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Mr Lovemark bites his critics

Okay, Kevin Roberts is the bloke who blew away a Coca-Cola vending machine with a machine gun to celebrate Pepsi knocking the world's biggest drink brand off the top perch in Canada in the late 80s. Roberts obviously worked for Pepsi at the time. He is now worldwide CEO of advertising group Saatchi & Saatchi, although he has stopped calling it an advertising agency. It's now an ideas company, thank you, and was recently bought by Paris-based marketing communications conglomerate, Publicis.

Roberts has spent his life in the global brand business and worked for brewer Lion Nathan, pen and razor blade maker Gillette, and packaged goods giant Procter and Gamble, among others. He is working furiously to become a brand himself. If you haven't yet heard, he is stomping around the world preaching his new take on brands: forget them. You've gotta have a "lovemark", that is, something people feel absolutely passionate about and committed to.

Check out the lovemarks.com website for the spin. What makes Roberts really interesting is that in the competitively paranoid and pathologically stiff game of global commerce, he's damn near mad. The British-born New Zealand citizen who spends his life on planes, says what he thinks and doesn't care a ginger crispy about it. And that's rare. Sure, he's in advertising but even at the top of publicly listed advertising conglomerates they are usually as contrary minded as the strides on a Swiss banker.

So, as he is the point man for a company that makes its money trying to advance the status of client brands – sorry, lovemarks – around the world, I thought I would throw in a few curve balls about the growing anti-brand movement. What did he make of it? Bad move. "Pathetic. Attention seekers. Completely f...king stupid. Don't know their arse from their elbow. Morons. Totally f...king wrong."

Pretty clear, really. Roberts sees little threat to brands from the new anti-corporate unrest evident at various World Trade Organisation summits and World Economic Forums. But mention Naomi Klein, author of the best selling anti-brand book *No Logo* and Roberts gets close to a few karate chops.

"These people are talking through their f...king arse. They are completely wrong because the research is shit. The research is very politically correct. It talks about what you do and what you say. It doesn't talk about what you feel. What you feel is complete trust in a trademark. You are not going to put down your baby's throat an ecologically sound milk you have never f...king heard of – you're just not going to do that."

Roberts is fantastic when he is wound up. At this point he is close to screaming and I make a fatal decision to ask another question, this time about the rise of niche brands and what to make of the truckloads of consumer research showing high levels of distrust towards big business.

“You are not going to swallow a beer you never heard of. You are not going to do that, man,” he now screams. Wrong, I think to myself. But then this: “You say you will because you say you are some left-wing, pinkie, radical, liberal on about non-branding. But the point is trademarks were invented to give confidence and protection from charlatans and that’s still prevalent.”

Wow. Don’t know about the left-wing, pinkie, liberal stuff but that’s what throwing a couple of curve balls at Roberts gets you. At this stage I say “fair point” and Robert’s tone drops down an octave. “Look, philosophically I’m a radical, I’m creative, I’m aesthetic,” he hastens to add. “Politically and economically I’m to the Right, socially I’m to the Left. But I look around at every f...king business and it’s all about reputation and image. The start-ups don’t make it. The little guys find it very tough. Every single industry I know – beer to wine to motor cars – it’s always the big five.”

Roberts is great to interview. Not sure it would be good for your health to work for the man and beg to differ, but you can guarantee an extreme ride. One minute he’s bull-doing the critics of mass branding into oblivion and the next he’s articulating great empathy. Globalisation, he he says, is the “biggest croc of shit I’ve ever seen.” But evidently a necessary evil? Saatchi, he says, has started hiring sociologists, environmentalists and “ecology people and all that kind of stuff”.

But back to lovemarks. Nike has a problem qualifying as a lovemark because of its Asian sweatshop practices. McDonald’s has to “front up” to its customers about the food: “You go to the McDonald’s website and they don’t even mention the food,” he chastises. And the Committee for Sydney cops a rocket for its posturing about the rest of the country looking for a handout. “Sydney is a lovemark. But when you are in love with someone, you don’t want them to be arrogant or boasting.”

Then like any great salesman, Roberts turns to *The Australian*. “For me as a world player, *The Australian* talks about stuff in a way that combines the local and the global. It’s as good as *The Times* in the UK.” Lovemarks or not, more sprulking like that will get a man a long way. Perhaps that’s why Brand Roberts is rising.