

Learning to Think Strategically Is Harder Than It Looks

The story of one working professional who honed his communication skills through a new SCE masters program

You might think that someone who works for the Center on Global Brand Leadership at Columbia Business School has no need for an M.S. in communications; but you'd have to think again.

David Rogers, who works as the Center's associate director, has been pursuing part-time studies for the past two years in strategic communications at the School of Continuing Education (SCE), and believes he has learned a lot. In particular, he appreciated being in a class made up of experienced communications professionals like himself, and taking classes that focus on real-world issues of strategy and business.

Rogers has now completed his Advanced Communications Project, the equivalent of a master's thesis for the program, in which he advised a new women's magazine called *Tango* on how to build a brand that would connect with readers.

The project was a learning experience from beginning to end, he says.

He had to be enterprising to come up with the idea for the project in the first place. When he reached the final semester, he knew that he wanted to do a project on a consumer brand in need of crafting an identity. He also knew he wanted to work with a relatively new company—one that had already gotten off the ground but was still young enough to be open to new ideas.

But knowing what he wanted was one thing and

finding a suitable candidate, quite another.

Rogers found help when he walked across the hall to the Business School's Eugene M. Lang Center for Entrepreneurship. They put him in touch with three CU alums leading new businesses that the Lang Center had helped to nurture—a path that led ultimately to *Tango*, a magazine that bills itself as being "about relationships."

Thus a project was born—after which, Rogers says, the real work began, starting with a survey of the women's magazine industry and of *Tango's* previous customer research. To understand the brand more thoroughly, he then interviewed the editorial team, performed a linguistic analysis of the magazine copy, and led consumer groups through a series of questions, games and interactive exercises.

Rogers says that he often relied on advice from his supervisor, Louise Whittet, an expert in strategic planning and brand development, in shaping his research and contacting sources in magazine advertising. With her help, he was able to "get in touch with experts whom I could never have otherwise reached," he says.

He also gained valuable input into his project at the independent seminars taught by faculty advisers throughout the semester. At one, the faculty discussed the differences between a market-based brand—one that is developed to meet the needs of a pre-existing market—and a "lighthouse" brand, where a

company, using its leaders' vision and passion, attempts to drive the market in new directions.

Rogers could see that the magazine world—and the media industry generally—favored the latter approach. "You don't write a screenplay or a TV show based on market research," he explained. Using this observation as his starting point, he began to develop a strategy focusing on *Tango's* unique take on relationships and finding the core audience most likely to be interested in the magazine's message.

Earn an SCE Masters

The M.S. program in strategic communications is the first graduate program to be offered by the School of Continuing Education. It has graduated 70 students since its inception in 2002.

Gratified by the program's success, SCE has since added three more graduate-level programs:

- Fundraising Management for Nonprofits;
- Landscape Design; and
- Technology Management.

In fall 2006, it will be offering two more: in information and archive management and in actuarial science.

For more information on all of these programs, go to www.ce.columbia.edu/

The final test, however, came when Rogers had to present his analysis and recommendations last December, twice—first to a review board of SCE faculty and board members, and the next day to *Tango's* editors and founder.

It was an intimidating situation, combining the intensity of an academic oral defense with a real-world pitch in a corporate boardroom. Fortunately, Rogers had done enough preparation that he was able to sail through with

flying colors. In fact, *Tango* was so impressed by the quality of his research that they followed up to discuss the cover of their next issue and future editorial strategy.

Trudi Baldwin, who has directed the M.S. in strategic communications since the program's inception in 2002, says that Rogers' story is far from atypical. During the past three years, she has received a great deal of glowing feedback—both from the students who have participated and from representatives of the companies and organizations they have worked closely with, who acknowledge having received valuable advice. "The benefits go both ways," Baldwin says, pointing out that a number of students have received job offers as a result of their work in the program or have moved up within their own workplace.

Whittet concurs with Baldwin's assessment, saying that she often observes students who are already in the industry getting a "broader and deeper view of the field" and later "moving to fill wide-ranging roles" in their companies. "They develop into strategic thinkers instead of just doers," she explains.

For more information on the strategic communications M.S., go to www.ce.columbia.edu/stratComm/index.cfm



SCE student David Rogers, left, advised a new women's magazine on how to increase their readership.

Juan Souki Captivates Downtown Audiences with Deconstructed *Cherry Orchard*

M.F.A. student makes New York City debut with play developed in Columbia Chekhov course

By Mary-Lea Cox

In today's global village, it was perhaps inevitable that New York would one day reap the benefits of a multimedia artist from Venezuela tackling one of Chekhov's masterpieces.

On Jan. 20-29, Columbia M.F.A. student Juan Souki delivered a version of *The Cherry Orchard* that, in the words of critic Anne Bogart, "transported Chekhov squarely into our present climate with great exactitude and theatrical flair."

Souki, who worked as a director in his native Venezuela, said it was the first time he'd been given the opportunity to work with and deconstruct a classic. "My background is mainly new work, multimedia and performance. But at Columbia I spent a whole semester working with Chekhov in a class with Brian Kulick, and the exercise of deconstructing *The Cherry Orchard* became my final project."

It was also Kulick who offered the young director



the opportunity to make his New York City debut with the play. Kulick is the artistic director of the Classic Stage Company, which maintains a close relationship with Columbia's School of the Arts (SOA). Indeed, Souki's production marked the second time last month when SOA students took over the company's E. 13th St. venue, the first being a performance in early January of *The Molière Cycle*.

The action of *The Cherry Orchard* centers on a threadbare aristocratic family and their loyal servants, who are confronting new realities in the period just after the serfs have been emancipated and

Russia is on the cusp of political crisis and change. To make ends meet, the family has no choice but to sell its ancestral estate, including a beautiful cherry orchard, after which the characters disperse to pursue their separate destinies in what they hope will be a brave new world.

Inspired by Paul Schmidt's and David Mamet's translations, Souki decided to compress the script, which in the original Russian takes six hours to perform, by turning it into a collection of short scenes and interludes.

The set is minimalistic. A switch of one or two pieces of furniture, along with informa-

tion displayed on a digital screen hanging from the ceiling, indicates a change of scene or setting.

The play's power comes from the characters' passionate interactions, as reinforced by dramatic lighting and music.

In one memorable scene at the end of the first act, the characters wheel out identical white plastic chairs and sit down to watch a video of SOA professor Arnold Aronson explaining the significance of the breaking string, which sounds twice in the play. According to Aronson, the sound, which is never explained, marks the beginning of modern drama.

This unusual use of multimedia takes place right before the intermission, and when the action resumes, a party is taking place offstage, and the action centers around a modern pink toilet, where the characters arrive in turn and soliloquize about their fates.

Souki recruited Grammy-winning sound engineer Marcelo Añez and Ben Edelberg, GSAAP'06, set

designer for the films *Big Fish* and *Minority Report*, to help him realize his production concept and design.

"The experience has been unique," said Souki. "I feel very grateful to be collaborating with such a talented team and to have the opportunity to bring the work downtown."

While Souki does not think his interpretation of the Russian masterwork is unique, he admits that he related to the play because of his South American background. "I do think the contents of this particular play speak to South American realities," he said. "In my part of the world, it's common to see your social status changing from one day to another. I wanted to bring out the violence beneath the surface of Chekhov's text. There is a rawness in the way the actors move, which brings back memories from home."

Souki added that he'd particularly enjoyed the experience of removing the play from its academic context. "Once you do that, the audiences are much more demanding, and that made the show grow so much," he said.