doesn't want to become Society's Number One Enemy as happened for tobacco.

PERSONAL FILE

- British, he's lived in New Zealand since 1989 (says it's the best choice he ever made) but he's usually stationed in New York.
- Before becoming head of Saatchi & Saatchi, he worked for Gillette, P &G and Pepsi Cola.
- He's a great sports fan - wild about rugby.
- He teaches sustainable business in New Zealand and Ireland.

"Today's trend is that of personalization. Scion's success in the US, where the young love it for the ways it can be set up, proves it."