

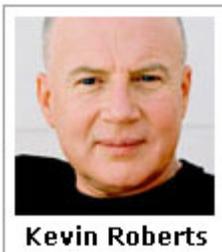
AdvertisingAge®

In Times Like These, the Best Bet Is Winning Ugly

Lovemarks Creator Says to Quit Playing Nice and Find Some Guts

By Kevin Roberts

Published: May 11, 2009



Kevin Roberts

For the past six months all we have heard about is losing: jobs, companies, sales, confidence. We've seen anger and depression, bullying and gut-wrenching pain.

I'm a radical optimist — in times like these, there's nothing else to be. Instead of more analysis of what's gone wrong and who's to blame, I want to talk about winning. Remember winning? That sense of challenge and achievement, shared spirit and ambition?

At our best as an industry, we offer optimism, joy and connections. We create wealth — from brands and services, from experiences, emotions, enterprise and meaningful purpose. The next two or three years will transform marketing, just as the previous three did. Will we become technicians and tacticians or remain movers and shakers?

Almost 10 years ago, I called for a shake-up of brands, and the idea of Lovemarks was born. As "The Lovemarks Company," in this tough new reality, we have dug into the fierce side of love. It might not be gracious or elegant, but it has guts and focus. Cut to the chase. Hang tough. Win ugly.

"Winning Ugly" demands new skills and dumps some old ones. It's time to:

FACE THE TRUTH. It might be ugly and it might hurt, but be brave. Pepsi faced the truth about its Tropicana-packaging redesign: People didn't like it. A sales drop of 20% is ugly, but it focuses the mind. Tropicana is back in the surprisingly loved and familiar pack.

ACT FAST AND ACT DECISIVELY. Leave the loose ends dangling and keep moving. John Chambers of Cisco said, "Without exception, all my biggest mistakes occurred because I moved too slowly." This is a man who, after the 2001 dot-com bust, laid off thousands, slashed product lines and transformed the organization. Even if it's ugly, act fast.

REFRAME, REFRAME, REFRAME. Wrench yourself out of the familiar and predictable. OK, our hard-won expertise may look ugly once it's ripped apart, but that's how to see what worked and what didn't. If we don't reframe, consumers will. Starbucks has struggled to escape the "\$4 cup of coffee" frame -- even though half the chain's beverages cost less than \$3, and one-third cost less than \$2.

CONTROL WHAT'S CONTROLLABLE. Refuse to be paralyzed by the unknown. If it's beyond your control, let it go. Walmart attracts three to four tweets a minute, and they're not all compliments. Execs there know they can't control Twitter, so they let it go and use it as a valuable listening post.

MEASURE ONLY WHAT MATTERS. And do it fast. Gaps in your research may feel ugly, but stop feeding what Kim Dedeker of Procter & Gamble calls "the metrics monster."

STICK TOGETHER. Create teams that don't fit into a box in the org plan. It looks ugly, but it can accelerate performance, flexibility, results.

ADOPT THE THREE-DAY RULE: one day to identify the problem, one day to send the solution upstairs for approval and one day to put it into action. It ain't pretty, and it ain't always fun, but it will Win Ugly.

ELIMINATE COST AND WASTE. This is always ugly, but it's an opportunity, too. What you eliminate now has more impact on the bottom line than what you add and certainly more than what you offer as a price reduction. By my calculations, to make up for a 5% price reduction, you need a 19% increase in sales. That's not happening anytime soon.

No one knows more about Winning Ugly than a mom with a family to take care of. It's hard-wired. She wants to spend less and get more. She cuts cost and waste. She puts keeping her family together as her No. 1 priority. Every victory she feels she's won — no matter how small — helps.

I talk about families because that's where the heart of this industry lies. Winning Ugly is winning for consumers. It's winning sans frills. And I mean sans frills not for consumers but for us. All the processes and practices and patterns we have used as buffers have to be stripped back to what makes a difference.

For example, our skill at connecting more effectively, more deeply and more emotionally; our ability to discover motivating and relevant revelations (not just rehash noninsightful insights); our knowledge of how consumers are reframing value for themselves. We have to know when they want the comfort of certainty and when they feel like something new, when we can surprise them with what seemed obvious and when we can help jump-shift the value comparisons they make. P&G invited consumers to compare its new product Tide Total Care with dry cleaning rather than other washing products. iTunes shifted the value frame from buying music by the album to buying it by the track.

Winning Ugly is about winning today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year. Winning Ugly is not about winning at all costs; it is not winning by cheating or playing fast and loose with the truth. It's about being authentic, transparent, passionate and stripped down to the essentials -- winning naked, if you like. As I say, ugly!

And remember what Vince Lombardi said: "I firmly believe that any man's finest hour, the greatest fulfillment of all that he holds dear, is that moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle — victorious."