

FORUM: THE LIFE AND WORK OF EVERETT ROGERS—SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Introduction

If you want to know how to succeed in the complicated process of diffusion of innovations, you can go beyond Everett Rogers's justly famed book of that name, and look at the man and the way he lived. When Ev left us in October 2004, his legacy was not just a lifetime of extraordinary work, many fine publications, and a wealth of friendships around the world. It also was the lesson of his own unique way of going about his work. In diffusion theory, health communication, entertainment-education, and the other areas he worked in so vigorously over a half-century, there were some common themes—each of them identified not only in his writings, but also in how the man conducted himself personally and professionally.

In his many books and articles, and in his teaching and consultation work, Ev Rogers argued that successful diffusion of innovations requires bringing together both knowledge and direct experience related to the innovation, using informal personal networking to supplement the more formal processes, and using whatever influence one has to champion new ideas. In everyday life, his conversations with colleagues, students, funders, or decisionmakers often began with information from the science he knew so well, but quickly moved to vivid stories of who Ev had just talked with, or where he'd just visited. The listener soon felt he or she was part of the experience too, and that made learning or action easier. Ev's blend of scientific knowledge and direct experience was potent, in part because of his unvarnished enthusiasm for what he'd experienced himself!

His recipe for diffusion also carried into the personal networking realm, where I saw Ev constantly, but seemingly without effort, help connect people he thought should know each other, or who could work with him on a project. Just to give one example from my own life, he started telling me 10 years ago about his good friend and colleague, Professor Doe Mayer of the University of Southern California Cinema and Television School, who he thought I should get to know. When I didn't immediately follow through, he gently suggested again that we really should be in touch, and of course once I did make the contact I found a powerful mind to help shape how I think about health communication, and a good friend to boot!

And Ev was the constant champion of many, often wildly diverse, ideas he thought were worth more public attention. Some years ago, when the City of Santa Monica established one of the first public Internet systems, the Public Electronic Network (PEN), it included computers in places like public libraries, so that homeless people could be part of the system. Ev not only wanted to write about PEN, so that this creative idea could be spread more widely, but he also asked a homeless man he'd met through that system to coauthor an article with him! His coauthor's perspectives helped frame the article's themes more creatively, of course, and his presence also helped generate more attention to the article itself.

This recipe for promoting the spread of new ideas added up to an approach that often to me sounded a bit like the “action research” method promoted by the great social psychologist Kurt Lewin. Lewin thought of action research as a three-step spiral process of planning for action (including reconnaissance of the environment so the planning will have some sense of reality to it), taking action, and fact-finding about the results of the action. While Ev Rogers might have used different words, the basic notion was the same. Ideas don’t implement themselves—their use requires systematic effort, and often use of the tools of science to help with implementation.

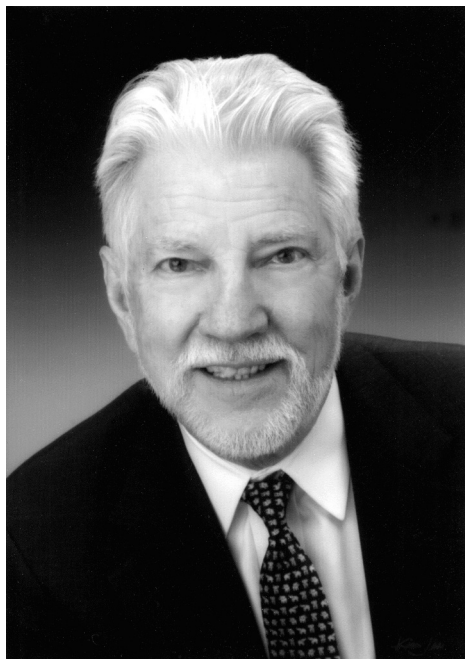
In the most general sense, Ev both believed and demonstrated in his work and life the importance of the human element when turning ideas into action. That is perhaps more commonplace today (though certainly not universal, in a world where too many decisionmakers still think change can happen solely on the basis of a directive memo!); when Ev Rogers was starting his journey in these realms, it was relatively uncommon.

But then the man always was looking one or two steps ahead in all his work. I even saw that for Ev Rogers in our trips together to the Santa Fe Opera, made over a number of years with his wife and colleague Corinne. We’d be sitting there enjoying the performance, but Ev also was looking beyond the back of the opera house to the lights of Los Alamos in the distance, no doubt plotting next steps in some of the very interesting work he did with scientists there in recent years.

That’s just one of many, quite diverse memories I’ll treasure of this extraordinary colleague and friend. In the pieces that follow, however, my coauthors and I will concentrate on some particular aspects of Everett Rogers—how he impacted us as scientists and most specifically as writers. The article and three commentaries in this section all are by people who wrote with Ev quite a lot. That each piece includes a blend of professional observation and personal remembrance is nothing more than us sticking to that part of Ev’s take on effective diffusion. His work and (we hope) our words in this set of brief essays reflect the wisdom of the great artist Pablo Picasso:

What is necessary is to speak about a man as though painting him. The more you put yourself in it, the more you remain yourself, the closer you get to truth. . . . You’ve got to be there, to have courage; only then can it become interesting and bring forth something.

*Thomas E. Backer
Human Interaction Research Institute
Encino, California*



Brief Biography of Everett M. Rogers

Born on the family Pinehurst Farm in Carroll, Iowa, in 1931, Everett M. Rogers attended Iowa State University (ISU) for his BA, MA, and PhD degrees (he also served in the U.S. Air Force between his BA and MA studies). Iowa State University in those years (the 1950s) had a great intellectual tradition in agriculture and in rural sociology. Numerous agricultural innovations were generated by scientists at land grant universities and at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Rural sociologists, including Ev's doctoral advisor George Beal, were conducting pioneering studies on the diffusion of these innovations, like the high-yielding hybrid seed corn, chemical fertilizers, and weed sprays. Questions were being asked about why some farmers adopted these innovations while others did not, and also about why it takes such a long time for these seemingly advantageous innovations to diffuse. These questions intrigued the young Ev Rogers.

Back at the family farm, Ev's father loved electromechanical farm innovations, but he was highly resistant to biological-chemical innovations. His father resisted adopting the new hybrid seed corn, even though it yielded 25% more crop and was resistant to drought. During the Iowa drought of 1936, while the hybrid seed corn stood tall on the neighbor's farm, however, the crop on the Rogers' farm wilted. Ev's father was finally convinced.

These questions about innovation diffusion, including the strong resistances and how they could be overcome, formed the core of Ev's graduate work at ISU. His doctoral dissertation was study of the diffusion of weed spray, and involved interviewing more than 200 farmers about their adoption decisions. He also reviewed existing studies of the diffusion of all kinds of innovations—agricultural,

educational, medical, marketing, and so on. He found several similarities in these diverse studies. For instance, innovations tend to diffuse following an S-curve of adoption.

In 1962, Ev published this review of literature chapter, greatly expanded, enhanced, and refined, as the now-legendary book *Diffusion of Innovations*. The book provided a comprehensive theory of how innovations diffused, or spread, in a social system. The book's appeal was global. Its timing was uncanny. National governments in countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America were wrestling with how to diffuse agricultural, family planning, and other social change innovations in their newly independent countries. Here was a theory that was useful.

When the first edition of *Diffusion of Innovations* was published, Ev was an assistant professor of rural sociology at Ohio State University. He was 30 years old. But he also was becoming a world-renowned academic figure. The book, now in its fifth (2003) edition, is today the second-most-cited book in the social sciences.

In an academic career spanning 47 years of teaching, research, and writing, Professor Everett M. Rogers achieved many milestones. He held faculty positions at Michigan State University, Ohio State University, and the University of Michigan. Later in his career he served as Janet M. Peck Professor of International Communication at Stanford University, Walter H. Annenberg Professor at the University of Southern California, and most recently was Distinguished Professor of Communication at the University of New Mexico.

*Prepared by
Arvind Singhal
Ohio University*