

► **DRESSED IN TRADEMARK** black, Kevin Roberts, chief executive of Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide, thinks that the FT should use a photo of him spread-eagled on the brilliant white bed in his hotel room overlooking Hyde Park in central London. Given half a chance you feel he might even take his shirt off. "Do something different for a change," he says, cockily.

But if Roberts sounds a tad pleased with himself, he has good reason. Over the past year, Saatchis has won \$1.3bn in new business – more than any other agency network. It has just been named global network of the year by US publication Advertising Age and agency of the year by its rival, Adweek.

It was also named global network of the year at Cannes, the advertising Oscars; and came second in the Gunn report, which tots up successes in the creative awards. So, while Saatchis may not quite be the global business icon it was before the brothers were ousted in 1995, it is clearly back on form.

Roberts joined the company in the dark days of 1997. Maurice and Charles Saatchi had gone, it had lost large slugs of business, particularly in the flagship London office, and its biggest client, Procter & Gamble, was considering axing it from its roster.

"There had been too much negative press coverage, some acquisitions hadn't turned out and the market turned against the type of funding in place. It was still a good agency, but there was a lack of confidence, leadership and inspiration," says Roberts.

With billings of \$6.6bn, more than 7,000 staff and 138 offices, it must have been a hugely complex management task. But Roberts chooses to describe it in

## A little bit of TLC... and a lot of P&G

**He might talk a load of sappy nonsense but Saatchis' top client thinks Kevin Roberts has 'depth'**

touchy-feely business terms couched in psycho-babble that make him sound more like David Brent, the ineffectual boss of TV series *The Office*, than a serious corporate player: "We don't have committees, we talk about progress against our dreams," he told a US newspaper recently.

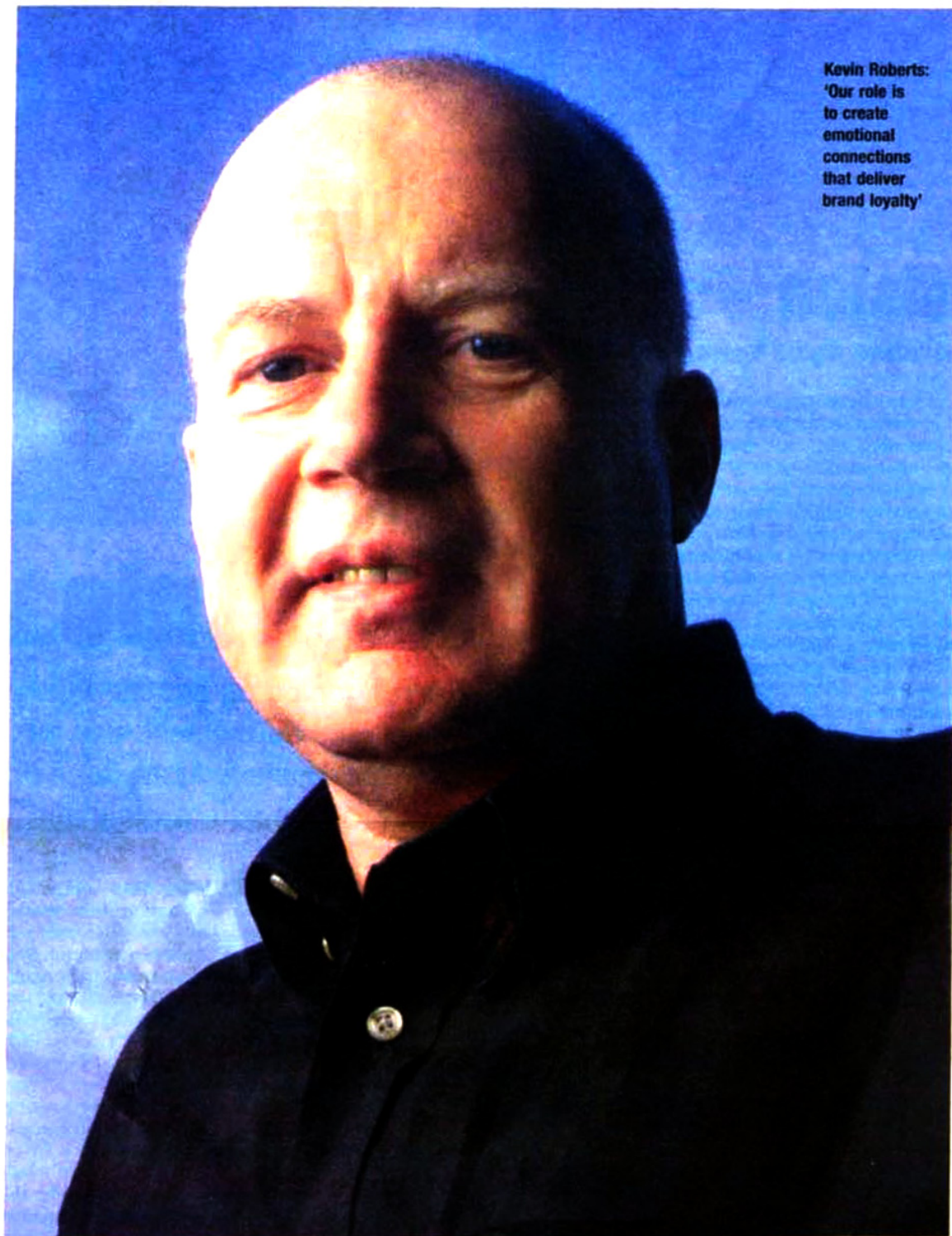
He evinces an almost insouciant disregard for the technical business of management: "Advertising is a very simple business. Was Saatchi & Saatchi well managed? No. Is it now? Yes. We are gold standard. But the difference between the best and the worst-run agency is just a couple of margin points."

Real competitive advantage in advertising, he argues, comes from softer, more intangible things such as "vision" and "spirit". So within months of arriving, Roberts dropped the descriptor "advertising", declaring instead that Saatchis aimed to be "the hottest ideas shop on the planet".

He invested heavily in recruiting the best creative and planning people. Hence the agency focus on Cannes, which Roberts admits is little more than a recruitment and positioning tool.

He then developed his theory of "lovemarks" – the idea that because most products are equally good these days, emotion, not functionality, is what differentiates them. The development of lovemarks, based on "mystery, sensuality and intimacy", has now become the defining task for his company. "Our role is to create emotional connections that deliver brand loyalty beyond reason," he says.

The notion itself is unexceptional mainstream brand thinking, but his vocabulary almost demands cynicism. "Yes, it's deliberately provocative," he admits. "But brands are so bland and boring they are



**Kevin Roberts:**  
"Our role is to create emotional connections that deliver brand loyalty"

under threat. They need to wake up urgently. We have to bring back emotion and love, and not be put off by you pricks in the media saying the vocabulary is too soft, because you are all fucking wrong."

Roberts would have the world believe that he has turned round Saatchis – including five straight years of income and profit growth – through the power of respect, love and support. But those close to him say this is only a small part of the picture.

Key is his ability to win the trust of clients, particularly P&G. "He gets painted as a showman, but he has depth," says Jim Stengel, global marketing officer of P&G, Saatchis' biggest client. "He gets things

**'We have to bring back love and emotion and not be put off by you pricks in the media'**

done. He knows what he's good at and surrounds himself with people who complement his skills."

What he is really about is absolute focus and detail, say those who have worked with him. "Despite the casual exterior, he's an incredibly disciplined buttoned-down businessman. He is trusting and straight, and has rigorous 100-day plans for both himself and the agency," says Tamara Ingram, former chief of Saatchi & Saatchi London.

Another former Saatchi executive claims that Roberts is in fact a fairly conventional businessman, who has his most provocative statements scripted for him by a PR genius in New Zealand. "Roberts is the

class swot who claims he was partying the night before exams when he was in fact studying," he says.

It's a perfect metaphor for the agency as well. While the company has been successful in attracting new business, a large chunk of this has come from three key clients – P&G, Toyota and General Mills, which now comprise 40 per cent of global revenues.

The agency's performance on P&G in particular has been impressive. From the weakest agency on its roster, Saatchis is now its lead agency, with seven out of its 10 top brands and over half its budget.

But that could never have happened had Roberts and his chairman Bob Seelert not shrewdly bowed to client pressure and sold the agency three-and-a-half years ago to Publicis. They dismissed the idea of deals with the big three holding companies and, in what would have been a masterstroke, Roberts even tried to broker a deal with management consultant McKinsey & Co, but couldn't agree a price. So, when Publicis's Maurice Levy closed down the D'Arcy network last year, Saatchis was perfectly positioned to pick up some of the defunct agency's P&G brands, including Crest toothpaste and Folgers coffee.

So there is Roberts, the details man who talks of love and respect, heading an agency that boasts of new business but is dependent on three clients, talking up its creative successes when the bulk of its profits come from dull soap and shampoo ads.

Of course, this is precisely what Saatchis has always done. Even in the glory days of the Tory party and BA, it was always dependent on P&G to keep it going. And if this is failure, it's a failure most agency chairmen would give their eye teeth to share.

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