Tailoring tomorrow’s ‘suits’

By GREGG GOLDSTEIN

Whereas many graduate business schools have their eyes fixed firmly on the world of finance, New York U.’s Stern School puts stock in showbiz, thanks to a pioneering Entertainment, Media and Technology Program overseen by Al Lieberman.

Before joining Stern in 1996, the EMT co-founder spent decades working in marketing for entertainment and publishing companies. In that capacity, he observed firsthand the battle between “suits” and “creatives” — a common disconnect Lieberman has made it his mission to repair as executive director of EMT.

“A lot of my colleagues were having tremendous problems because they didn’t really understand what the creative people were thinking or why they had come up with certain campaigns,” he recalls. “They were being asked to sell the campaigns to clients and weren’t doing that great a job, and therefore weren’t maintaining much respect from their creative counterparts. There were often very interesting verbal battles between them.”

Lieberman’s desire to educate business students on how both sides of the industry work together inspired him to offer Entertainment and Media Marketing, a class that formed the basis for EMT’s launch in 1997.

Working alongside EMT director C. Samuel Craig, he has grown his program to 25 graduate business courses covering film, television, digital media, publishing and music, teaching 800 full-time students — plus nearly 2,000 more in the school’s Langone continuing-ed division. “I’m dealing with the suits,” he says, “the people who really want to be managers, business executives, accountants, CFOs and heads of advertising departments in entertainment and media businesses.”

Lieberman’s journey to NYU began at NYU, where he received a marketing MBA in 1963. After rising to executive VP of Young & Rubicam’s direct response division, he went to work for Simon & Schuster. In 1986, he founded Grey Entertainment, an advertising and marketing division of Grey Advertising whose clients included Warners, ABC and HarperCollins. “It brings tremendous experience, wisdom, energy and creativity,” says Stern dean Peter Henry, who joined the school last year and sees EMT as one of its key strengths. “One of the key things about the economic recovery is that it’s being driven by emerging markets. And what’s one of the greatest areas of growth in these countries? Media and technology.”

One of the ways Lieberman teaches the “suits” of the future is integrating them with the creatives in Stern’s sister division, the Tisch School of the Arts, and its Kanbar Institute of Film and Television.

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MASTER CLASS

Globalization-savvy prof predicts media’s emerging markets

Among the six courses Al Lieberman teaches as executive director of NYU Stern’s Entertainment, Media and Technology Program, two focus on the subject that intrigues him most: the globalization of the entertainment and media industry.

It’s a subject he learned well when launching Silhouette Books for Simon & Schuster, a romance-novel imprint he helped expand to 18 languages in 50 countries. After founding EMT, his education continued through travel to such countries as China, India and Brazil, as well as through the formation of partnerships with schools around the world.

“The two strategies that drive the consumption of media and entertainment in other countries are the growth of disposable income and the growth of discretionary time,” Lieberman says. The key to targeting where this has occurred (and will occur) is defining the emerging middle class in key foreign territories and measuring its growth, a difficult task Lieberman and his students undertake by sifting through figures from PricewaterhouseCoopers’ global entertainment and media books and other resources.

“In my own career development, I...”

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watched the P&L (profit and loss statements) from major media companies change dramatically, particularly in film and eventually in television and other areas,” Lieberman says. “Last year, the Chinese film market went up 30%. When I was visiting and worked on the bid for the 2000 Olympics 15 years ago, they were nowhere near that,” he says. “A movie ticket was 8 yuan, which was equal to about $1. Even though there were about 1.4 billion people in the country, there were maybe 200 million who could afford that. Well today, 500 or 600 million can afford to pay $4, or about 30 yuan, because it’s a huge growth world.”

The key to his analysis, Lieberman says, is looking at the right figures and cultural changes. “We’re not concentrating on cars or gasoline or their exports to America; we’re talking about what they have in their pockets and what they’re using, because entertainment and media is not the first thing you spend your money on. You take care of the market basket first. If you’re working in the field seven days a week, you don’t have time to read a book, magazine or newspaper. The moment you have weekends or holidays off, all of that is part of the growth.”

While extreme poverty remains a fact of life for hundreds of millions in countries like India, Lieberman says, “It still leaves a lot of people who’ve grown into a middle class who are watching Rupert Murdoch’s Star, Sony TV and the government television channel Doordarshan.” They have fueled the “explosion of Mumbai,” he says, in film, music, telecom, cable, TV and other areas.

Through his research, Lieberman has identified the countries with “mature,” “developing” or “growth” economic potential for the entertainment industry. “All of Western Europe is mature — they’re not going to grow much, but they’ve already become very large,” he says. “Eastern Europe, India and China are developing. Australia and New Zealand are somewhere between mature and developing because they’re English speaking and get so much content from the U.S. and U.K. We talk about piracy, corruption and difficulties in Russia, but clearly it’s in the growth category, as is Latin America. And then there’s South Africa, which is enormous.”

— Gregg Goldstein
Brands sponsor student shorts

By ANTHONY KAUFMAN

Mark Twain once said, “I never let school interfere with my education.”

At New York U’s ProMotion Pictures program, however, the rigors of academia and real-life educational experience go hand-in-hand. Conceived in 2004 by two MBA students, Jeffrey Grossman and Russ Axlerod, ProMotion Pictures pairs students from NYU’s Stern School of Business and Kanbar Institute of Film and Television to produce short films for sponsoring brands. In its first year, Volunteers three student teams a total of $90,000 to make five- to 10-minute movies. Since then, Unilever, Axco, Cisco, Verizon, Heineken and Johnnie Walker have all followed. (Axlerod, meanwhile, went on to get a job as Microsoft’s director of brand strategy.) There are a number of goals,” says C. Samuel Craig, director of Stern’s Entertainment Media and Technology (EMT) Program, which houses the ProMotion endeavor. First, it fuels the collaborative and entrepreneurial relationships between Tisch and Stern students, and secondly, it gives the students at both schools the opportunity to execute an idea that is creative but also speaks to the business objectives of a company.” Indeed, NYU alum and Toy Closet Films co-founder Ryan Silbert, who directed a short for Cisco called “Digital Architect,” says the project afforded him the “incredible chance” to bridge personal filmmaking with the more commercial concerns of branded entertainment.

While Stern students get an idea of what’s involved in putting a film together, Tisch students get to interact with future execs, says Craig.

“So it’s about the immediate relationship working on student films, but it’s also the networking that occurs after that.” According to Craig, the program has gone through its own learning curve. “They made most of the mistakes early on,” he says, citing an incident in which one film used SAG actors (“that cost us a non-trivial amount of money,” he admits). If students simply submitted pitches in the past, says Craig, “Now there’s much more of an effort to shape the ideas and budgets, with more give and take, which is a good experience for the students, but I think it also gives us a better product.” Last year, four ProMotion films for the New York State tourism brand “I Love New York” were shown on Jet Blue in-flight services; one particularly heralded short, “Crush,” produced by Stern students Heather Jack and Claire Harlam and directed by Tisch filmmaker Gabrielle Demeester, is also playing the festival circuit. This year, Vita Coco is on board as sponsor, and will award the most popular short a prize. Ryan Heller, a third-year dual MBA/MAE degree student who helps run ProMotion, says the projects are especially valuable because it allows students to follow a product through fruition, “to interact with a client and to conceptualize something, execute it, deliver it, and see it through distribution in a limited amount of time,” he says.

And as the program’s exec director Al Lieberman says, the tangible results may even help land graduates a job. “Instead of showing a CV or a bio, which we all have to do, they show their finished work, which is very, very worthwhile thing.”

Suits

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In a unique program, NYU offers a dual-degree, three-year MBA/MFA in producing, with courses from Stern and Kanbar. Even students who stick to Stern classes with an EMT specialization can learn how to work with the creative side in ways that may prove crucial in their future careers.

“Probably the most dramatic way,” says Lieberman, is through ProMotion Pictures, in which EMT and Kanbar grad students work together to create branded short films sponsored by various companies.

ProMotion was founded by alums Russ Axlerod and Jeffrey Grossman while they were attending Stern in 2005 and is run by students. “We have 15-20 panels with business and EMT and the students are expected to make those a call and bring them in,” Lieberman says. “This helps them meet the industry people who are hiring.” He also hires students to write papers (for both pay and attribution) and help him develop new courses.

Lieberman strongly believes in providing real-world experience at school, and not just through the internships and job connections he helps to arrange either. To this end, EMT takes a class to the Cannes Film Festival each year as a way to teach about globalization in the entertainment industry, and since 2008 has run a similar undergraduate class with the Tribeca Film Festival. Students also attend and help coordinate panels at the annual MBA Media & Entertainment Conference (held at Stern and run in conjunction with Columbia, Duke Fuqua, MIT Sloan and Wharton) and the annual Future of TV conference Lieberman co-chairs.

He and professor Craig realize if you really want to teach entertainment, it’s not just about lecturing,” Axlerod says. “It’s not an ego thing for them. It’s about going out to the community and getting everybody they can to come teach. He’s got great contacts and he’s not afraid to leverage them on behalf of us, which is great.”

In addition to an all-star lineup of guest speakers (including execs from Comedy Central, ESPN, NASCAR, Sony and William Morris Endeavor in recent years), the division augments its three or four full-time tenured professors by relying on execs for such companies as Viacom, HBO and Miramax as teachers. While this system may seem chaotic, Lieberman keeps EMT relevant in today’s ever-changing media and technology worlds, he points out that “this is a business school that depends on continuity,” noting that Cablevision’s Local Media group president (and former EMT exec) Tiel Smith has taught at EMT for nearly a decade, and CBS chief research officer David Poltrack has been with the program from its beginning.

But for Lieberman, who still teaches six courses at age 71, the main focus is still his students. “The terrible phrase that some business schools use is that students are customers,” he says. “For me the students are the reason I will teach until my dying day. That’s what I really love about it.”