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Globetrotting Ad Guy

Saatchi and Saatchi's CEO wants his firm to perform like the Yankees

Everywhere he goes, Kevin Roberts tries to turn business management on its head.

Whenever there's a second's silence, the 49-year-old CEO of the Saatchi and Saatchi agency, likes to fill it with a new idea.

He often says he wants to make Saatchi the planet's "ideas hothouse," stretching itself from advertising into other areas of marketing.

A conversation with the Britain-born New Zealand citizen is almost as exhausting as it is invigorating. From his love of New Zealand to his hunt for bootlegged CDs by Canadian singer-poet Leonard Cohen to his hatred of Britain's class-conscious society, Roberts leaps from one topic to the next.

It is the way he lives his entire life. Every month, the eternally black-clad Roberts spends one week in New York – where the company has about 500 staff members in trendy glass-walled offices near the Hudson River in SoHo – as well as a week in London, a week in Auckland and the rest of the time traveling in Europe or Asia.

Roberts is determined to scotch suggestions he won't be able to maintain his jetsetting schedule as he pushes the 7,000 staff members around the world to build on 1997 billings that reached \$7.3 billion. In New York, his time is spent with key clients who own such famous consumer names as Tule, Tylenol and Cherrios.

Toyota, Delta Airlines and DuPont are other crucial corporate customers.

He has barely stayed still since he left England when he was 19 to work for Procter and Gamble in Switzerland. He moved on to France, then Mexico, Canada and Cyprus.

"I couldn't see myself as Swiss, Moroccan or Cypriot and in 1989 I went to New Zealand. I thought it was the best place I'd ever been – I loved the values and loved the people. So, I became a Kiwi," Roberts says.

Raised in public housing in England's northwest coal district, Roberts' background is strictly working class. His father was a security guard at a mental institution and his mother worked in a shop.

“I left England because I couldn’t stand the class system, the snobbery and the old boys’ network. I didn’t like their values.”

England is high on his list of pet hates, but chief executives are up there as well.

“I don’t have a single businessman friend. I just think they are very single-dimensional and boring people,” Roberts says, apparently without fear of insulting the very people who pay his agency.

“They are driven by stuff I’m not interested in. I wasn’t an MBA and I teach leadership, not management. I don’t go anywhere where I would meet them. I’d rather hang out with artists or writers. That’s much more interesting to me than talking to a guy about running a business.

From any other chief executive such a claim might seem like little more than hot air. But when The Post arrived for an interview with Roberts, he was writing a personal check for \$5,000 to a New Zealand sculptor who had just arrived in New York with no money.

There are paintings and sculptures by unknown young New Zealand and Australian artists spread around the Saatchi headquarters.

But Roberts didn’t get to be boss of Saatchi’s ad agency – and, from next January – to chief executive of the agency’s parent company – by being dismissive of business.

When Roberts was approached by Saatchi nearly two years ago to run the agency, he was nearing the end of his seventh year as chief of New Zealand brewer Lion Nathan, which makes Steinlager and Australia’s XXXX beers. He had spent decades in packaged goods businesses, from Mary Quant cosmetics to Procter and Gamble to Pepsi.

A beer brewer was not an obvious choice to run a company piled high with sometimes temperamental and sensitive “ideas people”. He had never worked in advertising before becoming chief executive of one of the most successful firms in advertising history.

“I think the board of Saatchi was looking for someone who could manage brands successfully to manage the Saatchi and Saatchi brand. I mean, we haven’t got anything else. We don’t own a factory, we don’t expend any capital, we don’t have a new product development laboratory. All we have is a brand name,” Roberts says.

“The other thing they said is that the second asset we’ve got is people, and all these people have done it tough over the last couple of years in terms of top management and leadership.”

Saatchi and Saatchi had gone through a turbulent few years since 1995 when the two brothers who founded the agency left in disgust at their perceived maltreatment at the hands of the group's managers.

"We've virtually changed nobody since I came 18 months ago because the people we had were terrific. It's just that they weren't being coached, motivated and led."

Coaching, motivation and leadership – they are Roberts' passions.

Despite leaving school in England at 16, Roberts became a senior fellow at the business school at New Zealand's Waikato University.

Roberts is convinced there are two major facilities with modern business management styles. One is that business is rooted in the language of war, and the other is that companies want to cut rather than grow.

"All the language of war is so tired, decrepit and irrelevant. The current generation of graduates, especially the females, just reject the whole concept. They just say, "Look, we're not turned on by war – we don't want to go into battle every day, thanks. We want to compete and we want to grow and we want to achieve, but you've got to be kidding me – if there was a war, I wouldn't go."

Roberts' theory of business management is based on a study of the world's premier teams in a variety of sports. The study centered on teams that have excelled for long periods, such as the Yankees, the Chicago Bulls, Manchester United's soccer team and New Zealand's rugby union team.

Still a member of the New Zealand rugby board, Roberts maintains successful teams can teach business a lot more than successful individual athletes.

"We found that in champion teams they have these 10 practices – one of them is making magic, one of them is inspirational players, one of them is a sense of community, sacrifice and making plays for others.

"The Yankees are a classic example of a peak performance organisation. They don't have a star but they have everybody playing as a team, everybody sacrificing for each other, everybody in the whole organisation thinking about one another."

Saatchi and Saatchi can be another peak performer, Roberts believes. With the creative team feeling confident, Roberts wants a greater return from the ideas that make money for other companies. In Kevin Roberts' perfect world, client companies would be giving Saatchi a bigger share of the profits of a successful ad campaign.

“I have to figure this out because we want to get long-term benefit from a world-changing transformational idea. Forget commission, forget fees, forget all this crap. I want pay for performance. If your business goes up, I want a big chunk of that,” Roberts says.

“If it goes down you don’t give me it. I’m willing to take that risk. But we’re in bed with great companies that are probably still going to be there in another 100 years. So if I give them an idea that changes and transforms them and takes them to market leadership and they give me a fee or a media commission, I’m kind of disappointed.”

Roberts is serious about snaring more from any marketing coups. “We are in discussions. What they like is that I will partner them and be exactly on commission ground, but then they look at it and think ... what happens if it works?”

While the discussions continue so too does Roberts’ insane international travel schedule, which he actually seems to enjoy.

“How bad a life is this? I live in a loft in SoHo. I live in Auckland and I’ve got a penthouse in London on the Thames next to the Tower Bridge. My kids come to New York and London all the time. Rebecca just came with me to Vienna, Paris, Rome and Venice. Ben was just with me. Daniel was just with me in LA. I spend two weeks a month with my wife.”

“I don’t think you would want to do this with 6-year-olds, but the kids are 19, 17 and 14 and they want to know what’s meant to be wrong with this picture.”

The chief executive’s position at Saatchi will probably be Roberts’ last executive job, but he says he intends to be at the company “a long time”.