

Legacy in the Making

SAATCHI &
SAATCHI

Founded in 1970, Saatchi & Saatchi is a powerhouse in the world of marketing communications. Saatchi & Saatchi represents nine of the top 10 and nearly half of the top 100 global advertisers, including Acer, General Mills, HSBC, Lenovo, Lexus, Mead Johnson, Mondelez International, GSK (GlaxoSmithKline), Procter & Gamble, Deutsche Telekom, Toyota and Visa Europe. Over time, Saatchi & Saatchi has grown from a start-up ad agency in London to a global creative communications company headquartered in New York and located in 68 countries with over 6,000 employees. The Legacy Lab spoke to **Robert Senior**, CEO Worldwide, about his ambition for the Saatchi & Saatchi brand with a focus on its ongoing legacy in the making.



most famous agency in the world in a relatively short space of time. 'Against all odds' is really the story of the founding of Saatchi & Saatchi.

When you talk about the Saatchi & Saatchi story of today, what is the story that you tell? What are some of the galvanizing brand ideas?

■ I talk about 'nothing is impossible' as the guiding agency principle: an operating principle, not just a sound bite. To do that, you've got to have the kind of courage to take on big, chunky problems and believe that creative thinking can help to circumnavigate seemingly intractable problems. I talk a lot about the importance of ideas that can change things: that can change clients' careers, change their businesses, change our businesses, and can sometimes change the world too.

It's a dream, a very high ambition, to create ideas that change the world fueled by the belief that 'nothing is impossible.' To actually achieve that, in any shape or form that transcends hyperbole and bullshit, this agency needs to be populated by

When you tell people the story of one of the most famous ad agencies in the world, what is the origin story that you tell about the founding of Saatchi & Saatchi?

■ The genesis of the brand idea is literally the story of two brothers,

immigrants filled with ambition and courage. Saatchi & Saatchi started with just the two of them, Maurice and Charles, kind of making it up as they were going along. Through hard work, luck, courage and many acquisitions, Saatchi & Saatchi became the largest and

people who are humble, smart and courageous and embrace risk.

“Against all odds’ is really the story of the founding of Saatchi & Saatchi.”

Can you share a particular idea that you think is perfect evidence of your ‘nothing is impossible’ belief?

■ I’m quite a fan of the Toyota Tundra idea. In the recent past, the space shuttle Endeavour was on its last flight when it landed at LAX. From there, it was going to be put on display at the California Science Center. The shuttle needed to be moved from where it landed all the way across town to the museum. The issue was that one particular bridge Endeavour had to cross, leaving LAX, was not sound enough to accommodate the weight of the vehicle made to pull it. So, you’ve got this massive machine that’s designed to transport things like the space shuttle that could not get across this bridge because it was simply too heavy.

Now, it was kind of a lucky bounce. Endeavour was going to a place that was sponsored by Toyota, and someone at the agency suggested that, according to all of the data,

the Tundra should be able to pull it. This could be a great moment, and we could film it and get lots of PR. And then, that’s what happened. But the real genius of this idea was in understanding the business problem. In spite of the high number of Toyota pickup trucks and Tundras sold in the United States each year, it was still considered a Japanese company and brand. So the real brief, the leitmotif, the spiritual brief, was how to get Toyota to become more deeply ingrained and considered to be a part of American culture. With the Endeavour event, Toyota felt like it was contributing to a very important part of the American culture; meaningfully participating with a cultural icon of America. If you look back at the PR and Twitter feed, and all the social conversation happening around the shuttle, a great deal of the common trade was ‘USA, USA, proud to be American, a great moment for America and its pioneering spirit in space.’ Toyota became a part of that narrative.

Was it a fantastic PR moment? Yes. Was it audacious? Yes. Was it an absolutely impossible task to coordinate with the many different stakeholders, including NASA, Boeing, the California Transit Authority, the City of Los Angeles inclusive of the highway patrol and police forces? Yes. So, it all required a ‘nothing is impossible’ spirit to achieve an incredibly ambitious end. That to me is pure Saatchi & Saatchi. It’s not ‘beating your chest’ types of ideas. It’s not profanity in

Vatican City ideas. It’s smart and creative sorts of ideas, with the power to change things, delivered and executed beautifully.

Most advertising agencies have good ideas every day of the week. Most of those ideas end up in the trash can at the end of every day. At Saatchi & Saatchi, we have the temerity and the smarts to come up with something really smart, and we have the robustness to make the impossible real. At its best, that is what sets Saatchi & Saatchi apart from the competition in my view.

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When is Saatchi & Saatchi at its best? What has been the brand’s biggest success?

■ I think Saatchi & Saatchi’s biggest success is its sheer fearlessness, ambition and courage. These traits represent phenomenally enduring assets. I think when we do great

work with the 'nothing is impossible' spirit, it just takes on the impossible, and it won't be beaten by the noes. Whether it's the 'Blood Relations' work we did recently, successfully promoting blood donations by both the Israelis and the Palestinians as an act of love and unity, or whether it's some of the audacious acquisitions that have taken place over time, including when the brothers acquired E.G. Dawes, that spirit inspires this brand onward.

I think in the day-to-day sphere when we apply that fearlessness and ambition and courage, we are simply at our best. When we apply those traits, our work is better. When we apply those traits, we hire the right people. We just don't give up. No problem is too difficult. No problem is too great, and we'll do everything we can to make sure our clients' brands and businesses are promoted quicker because that's what we do.

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In its history so far, what has been Saatchi & Saatchi's biggest challenge?

■ The biggest challenge our brand has faced was when its ambition flipped to arrogance, and people started drinking their own Kool-Aid®. Confidence is a key word in all this. But when fearlessness, ambition, courage and confidence flip into outrageous arrogance, that presents a problem. Confidence is like cholesterol. You have got good cholesterol, and you have got bad cholesterol. Good confidence is very inspiring and has got great charisma. Bad confidence is repugnant; it's a repulsive behavior, and I think there were moments in time when we were very much in danger and guilty of that. The most prominent moment or version of that was when the brothers tried to buy the Midland Bank, which was a big retail bank at the time in the U.K. It was an unthinkable, arrogant thing for Saatchi & Saatchi to try and do. That was the biggest failure: when the brand drank its own Kool-Aid and just took it too far.

How do you combat that? How, as a leader of the Saatchi & Saatchi brand, do you walk the line between good confidence and bad confidence?

■ Stay humble. We're not massive. We are quite small. We are very blessed to be at the wheel of a big brand. Still, ours is actually quite a modest business. There's something very charming about understating things rather than coming in kind of me Tarzan, you Jane, we're going to

blow your mind with this idea. When I first joined Saatchi & Saatchi, I'd sit and listen to these overly confident, sort of arrogant account people who were overpromising to a client before the meeting had even begun, when I knew that what we had was at best mediocre. And, it was embarrassing. It was a horrible kind of denial and this sort of lack of self-awareness.

*"I think Saatchi & Saatchi's biggest success is its **sheer fearlessness, ambition and courage**. These traits represent phenomenally enduring assets."*

The sorts of people that I think are really truly Saatchi & Saatchi people have high self-awareness, are quite humble and are appropriately self-confident. They don't have to shout to be heard. They're willing to take the client out to the edge and go over the edge with them and embrace risk. There's a big difference between that kind of confidence and the confidence that's always wearing black and shouting and screaming and overpromising and 'we're never wrong' and 'we've got all the answers to all the questions.'

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Given everything you have shared about what defines Saatchi & Saatchi—as a brand, as a business, as a part of culture—how would you sum up what you want your enduring legacy to be?

■ We are the most famous brand in our marketplace, and yet we’re famous for a whole plethora of reasons, some of which are bad, including one of the founders strangling his wife at dinner, and some of which have less to do with creating ‘nothing is impossible’ ideas for our clients, including one of the founders having a significant art collection. I think if there’s one legacy I’d like to leave, it is to make certain Saatchi & Saatchi is famous for the right reasons—the amazing ideas we took to our clients. It’s quite a trite answer, but it is actually the answer.

To achieve this requires, day-to-day, a change in mind-set, a change in

our behaviors. We need to start inviting different types of people to the table to help us succeed if we are really going to use ideas and the power of ideas as our legacy. We’ve got to be open to technologies, open to many, many specialist fields too. Take the Tundra example. Making the Tundra idea real had little to do with advertising skills in the traditional sense. But the ideation and realization of using the Tundra to pull the Endeavour was absolutely bang on to purpose. So, I think if you go back to some of that bad confidence versus good confidence conversation, bad confidence would say that we’ve got this covered, leave me to it, we’ll solve it, we don’t need any help because we’re Saatchi & Saatchi, and we’re this omnipotent indestructible force. And actually, I think in today’s culture, modern brands show great confidence in sharing their weaknesses or vulnerabilities and opening themselves up to different communities and new ways of thinking. I think there are elements of that kind of cultural behavior we absolutely have to embrace in order to have any hope of standing the test of time.

It feels like the advertising industry is going through a lot of change. What’s your take on the current and future state of the ad industry? And where does Saatchi & Saatchi fit into the conversation about change?

■ Maybe I’m too old for this, but I’ve read lots of stories on a monthly, quarterly, annual basis

about the death of advertising from the beginning of video shops to the start of TiVo. Even in this week’s Ad Age, there’s another story about this crisis of ad avoidance. And yet, the advertising business is still growing. TV is still by far the most dominant medium. And yet, everyone is intent on telling us we’re dead and pointless and irrelevant and impotent and everything else.

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I think the first advertising agency sponsored the town crier that used to go around with the bell to announce that the bakers were turning out buns and a dignitary would be visiting the town next Wednesday, and then would do sponsored messages. Advertising will always be there. It just takes different shapes and forms. So, all this hysteria about how consultants are doing the job of advertising agencies, how everyone is doing content, how marketers are doing the platforms themselves, and how ad agencies are under siege really is, in my view, a little over-

blown. We've always been under siege because we're in the business of advocacy and storytelling, and there are always new storytellers who come and go. And, will this industry diminish? Yes. Will specialists' talents within the industry change in terms of delivery mechanisms? Absolutely. It's happening all the time. But, do the fundamental principles of intellectual reductionism and strategic reductionism and then a creative idea to bring to life and beguile, bewilder, amaze, jolt, create some sort of effect in the audience disappear? That will never change, in my humble opinion.

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I'm not in denial of change. I'm not in denial of the increasing importance of technology as a sort of supplement and partner to creativity.

But I will not be held hostage to the hysteria of 'we're all doomed,' because we're not. We'll only be doomed if we allow ourselves to be doomed.

Saatchi & Saatchi has been around now for 45 years or so, and I think it's incumbent on us to remain eyes wide open about what's happening now and in the future in order to make sure we stay relevant today and tomorrow for our clients. But if we got influenza every time someone dictated that our industry was dead, our funeral would have been years ago. I think a brand like Saatchi & Saatchi, on behalf of the industry, has got to stand tall, put its chin up, shoulders back and never lose sight of what's actually important. And what's important is strategic counsel and creative ideas that help clients to build their brands and businesses.

What's something surprising that most people don't know about Saatchi & Saatchi that continues to drive its legacy forward?

■ We are our own harshest critics. We've had discussions with creative leaders around the network about our standard. How do we measure ourselves creatively? What's a good year versus a not good year? Our whole legacy has to be the ideas we produce for our clients. Therefore, how do we measure that ourselves? Rather than say we must get X number of gold medals in creative competitions or rankings on external lists, we recently created something

that we call the '30-page book.' It's simple. It's exacting. It's a book and it's got 30 pages. Each page has just one idea on it. And the objective is to showcase ideas that will leave some kind of legacy of their own. And so, it's not the quite good or even the very good but the wow ideas that make the book. Between us all, more than 6,000 of us at Saatchi & Saatchi, we should have at least 30 ideas that would stand the test of time and that are worthy of publishing in a book every year.

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The best thing about the 30-page book is if the ideas won't stand the test of time, then we simply don't put them in. If you look at the 2014 inaugural 30-page book, there are only 10 entries. And the best bit about that 30-page book is that we have 20 empty pages to make the point. While on the front cover

of the book it lists one to 30, only numbers one to 10 have got ideas filled in. And we put one book in every reception area of Saatchi & Saatchi around the world. I'm trying to say to our clients, yeah, I know we've still got room for improvement, but at least we're willing to set ourselves a very high standard and to be counted.

What advice do you have for others working to build a successful brand legacy of their own?

■ I think it's almost become a cliché now, but culture eats everything for breakfast. A company's real legacy is defined by its culture, more than its output, I believe.

I'm not terribly good at what some would refer to as plumbing. I can do it, but it does not float my boat particularly. I understand the intellectual need for some process and some order and shape and ergonomics and operational efficiencies. I understand it, and therefore, I embrace it. But it doesn't define me, and it certainly doesn't define the Saatchi & Saatchi brand. What defines us and what defines any great company is its culture. And you create that starting with the founder. It's like when an agency is doing a business pitch and, especially if it's pursuing an independently owned company, the first person you want to talk to is the founder. What's the genesis of a brand? What was the heartbeat? When you're a leader, you have to go backward in order to go

forward. You have got to understand what you've taken on and which parts of that brand you believe are relevant and appropriate to move on into the future, to drive any kind of enduring success.

That was why I found the Saatchi & Saatchi opportunity for me such an enormous privilege and kind of intimidating. It has such a strong mythology and such a strong cultural backdrop and so much to work with. Pat Fallon, part of the namesake of Saatchi & Saatchi Fallon, used to say the night before a pitch, 'Don't f*ck it up.' That's how I feel about leading the Saatchi & Saatchi brand. You can f*ck up quite a lot in life, but don't f*ck this one up with the Saatchi & Saatchi brand. You have got to honor that one and really understand it in all its idiosyncratic nuance, sort of the good and the bad. Understand it, galvanize the cultural truths and reimagine those in today's reality. Then, you might have a fighting chance.

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*For 45 years and counting, Saatchi & Saatchi has helped iconic brands around the world identify their purpose and grow their legacy. At the same time, Saatchi & Saatchi's present leadership continues to be focused on defining what its own legacy is all about. While acknowledging Saatchi & Saatchi's history, Robert Senior takes the 'nothing is impossible' mantra and applies it to every modern aspect of the company and brand, mobilizing his organization around a unified culture. This focus helps to inspire all Saatchi & Saatchi employees as to how they should approach their jobs and the brands they work on: to tackle big, juicy problems with fearlessness, ambition and courage; to always stay humble; to never think you can't do something; to be your own harshest critic, all in pursuit of never f*cking up the legacy they are making.*

BY MARK MILLER

Mark Miller is the Chief Strategy Officer at Team One, an ad agency with global expertise and proprietary research into premium categories and aspirational consumers.