

Ad-vantage, Kevin

Media guru Kevin Roberts' bold moves included taking a machine gun and a lion to his presentations

john lui

When Kevin Roberts stepped in as the world-wide chief executive of Saatchi & Saatchi in 1997, he was on a mission to set things right.

The brothers Charles and Maurice Saatchi, who founded the advertising company in 1970 and who had vastly increased its size by buying up smaller ones, had been ousted two years before he joined.

The agency was reeling from the aftershocks of the shareholder-led uprising.

Clients defected. The firm was £2 billion in debt and was eking out a 6 per cent margin on projects, when the industry average was 11 per cent.

There would be resentment from insiders, he knew. He had taken steps to stop staff from fleeing, by first asking the top ranks if he was welcome (he was, unanimously) and promising to never install his friends from outside as lieutenants.

Roberts added a typically bold move.

"I said, 'Hey guys, we are all in this together. I will double the share price in three years. Employees can buy shares at a 10 per cent discount. Stay on at least three years and we will deduct the cost from your salary'. Three years later, we sold the company for five times that amount. A lot of people made money," he says.

The company was acquired by French multinational Publicis Groupe, the world's third largest communications concern, in 2000.

Roberts, 63, likes to make the most of a public moment. When the Briton was made chief executive of Pepsi Cola Canada in 1987, the brand was No. 2 in the country behind Coca-Cola. This was at the height of the period known as the Cola Wars.

He brought a machine-gun up on a Toronto stage and using theatre pyrotechnics, "shot" a Coca-Cola vending



PHOTO: SAATCHI & SAATCHI

machine in front of television cameras, at an event attended by then-Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. It was to be front-page news and helped the brand become No. 1 in Canada.

In 1989, he moved on as director of then-newly formed Lion Nathan, an Australian-New Zealand brewery group. He borrowed a lion from the Auckland Zoo and walked it on a leash into a room

full of jaded stock analysts.

Roberts needed to break down their wall of indifference.

He brought the animal in quietly from the back of the room, down the main aisle. When the audience caught sight of it walking up behind them, roaring, chaos broke out.

"They never forgot our name," he says, laughing.

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On recruiting the smartest and most innovative people by making his organisation a great place to work in

'If you motivate and inspire your people, guess what happens? The clients are delighted. They increase the profit, then the shareholders are delighted. Everybody wins'

On motivated employees

title is a word he coined to describe the "loyalty beyond reason" that consumers have with certain brands, and how it can be achieved.

Born and raised in Lancaster, in the north-west of England, the man who dropped out of school as a 16-year-old now has an honorary doctorate from the University of Waikato's Management School in New Zealand. He also has honorary professorships from universities in England and South America, among other countries.

He is now a citizen of New Zealand – a nation he fell in love with during his time with Lion Nathan – and has homes in Auckland, New York (where the company is headquartered), St Tropez and Grasmere, in the English Lake District.

For the last 35 years, he has been married to Rowena Roberts and has two daughters, two sons and two grandchildren.

Today, Saatchi & Saatchi employs 6,000 people across 86 countries.

In Singapore, its shophouse offices in Clarke Quay houses over 100 employees and regional clients include Procter & Gamble and Toyota Motor Asia Pacific. It has also run campaigns for the National Council for Problem Gambling.

The Saatchi & Saatchi global website has the tag line, The Lovemarks Company. He uses his principles of inspirational leadership seriously, even when they run counter to accepted management practice.

Of the four stakeholders in a company – the community, shareholders, customers and employees – it is usual practice for management to say that shareholders or customers come first.

"I really don't pay attention to that," says Roberts, who is described as a leader with "heterodox views" by the Knowledge@Wharton business magazine.

He says he recruits "the smartest and most innovative" people into his organisation and this is done by making it a great place to work.

"We are not hierarchical, we don't have lots of meetings, we don't have a lot of constraints," he says.

"The only sensible stakeholder in the company is the employee. If you motivate and inspire your people, guess what happens?"

"The clients are delighted. They increase the profit, then the shareholders are delighted. Everybody wins."

✉ johnlui@sph.com.sg

Roberts was in Singapore last month to meet the company's staff and clients, and to give a talk at the Red Dot Design Museum titled Winning The Age Of Now, on the subject of how today's consumers react better to interaction and inspiration rather than old marketing techniques.

He is today seen as a guru of media and marketing, more so since the publication in 2004 of his book, Lovemarks. The