

Fashion Rx: Emotional Rescue

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NEW YORK – Consumers identify with brands largely through emotion, said Saatchi & Saatchi chief executive officer worldwide Kevin Roberts.

As a result, it isn't easy to save a brand from becoming irrelevant in consumers' eyes, but it can be done provided there is a complete reversal of the reason-based approach that has prevailed for the past 50 years.

That premise forms the basis of "Lovemarks" (powerHouse Books: \$27.50), the latest in a growing group of books that advise that making emotional connections, or lovemarks, with consumers is not only the best – but the only – way for brands, products and companies to create a bond author Roberts has tagged "loyalty beyond reason"; a rarified territory most people reserve for a half-dozen brands. And the stakes have risen ever higher, in that regard, along with the ever-increasing barrage of brands – from national names to private labels.

The brands and products that stir the most loyalty with consumers, he contends, are those that develop relationships based on emotions – and love in particular – because "love is about action." Citing the work of neurologist Donald Calne, the British-born Roberts pointed out: "The essential difference between emotion and reason is that emotion leads to action [including purchasing decisions] while reason leads to conclusions." This is a crucial point, given that the number of people who make choices, including purchasing decisions, based purely on facts marks a very small minority of the world's population. And even some in the group buy the occasional product or service based on impulse or emotion.

Because they are emotion-based, lovemarks, unlike the entities they're associated with – such as brands – are owned by the consumer; the 54-year-old Roberts emphasized in a phone interview. As he explains in his 224-page book, slated to be published in May, "Lovemarks are not owned by the manufacturers, the producers, the businesses. They are owned by the people who love them."

Due to its role in ego-expression, fashion is among the best-suited sectors for creating lovemarks, which, in turn, enable style-based brands, products and firms to forge loyal bonds with consumers. Fashion can claim some human lovemarks, including icons such as Madonna, Missy Elliot and Posh Spice, Roberts noted. "Look at what Tom Ford did at Gucci, Rose Marie Bravo did at Burberry and what Dior has done to reinvent its brand as one with an urban edge," he added, rattling off a few more lovemarks.

Similarly, Roberts accorded high lovemarks to Prada's SoHo store, designed by Rem Koolhaas. The store is a lovemark, he said, because of its "wide open spaces, beautifully sensual shapes, and warm wood." As a result, Roberts

continued, “People feel they are moving around the store in an intimate way. And you look at a mannequin in the storefront and they create a sense of mystery.”

In contrast, Roberts considers the design of Gucci’s Madison Avenue location, “just another store, with bland design [features] and subdued lighting.

“The beauty of lovemarks is they bring together various aspects of life and culture,” Roberts said of his concept.

Paradoxically, though, fashion is among the industries in which the potential of lovemarks is least fully realized, Roberts said in the interview. Nonetheless, for the most part, he maintained, fashion houses themselves tend to be “conservative: slow in the way they make decisions and operate, and very hierarchical.”

Further, he contended, “They are poor at communicating, planning and logistics.”

Thus, it is not surprising Roberts sees the inability to distinguish most fashion ads from one another as one of the biggest obstacles impeding fashion brands’ relationships with people. “Fashion brands are obsessed with the same fashion photographers and it is hard to tell one fashion ad from another as you flip through a copy of Vogue,” he asserted.

In the author’s view, that’s the turf on which most brands live, bounded by a high degree of respect, but a low level of love. Fads rank high on the love meter and low in terms of respect; commodities rate low on both measures.

“The critical thing the fashion business has to do is to focus on a broader base of consumers – not the early adopters who fashion is obsessed with,” Roberts advised, as that’s clearly where most of the business lies.

Lovemarks spring to life when high levels of love and respect are established and maintained with consumers, whether by a thing, a place, a person or an organization. That is achieved, Roberts writes, by imparting an air of mystery, sensuality and/or intimacy. A sense of mystery, for instance, is conjured by telling a story and tapping into dreams and inspirations, which, if successful, can be parlayed into powerful myths and icons, like the Nike swoosh, which, Roberts asserted in his book, “changed the face of logo design” – an abstract image that conveys movement. Similarly, engaging the senses establishes strong bonds with people, which can breed a lovemark. And by developing intimacy, by stirring empathy and passion, a commitment that spawns a lovemark can follow.

The author’s top 25 lovemarks – those that have successfully established at least one of those links with people – are: Amazon, Apple, The Body Shop, CNN, Coca-Cola, Disney, Dyson, eBay, Google, Harley-Davidson, Italy, LEGO, Levi’s, McDonald’s, Manchester United, Nelson Mandela, Nike, Nintendo, Nokia, Pampers, Red Cross, Swatch, Toyota, Vespa and Virgin.

Further credence for an emotions-based approach lies in consumer researcher Dan Hill's book, "Body of Truth: Leveraging What Consumers Can't or Won't Say" (John Wiley & Sons: \$29.95), published last August. Although most marketing moves are still made on the presumption consumers are rational beings who choose products based on their perceived benefits, Hill, in his 267-page book, laid out an argument for why it's best to take a route based on feelings.

Simply stated, it's because recent research has shown 95 percent of human communication is unconscious; 80 percent is non-verbal, and roughly two-thirds of all stimuli reaching the brain is visual. Still, findings such as these have yet to filter into marketing campaigns, let alone marketers' understanding of consumer behaviour.

At the heart of the reason why the shift hasn't occurred is a 300-year-old tradition of chief executive officers making decisions with their heads, to the almost complete exclusion of their hearts. The primary reason for that is simple: quantitative data can be measured, rationalized on a cost-benefit basis or otherwise. Feelings are a taller and more elusive order.

In addition, current research on human cognition shows that while purchase decisions are often made on gut feelings based on physical, sensory and emotional impressions – sometimes subconscious ones, at that – people often rationalize their feelings subsequent to those transactions.

Because of the mind-body connection, it is critical for marketers to read the body's reactions to marketing stimuli via objective, real-time measurements, Hill counselled. "We consciously think we know what is happening when we make a decision, but our body knows the truth," the author writes. For that reason, psychological influences trump socio-cultural influences in marketing efforts, as they are deeper seated than present-day, surface influences, Hill added.

The other key to connecting with consumers, Hill writes, is that old marketing saw about simplicity. "Sensory clues that are more readily grasped are more fun and make us feel better," the author stated. "Complexity runs counter to the wisdom of evolution. Our emotions intuitively gather more information than reason alone can provide," Hill continued. "Rationally, the higher the cost of the product, the greater the need for utility, but on an emotional basis, relevancy often outstrips literal value and drives a different decision that feels right."