

Corporate Renegade Heads up Saatchi & Saatchi (Kevin Roberts) (Advertising) (Interview)

He counts performing artist Laurie Anderson among his close friends and says the business world is “populated by dimwits.” He runs a global advertising agency, yet volunteers that he personally doesn’t watch TV. And while his peers quote statesmen, belle lettrists and such eminences as David Ogilvy, his take on the human condition evokes the late Jim Morrison: “I’m not here for a long time... I’m here for a good time.”

Make no mistake: Kevin Roberts, the 48-year-old chief executive designate of Saatchi & Saatchi, is not your gray-flannel-suit executive. Doesn’t even dress like one.

Roberts’ signature black jeans and black T-shirt are very much in keeping with the SoHo denizen he has become on his one-week-a-month tour of Manhattan. More to the point, his sartorial choices announce the corporate renegade he obviously relishes being.

“Most organisations kill ideas,” says Roberts, his accent combining his British roots and his adopted New Zealand. “It’s not considered natural to sit with your feet on your desk, drink a vodka, smoke a joint, scratch your balls... and think! It’s just not politically correct.

“But you tell me,” he rants rhetorically, “where do they think great ideas come from? From meetings? From plane rides?”

About the latter two, meetings and plane rides, Roberts knows a thing or two. A former Pepsi-Cola executive, who as CEO of its Canadian operations helped unseat Coke as that country’s soft-drink leader, he was most recently chief operating officer of the New Zealand brewer Lion Nathan Ltd, now Australia’s beverage leader.

Auckland remains Roberts’ primary residence and the permanent home of his wife and four children. However, since being tapped in April 1997 to turn around an extremely troubled London-based Saatchi & Saatchi, the neophyte ad man has been spending about a quarter of his time commuting to the agency’s all-important Manhattan office from a nearby loft.

“New York is the best-valued, hottest city in the world,” Roberts says from a spare, white office overlooking the Hudson River. “Art, music, fashion, food – it all bubbles up from the street here, whereas in Europe or even Los Angeles it’s all imposed by the media or by Armani or by some other high-priced crap coming down.”

That makes New York ground zero of the “incredible fusion” Roberts sees for the arts, sports, commerce and entertainment. This fusion, the ad maverick goes on to predict, will render agencies obsolete unless they find a way to embrace it.

“We’re no longer in the commercial business but in the communication and connection business,” Roberts explains. “And communicating to the consumer is much deeper than it used to be, encompassing so much more than print, television and the Internet. After all, the consumer is you and me – and we’re nut cases, right?”

If we’re not nut cases, it’s Roberts’ belief that we have every right to be. The four institutions relied upon by our parents in their hours of need – church, state, company and family – have since been exposed as morally bankrupt or virtually effete. “There’s no security anywhere,” he says of the view to which subsequent generations must inevitably reconcile themselves.

This view, it happens, explains why sports, media and entertainment have exploded as late 20th-century growth industries. “They’re all escapes,” says Roberts, who credits the Walt Disney Co. for building a global business on this very premise. “Skip the videos, the movies, the theme parks. What they’re really selling is one thing: magic. And that’s just another form of escape.”

So is music, an area in which traditional agencies, Roberts believes, have been especially derelict. Saatchi’s global payroll of 6,000 has yet to include a bona fide music expert, he laments, despite music’s role in “the thousands of commercials we produce each year.”

“We just haphazardly stumble along,” Roberts says of a situation he quickly plans to rectify, “probably paying a high price for the music we do use but getting only 30% of potential results.”

One suspects the music job could interest the CEO-designate himself. While explaining the connect-the-cultural-dots philosophy he believes will drive commerce, Roberts recalls a recent lunch with Laurie Anderson, who afterward played a music video that she had just shot for Neil Young. It so happens the musician’s T-shirt bore the Tide logo, which nearly gave Roberts apoplexy.

“Here was this pop icon using the Tide bull’s eye as a retro icon,” gushes the executive, who on Jan. 1 officially becomes CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, the lead agency for Tide manufacturer Procter & Gamble. “And it got me thinking how under-leveraged and under-advertised Tide might be. I mean, this was no Nike swoosh or Coca-Cola wave but an underground kind of thing.”

So, too, will be the \$2 million billboard campaign that Roberts has just sold to strait-laced P&G. “It all came from a lunch I had with Laurie Anderson,” he recaps, as amazed as anyone who knows P&G would be, “watching a videotape

of Neil Young wearing this thing. ... But those are the kind of connections that, more and more, agencies are going to have to make.”

Although it's too early to tell if Roberts will be every client's cup of tea, the former brewmaster has not only shored up tenuous relationships with Toyota and P&G but also led Saatchi pitch teams to victory for such coveted accounts as Beck's beer and Adidas rugby gear.

Internally, he has reduced Maurice and Charles Saatchi – the company's namesakes who nearly disabled the agency on leaving in a bitter dispute several years ago – to little more than bad memories. And that in itself is no small feat but, rather, the sort of accomplishment that begs putting one's feet on the desk, drawing a stiff vodka, firing up a joint, scratching one's balls and starting to really, really think!