

LOVING IT!

The most creative minds, some of the biggest clients, a cabinet full of awards - no wonder Kevin Roberts is smiling. Steve Coomber quizzes the man at the helm of 'the ideas company', Saatchi & Saatchi.

Ad agencies are all about brands, right? Brand awareness, brand equity, brand strategy. In most cases that would be true. But not at Saatchi & Saatchi, the global agency with a roster of clients that includes Toyota, Procter & Gamble and General Mills.

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At Saatchi & Saatchi, worldwide CEO Kevin Roberts has a different take on brands. Out with brands, in with 'lovemarks'. Out with bland, in with mystery, sensuality and intimacy. "Brands have run out of juice," says Roberts, who is leveraging the firm's global network and cultural connectivity to propel the agency to a new creative future, transforming it from ad agency to ideas company.

As worldwide CEO, Roberts has a dual role. "At Saatchi, the only thing we have is our people," he says. "My job is to unleash and inspire; it is how I spend two-thirds of my time. Management and leadership are not the right business models for creative people. You can't get eagles to fly in formation – you must inspire them and unleash them to be the best they can be."

Role number two is brand manager of Saatchi & Saatchi, building on the mystique inherited from the Saatchi brothers, Maurice and Charles, who founded the firm in 1970. As CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide, he travels the world for much of the year, spending 175 nights in hotels in the 12 months to March 2006, as you would expect the CEO of a global company to do.

LOCAL CULTURE STILL RULES

However much globetrotting he does on behalf of Saatchi, though, Roberts doesn't see globalisation as imposing a monoculture on the world. "There has been an incredible switch in power over the last decade," he says. "When I was growing up, brands had the power: Heinz, Coca-Cola, these were powerful brands. Then distribution took over. Now there is another switch in power: whatever business or industry you are in, the consumer is calling the shots. The consumer is boss, and the consumer is local."

Some might question whether consumers really do have the power attributed to them. Ever tried to choose a mobile phone by comparing different contracts? How powerful did you feel? Roberts admits that too much information can be confusing, but argues that consumers are the ones doing the deciding, not the product and service providers.

"Give a creative the objective and a framework, then get the hell out of the way!"

"We have passed through the information age," he says, "and consumers are saying, 'I just don't get it, I am overloaded with information.' In the end they will make a choice based on some wayward emotional stimulus. They tried to do all the right things, check the prices, the features, the benefits, but that is not how they will make their call."

Emotional decision-making fits neatly with the lovemarks concept that Roberts is pushing through Saatchi & Saatchi and rolling out to clients.

An evolution, perhaps a reinvention of the brand concept, lovemarks are brands which score highly in terms of love and respect, the three key elements being mystery, sensuality and intimacy.

To a cynic it might sound a bit fluffy, but Roberts says the response at CEO level has been uniformly positive: "Ask a CEO, 'Do you want your brand to be respected, or loved and respected?' 100% would vote for the latter."

"Fear sometimes sets in further down the organisation. 'How do we measure it? I never learned that at MBA school!' would be some people's reaction. But from the CEOs, the response was fantastic." In any case, judging by the results of the campaign for the launch of the new Toyota Camry, a move from 'sensible to sensual' has certainly benefited Toyota in the place where it really matters – the market.

"Toyota's design has improved immensely over the last three to five years," says Roberts. "They were always big on quality, durability, reliability, the engineering side – now they have moved towards the consumer. They said to me: 'We want you to move Toyota from the most respected car company in the world to the most loved.' To do that you have to be closer to the consumer."

AT THE SPEED OF FORESIGHT

Saatchi's trophy cabinet is stuffed full of awards. The agency has won nearly 3,000 in the last five years alone, but the ideas business is a constantly moving game. For Saatchi to keep the awards coming, the clients happy and the revenues flowing, it must continue to recruit, retain, motivate and inspire creative talent, import and share best practice, and leverage its global network to make it even better at what it does.

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A key competence for Saatchi & Saatchi is transferring insights and information throughout the organisation.

It is something that Roberts believes the agency does well. "It has got to work like a spider's web, a network; there is no other way," he says.

"It won't run on a bureaucratic, command-and-control model. The two key things are connectivity and collaboration. The winners are going to be those people who can connect and collaborate at lightning speed, across markets, geographies, time zones, demographics and more."

Saatchi & Saatchi has benefited from the leadership of one of its clients in this area. "We work for Procter & Gamble in 85 countries, and it is the best training ground on the planet for consumer marketing," says Roberts. "Our partnership with them has driven us to develop deep consumer understanding and cooperation, because that is how Procter & Gamble work."

FLEXIBLE, FLUID STRUCTURE

As well as creating the right environment for sharing best practice, Roberts has dismantled barriers to importing best practice. In the ideas business, organisations need to be responsive to survive. "We don't have investments in technology, or plant or history," he says. "We are so fluid and flexible, we don't own anything, not even company cars or offices, I don't believe in fixed overheads!"

There is also a sensitivity and awareness to the cultural differences in the creative process. The creative process as described by Roberts is a four-step programme. First comes information gathering, and how you gather information differs from country to country.

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The next step is applying the knowledge, and once again culturally this is different, depending on educational standards around the world. After knowledge comes insight, which is also local, requiring different techniques and skills, market by market, region by region.

And finally there is foresight. "This is where the creative process, no matter where you sit in the world, comes to the same place," says Roberts. "Because the foresight is about empathy, genius, imagination and intuition, and it doesn't matter whether you are in Malaysia, Russia or Australia, that is where the thing really is sparked by brilliant minds and empathetic people."

ONE TEAM, ONE DREAM

Another of Roberts' favourite topics is teams and peak performance. *Peak Performance: Business Lessons from the World's Top Sports* was the title of the book he co-authored on the subject. He studied high-performing teams, notably the All Blacks rugby team, with its 76% win record over 106 years, but also other long-term winners such as the Australian cricket side, the Beckenbauer-era West German football team and the New York Yankees baseball team.

Roberts discovered two fundamental foundations for building sustainable high-performing teams: family and inspiration. "The more family-like behaviours and feelings you can incorporate into a company, the more sustainable the growth," he says.

"And I am not talking about an old-fashioned 1950s paternalistic family. I am talking about today's family, which is progressive and demanding, yet sharing. The values are progress, ambition, sacrifice for each other, love, not just respect, sharing and nurturing. It is not about team, it is all about family."

The second thing Roberts discovered was that at the core of great teams were not managers or leaders, but inspirational players. "The lessons for companies are clear," says Roberts.

"The idea that one charismatic leader can take you forward is rubbish. The one common characteristic of leaders is that they need followers. We are not in the business of hiring followers, so what you need is inspiration, rather than management or leadership."

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"That is what we try to do at Saatchi & Saatchi. It's about pointing, not leading; unleash and inspire, not command and control. We call it the 'elastic sandbox': give a creative the objective, give him or her a framework, then get the hell out of the way! Except to provide unconditional love and support."

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

Roberts has done his fair share of unleashing, inspiring and keeping in touch with his stakeholders. Since 1997, when he was appointed worldwide CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, he has used his progressive approach to re-energise what was, at that time, a fading star in the

ad agency constellation. A stellar performance, fuelled by Roberts' inspiration and ideas, has propelled Saatchi & Saatchi back to its place among the top-tier agencies.

There is no question that Roberts has energy and foresight in abundance, or that he is willing to tackle the status quo and shake things up, but can he keep Saatchi & Saatchi moving forward? Can he help the agency to become a creative over-achiever, enjoying the kind of sustained success demonstrated by his favourite rugby team, the All Blacks? Can he revolutionise advertising with the lovemarks concept? As they like to say at Saatchi & Saatchi, nothing is impossible.

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