

A Dreamer in Advertising

Kevin Roberts. Wereldburger pur sang
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Kevin Roberts, Managing Director of advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, travels the world delivering his unorthodox message about love and emotions. Yesterday he was in Brussels.

By our editor, Ruben Mooijman

"EVERY threat is a challenge."

"Humour is the shortest route to the heart."

"Emotion leads to actions, reason to conclusions."

These could be quotes from the Anonymous Society, but in fact, they're a few of the one-liners which are Kevin Roberts' stock-in-trade. No wonder that someone who is so fluent has found himself in advertising, you think. But appearances can be deceptive. Kevin Roberts has only worked in the sector for five years. After a career as a marketing man for consumer products, out of the blue in 1997, he became the top man at Saatchi & Saatchi (138 offices, seven thousand employees).

But this hasn't limited his influence on the sector. In no time at all he has become a phenomenon. Not that he hasn't given himself a helping hand along the way. With his almost totally shaven head, black T-shirt and uncompromising language ("Good morning. Bloody early, hey?") he's unlike the average chief executive of an international company.

Roberts' fame is based on Lovemarks, a concept he has developed himself. The concept is so simple it can be explained in a single sentence. As products become more and more alike, emotion is the only way in which you can seduce consumers. It sounds simple, it looks simple, it is simple. Roberts admits that openly. You ask yourself if you or anyone else hadn't ever had the same thought. Perhaps, but no one has ever laid it out so well and so plausibly as Kevin Roberts.

A Lovemark, he explains, isn't the property of a manufacturer, but of the consumer. They are so crazy about the Lovemark that they will go to any lengths to obtain it. "Loyalty beyond reason".

Examples? Harley Davidson, Apple, Italy, JFK, Mandela. Because a Lovemark doesn't have to be a brand. It can be anything, as long as it stirs the emotions. "Why is Harley a Lovemark and not Suzuki? A Suzuki is more reliable, handles better, is more economical, cheaper and easier to maintain. A Harley? It's all about freedom, man."

Roberts' Lovemarks top three? Number one: his mother-in-law, "A fantastic person." Two: the All Blacks, the national rugby team of New Zealand, Roberts' adopted homeland. He identifies so closely with the team that, like the players he dresses totally in black. Three: a tie between Saatchi & Saatchi and New Zealand.

Roberts explains his simple concept with a simple graph. The x axis shows love generated, the y axis shows respect given. Throwaway products and functional supplies like water and electricity get little love and little respect. In the next quadrant we find products with little respect but a lot of love: hyped and trendy products. The Furby, Harry Potter, Britney Spears. Most traditional products are in the opposite quadrant: a lot of respect, but little love. "Brands which use er-words: better, newer, thriftier, stronger." The last section is reserved for real Lovemarks: a lot of love and a lot of respect. "This is where you can build deep relationships with your customers." Keywords for real Lovemarks are: mysterious, sensual, intimate.

So much for the theory. But Roberts' first task is not to dream up nice advertising models, but to make profits for Saatchi & Saatchi's French owners, Publicis. So far he has done so with a will. During his five year stewardship, profits have risen each year, and during the Cannes advertising festival, the agency won the most creative awards by far.

Saatchi & Saatchi's biggest clients are Toyota, General Mills and Procter & Gamble. Not exactly Lovemarks candidates, you'd think. But look at how Roberts (whose credo is "nothing's impossible") has tried to turn Cheerios, General Mills' breakfast cereal brand, into a Lovemark. The commercials transmitted in the United States didn't say anything about the intrinsic qualities of the product, but rather the role that Cheerios played in the family. When you see how a toddler wakes his parents with a Cheerios breakfast, as a viewer you realise immediately that the slogan, "Good for the heart", is not just about the product's cholesterol-reducing properties (which is, of course, mentioned in passing).

Or take Toyota. Roberts wanted to convince the management of the Japanese company that they shouldn't simply strive to be the most respected brand in the United States, but above all, the most loved. Saatchi & Saatchi created a commercial in which a Toyota, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, was followed by a stream of cars which threw themselves into the abyss while the Toyota looked on from the cliff top.

Another example of Roberts' unorthodox approach is a commercial which is little more than a joke. A man walking alongside a fence hears a group of

people on the other side chanting, "Thirteen, thirteen". Inquisitive, he finds a hole in the fence and looks through, eager to find out what's going on. Immediately from the other side, a finger is poked into his eye. Shocked, he reels back, while from the other side of the fence we hear, "Fourteen, fourteen". The commercial was made and, shortly afterwards, they looked for a client. The new client was Cash Converters, a chain of second-hand shops.

Brands don't have any choice, according to Roberts: they must stir emotions or lose out. Without an emotional approach and consumer love, they immediately fall into the commodity trap: the vicious circle of pressure on prices, pressure on margins and pressure on market share. "Every car starts without fail, every coffee brand has a delicious aroma, every anti-dandruff shampoo makes short work of dandruff. You can't create Lovemarks by management or leadership, but through inspiration. Not through mission statements, but through dreams."