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Saatchi CEO responds: Ad shops' job is passion

Kevin Roberts rebuffs '97 blast from Unilever chief FitzGerald

Saatchi & Saatchi CEO Kevin Roberts is taking an impassioned stand against Unilever Chairman Niall FitzGerald's famous accusation that ad agencies are failing to keep up with marketers' communication needs.

Mr Roberts launched his aggressive defense at the annual conference of the European Association of Advertising Agencies in Budapest. It was the same platform Mr FitzGerald used a year earlier to deliver his attack.

As CEO of a global Procter & Gamble Co agency, Mr Roberts declared himself unconcerned that his speech was likely to send any chance of winning Unilever business to "subzero".

AGENCIES 'MAKE MAGIC'

Ad agencies' major contributions to a client's business are in "making magic" and in the simplicity of the consumer connections they create, Mr Roberts said.

"We are, Mr FitzGerald implied [in his speech last year], suffering the death of a thousand cuts delivered by management consultancies, design groups, direct marketing agencies, new-media agencies and small marketing communication hot shops," Mr Roberts said.

In fact, he declared, "the assumption that large agencies are stuck in a competitive time warp, not knowing how to respond, is wrong. The metaphor is wrong. We're not dinosaurs; we're Godzilla, and we want it all: TV, print, billboards, infomercials, radio, pencils, skywriting, the Web. If it's the right medium to communicate, we'll embrace it and use it."

SAATCHI NEW-MEDIA PROWESS

Mr Roberts spelled out Saatchi's "digital smarts" – such as its ownership of new-media shops and the spread of its interactive teams, its Web projects for General Mills, Hewlett-Packett Co. and Toyota Motor Corp., and its Web-based Innovation in Communication Award. And he suggested most other agencies are just as advanced.

But, Mr Roberts said, new media are "not the main event" but tools to support the brand.

"I'm relaxed about how to steer a large organisation like Saatchi through the technology turmoil," he said. "The Web is only 1,500 days old. At this stage, we

don't have to respond to every eddy and swirl. In fact, we could tip over if we do."

The main things big business needs from creative agencies are emotion, passion, ideas and simplicity, Mr Roberts said.

No one else is going to provide these essential elements for business success. "It's not their job," he said. "And besides, they're not crazies; they're not dreamers, they don't misbehave; they don't spend a lot of time looking out the window just wondering and imagineering."

CREATIVITY A RARE THING

Creativity is a rare thing, Mr Roberts said, noting, "Creative directors don't grow on trees like MBAs."

As a consumer, Mr Roberts said, what he wants from a brand is "engagement" – dreams, memories, passion and laughter.

"That's what great brands provide," he asserted. "And that's what the great agencies will bring to every medium and tool we touch, the Web included."

"I absolutely know I'm right about this," Mr Roberts concluded. "I was the client for 30 years [before coming to Saatchi in 1997]."