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Saatchi's labour of love

Paul McIntyre spoke to Kevin Roberts, worldwide CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, who was in Australia this week, about the transition from trademark to trustmark to Lovemark

There's an old joke about blaming a New Zealander when the fridge boasts a leg of lamb with a love bit. Little surprise then that Saatchi & Saatchi worldwide CEO and citizen of the Long White Cloud, Kevin Roberts, is frantically plastering them all over the world's big brand owners.

Four years ago, Roberts took advertising off the Saatchi banner and replaced it with "Ideas Company". Lovemark is his big new one. We've had trademarks and trustmarks but the future game is Lovemarks, screams Roberts. New it certainly is not but the British turncoat is giving the notion such a pounding that anyone who's missed reading the last 300 years of the Journal of Brand Management wouldn't give a freckle.

To use Sony parlance, Roberts is an Emotion Engine. He's the type who will say when asked about traditional research methodologies, "analyse this" with a raised index finger.

"Nothing has happened to brands for the past 30 years," he says. "Absolute sweet Fanny Adams. You enter any relationship with a rugby team, a city, a newspaper, a brand; many might sit very high on respect and nowhere on love. You buy them because you know stuff about them. Nike is an example of a brand which has huge respect but is it a Lovemark today? You can plot any relationship – brand or otherwise – by whether it's based on love or respect. High respect ratings used to win. These days a high love rating wins. If I don't love what you're offering me, go home."

At the crux, Roberts says very little which is new. The difference is he is Kevin Roberts. Crazy, a serial cusser and completely convinced by his new vision, Roberts invented the Love-Respect axis which, you guessed it, places love and respect on an axis. Saatchi also has the Lovemark, a simple web-based diagnostic tool which has users rate brands in three dimensions: mystery, sensuality and intimacy.

Roberts dislikes overthinking. "Consumers do not want any more information. We are suffering from information overload. What they want now is the relationship. They want a connection. You just have to watch all the TV shows of all these mid-30s people wandering around, everybody is looking to connect to make relationships. Responding with emotion is not gullibility. I think rational man is a myth. So we discarded all the normal research stuff and we just went

for feelings. I don't know how reliable it is but it certainly seems to be resonating."

To be sure, in the past 18 months, concepts such as brand spirit, brand soul, brand manners, brand chartering and brand architecture among others have been getting a good run, as consultants and brand owners seek to break their offer from the commodity crowd. Roberts says they are still stuck in a brand paradigm.

"This is all short-term stuff. Every one of those is based on information. I've read them all and they are still making mistakes where you deliver a superior product, the more you communicate the benefits of the brand the more powerful that's going to be."

He acknowledges some of them are about trying to live brand values but still doesn't buy it. "Yeah, my view is very different and it's resonating much more. I'm getting access to CEOs when I don't think the others are. So I'm going to make this happen I think before them. CEOs have got to answer the question, do you want your brand to be loved or respected? There's meat in here mate and while there still should be questions, we're attempting to take brands to a new level and that could be a good thing. We're doing this openly on the web. I got some criticism for that. The argument was 'this is your intellectual property and you should keep it to yourself'. We said we're all going to learn from this. This is going to accelerate the whole thing by getting it out in the open."

Roberts is certainly doing his bit. He was recently at a Cambridge University CEO forum with the likes of P&G's Dirk Yeager, Cisco's John Chambers and Wal Mart's Lee Scott. All of them, Roberts says, were obsessed with the Internet, its impact on distribution and how they could break through the attention economy now that network TV didn't dominate. "I said, guys, the question is bigger than this. Here are the top 100 brands in the world as rated by Interbrand and most of them are not even trustmarks."

The big question though is Saatchi's role in helping move companies into Lovemark status. Surely it has to be about realigning culture, processes and products to engage customers before the big communications project starts?

"You can't become a Lovemark based on bullshit, advertising nonsense and twaddle," says Roberts. "You've got to deliver the product. It's got to be sequential. You've got to deliver the product. It's got to be sequential. You've got to go from a brand to a trustmark to a Lovemark. It's very hard to miss steps and it's about getting through that transition. We are learning about this but we see ourselves as brand navigators. Here's where we want to get to, but there are a lot of different ways of getting there and you will have to do lots of different things and it will take different amounts of time. Most of the people we are talking to about this have been in the brand game for 30 or 40 years. They've

been very sophisticated and are now searching for the answer to build the top line, not the bottom line.”

Roberts says Toyota and P&G are two companies among five which are pursuing the idea at board level.