

New Canaan's Seelert bestows his wisdom in new book

By Richard Lee
STAFF WRITER

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Bob Seelert likes his job.

During his c-level career, he had a front seat at two mega-mergers.

Now, as nonexecutive chairman of global advertising giant Saatchi & Saatchi, the New Canaan resident draws on his 40 years with General Foods, Topco Associates, Kayser-Roth Corp., and Saatchi to counsel clients such as Procter & Gamble.

"I meet with them eight times a year. I tell them what I do. I'm at a point of maturity in my life where I'm comfortable doing that. As a nonexecutive chairman, I give a lot of counsel," said Seelert, whose book, "Start with the Answer and Other Wisdom for Aspiring Leaders," has a May release date.

"I spend time at work dispensing advice and consulting. It keeps you on the cutting edge of life," he said.

In the book, published by John Wiley & Sons, Seelert, 66, details his groundwork at Manchester High School, his parents' Hartford beer distributorship and at Harvard Business School.

Chapters are capped by words of wisdom from Seelert, who says there are eight dimensions of business life: preparation, building and managing a career, business strategy, business operations, finance and economics, leadership, culture and communications, and personal spirit and style.

"It was designed to be an easy read. They're down-to-earth, common-sense stories," he said.

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"My dad was a hard-driving guy who died when he was 48, and my mother took over the presidency of the distributorship. Talk about drive and enthusiasm," said Seelert, who led turnarounds at Topco, a grocery cooperative, and Kayser-Roth, a leg wear manufacturer.

As chairman of Saatchi & Saatchi, he hired Kevin Roberts as chief executive officer. Together, they led the agency's merger in 2000 with Publicis Groupe.

Seelert is a key Saatchi & Saatchi family member, Roberts said. "Bob provides me with advice, counsel and perspective. He gives me unconditional love and support. I use him relentlessly with our top people. I don't think there's a business situation that he hasn't experienced."

Following the merger, Seelert decided to write a book, but he needed a thread to tie it all together. "If I were a brand, what would be my one-word equity?" he asked one of his executives.

"Your one-word equity is 'wisdom,'" the Saatchi exec replied, leading to the book's format.

It is a primer for people considering a business career and for corporate veterans, said Wylie senior editor Richard Narramore. "The book is about a vision of a captain of industry. He has a perspective that people don't have."

Saatchi & Saatchi is facing stiff competition as companies cut spending, said Kevin McEvoy, marketing professor at the University of Connecticut's Stamford campus. "They've done well in the past few years. Saatchi & Saatchi is very solid with a reputation for creative and client maintenance."