

Consumer Is Boss
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He is in love with his pen. He fiddles with it, puts it down on his desk and gazes at it. It's a Mont Blanc, a roller ball. He can even put his adoration into words: 'It's a chunky, friendly pen – most pens are too thin, they're for sissies, and you can't write with them. Ah, but this pen is amazingly sensual. And it's called Master. Brilliant, isn't it?'

The pen is black. It couldn't be any other colour. Because black is the hallmark of Kevin Roberts, CEO Worldwide (chairman of the executive board) of advertising giant Saatchi & Saatchi. He always wears black. It doesn't matter if it's a suit or casual, as long as it's black. Is it a statement? You bet ('Just try going to a meeting with four men dressed in black, I can tell you it makes an impression'). But black is also the ultimate fan's pure expression of loyalty, because black is the colour of the All Blacks, the New Zealand rugby team that hails from his favourite country and far-off home base.

Black suits this 55-year-old guru. And with so many performances around the world, 'KR' can justifiably call himself a guru these days. Here's the schedule for two average weeks with Kevin: Thursday in Cincinnati, Friday in Tokyo, Saturday in Beijing, then Shanghai, Hong Kong, and to New York via Paris, jump over to Chicago, weekend in San Francisco, then a few days at his former school in his English birthplace of Lancaster, and five days in St. Tropez at his third house (on the golf course).

'I only talk about love and emotion.'

And when he refers to love, he's talking about consumers' love. Love for a Mont Blanc, love for the iPod with the Bose speakers behind him in his transparent office on the sixteenth floor of the Saatchi head office in SoHo, New York. The man that is at the helm of an 'Ideas Company' with 138 offices in 82 countries has the Hudson at his feet. To his left he has a view of the Statue of Liberty and to the right the Empire State Building. This is the birthplace of the Big Idea: the notion that consumers long for an emotional relationship with a brand or product, that he or she really has to love it. He first presented this belief in his book *Lovemarks - The Future Beyond Brands*, which sold 150 thousand copies last year, was published in fourteen languages, and will be published in a new, extensive edition in the autumn.

'Branding is dead,' is Roberts' message.

‘Simply putting a branded product in the market, no matter how good it is, simply isn’t enough these days. You have to go much further.’

‘In the past everything boiled down to respect. You were willing to pay more because you respected the brand. You bought Nivea cream because you trusted it. But today there are equally good creams made in Japan, America or Belgium. And every shampoo makes your hair soft and shiny, every soft drink is fizzy, every beer tastes good and they all get you drunk. So which product do you choose?’

The emotional value is decisive. Research from the British agency QiQ reveals that companies can ask 20 to 200 percent more for their products if consumers feel attached to it: ‘I’m prepared to pay more for an iPod, even if it does not perform any better than a Sony mp3 player. Because I love Apple. It isn’t rational. It is aesthetics, it is design, it is cool, that sort of thing. It is emotional loyalty. And loyalty transcends reason.’

And loyalty is Roberts’ middle name. He is of course loyal to the All Blacks (he lives in Auckland and served on the New Zealand Rugby Union Football Board for years). But he has also remained loyal to brands that he has become attached to throughout his career. He has been faithfully using Gillette razor blades for 35 years (he was a product manager at Gillette), he washes the few hairs he has left with Head & Shoulders from Procter & Gamble (where he was responsible for the Europe and Middle East regions) and never drinks any soft drink but Diet Pepsi, today he’s on the caffeine-free variety (he was the company’s chairman of the executive board in Canada).

He calls the Gillette Mach 3 Turbo and the Mont Blanc Master his lovemarks – ‘brands with lots of respect and lots of love’. Virgin Atlantic is another lovemark; he flies with the airline (Upper Class) whenever he can. His children – three twentysomethings and a thirty-something – are all crazy about Virgin Atlantic and simply won’t settle for anything else. ‘Why? Well, all the video games have been created for them, the crew’s attitude has been conceived for them, the red uniforms are designed with them in mind, and they have a real bar on board, chairs you can rock in, and to top it off they’ve got screened-off beds. It’s all massively exciting! Virgin is freedom. British Airways just doesn’t have the same panache. It’s a good airline, but it’s not exceptional.’

Roberts explains that Virgin grasps the fact that consumers are in charge. ‘The consumer is boss. And companies that don’t listen to consumers, have to face the consequences.’ In taking this view, he is diametrically opposed to journalist Naomi Klein, who conversely claimed in her mega-bestseller No Logo (2002) that large companies such as Microsoft, Gap and Starbucks Coffee are all-determining and that the information age has changed very little about this.

'Her book was a huge success, but her idea is a total failure,' says Roberts. 'Customers hold the power. We have information, and what's more, we've got technology. We have DVD and video and we can skip the commercials. We can play the news on our mobile phones whenever we like. I read a magazine that is tailored to my needs and interest, I've got TV-on-demand, and I also want to see my ads on demand, when I'm in the right mood or when the context is right. And, oh yeah, I buy my books in the middle of the night at Amazon.com and get my music at iTunes. So if you really believe as a company owner that you're in charge...'

He sticks up his middle finger: fucking forget it. Roberts is as fast as a snap of the fingers, he prefers examples to science, drums his fingers on his desk to the rhythm of his sentences (and stands up every now and then to grab a football in the corner and tries to keep it up in the air).

'I hate it when managers storm into my office, slam their fists on the desk and then rant and rave that their brand does this and their brand does that. I tell them: 'It's not your brand. Your brand belongs to the people who use it. So get your ass outta here and get over to the shops, to your customers. Don't muck about going to some focus group, go talk to the woman doing her shopping. Go home with her, check out what she has to do in the kitchen. Only then will you really understand what you have to deliver.'

So Apple doesn't belong to Steve Jobs (whom he coincidentally e-mails regularly) 'I own Apple. I sense it. I influence every move that Apple makes. Apple didn't develop the iPod Shuffle, African-Americans who wear their phones around their necks on a chord developed it. They told Apple: 'Hey man, I want an iPod that I can wear around my neck, because that looks cool'. And Apple says: 'Okay, you're right'. And they make it. Apple invents an iPod, 10,000 songs, 40 gigabyte, 60 gigabyte, 600 dollars. But the kids say: 'No man, 320 songs is enough for us, as long as we can shuffle'. Now you can buy both models. Absolute magic, isn't it?'

Toyota (one of the Saatchi's largest clients) takes the same approach. 'They don't worry about technology, which is already state of the art. They focus their attention on consumers. If motorists want 18 cup holders in the Sienna, no problem, they'll design it. When they came up with the Sienna, an average family car, nothing special, the top engineers spent five months driving down American motorways. They wanted to know what it felt like to drive at American speeds. Five months! Not the market researchers, the top engineers! Incredible.'

And even that does not necessarily have to be enough. Because how do you set about capturing the hearts of consumers? 'They no longer believe

poppycock about being bigger, faster, cheaper, better. They know how to find information about the products, on the internet, on TV, in blogs. Consumers want to hear something about themselves. Show that you understand them! Just hit me, baby, arouse my curiosity, entertain me!

The key words are: mystery, sensuality and intimacy. Mysterious: Is there really bull sperm in Red Bull? ('No, but Red Bull has never officially denied it.')

Sensual: Grolsch's swing-top bottle ('Shhhh! It looks cool when you open the bottle, like you really know what you're doing. Testosterone').

Intimate: The perfume department at the Bijenkorf department store ('It smells nice, the ladies are always happy to help you, they spray perfume on you, they touch you').

The real lovemarks are preferably imbued with all three. Consumers collect these brands on lovemarks.com: they swear by them. Lego, Oil of Olay, Levi's and – Roberts' all-time favourite example – the American coffee chain Starbucks (the name refers to a figure in Moby Dick). 'Starbucks doesn't have anything to do with coffee. Starbucks is your home away from home. It's where you start and end your day. It's where you meet up with your friends. This alone creates intimacy. What's more, it is very sensual: It's the only place where you can buy Bob Dylan's new album. So if you want Live at the Gaslight, 1962, you have to go to Starbucks. How fucking smart is that? A Boy Dylan fan just has to have that CD. It moves you.'

'And then there's the scent of course. It's the same in every Starbucks. And they also cleverly create the same sound everywhere. The coffee machines make more sound than necessary and this arouses your appetite. Very sensual. Mysterious too: They make flavours that I had never heard of. You pay three bucks fifty to have the pleasure of drinking a thirty-cent cup of coffee at Starbucks.'

'Diesel is unbelievable. A fantastic brand. You don't have a clue what to expect when you walk into a Diesel store. They don't even have clothes in the shop windows, but rather photos or something else. Camper is another great example, it's a company with a history dating back a century. I've got those shoes. One pair is black and white and the other pair is white and black, and another pair has a red cross on it. And the shops make you want to have sex with somebody on the spot, they're that fantastic.'

It's a lesson that Roberts is now going to teach the supermarkets. Around the world. This is his Next Big Idea. If for no other reason than because the world's largest company is a supermarket (Wal-Mart).'

Just imagine any supermarket anywhere in the world, and you will conjure up a vision of something horrible. Supermarkets are the only places in the world where you still hear Phil Collins and Neil Diamond blaring from the speakers. They've even stopped playing Phil Collins in lifts. And then there's the lighting! The women who do the grocery shopping look horrible in the fluorescent lighting and they feel horrible too. That light is intended to make the potatoes look good, not women. And what about the refrigerated section: you almost freeze to death. You want to get out of there as quickly as possible. What's that you say? You want to sell stuff, don't you?'

'There is no intimacy in the supermarkets. And it is possible to create intimacy. You pay with your credit card, you buy the same products every week. They can know everything about you.'

Roberts' solution - You are handed an iPod with your favourite music when you arrive at the supermarket ('that takes care of blocking out that other racket as well'). The music lasts 40 minutes, 19 minutes longer than the average time that customers spend in a supermarket. There is a small screen attached to your trolley that shows what you bought on your last visit.

Soft drinks? This week we have Sisi on sale. Pasta? Customers who bought this pasta, also bought this white wine. 'That's also how Amazon.com does it. It's so simple. You walk down the aisles watching the TV as you go. And then all of a sudden there is an Adidas commercial. It has to be an experience. People want to sip the tea, taste the cheese, feel the diaper. Make it happen.'

He talks about 'SiSoMo' (Sight, Sound, Motion) in his new book entitled *Sisomo, The Future on Screen*. And in the new version of his book *Lovemarks* he devotes an entire chapter to the horror of the supermarkets. And his third book entitled *Shapes In My Heart – Lovemarks in Action* also lets consumers and companies have their say.

Three books, which will all be published in the autumn. And for those who haven't already figured it out, this guy Kevin is one busy guy. Here's just a sample of his activities: He is professor of Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Waikato (New Zealand), teaches three weeks a year at Cambridge, is co-owner of a chain of internet kiosks and a travel agency, has a joint venture in cosmetics with his wife Rowena, writes a monthly rugby column on www.nzedge.com, and together with a couple of All Blacks runs the International Rugby Academy near Wellington.

He spends about a hundred days a year here in New York; he has an apartment in the Tribeca neighbourhood ('Robert de Niro and Harvey Keitel are my neighbours'). He has owned a house in St. Tropez for thirty years, but his real home is Auckland. He calls New Zealand home because of his forefathers, the Anglo-Saxon, the outdoor life and the sports.

For me, Air New Zealand is a lovemark because when I fly with them I return home twenty-four hours earlier. The steward says to me: 'Would you like a glass of Chardonnay sir, or would you like a beer, mate?' We are immediately mates, it's home for both of us.'

Never ever routine. Life's a shuffle. But Apple coined that one. 'Genius. If only I'd thought of that slogan.'