

# Start with the Answer, Start with Bob Seelert

*Bob Seelert is one of the most senior executives to emerge into the recessionary business landscape in 2009. His new book Start with the Answer is a success recipe for both young aspiring professionals and current business leaders alike. With two Harvard degrees and a 40-year career as a 'Captain of Industry,' Bob Seelert has earned a reputation as a turnaround expert, reviving the fortunes of companies and brands in the USA and abroad. For the past 12 years Seelert has been the Chairman of Saatchi & Saatchi, one of the world's leading creative ideas companies.*

[ *by* **Carmen Maria Sanchez, Princeton University** ]

**Business Today:** What does it mean to be a marketer? Is it a skill you personally developed inside or outside the classroom?

**Bob Seelert:** I have a couple of stories in my book that have been helpful to me. One of them is called my formula for success: 1 part brains, 2 parts common sense. Marketing has to do with common sense, and sometimes if you overanalyze things, you get the formula reversed, where it's 2 parts brains and 1 part common sense. That doesn't square with the real world. And after all, the consumer is your wife. It's a pretty straight-forward world here in marketing.

The other story I have in the book is "Listen to Your Barber," which is essentially a parallel for go out and live life and participate in the real world and take advantage of interacting with people you may not frequently meet. Ask everybody. Be incredibly curious. Just

participate. Marketing is all about what is on the cutting edge of going on in life. So you want to live life and keep it down to the world of common sense.

**BT:** How have you weighted the importance of brains and a prestigious education, compared to the importance of sound instincts and personal skills?

**BS:** Prestigious schools provide great screening grounds. You have to be smart to go to places like [Harvard, Seelert's alma mater or Princeton, BT's home base]. But once you get to a certain level, I really like the combination of brains and street smarts. There is the school of practical reality. Take your education and marry it up with that.

**BT:** What sorts of advice would you give to college students who aren't sure they want to go into the cut-throat career of business,

where you need street smarts but also school smarts? Based on your book, what are the tough questions—well, I suppose the tough answers—seniors should focus on to figure out exactly what they want to do?

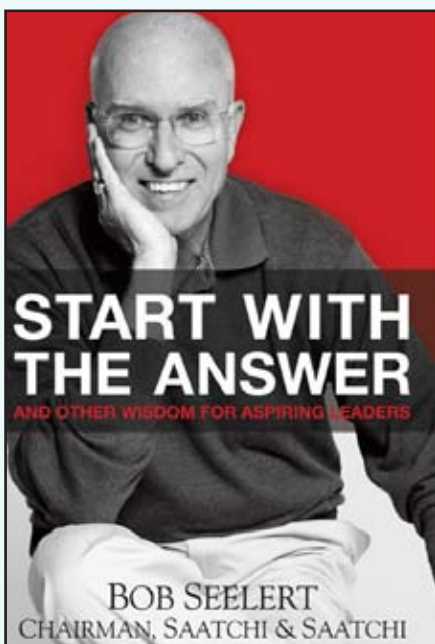
**BS:** My career advice always falls into the same category. The first thing you should do is think, what is it that you're good at? Do a candid self-assessment. Utilize resources like family, friends, counselors, former work associates in this. Second, you should write down what it is that you really like to do. What do you groove on? Where is your heart? What really turns you on in life? And when you have those two things—what you're good at and what you like to do—you should put them together with either a company or a career that highly values those attributes. If you put all these things together, you will have a combination for both success and happiness.

**BT:** Would you say that it matters more who you're working with—the type of people you are interacting with—than what you're actually doing or what the job is?

**BS:** It's a combination of the two things. On the one hand, someone might choose to go into advertising. But on the other hand, these companies are what I would call cultural animals. They can be very different, one from another—which gets at the idea of who you're working with. So I think you should pay attention to both. But you have to be true to yourself. So I would start with what you're doing, since that ought to reflect both what you're good at and what you like to do. And if you find out that it doesn't seem to be the right place or these don't seem like the right people, maybe within the field you want to be in there is another place that would be better.

**BT:** You've worked successfully in many industries, and now you're in the ad business. Would you say that there is a big difference, if any, between pursuing a career in the marketing industry straight out of college and applying for jobs in other competitive industries, such as investment banking?

**BS:** When we hire people at Saatchi and Saatchi, we like them to have three attributes: passionate, competitive, and restless. We want to make an assessment that this is the field they really want to get into



and that they've done some self-examination and thinking about what it's all about and whether it's something they really want to do. We want them to be competitive, getting ahead in their careers, growing as people, but also winning on behalf of their clients. We want to see them wanting us to win as a company, and wanting to see their clients winning in the markets they're in. And we also want them to be restless, which means they subscribe to the mantra of our company, which is "nothing is impossible." No task is too great—just tell us what needs to get done, and we'll figure out a way to do it better than anybody else.

The field that we're in is on the cutting edge of what's going on in life. It's constantly changing. So it's something that can either keep you young or really tire you out—but it always keeps you in the present.

**BT:** You mentioned people who were getting ahead in their career. What about students, who don't yet have a career per se?

**BS:** Well you're going to go build one. Building a career starts off as something you want to be passionate about and you're going to learn that field in a professional kind of sense. You're going to develop functional skills. As you go along in that journey, you're also going to develop managerial skills. And on that journey, you're going to think a lot about who you are as a person—values, beliefs, principles, practices you stand for and guide you through life—and that's going to make you become a leader and inspire others in that endeavor. It's a journey of personal growth—from functional skills, to managerial skills, to leadership skills.

**BT:** Would you say it is advantageous to have work experience in other industries before venturing into the advertising industry, which is so wide ranging, or can you dive into it?

**BS:** You can dive into it. Experience and exposure can always be helpful, but we wouldn't be reluctant for you to dive into our business if that's what you had really thought through and were passionate about. One of the things that is fascinating about it [the marketing industry] is that you get to interact with a lot of different businesses over time—because an agency like ours has

a broad range of clients and exposure to a broad range of businesses.

**BT:** In your opinion, what has been the most successful or most unprecedented branding venture in the past fifty years?

**BS:** In the last decade, one of the best jobs in branding has been done by Apple. This is a company that we don't have any association with, but I have great admiration for them. I think they've done a great job of branding as they go from things like the iMac to the iPod to iTunes to the iPhone—they've got it all collected under this Apple banner. It's a real "Lovemark," in our vocabulary. It's all supported by products that are cutting-edge in terms of design, technology, and innovation. They've done a fabulous job.

If you ask me in the last fifty years, we do have a client that I think has done a fabulous job, and that is Toyota. They have developed a complete line of vehicles that are quality cars that are reliable. They've established a bunch of model name equities that have perpetuated over a long period of time by re-launching, by continuously innovating, by continuously improving.

**BT:** What exactly is a "lovemark"?

**BS:** A lovemark is the future beyond brands. Brands are things that are differentiated and that you can have a lot of respect for, but if you can go beyond that in the emotional connection kind of way—all the way to what we call lovemarks—you can, in truth, inspire loyalty beyond reason. That's what we're trying to do: bring our products to life in such a manner that people fall in love with them.

**BT:** Would you say that a company with a horrible-sounding brand name—a company with no lovemark so to speak—can succeed? What if the name is terrible but the product is of great quality?

**BS:** Brand names are a funny thing. They've sprung from all different vantage points to be successful. For example, along the lovemark kind of line, just in naming, Apple versus Microsoft kind of has a propensity to be a lovemark. One of them sounds like you could take a bite out of the apple and fall

in love with it, and the other sounds more techie, geekish.

I was once in the pet food industry and Alpo was a very successful brand at the time. What was Alpo? Where did they come up with that? It stands for the Allen Products Company. But it was short, it was distinctive, and it was memorable. Those are some characteristics of a good brand name.

**BT:** Would you say that the goal of marketing changes during hard economic times?

**BS:** The goal of marketing is to maintain brand recognition and understanding, and we want to build revenue on behalf of our clients. When you get into a recession, one of the things we need to do is step back and take a look at the reality of the environment and we want to make sure that we do what we call “reframe” the value of our clients’ products for the nature of the environment we’re in. For example, Tide has always had a reputation for being the best laundry detergent around. In a recessionary environment, it doesn’t hurt to remind consumers that Tide’s color integrity feature helps to keep clothes looking brighter and newer longer. Because in a recession you might not go out to buy that new blue dress as often as you would like, the fact that the one you have is looking brighter and newer longer isn’t a bad benefit. That checks the value proposition and ensures the product stands up for the environment that it’s in. You always want to be relevant.

**BT:** What about the growth of web-based advertising in changing the way that customer service is defined by companies and how companies go about getting people to buy their product in a way that goes beyond reason?

**BS:** Advertising is not just providing information. What we need to do is make connections. We need to be connecting the products and services of our client with the needs and requirements of consumers—and how these things fit into a consumer’s life. In the old days of Pampers, you used to talk about functional benefits—how Pampers keep babies dry. But today’s women want happy, healthy babies, and someone who can

provide her with products and information and be a partner in creating happy, healthy babies. Marketers used to be intrusive; we used to bang people over the head with our message. Now, we want to be invited into their home. We want them to be coming to us, as opposed to us coming to them.

**BT:** Theories about ‘the hypodermic needle effect’ suggest advertisers inject poison into people’s brains and induce them to buy products they don’t actually need. Do you think these kinds of dangers exist?

**BS:** I don’t believe you can make people do things they don’t want to do. I have a tremendous respect for the consumer to sort through the wheat from the chaff. Abraham Lincoln was once quoted saying, “You can fool some of the people all the time, all of

the people some of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.” I’m not into the hypodermic needle deal.

**BT:** What was the most challenging or disillusioning moment in your quest to build your career? How did you turn yourself around?

**BS:** I had one moment in my life when, if I went home and were honest with myself and looked in the mirror, I was working for money, as opposed to the satisfaction of what I was doing. That was a big mistake. I moved on and put that behind me because I like to get up and feel good about what I’m doing when I go off to work every day of my life. Fundamentally, I have done that for forty years. Have fun while you work—it’s a big thing. **BT**

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