

“I don’t have ‘Born to Follow’ tattooed on my buttocks”

Opinionated and combative, there aren’t too many ad CEOs like Kevin Roberts left. Through the course of an interview, he gave us everything from some belated advice for former team Saatchi India to vital tips on lion handling

Ravi Balakrishnan

Considering Law & Kenneth is not reckoned to be a creative powerhouse, and Saatchi & Saatchi has a strong creative reputation, what were your thoughts when the acquisition was first broached?

I thought it was brilliant. We could both build with each other and become better. Law & Kenneth are hungry, ambitious and full of piss and vinegar. They win stuff. They are hunters and killers. Saatchi has magic, mystique, global connections and great creativity. It would be nice to see One and One equal Five.

Why didn’t Saatchi & Saatchi India hit its stride pre-merger? Some of the people we spoke to who used to be with the agency claimed they didn’t get enough support from the global ops.

Whinging moaning bastards! You should take control of your destiny. If anybody had said that to me, I’d have shot them on the spot. It’s kind of pathetic, isn’t it? Go, put some long pants on junior, and grow up please. I don’t think I am ever going to hear that from Praveen Kenneth. I don’t think it’s in his mentality. In the months since we’ve done the deal, we’ve talked three times.

So what sort of a difference has Law & Kenneth made?

It’s got leadership. People I trust and want to work with. They are Indian: the last time I looked, we were quite English (referring

to former Saatchi India chief Matt Seddon). These guys have a soul, all the things that India brings with it and I like them very much.

In a decade old interview with us, you said, “We don’t have the relentless driving-result-focused-mentality of the Australian cricketers which is more a BBDO kind of approach. We want to play advertising the way India plays cricket — with spectacular success and failures.” How has that worked out for Saatchi & Saatchi?

Nothing has changed! Except Australia has become less relentless. If you are going to win some, you will lose some. I don’t want to win all the time. I don’t want to win 1 - nil. I’d rather lose 5 - 4. At Saatchi & Saatchi, we are lucky since our brand is bigger than our reality. We are not the biggest, or the best, but we are the most famous. We want to give our people four things: responsibility, learning, recognition and joy. When you tell millennials that, they want to be part of the family.

How hard is attracting talent these days? It’s quite a struggle if some of your rivals are to be believed

That’s bullshit. For every job, I have 50 to 100 qualified people and they are good. I wonder why clients can’t keep people in their positions longer. The CMO stays on two or three years. A brand manager seems to be gone in two weeks. I’ve been running Saatchi 17 years; more than most CEOs in client companies. The talent question is vital. Over the past 20 years, we had a period where everyone became consultants and then bankers, or joined start-ups and now they are all being attacked by Google and Facebook. We keep going since our school system turns out kids who are creatively driven. We don’t get paid better but the lifestyle is alright. We dress better and live better.



We are moving to an age of acts not ads. You, of course, did a few of these before the phrase caught on like blowing up a Coke machine when you were with Pepsi. Were you ever able to top that?

After I left Pepsi, I joined a company called Lion Nathan in New Zealand. Lion was a brewer and Nathan a big retailer. We put these together and launched them in the stock exchange in 1989. It was a new company but it would immediately be the biggest in the country. In my first analyst conference, as chief executive, with some 70 or 100 people in the room, I entered holding a lion. The lion went first closely followed by me. I’m not kidding: you know how these Wall Street analysts are like — macho. But they were all shrieking and running. I said the reason I brought this in is so you will remember the name of the company. Lion — and then there was a roar, not from the lion I had with me but a sound effect — Nathan. There were two things I learned.

Always stand behind a lion, because it goes forwards and backwards. And No 2: Make sure its keeper with a tranquiliser gun is between you and the lion. We did lots of stuff but the Pepsi Coke thing follows me around, maybe because it was in the middle of the cola wars.

Anything else that sticks out?

I gave a speech as CEO of PepsiCo Canada called ‘what keeps me awake at night’. The curtains drew back and I was sleeping in a big double bed. I woke up and did the whole presentation in pyjamas. Rolf Jensen who ran the institute of the future in Copenhagen said “the heroes of the 21st century will be storytellers.” And these were stories. If those things happened today I’d have been all over the internet: “Crazy Pepsi president shoots Coca-Cola vending machine.” It’s still being done now, but not enough perhaps. We

are in show business. It’s theatre. You inspire people to action by emotionally connecting with them.

Your contemporary CEOs are not as digitally active as you are. Do you think they are missing a trick?

I’ve no idea what they are doing since I don’t look at them. I write four blog entries a week; it’s bloody hard work. I’m attempting to be inspirational in a personal way. I took to Twitter recently against better judgment because I felt it wasn’t for me. I find it a bit fast and superficial. So I don’t follow people on it. I do not follow. I don’t have ‘Born to Follow’ tattooed on my buttocks. My sons are Twitter mad and on Facebook and Instagram. It’s an admirable way of living but it isn’t for me. I’d rather blog, read magazines like *Monocle* and take photos with a Nikon rather than a smartphone. I’ve never yet taken a selfie cause I’m not part of the me, me, me thing.

You’ve also come in for a fair share of criticism since you write about your lifestyle and hotels.

I don’t spend too much time in hotels. It’s mainly on planes. Staying in a hotel would be a luxury.

So how do you deal with critics?

I don’t read them and it wouldn’t bother me anyway. When I took over, 17 years ago, a wise man said when you run Saatchi you are in the public eye. The strategy we agreed on was that following Maurice Saatchi, the agency needed a personality and not just a manager. He said you have to do two things every morning: strap on a bullet proof chest and a waterproof back. So every morning to this day, I, metaphorically speaking, do just that.

What’s your new role as head coach going to be like?

Call Sunil Gavaskar and he will tell you! (Laughs) We want to take the Top 20 and the Top 100 and then the Top 1000 leaders and coach them so they can play at peak. The new team will be one Publicis. Not all the different brands and networks. These guys are all talented and smart. It’s like coming together for a hockey team. It’s the only job of its kind in the business.

How are you going to deal with know-it-alls who believe they don’t need coaching?

Really great players know that they don’t know it all. They want to learn more and few are as old as me. Few of them have been doing it as long as I have and few have been a client. So far, everyone has said “fantastic, we get him for nothing and he’s going to make us better.”

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