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Become a "Thought Leader" and Separate from the Competitive Pack

By Ken Lizotte, CMC

At a presentation on the topic of professional fees, a researcher from New Hampshire-based Kennedy Information was once asked to explain how the tiniest .5% of revenue-producers at the top of his PowerPoint chart had managed to get there. What made these companies and individuals so much more in demand than all the rest?

Without skipping a beat, the researcher responded, "Oh, those highest revenue-producers are the ones who regularly publish articles and books, do speaking engagements, and connect with the media...They are the thought leaders."

Though this research had been focused on consulting firms, its conclusions could easily be transferred to other professions and industries as well. After all, what happens when an executive and/or company goes high-visibility? Think Richard Branson, Jack Welch, Oprah or Donald Trump! Customers and potential customers become more aware of your firm's products and services, sales go up, awareness remains high and a wish to identify with the company and/or its products spreads throughout a sturdily loyal target market.

Bill Gates for example has always enjoyed media attention from his image as a Harvard drop-out who went on to build one of the greatest business empires ever. To most of the public, Bill Gates IS Microsoft and Microsoft is Bill Gates. During his legal troubles of recent years, Gates was the beneficiary of millions of Microsoft loyalist customers who believed the government was unfairly persecuting him for too successfully turning out good products. Many such loyalists could be heard insisting that the government's case would not deter them from continuing to support Microsoft by purchasing its products which they believed to be innovative, effective, reasonably priced and reliable. The personification of Microsoft the company through

identification with Gates the individual solidified many customers' continued sharing of their wallets, keeping Microsoft fiscally healthy despite widespread seemingly negative media coverage.

Contrast this public reaction with the public troubles of Dennis Kozlowski at Tyco International, and other executives in similar straits from Enron and Worldcom. The public did not know any of these individuals before their public images burst upon the nightly news and thus had little sympathy for them or for their plight. Customers deserted these firms in droves, preferring to stay far away from the perceived dastardly circumstances. Had any of these executives been known previously by the public as sympathetic figures, leading thinkers, pioneers of industry, the reaction may have been different. This time a similar yet contrasting example would be Martha Stewart. Many today still vociferously protest her treatment despite her conviction of stock market conspiracy in Federal court in early 2004.

Evidence of thought leadership as an effective marketing strategy is not merely anecdotal, however. In the legal profession for example a 2003 study was conducted on the possibility of measuring legal media ROI. Conducted by Levick Strategic Communications and PR Newswire, the survey counted media appearances by 200 law firms, finding that the top 25 firms on the list ranked according to revenue had also experienced an increase in their overall media presence in 2002 over 2001 by about 18%. But those firms ranked below in the next two quarters (26-75) had only increased their media presence by a minuscule one percent. Richard Levick, President of Levick Strategic Communications, insisted that this data proved that a sustained media effort can and does result in a significant return-on-investment.



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It's clear then that those who practice "thought leadership" truly stand out from the competitive crowd. Publishing a book (like Gates, Welch, Trump and Stewart) or publishing articles (Oprah Magazine!), or making oneself available to and sought-after by the media (consider Branson and his newsworthy balloon-around-the-world adventures), or speaking before professional groups, or conducting research on an important issue—such methods draw attention and gain recognition for companies and their leaders in ways that more traditional methods (brochures, website, networking) cannot approach. Thought leader channels get business leaders and their companies out there on public platforms all their own.

Getting the Process Started

How can you become a thought leader yourself? What's the best way to get the process started? The most essential element, especially in terms of getting the ball rolling so that your thought leader foundation will sustain you over the long haul, is to get your ideas published. This action alone wins you a credibility and stature second to none. Most people will never publish an article in their life, let alone a book, and just as many will never experience more than a small mention in their hometown newspaper, for a sports or academic honor while in high school. Thus publishing pushes you out there in front of the pack from day one and keeps you there.

But where to begin, with a book or an article? Most neophyte thought leaders find it easiest to begin with articles rather than taking on the overwhelming commitment of a book. That way, they can more quickly raise their market visibility and counterattack the effects of the higher visibility of already-established thought leader competitors.

For example, Wolf Greenfield, a leading Boston intellectual property law firm, decided to embark on a thought leader strategy out of frustration from seeing other IP firms in the Boston area routinely get quoted in feature articles in the area's leading local media, notably the Boston Globe. Experts at Wolf Greenfield however never ever received a reporter's call. But to conceive, develop, write and publish a book would likely have taken at least a year and a half.

In contrast, by focusing on articles, a year or so later they had 30 by-lined published articles under their belt, and as a result had become so well-known to Boston legal beat reporters and columnists, that media calls began going out to Wolf Greenfield first, rather than (as was the case previously) not at all. Anonymity ceased to be a troublesome issue.

How to get started? When publishing articles, keep in mind that the first thing to do is NOT to actually begin writing an article! Instead, first determine your primary business objectives: Which of your products or services would you most like to promote? What area of expertise do you most want to be known

for? If you were to become a famous thought leader, what core services would you most wish to be known for?

Once you have answered this question, structure your article ideas around these topics to insure that your articles will highlight these services. Then go hunting for a "go-ahead" from an editor at a publication read by your target market, i.e., one read by decision-makers who typically hire you. Do you typically serve the chemical industry? Consumer manufacturers? Real estate buyers and sellers? High tech companies? Whatever your target market, there's a publication out there to serve that readership.

Example: A manufacturer of high-tech data storage systems wanted its insurance firm prospects to understand how easy-to-learn its product was, so its VP Sales/Marketing wrote an article for an important insurance trade magazine called "The Dangers of Inaccessibility." While the article couldn't blatantly promote the firm's product (no publication will allow that), by discussing the competitive advantages of accessible, flexible data storage today the article implied that if readers wanted to learn more, their best bet would be to contact the leading expert on the subject--the author (and his firm).

So pitch your ideas to relevant trade or business publications, locating them via a directory of trade and business publication found in any public library, or by searching the Web, or (sometimes the best tactic of all) by asking your clients what they read!

Next, make your "pitch" via email to an editor, following up with 2nd email or phone call a few days later. If you call, make sure you're armed with a succinct, to-the-point 10-second synopsis of your article idea, then expect to hear one of two responses: "Sounds like a good idea. When can you have it ready for us?" Or: "Sorry, we just did that one a few months ago. What else you got?"

What's important here is to realize that editors depend on business leaders just like you to feed them ideas and to offer to write articles for them. So if the first idea you pitch isn't right (for whatever reason), they will be nonetheless eager to hear a 2nd and a 3rd idea from you. Have a few more ready.

The next step will be for you to write the article an editor has expressed interest in,

submitting it within your deadline with your e-picture and bio. Then be ready to work with the publication's edit if he/she has questions or editorial comments.

Follow this advice and before long you will be publishing regularly throughout the year, and perhaps getting ready to write and publish a book.

When ready for that next big step, go through the same process as you did with article idea development in order to zero in on your best business focus. The books of Gates, Welch, Stewart and Trump, for example, all exemplify their individual core expertise. Can a title get any better than "The Art of the Deal" to illustrate what Donald Trump is all about? To be effective, your book's title and focus must similarly illustrate what you and your company are all about, i.e., how you wish to be perceived by your targeted customers.

To actually get your book published next involves sending query emails to publishers just as you did with articles editors. If you get a bite, you will be asked to submit a book proposal, consisting of 6 parts: book synopsis (3 pages), your bio, table of contents, why your book is important, how you plan to promote and help sell it, short sample chapter (20 pages). There are many resource books on the market to help you understand in more detail how to effectively put all these components together. Find one and study it thoroughly so that a publisher will be impressed with your idea and offer you a formal contract. After that, you will write your book, it will be published and you will be on your way to thought leader heaven!

Public Speaking

After you have got your publishing program rolling, you're ready to add the second major thought leadership channel to your campaign, i.e., public speaking. Invitations to speak at conferences and other events may actually follow automatically, but to help them along leverage your published works via carefully-executed marketing techniques. For example:

- 1) Send an email announcement to your personal e-list of clients, prospects, colleagues and friends. Don't just wait for people to see your articles or book. Getting proactive and making sure that it gets read builds a buzz that will expand your business opportunities.

2) Pass out your articles, when appropriate, at networking events you attend. Hand them directly to influential contacts. If you have a book, don't hesitate to hand out free copies of that as well, though given the cost of such handouts you will want to be in this case a little more selective.

3) Search out calls for speaking proposals, especially at organizations of which you are either a member or which you frequent. Your articles or book now become valuable credentials to add to such proposals.

4) Post your articles or news of your book on your website and add a line declaring yourself available for speaking engagements. Also on your website, list your speaking topics and also a calendar of past, present and future engagements. This tactic bolsters your credibility as a speaker in constant demand.

5) At your talks, always distribute your articles to everyone in attendance or make available your books for sale. Emphasize again that you are available for future speaking gigs... and don't turn any down! Larry Winget, a highly sought-after motivational speaker, has said that "the best way to get speaking engagement is to go out and speak!" Exposure breeds further exposure, growing your speaking assignments exponentially.

Driving Traffic to Your Door

Finally, the media loves a popular expert, so by sending out regular press releases announcing your articles and speaking engagements, editors will begin to contact you as an expert to be quoted in their pages and meeting planners will clamor to have you on their schedules. Use an Internet wire service to send your releases out, providing within these releases a link to the web site page where your article, book or list of speaking topics can be found. In this way you drive media traffic directly to your door.

Thomson Management Solutions, a provider of products and consulting services for the financial services industry, may be the best example I know of a company practicing all forms of thought leader marketing. Its CEO Maria Thomson has authored both a book and many published articles, including a column in a leading insurance trade newspaper, and has

keynoted at major industry conferences, fielded countless media questions, originated a survey of industry practices, and created a website that is active, engaging, and responsive to industry issues and themes. As a result, her firm is well-known in her targeted markets, as prospects, customers and colleagues read her articles, hear her speak at conferences, and frequent her website to view her articles, latest research and expert comments. All these channels hum together to amplify the buzz.

As your firm too commences down this road, your company's credibility will be similarly enhanced by the implied third party endorsement of your ideas emanating from trusted publications and professional/industry groups. The resulting public attention will augment your overall business development efforts, boosting your bottom line to new heights. At this point, bona fide thought leadership will have arrived. Once there, enjoy the ride!