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Business Newsletter

Admen behaving badly is no way to run an industry

For an industry that prides itself on solving clients' problems, the ad business might need to take a look at itself in the mirror a bit more often

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John Slattery as Roger Sterling and Jon Hamm as Don Draper in Mad Men Picture: Lionsgate

The recent and controversial resignation of Kevin Roberts, the executive global chairman of advertising giant Saatchi & Saatchi, has once again turned the spotlight on an industry that has been accused of widespread misogyny and blatant gender and racial inequality.

Roberts was initially told to take leave by Publicis Groupe, the French agency network which owns Saatchi & Saatchi, after he denied in an interview with Business Insider that sexism and gender inequality was an issue in the advertising world.

Sounding more like David Brent than David Ogilvy, he proclaimed that any conversation about it was now "over" and went on to dismiss industry advocate Cindy Gallop as a shameless self-promoter who made things up to create a profile for herself.

A week later he was gone out the door, prompting Maurice Levy, the chief executive of Publicis, to say that the company would not tolerate anyone who "does not value the importance of inclusion".

While it was an ignominious end to an otherwise stellar career, it came only months after the American advertising industry was rocked to its core after JWT's global communications chief, Erin Johnson, filed a discrimination lawsuit against Gustavo Martinez, the agency's chairman and CEO.

Among many other things, Johnson alleged that Martinez had made jokes about rape, compared black people to monkeys and once told a journalist that he disliked living in Westchester County because it had "too many Jews".

Like Roberts, Martinez was out the door within weeks - and not long after the fallout, Martin Sorrell (the CEO of WPP, which owns JWT) told a gathering of American advertising folk that the problem of sexism in the industry is pervasive and that this was by no means an isolated incident.

To an outsider looking in, the industry may smack of the Mad Men days when testosterone-charged Don Draper-like characters strutted their Neanderthal stuff with impunity and the act of patting a female on the behind was possibly viewed as a precursor to after-hours drinks in the boardroom.

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But then again it's not that long ago since the 1970s and 1980s when, if you were of a particular religion or your alma mater was one of several boys' schools in south county Dublin, your career path in certain Dublin-based ad agencies was almost mapped out for you.

While the old boys' network may be a thing of the past in Irish advertising, it is clear that there are still significant gender imbalances within the industry and at all levels.

Of the 53 member agencies that are members of the Institute of Advertising Practitioners in Ireland (IAPI), for example, there are just nine female CEOs or MDs. Of these, seven preside over independent Irish-owned agencies although just two of them are shareholders in the business they manage.

Although the gender breakdown within the industry is evenly split 50:50 between males and females, when it comes to the gender breakdown of the boards of Irish agencies, just 22pc are women - while they make up 46pc of other senior executive roles.

After that, the percentage of women working in other key functions fluctuates considerably, depending on the role.

In account management, for example, women account for 71pc of those employed. Meanwhile in the all-important senior creative roles, they make up just 26pc of those employed throughout the industry.

Of course there's several industry initiatives underway - led by IAPI - to help address these gender imbalances. IAPI's Doyenne of the Year (which recognises women who make a contribution to the industry) is just one of them. In addition, IAPI seeks to promote women to industry committees like the ASAI and the JNRS to ensure that there is a gender balance.

In the UK, many advertising agencies have already signed up for the Make the Leap initiative, which aims to have 40pc female representation and 15pc black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) in senior positions by 2020. The initiative also aims to eradicate "unconscious bias" within the industry through training and education.

Whether these initiatives turn out to be box-ticking exercises and mere tokenism or indeed a more fundamental sea-change in an agency's cultural development remains to be seen. But at least they're a good starting point.

But gender inequality - whether it's conscious or unconscious - is always going to be an emotive and sometimes divisive issue.

Some might argue that, for an industry that propagates and reinforces gender stereotypes in much of its output, change might be a tall order.

But hey, it's 2016 - and as the industry's key assets are its people, then its ability to survive and thrive will ultimately depend on its ability to address gender imbalances and promote equality and diversity at all levels.

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