Business Consulting With a Flair for the Dramatic

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966 Words
20 August 2001
The Wall Street Journal
B7D
English
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A few hours before show time, when many actors would be getting into character, William Hall found himself concentrating on "the global knowledge-worker pool," "megacorporations" and "a fundamental shift away from markets and products to networks and services." Mr. Hall is a member of Fratelli Bologna, a San Francisco-based theater troupe that has found a lucrative -- and highly unusual -- niche dramatizing business scenarios for some of the world's biggest companies. Among them: several units of Royal Dutch/Shell Group, Dow Corning Corp. and Lucent Technologies Inc.

Fratelli Bologna's productions are often the culmination of months of research by Global Business Network, an Emeryville, Calif., consulting firm that brings in the theater troupe to help its clients better understand what the future might look like. The Idea Factory Inc., a San Francisco firm started by a former Global Business consultant, also uses Fratelli Bologna to help clients anticipate market trends.

In late June, before an audience of officials from Dallas-based Christus Health, which operates 30 hospitals across the South, Fratelli Bologna's performance focused on what the health-care industry might look like in 2010. In one scene, Mr. Hall played Terry Samuels, a smooth pitchman for Zhen-Shan-Ren Healthcare Provision Corp., a supplier of patient-monitoring products.

"We've designed a huge range of health monitors to fit all physical requirements," said the character, sporting a loud paisley shirt and rose-tinted glasses. "They include a very tasteful selection of necklaces, bracelets and rings ... There is even a range of products for the pierced, designed by and for our younger customers."

It may all seem a little strange, silly even, and many companies prefer to stick to PowerPoint presentations. Global Business's Nicole Boyer says only about a quarter of her clients normally use the troupe, whose average fee is $40,000 to $50,000 for a three-hour performance. Now, in the face of the sluggish economy, it is an especially "tough sell," acknowledges Global Business Chairman Peter Schwartz. Usually, Fratelli Bologna lands 15 or so corporate-acting jobs a year. The troupe didn't work in July, however, and has only a tentative date scheduled for August.

Still, executives who have worked with Fratelli Bologna insist that their money was well spent. Christus Chief Executive Thomas Royer, for instance, credits Fratelli Bologna with helping his staff internalize 18 months of complex analysis in just a few days. "With humor, you learn it faster," he says.

Getting into corporate work was an unlikely career move for Fratelli Bologna. When the troupe won the role of the press corps in Philip Kaufman's 1982 blockbuster movie "The Right Stuff," it hoped to achieve Hollywood stardom. But that never happened. Then in 1993, the wife of Fratelli Bologna member Richard Dupell joined Global Business as Mr. Schwartz's assistant. Soon thereafter, Mr. Schwartz saw a production of Fratelli Bologna's "The Webber Family Christmas." The play involved audience interaction -- and, sitting there that night, Mr. Schwartz had a brainstorm.

Before this, Global Business had tried to dramatize the future for its corporate clients in "the most crude way," says Mr. Schwartz. Fratelli Bologna's ability to work the audience "absolutely blew my mind, and I began to realize that you could do some interesting things having them stage our scenarios."

Jon Kabbe, a former Dow Corning executive, says that when Global Business first proposed using the theater troupe to him, his reaction was: "Hell ... you've got to be kidding." But in the end, the actors won him over. "I had expected ... we'd have to educate them on business," remembers Mr. Kabbe, who has since retired. "That really wasn't the case. They knew their stuff."

Last summer, Fratelli Bologna put on a show for Dow Corning that depicted a future in which the green movement had ascended around the world. At one point, a woman was even arrested for baking a cake with unnatural ingredients. Although far-fetched, the scenario helped executives "realize that geographic boundaries may be a thing of the past" on issues like the environment, says Barie Carmichael, the company's chief communications officer. "If we hadn't played it out, I doubt we would have seen that."

A few years ago, as part of its work for the Idea Factory, Fratelli Bologna staged a "Dilemma Dinner Party" at which the troupe's Mr. Dupell served a four-course meal to executives from a Shell subsidiary. Cast members took turns interrupting the dinner to present various issues. One actress, for example, helped Shell executives confront the struggles of laid-off workers by playing a woman left homeless after being fired as a school switchboard operator. Obstructing the doorway, she forced attendees to step around her to get to the dinner.

As the 30 guests sat down to salad, the character barged in. "So many of you pass by without saying anything," she barked. Looking at the elegant spread, she added: "Hey, that looks very good. Very fancy." When the Shell executives were finally told that it was all part of the act, "there was a moment of suspended disbelief," recalls the Idea Factory's Erika Gregory.

"The whole point is to try to make this feel emotionally real," says Ged Davis, vice president of Shell's Global Business Environment unit, adding that the presentation was "very powerful."

Messrs. Hall and Dupell say they get a thrill out of helping big companies. "The stakes in this are so high," Mr. Dupell says. Besides, there are other advantages. "In three days" of corporate work, he says, "we can make as much as we would make in two months doing theater."

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