

Interactivity is the key word, says advertising guru

By ARUN JOHN

KEVIN Roberts is by no stretch of the imagination a stranger to unconventional ways of capturing attention. Under his watch as head of Pepsi-Cola in Canada, the soft drink overtook Coca-Cola as the country's leading soft drink. To celebrate, he brought on stage at a conference the rival company's vending machine and proceeded to blast it with a machine gun.

Although only blanks were used in the machine gun and the vending machine was pre-configured for the extravagant display, Mr Roberts' desired effect echoed out loud and clear. To him, that emotional connection and resonance with brands is all that matters, whichever medium is used.

Mr Roberts is now the worldwide CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, ideas company and one of the world's leading creative organisations. He is regarded by many as the advertising industry's leading guru and spoke to BT recently about digital media and branding, arguably the most pressing conundrum faced by traditional advertising houses around the world today.

"The digital revolution is transforming marketing, entertainment and technology everywhere. The boundaries between media and advertising, content and products, creator and producer, audience and critic are dissolving," he said.

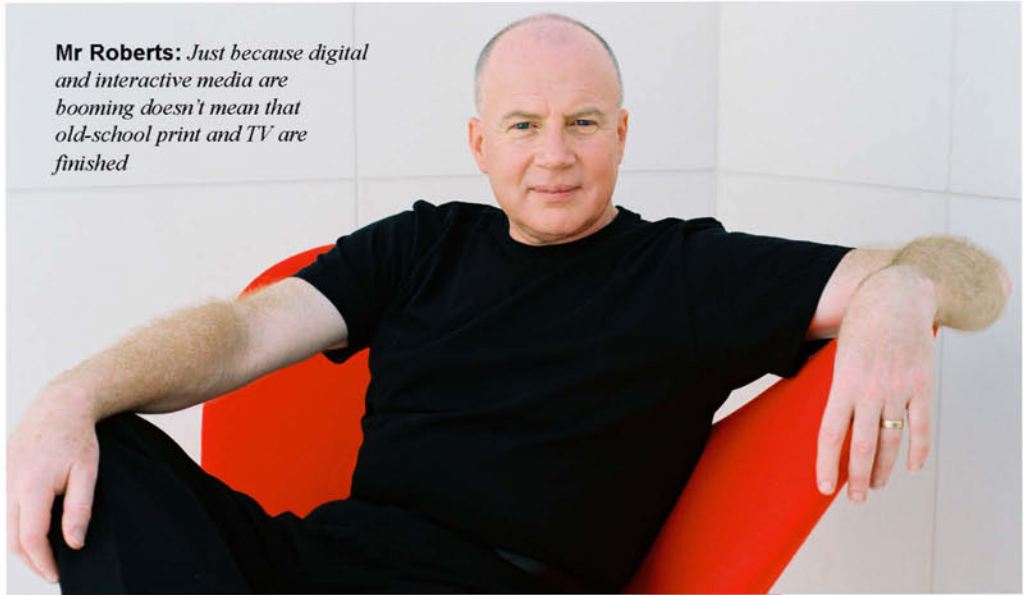
Indeed, the digital age is truly upon us. Global users of the Internet exceeded one billion last year, with approximately 36 per cent of this global community residing in the Asia Pacific region alone.

It is not surprising, therefore, that online advertising is the fastest growing segment of total advertising dollars today. Zenith Optimedia estimates that Internet advertising will grow at double digit figures in every region of the world. Asia, where Internet spending on advertising is projected to increase by about 72 per cent, ranks as one of the fastest growing regions for digital branding.

Mr Roberts remains adamant, though, that the branding concepts that have stood him well through most of his illustrious career will not become obsolete in today's digital age.

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that old-school print and TV are finished," he says, adding that marketers today have to take ideas across media and technologies.

In the global advertising market, where total adspend is expected to grow by almost 24 per cent to approximately US\$495 billion in value by 2009, Mr Roberts insists that going digital would only serve to better engage the consumer.

Human beings are 80 per cent emotional and 20 per cent rational, he says, adding that human emotion should be the principal currency in the 'Attraction Economy' in which we now live.

"Being digital fuels the 'Attraction Economy' with new connectivity, interactivity and mobility. It's expanding our tools and technologies to connect with customers; it's giving us a richer palate."

Indeed, the man responsible for advertising concepts such as 'Lovemarks', which he describes as deep emotional connections with brands, believes that companies in Singapore should not be overly concerned about adapting to branding in the digital age.

"No one medium is going to replace another; no one medium dies. The answer is always people, not technology, regardless of the size of the market. What thrills them, attracts them, inspires them."

Interactivity seems to be the key word in advertising today, with Mr Roberts himself predicting that all

media will be interactive within the next five years. The way forward for the digital media advertising platform, therefore, looks set to imitate other Asian markets such as Japan and South Korea, where more than 85 per cent of mobile subscribers have Internet-connected devices.

"The dominant interface of the future is the screen. The screen is the fundamental global and local connector. What will change is the context and the way it's handled for the mobile phone or the computer, TV or movies. But Nike should always be 'Just Do It', no matter what the medium," he says.

A key feature of the online landscape is its young demographic characteristic. A recent report found that 72 per cent of the global Internet population is under the age of 40. This fact is not lost on Mr Roberts and he believes that this generation loves the convergence of advertising, as long as the technology stays behind the screen.

"This is the era of 'sisomo' – the convergence of sight, sound and motion on a screen. The media landscape is shifting rapidly from mass media to imitate 'sisomo'. Come up with 'sisomo' ideas that can bring any screen to life, come up with 'sisomo' formats, stories, characters and ways for people to communicate, participate and to explore."

In Singapore, advertising expenditure is expected to hit US\$1.27 billion in value in just the

next couple of years. The rapid expansion of interactive media and mobile communication, especially among the young, looks set to make digital branding an ever expanding sector of the advertising industry here.

Mr Roberts, however, urges companies here to not forget the fundamental factor in any marketing strategy – the consumer.

"Your marketing mix should be determined by your customers, not by you. Go where the customer lives. Communicate with her where she wants and the way she wants. That requires integrating your consumer touch points. Consumers are active participants, not passive receivers."

The digital age may have descended on our global society. But according to Mr Roberts, what has not changed, however, is the fact that branding is always about the consumer and the emotional connections they make with any brand.

Do not be surprised, therefore, if at the next company event you attend, the CEO starts wielding a dummy machine gun and starts firing away at a competing brand.

As Mr Roberts boldly declares: "Generate ideas that have never been seen before and don't back away from them because they are tough to test and even tougher to measure."

It seems like sound advice, no matter what the technological age or generation.