

Thought Leadership as Brand Strategy: Establishing Your Voice and Perspective

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A thought leader is a coveted position for any organization. After all, who wouldn't want to carve out a niche as an expert, claiming a spotlight that could potentially reflect a positive light upon his/her business ventures? As a brand strategy, thought leadership can elevate the reputation of individuals and whole organizations. The hard truth, however, is that not everyone is qualified for the job.

If thought leadership is a potential strategy in the development and enhancement of your brand, there are a few things to consider before you head down that path.

First, it's important to examine what it means to be a thought leader and determine

whether an individual in your organization has the qualifications or "street cred," if you will, to be one. According to one definition, a thought leader is an individual whose views on a subject are taken to be authoritative and influential. Wikipedia defines a thought leader as "an individual or firm that is recognized as an authority in a specialized field and whose expertise is sought and rewarded."

To be a thought leader, then, an individual or organization must be able to demonstrate authority on a subject, prove credibility, establish trust and, most significantly, have something to say.

Credibility comes in many shapes and forms, but it boils down to one essential issue—has the individual in question proven

Six tips for Future Thought Leaders

- Find Your Story
- Establish Your Voice
- Identify Your Audience
- Stay on Message
- Offer Fresh Perspective
- Be Responsive

Thought Leadership Methods Are Plentiful

Looking for ways to position your CEO (or even yourself) as a thought leader? Consider these methods:

- **Online:** Blogging and podcasting continue to gain followers. Other online opportunities to strut your professional stuff include social media platforms such as **LinkedIn** or **Google+**.
- **Traditional media:** Do you have a strong local business presence? Check out your local dailies and business publications. Often, they seek out guest columns and editorials. Trade publications are another great way to reach a specific target, and they are always looking for experts to add to their editorial mix.
- **Awards:** Maintaining leadership means keeping up the reputation. Look for opportunities to be recognized in your field and then leverage that recognition through news releases and social media.
- **Speaking engagements:** These are a little trickier, but possible. Speaking engagements offer a great opportunity to raise your profile and engage audiences. Create a speaker's biography that highlights successes and recognitions in the field for introductions at speeches.

him or herself in some way? Has he/she changed the status quo, made a major breakthrough, or become known for something, if only within a limited sector? A potential thought leader must be established as a trusted subject matter expert with expertise to share and an opinion that will be of interest to others.

Another significant consideration is whether the prospective thought leader in your organization is truly committed to this strategy and willing to put in the time and effort necessary to see it through. While thought leadership may be a coveted position, it's one that requires a fairly intense commitment of time and energy. A thought leader is

not the same as a spokesperson or some other corporate "talking head," and it's not a role that can be effectively filled by a ghostwriter or through pre-packaged message points. A thought leader must have some "skin" in the game and be willing to let things hang out a bit, tackling important issues and being ready to respond when called upon.

The final and perhaps most important question is whether a thought leadership strategy is really worth the trouble. The answer to this is largely dependent on whether or not there is an opportunity to make an impact within your industry. If, for instance, the field is already crowded with well-established and credible experts, thought leadership might be difficult to achieve. On the other hand, if it's possible to carve a new niche or add to the conversation in a meaningful way, thought leadership could provide a platform to enhance reputation and create a more powerful brand.

Once you have established that a potential thought leader has the authority to fill that role and is committed to the task, it's time to develop a plan. Bear in mind that this is a long journey with many steps, and the impact will not be felt overnight. Of course you should set benchmark measurements, evaluate progress and adjust efforts as needed.

In the end, like any strategy, the concept of thought leadership will only be effective if executed with a fully developed plan, with careful consideration of the pros and cons, and with the full commitment of organizational leadership.

With these concepts in place, here are a 6 tips for future thought leaders:

Find your story. Thought leadership requires a story, not only about the topics at hand but about the individual as well. Like any new branding effort, it requires the establishment of brand proof. That can be done through the creation of a company and in-

dividual biography, but it's also important to help the targeted audience understand what to expect and to address the primary question of any audience: What's in it for me?

Establish your voice. An initial planning meeting should determine the types of subjects a thought leader will address as well as the tone and tenor of commentary. What is he or she most passionate about? A committed thought leader will be deeply involved in the process, but it may take a few tries to find the right "voice." Consider starting small, perhaps establishing a blog to get in the habit of writing. Leverage these early efforts to attract attention from journalists or editors at key trade publications or other media.

Find your audience. Like any good communication strategy, it's important to identify target audiences and determine where they can be found. Early and ongoing research should direct efforts and determine what communication channels are most effective. This demands a comprehensive approach.

Profile of a Prolific Thought Leader

A true thought leader has vision, insight and strong communication skills. He/she also possesses other traits that can add depth to the process:

- **Dedication:** Thought leadership is not something a professional communicator can "just do" for his/her boss. Thought leaders must be dedicated to the process and passionate about what they are saying.
- **Persistence:** Starting out, it may be difficult to find the right medium, the right voice or the right strategy. Try a few things out to find a good fit.
- **Deadline-oriented:** Whether you're getting something out the door to an editor or posting on your own website, remember that people are waiting for information. Give them a reason to keep coming back by showing up on time.

Stay on message. Want to be known as a company focused on safety, the environment or innovation? Think about what you have done and what you have to teach others on those subjects. Don't stray too far afield. Stay focused on what you want to be known for as an organization and stay on message to achieve that goal.

Offer a fresh perspective. A thought leader should have something new to add to the conversation. Keep it fresh by staying abreast of trends and current events in your field, and be sure to provide insights from your unique point-of-view. Share your organization's wins and losses, and do not be afraid to talk about the hard lessons learned along the way.

Respond to your audience. Thought leadership is not a one-way street. It's an engagement strategy that requires a leader to respond to feedback, whenever possible. The most effective thought leaders engage their audiences in discussion by asking for feedback and questions. Some will be positive, some not. That means a thought leader must also have thick skin. The basic rules of media training are especially apt here—maintain the credibility and never appear rude or angry in response to criticism. Keep long-term goals in mind, stay on message and behave like the leader you set out to be.

Used effectively, thought leadership can enhance brand awareness and emphasize knowledge and expertise. But the strategy demands a comprehensive approach that leverages multiple mediums and is clearly aligned with organizational goals. It's a marathon, not a sprint, but when properly managed it offers tremendous benefits. If nothing else, it can put a leader in direct communication with the very audiences he or she hopes to engage and influence. **PRN**



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