5 steps to creating THOUGHT LEADERSHIP CONTENT that gets results

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EDITORIAL

“The ancestor of every action is a thought.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

- Giving your target readers a new way to look at old challenges
- Laying out a fact-based case for zigging when others are zagging
- Making readers say: “Why didn’t we think of it that way before?”

In fact, according to Forbes’ authority on the topic, Russ Alan Prince: “Thought leadership is one of the most powerful methodologies for generating new business opportunities.” And when it comes to promoting your ideas, we’re not just talking about the marketplace – we’re talking about lead thinking around any idea or cause. Big thinkers generate big ideas that drive change – from new sales to new policies to new cultural norms.

But, as with any buzzword, there are lots of misconceptions about what thought leadership content actually is. So to get there, let’s tick off what it’s not:

A thinly veiled plug for a company’s products or services

A run-of-the-mill case study that is really just advertising

A recitation of new research findings from someone else

Anything with sales-y phrases about you vs. the topic – e.g., “leading provider”

A brochure – nothing wrong with them, but they’re not thought leadership

For us, this description does the trick: “Thought leadership means continually creating and communicating insightful and persuasive ideas that clearly distinguish an organization on the topics that matter most to its stakeholders.”

Expanding on that a bit for business: Thought leadership content is a way of differentiating your company from its competitors by being informative, innovative, challenging, and relevant. It’s about using the power of insightful ideas to open doors with prospects and customers. Insight plants seeds. No insight, no persuasion.

Based on our experience working with hundreds of authors and marketing teams, there are five critical steps to creating thought leadership content that sets you apart.

“Ideas are like rabbits – you get a couple and learn how to handle them, and pretty soon you have a dozen.”

– John Steinbeck

- “I’m busy with no time to put pen to paper.”
- “Yes, we have a strong viewpoint on that, but I’m not a writer.”
- “Only a select crew comes up with the ideas.”
- Or, “Everyone’s a thought leader around here.”

Getting started is often the hardest part of developing great thought leadership content. But there are systematic approaches you can apply to get around the barriers and to maximize the power and impact of your organization’s big ideas. It all starts with recognizing there are many ways to capture content. And, it relies on opening the right kind of dialog with the experts who will “own” the idea until it sees the light of day.

Here are some ways to capture the stories that will fuel your thought leadership content:

Videotape your executives presenting at industry events

Ask your subject matter experts to forecast the next 12-18 months in your industry

Talk to customer service – and sales – about what they hear from customers

Serve up an industry article to your executives – ask them if they agree (or better yet, disagree) with the premise

Provide opportunities for your team to download ‘thought leadership snacks’ (one company we know uses Voxer on the drive home as a medium for diffusing ideas)

… and, of course, consider using outside resources to help facilitate, and even own, some or all of these types of processes

And remember: Don’t go inside out. No one wants to hear you talk about yourself – your audience wants your insight on their challenges. As one CEO we work with is fond of saying, “Show me how your idea is relevant and significant. Everything else is just details masquerading as big ideas.”

No one person can tackle these challenges single-handedly. Great thought leadership usually does not come from this senior partner or that vice president or marketing director but from a little-recognized troika: smart subject-matter experts, savvy marketing pros, and seasoned business communicators, working together.

“The value of an idea lies in using it.”

– Thomas Edison

Sometimes when we ask our clients, “Who is the audience for this thought leadership piece?” it goes something like this:

Executive 1: “It’s the CIO.”

Executive 2: “And the CEO! Sometimes it’s the CEO.”

Executive 3: “And VPs of Sales; we need to talk to them too.”

Marketing manager: “Right. So it’s CIOs, CEOs, and VPs of Sales. OK, good?”

Us: “Nope.”

Never skip this stage! Don’t ever short-change it! If the story idea isn’t pressure-tested early on, the odds are that you’ll end up with “me too” material that undermines the company’s brand and defeats the whole point of developing serious thought leadership in the first place. Or you’ll have story themes that simply aren’t timely or well supported.

Pressure-testing the story idea calls for challenging the promoter – whether it’s the originator of the idea or a regional marketing manager – to explain why it’s relevant now. Ask them these questions:

Who is the target audience?

Why should they care about this idea?

How is that different from other perspectives they’re hearing?

What should they do about it?

How does this support their organization’s objectives?

Only when the answers satisfy those held accountable for defending the company’s market position and purpose can there be any discussion of language, narrative, or potential placement for the story. Always pressure-test to nail down the basics first. It’s hard work, but it’s the essential foundation for the follow-on steps.

And last but not least, for thought leadership to be effective it needs to be focused – laser focused – on one target role or buyer persona. Audience is singular, not plural. Something written broadly enough to appeal to all will resonate with none.

"We often refuse to accept an idea merely because the tone of voice in which it has been expressed is unsympathetic to us."

– Friedrich Nietzsche

Rejection Just Ahead

- Muddled metaphors
- Inconsistencies
- Jargon
- Dense text
- Misspellings
- Many words of many syllables

- Compelling theme
- Accessible story
- Clear, simple words
- Short, crisp sentences
- Verbs + nouns > adjectives
- Engaging introduction
- Call to action

Active voice beats passive voice nearly every time. The passive is popular in business circles when there is bad news, and people are trying to avoid assigning blame (probably more common in politics!). On the flip side, one reason that successful leaders hit their mark is because they speak clearly in "subject + verb + object" formats. Clear communication breeds clear understanding – and greater accountability.

Tone is one of the most difficult factors for business writers to get right. It's easy to be off key and send the wrong message, which is why so many writers take refuge in "safe" verbs, neutral nouns, and familiar jargon.

Relax! It's OK to amp it up a little. The real world, which treasures straightforwardness, involves negatives. We don't mean you should wallow in the downside, but there is room for negative examples in moderation. It's also quite acceptable to use conversational tones and expressions, especially in content that can benefit from being more familiar.

And nail this from the get-go: Are you talking to a CFO, line of business leader or a plant operations manager? Speak accordingly. Talk like they talk.

For purveyors of B2B solutions, there are typically two kinds of buyers – those who are running away and those who are running toward. Running-away buyers are motivated by caution and respond to a voice and tone based on their desire to manage risk. Running- toward buyers are motivated by opportunity – and they perk up when they hear the language of innovation and change. They're risk takers. Knowing which way your audience is running is key to getting their attention and making an impact.

“Content is king but
distribution is queen.
And she wears the pants.”

– Jonathan Perelman

– a lovely, well-written piece that sits on your office shelf but does nothing to advance your business goals.

When it comes time to decide how to use the content, you’ve got to remind yourself of the big goals. Ask yourself:

Do you want to use the story to generate leads in the next two quarters?

Is it to expand the intellectual “footprint” of a new regional office?

Is it intended to help shift the overall perception of your company over time?

Is it a brand-new idea backed by lots of proprietary research, or a viewpoint based on your practical, day-to-day work?

Answers to those kinds of questions will determine, for example, whether you post the story on your website, or try to place it as a bylined article in an external publication, or break it up as a short article plus an infographic, or a blog plus a series of tweets.

Never lose sight of your audience and their consumption patterns. Writing for a CEO reader who does everything on her mobile phone? Maybe the content lends itself more to a video than a white paper?

Too many content teams spend too much time creating content and not enough on placing it. What are they left with? Credenzaware. Make content that gets heard by developing solid content distribution strategies that spans owned, earned, and paid channels.

Make this your mantra: It doesn’t matter how good the story is if no one hears it.

"Repetition makes reputation and reputation makes customers."

– Elizabeth Arden

Say it again

Psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus pioneered the study of memory, showing that consumers tend to forget what they've heard over time if they're not reminded, over and over. In these days of digital overload, that's common sense, right? So, remember Hermann – and make frequent and consistent communication over multiple channels the name of your thought leadership game.

To be successful, you must produce thought leadership content regularly. Not so regularly that volume starts to eclipse quality – and not with such frequency that you're a pest to your target audience. It's your job to figure out what regular should look like for your intended readers.

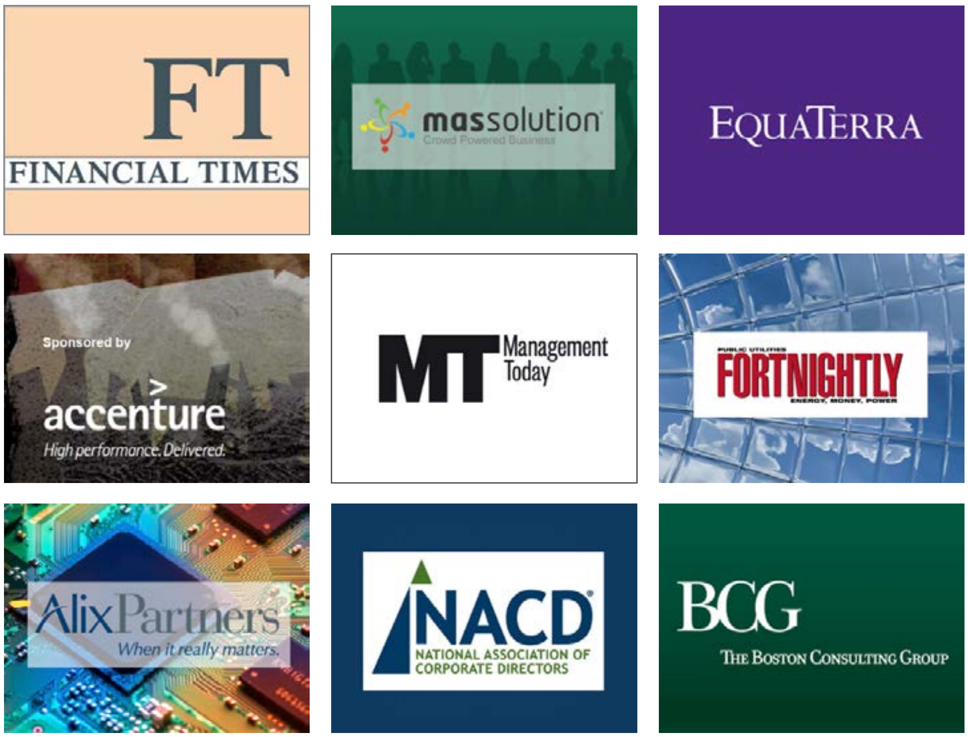
There's a ton of good data out there that demonstrates the value of repetition in content marketing. But don't just post the same thing over and over again on different channels. Rather, think of all the ways that a single piece of content can be repurposed. For example, the content of a single white paper can fuel:

- Blog posts
- ebooks
- Tweets and social media updates
- Infographics
- Slideshares
- Videos
- Press briefings

So feed the content beast often. But be sure to serve up full meals as well as bite-sized snacks.

Not every piece of thought leadership content you write will have your customers whipping out their checkbooks. But, by following the steps outlined here, you'll be well on your way to creating thought leadership content that starts a sustainable – and successful – conversation with your target audience on an ongoing basis.

Some good examples of thought leadership …



Ready to roll?

Got the five stages locked down? Or could you use some help shaping your stories and getting them out into the market? Whatever the stage or scope, we'd love to hear from you!

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