

El País Business supplement. 6th March, 2005.

“Capitalism is the driving force of development”

A Briton by birth, a New Zealander by adoption, American in practice, Kevin Roberts, chief executive officer of Saatchi & Saatchi, is an extraordinarily self-assured man who professes to be politically rightist and socially leftist. In his opinion, it is business, not government, that can change the world, although he recognises that it will only be able to do so when business decisions are taken not only on the grounds of economic profit, but also take environmental, cultural and social benefits into account.

Roberts has been crusading for years to introduce a new concept in the world of advertising: Lovemarks. The term is so hard to translate into Spanish that in the Spanish version of the book (soon to be published) will retain the English term ‘Lovemark’.

Question: What is a Lovemark?

Answer: It’s a brand that has evolved from having a mere functional attribute to something you feel passionate about, a loyalty beyond reason, something full of mystery, sensuality and intimacy that you find irresistible. For example, Real Madrid, for many people who live in Madrid, is irresistible. This is not the case for people who live in Catalonia. For them, Barcelona is a Lovemark. You feel passion, beyond the results, beyond how they play, beyond the coach, you don’t care who the president is: you feel that love.

Q: If I support another team, do I feel the same?

Naturally, because love is universal. Love is not exclusive. But it’s different from being a brand. In sport, it’s dead easy to grasp the Lovemark concept. Why? Because it’s a human emotion. With brands it’s the same, but for 40 years we’ve heard them talking about prices, value for money, discount, distribution, performance and for many years it was true because there were differences in quality between some brands and others. Those differences are now very slim.

Q: But if you’re unable to produce as cheaply as the competition, or nearly as cheaply, you’re finished.

No! The price is a factor but when you buy a Mercedes, you get the same as when you buy a Toyota. But there is something about the Mercedes that makes you pay more.

Q: Isn’t your movement targeting an elite?

No, because there are Lovemarks in every category. Love is not just for the rich. Love is for the poor too.

Q: You talk about loyalty beyond reason, something irresistible. Isn't that as if you were talking about drugs?

No, a drug is addictive.

Q: What's the difference between an addiction and an unreasonable loyalty, a loyalty that goes beyond reason, something irresistible; a product you can't help consuming?

There are differences between reason and emotion in English. It's between reason, between the facts and the data and how I respond emotionally. Do I feel great when I wear this or do I feel lousy? Do I feel desirable, do I feel fun, do I feel... whatever? If the answer is yes, then there's a stronger connection than just the argument that "I like it because it's black". Irresistible is quite different to addictive in English. Irreplaceable is like when there is no Coca-Cola, and I'd rather drink water than Pepsi. That's irreplaceable. Irresistible is "Oh, God, there's Coca-Cola, I want one". Addiction is "I want one, then another, then another, then another" and I depend on it.

Q: Many youngsters are only interested in branded clothes whereas their parents at their age were interested in politics and changing the world.

Everything looks rosier when you look back. Adult people today, when they were 15, also bought McDonald's, Coca-Cola and other brands. Young people today are less politically active because there are fewer leaders and political options and they are less inspiring.

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Q: Do today's leaders reflect today's societies?

Of course.

Q: Do we have the leaders we deserve?

Ha, ha...! you have the leaders you deserve. Unfortunately, that's how it is. You have the leaders you deserve and I think we are in a barren period globally. The most respected politician is Nelson Mandela, and he's not even involved in politics!. But if you're one of those people who doesn't believe in brands and consumers, I disagree with you entirely because I believe it's a lie and the proof is that Naomi Klein and her no logos have failed and disappeared without trace. You can't dictate to consumers that absence of options: consumers want to have fun, express themselves and bolster their self-esteem. No logo has gone and the basic ingredient of that past is f*/?ing communist on that point of view. And it has failed. Marvellous!

Q: You say that the aim of business is to make the world a better place. And you ask yourself ironically "and if not, who? The government?"

And my answer is no. Capitalism, democratic capitalism, is the only sustainable driving force for the development of the Earth.

Q: And who makes capitalism democratic, if it isn't the governments trying to contain capitalism?

The governments are there to liberalise, not to contain. I don't believe governments are on Earth to contain. In democracy, governments have a role to play in terms of healthcare, education, transport and security.

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Q: And taxes...

Well they need taxes to pay for those four things, but taxes are a means of funding, not an instrument of government. The role of governments is to provide healthcare, education, transport and security. I can't accept a government role in industry or in business. They're f*/*ing useless and it's not their job. In the same way as I don't believe business people should get mixed up in politics. In today's world, governments are moved by staying in power – I live in America, ask me more about that if you like – and by domestic policy, because they are the ones who vote for them. I have little faith in governments producing the necessary thrust for 6,000 million people. Only business can give hope to the 2,300 million people who live on a dollar a day. But we have to change the way we do business because it is very exclusive now.

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The Sustainable Four

Kevin Roberts considers that the current social situation on an international scale can only be modified through the business world.

Q: And how?

Companies have to become sustainable in the four areas: economic, cultural, social and environmental. Today we are only concerned about economic sustainability. When you talk about the other areas they tell you to f*/* off. Why? Because Wall Street, the market, does not reward the other three lines. And it must. It must do things like drive research and development towards the developing markets, trust in locals to run their international operations and not just in Americans or Britons or Spaniards. We should be investing environmentally in local communities: We should be introducing local products, not imposing global ones. As we create jobs locally, we also create self-esteem locally. I am from a working-class background and being in business has enabled me to get out of it.

Q: But, by definition, business means profit. The investment goes where there is profit to be made, not where it is needed.

Because there is a problem of proportion. We give the shareholders too much because we're not moving in the four lines of profit. If we took our decisions on the basis of economic, environmental, cultural and social benefits, we would balance our investments.