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OSU researcher leads growing field

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TULSA – The nation's third-most-published researcher in electronic customer relationship management – eCRM for short – works not at Stanford, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or Harvard, but at Oklahoma State University-Tulsa. And he isn't even tenured.

Nicholas C. Romano Jr. received that honor from an academic study of articles published in the top four technical journals between 1998 and 2004. Out of 344 articles penned by 619 different authors, the researchers from the University of Mississippi and Texas Southern found 43-year-old Romano had six published in the *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, a quarterly publication by M.E. Sharpe Inc. of Armonk, N.Y.

That was enough in that rapidly growing field to rank him third in the world, behind researchers at Drake University and Erasmus University, according to the study published in *Business Research Yearbook*.

That also involved a handicap: Romano didn't receive his doctorate from the University of Arizona in management information systems until 1998. He then stayed on a year for post-doctorate work before joining the University of Tulsa staff. Two years later, he became an assistant professor in the OSU Spears School of Business Department of Management Science and Information Systems.

"In this electronic age, this just shows you that location and distance doesn't matter," said Romano, who has maintained that level of productivity since 2004, not just writing articles but also editing special publications for the *International Journal*.

It also brings kudos to OSU, employing the only researcher in Oklahoma among the top of this emerging field – which charts not only relationships between companies, but also between companies and consumers.

"One of the things we have as a goal of our department is to become more recognized in the IS (information systems) sector," said Romano, who noted positive press like this can affect published campus evaluations like those in *U.S. News and World Report*.

"It helps with our reputation," he said. "To be honest, the rating of schools is all by reputation."

This year M.E. Sharpe published Romano's



Nicholas Romano at work.

PHOTO BY KIRBY LEE DAVIS

first book, appropriately called *Electronic Customer Relationship Management*. It represents a collection of articles edited by Romano and his frequent collaborator, Jerry Fjermestad, an associate professor of management at the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

Vladimis Zwess, editor-in-chief of the *International Journal*, called Fjermestad and Romano "the leaders in establishing eCRM as an area of study" in management information systems (or MIS).

"Their previous work has done much to deepen and systematize our understanding of the roll of eCRM in corporate success," Zwess wrote in the foreword to their book.

Intimate relationships

For Romano, who will teach two courses next fall, delving into research represents his third career turn. He'd progressed through dental school before deciding he didn't want to be a dentist. He then secured a business degree, only to have three years at International Business Machines Corp. teach him he didn't enjoy the corporate life, either. So he went back to school to win his doctorate at Tucson – the only school he says he'd ever leave OSU for.

While he's carved a niche in customer relationship research, he has many areas of interest. One wall of his office sports photographs charting four generations of his family tree and that of his wife, Rosalina, a 37-year-old special ed teacher. Another wall mixes his diplomas and accreditations with portraits of his two daughters, Isabella and Gabriela. He's

making room for a third to come in January.

Between those walls and one lined with bookshelves full of tomes, magazines and collectables, sits his large work desk – which like that of most researchers holds stack after stack of files, reports, memoranda and memorabilia.

"A lot of things I'm doing, most people don't do until they get tenure," said Romano, who will be up for tenure next year. His work "helps companies to figure out how to better serve their customers in this electronic age – how to better serve their needs, how to better serve their wants, and how to better serve their desires."

Research compiled by Romano and his colleagues provides value to companies by helping them compete while developing "intimate relationships" in today's electronic world.

"It's all about relationships," he continued, "their relationship with their customer. In this day and age, it's totally different than it was before."

Romano is taking that research into topics some businesses may not have the money or drive to tackle, such as privacy and security. Concerns over both have drawn discussion at Congress and several state legislatures. Few efforts have been made to gather the accumulating data on such issues, making the researcher's role even more vital.

"It really is important," said Romano, expressing concern over potential laws enacted without a thorough study of the facts. "I think the security aspect is really one I want to sink my teeth into."