

At The Nexus Point Of The Wine And Spirits Business

An Interview with Gino Colangelo, President, Colangelo & Partners

EDITORS' NOTE Gino Colangelo founded Colangelo & Partners in 2006 after spending over 10 years in global communications and 10 years running his own retail business, a unique experience in the agency world. He is most proud of the team at Colangelo & Partners, the growth of individual employees, and the partnerships the agency has built with its prestigious, global family of clients.



Gino Colangelo

FIRM BRIEF In a rapidly evolving marketplace – and an industry where change is constant – Colangelo & Partners (colangopr.com) sits at the epicenter of the wine, spirits, and culinary conversation. Over the last 18+ years, Colangelo & Partners has grown its clientele from smaller, entrepreneurial brands to include regional and national institutions; technology and e-commerce companies innovating in the beverage alcohol sector; prestigious, sought-after luxury labels; and everything from global, instantly-recognizable brands to passionate, up-and-coming vignerons.

What was your vision for creating Colangelo & Partners, and how do you define its mission?

When I thought about starting my own agency, I knew I wanted to be more than just a

communications services provider; I wanted my company to be a key player in the categories in which we operated. I also believed strongly that vertical integration – being intimately connected to a specific business category and having a team that was deeply knowledgeable and passionate about the category – was critical for a start-up agency. It's easy to be passionate about food, wine and spirits, the categories – which are closely related – upon which we founded the agency.

Our mission is to operate at the nexus point of the wine and spirits business.

What have been the keys to Colangelo & Partners' growth and leadership?

I was working for a large, generalist, global agency and thinking about starting my own business. I had been in my own business previously and I believe I'm an entrepreneur at heart. I looked at the landscape of agencies in the wine and spirits industry and noticed they were all more or less 10-15 people. Looking closely, I noticed that the principals of these agencies were wearing too many hats: New business generator, client service lead, strategist, HR manager, accountant, operations officer.

Fortunately, around the time I was thinking of starting an agency, a brother of mine was in

between businesses. Though he knew nothing about PR – or about wine and spirits – he knew operations. I asked him to join as a partner, responsible for everything – HR, accounting, administration, operations – that was not related to client service or team management. We've maintained this clear division of responsibilities for the past 18+ years, and it has worked out very well.

I also didn't focus on billing and profitability with every client. Some clients were important to the agency because of their reputations. Essentially, I cultivated a client base that would create a brand halo for the agency, and I built a team of dedicated, intelligent and hard-working professionals who love the business in which we operate. Our team is also, by design, quite international. By last count, we have 15 nationalities represented among our 95 or so team members.

Will you provide an overview of Colangelo & Partners' capabilities and services?

Fundamentally, we're a wine & spirits communications agency with four core service pillars:

1. Press Relations. We have the most comprehensive and strongest press relationships in the wine and spirits business.

2. Trade Relations. We cultivate a network of Somm contacts for our wine clients, bartender contacts for our spirits clients, importers, distributors, retailers and restaurant owners.

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We leverage these relationships for consulting assignments, events, education and more.

3. Events. We do somewhere between 200-300 events each year. An event could be a pairing dinner for 10 journalists, a guided tasting seminar for 30 Somms, or a 1,000-person tasting for a particular type of wine – Chianti Classico, for example. Most of our events are for the trade, but we do consumer events as well. And we support client participation in larger, industry events.

4. Digital marketing. This is a broad category that includes social media, influencer marketing, paid media planning, email marketing, website development and creative.

Will you discuss Colangelo & Partners’ focus on integrated communications as the key to propelling a brand’s story?

The wine business (less so with spirits) works on very small margins. Clients need to maximize the reach of every dollar spent on communications. By integrating our communications, we’re able to get a multiplier effect. For example, we work hard to get press hits. When we get them, we want to amplify their reach through social media – the client’s social platforms as well as our agency platforms, which have quite large and relevant fans/followers. If we’re doing an event, we promote through the press and generate content (photos, videos) for social media. Our goal is to leverage every dollar

spent multiple times for our client’s benefit. Message consistency is just as important as amortizing dollars spent. Whether in the press, a trade event or on social media, the brand look and feel, and the messages we communicate about the brand, should be consistent.

How critical has it been to build the Colangelo & Partners’ team?

Our team strength means everything. My first priority every day is finding, hiring, training, and managing the best people possible for the job. We’re on a continual talent search. If we find somebody who we think would strengthen our team, we will make a hire, even if we don’t have a specific job opening. We need people who are passionate about our business categories – not so hard to find since we work in food, wine and spirits – and great communicators. We’ll hire a PR generalist and teach wine or spirits. We’ll sometimes hire somebody from the trade (a distributor sales rep, Somms, bartender) and teach PR. If we’re lucky, we find somebody with both skillsets.

As Colangelo & Partners approaches its 20th anniversary, are you able to reflect on the agency’s impact and success?

The wine and spirits industry is under threat from a variety of sources – tariffs, anti-alcohol propaganda, Ozempic, marijuana and more – so there isn’t a lot of time for reflection on our growth and success. If I do stop and

think about it, I’m very proud to have created an agency unique in the wine and spirits business by virtue of our large and diverse client base, our product offerings, and the expertise, diversity and commitment of our team. We have several clients who attribute their growth directly to our work; I’m very proud of that. Most of all, I’m proud of the team of passionate, hardworking communications professionals we’ve built. We guard our reputation zealously and our reputation is built upon the dedication and great work of our team, many of whom we’ve developed from early in their careers into leadership positions in the agency.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

Figure out what makes you happy at work and pursue the type of job that delivers what you’re looking for. We spend a large percentage of our lives at work – getting out of bed in the morning is a lot easier when you love what you do. Also, take chances. Speak up. Don’t be afraid to ask for a tough assignment, even if it’s not exactly within your job description. If you’re not working in an organization that rewards initiative, it would be best to figure that out early and move on, so you have little to lose by taking chances. Be an active listener and listen more than talk. When you do talk, make sure you’re adding value to the conversation and that you can defend the position you’re taking. ●

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