

What is Thought Leadership and Why is it Better with Content Marketing?



How do you sell without selling?

Try Thought Leadership.



Today, companies face competing pressures regardless of the sector they're in. Budgets are tight. Marketing strategies are increasingly complex.

Clients want to feel confident in every purchase they make. As a 21st century marketing strategy with manageable costs and lasting and substantial benefits, thought leadership matters now more than ever.

Joel Kurtzman invented the Opacity Index, which measures the risks associated with economic policies, corporate governance standards and corruption in international markets. He is a consultant and has been a *New York Times* columnist and editor of the *Harvard Business Review*. He is a thought leader and in 1994 he coined the term to label people who seed business with good ideas.

The Thought Leadership Reputation



Thought leadership is not complicated. It means a reputation as a singular expert. As the Harvard Business Review says: You gain a reputation as a thought leader when you are “someone who doesn’t just participate in the conversation.” You actually drive the conversation. “No matter how brilliant and talented you are, you won’t be sufficiently appreciated within your organization or by your customers until the broader public recognizes you.”

As straightforward as it seems, however, a closer look at the thought leadership concept sheds some additional light on the phrase.

A thought leader is an expert, an authority, but being an expert is not enough, in and of itself, to make you a thought leader.

Mere expertise is only the beginning.

It's not enough to be an expert anymore. With an endless rollout of information, consumers are looking for more than answers to their questions. They're searching for resources capable of translating the mountain ranges of expert information into digestible useful content.

There is a public-facing requirement, too. A thought leader is “recognized” and is someone “whose expertise is sought.” A thought leader doesn't exist in a vacuum. Thought leadership does not require exceptionally narrow expertise. You can be a thought leader in the broad field of technology. You don't have to limit your thinking, say, to a narrow aspect of cloud networking.

Admittedly, the bigger the subject, the more likely it is that there are competing thinkers in that space, but it's equally likely that as you become increasingly specialized, your audience becomes vanishingly small.

The beautiful aspect of thought leadership is its potential to alter the entire landscape of an industry. In fact, **without thought leaders, innovations and inventions wouldn't exist.**

When establishing yourself as a thought leader, you'll want to spike interest and solidify your placement by revealing new and original insights.

Beyond Buzzwords

It's undeniable that "thought leader" and "thought leadership" are word pairings that put some people's teeth on edge. Both phrases are buzzwords that have been very much in vogue – to the point of overuse – in the business community in recent years. Their popularity has served to dilute their meaning almost beyond recognition for three reasons.

First, many of us are inclined to see over-popular buzzwords as meaningless jargon. Forbes magazine included it as one of its “most insufferable” bits of business jargon as far back as 2013.

Second, it’s all too easy for anyone to call himself or herself a thought leader, regardless of whether the shoe actually fits. If everyone is a thought leader, no one is a thought leader.

Third, the published thoughts of some prominent self-styled thought leaders have turned out to be just plain wrong.

Those objections are, however, superficial at best. If we simply call our thought leader a recognized expert or a well-known authority, we eliminate the objectionable jargon.

If we understand that thought leadership is a quality that grows organically from interaction with the world outside and that calling yourself a thought leader isn’t enough, true thought leadership can emerge. And if it comes from a position of experience, knowledge and understanding, thought leadership will be taken seriously, even if it doesn’t, for example, predict the future with 100 percent accuracy.

The 3 Pillars of Content Marketing



To merit the designation as a thought leader, you must satisfy three distinct elements, all of which have a great deal to do with content marketing.

We describe content marketing as:

A strategic marketing technique of creating and distributing content to achieve greater reach by attracting, informing, and benefiting a target audience – with multiple goals including supporting a brand, creating sales, and achieving or enhancing a reputation for thought leadership.

PILLAR #1

Establish Meaning



If you were to perform a Google search for your primary topic, how many results do you see? For most businesses, thousands of pages of content already exist. Being an expert isn't enough.

You must restructure available information so it actually has meaning. You understand your target audience. Cultivate content relevant to the needs of your audience while simultaneously delivering **innovative concepts and solutions**.

PILLAR #2

Highlight Relevance

When seeking information and meaning, your target audience is only interested in content and concepts that are relevant to their specific needs. Throughout this virtual journey, they'll pass by hundreds of search engine results until they come across something that's especially relevant.

In the quest to establish authority within your industry, it's essential to relay your message in ways that are **strikingly relevant** to the current and future needs of your audience.

PILLAR #3

Stimulate Engagement

Far too many individuals or businesses poised to become thought leaders derail their own success. Having innovative solutions or evolutionary concepts won't take you far unless audiences are fully engaged. The streamlined access to niche information means you'll be competing with others on an intellectual and informational scale.

This medium is tricky to master, but it always begins with understanding what's important in your niche. From there, foster engagement by demonstrating your **unique and original concepts**. A mistake a budding thought leader makes is rewrapping common knowledge.

Engagement only comes from the excitement of newness.

Shorn of all the buzz, thought leadership has the kind of value that goes to the heart of what organizations are trying to accomplish.

We will examine that value, but central to its cultivation is the cold, hard fact that you don't get to dub yourself "thought leader" without putting in the work that justifies the title.

An Enduring Trend

Dismissing thought leadership as a fad, instead of embracing it as a strategy, is a fundamental mistake that ignores a truly cost-effective, practical and valuable marketing strategy on the table.

Thought leadership matters regardless of your industry, your sector, your location, your competitive position, your history or your goals. As a strategy, it's unique in that it remains relevant despite any changes in marketing practice that the future holds.

Marketing is often ephemeral; thought leadership endures.

Having made those claims for the value of thought leadership, we need to answer two questions:

1. Where does all that value of thought leadership come from?
2. And what does it take to get there?

The Value Proposition

All organizations have needs in common. They need to be found by their customers, clients and prospects, and, of course, employees.

Once found, the target audience needs to be convinced that the organization is capable of solving some problem for that audience.

Whether the problem is simple or complex, whether the organization is delivering goods, services or a combination of the two, and regardless of the identity of the organization in terms of industry, those needs are universal. In fact, they're the starting point from which all organizational activities originate.

In the 21st century, those needs are increasingly met on the internet. That's where people, whether customers, prospects, vendors or competitors, go to find out what your organization is all about. You may not close the deal on the web, but it's where the process starts.

Thought leadership gets you found. If your firm is working at the intersection of big data and health care delivery, for example, and your website is populated by thoughtful pieces on the subject, and your Facebook page points to those pieces, and you make it a point to keep your content up to date, and other sites have linked to yours because it's an excellent repository of information, then people with an interest in the subject, whoever they are, will find you.

While it's always a necessary beginning, merely being found is not enough. Once an audience has found you, what do people want?

The answer is surprisingly simple:

People want an organization they can trust.

That's who they want to do business with. That's who'll they'll ask to consult over a knotty problem. As a thought leader in your field, you've demonstrated that you are at least "a," perhaps even "the," go-to resource.

Thought Leadership & Domain Authority

Consider this: “Thought leadership” was once synonymous with “domain authority.”

Domain authority is one of the fundamental principles of the internet, especially the internet that is ruled by search engines. In fact, domain authority is essentially what search engines judge. It is a measure of the importance and relevance of a given site in relation to all the other sites that touch on a subject. It is what the mysterious algorithms of Google, Bing and other competitors use to determine the ranking of sites in search results.

Domain authority is what all the SEO experts, black-hat and white, strive to influence.

In other words, it's what makes your organization more or less visible to the world when the world goes online.

And thought leadership, even as it may be known by any other name today, is a key to visibility.

It may, in fact, be the key.

What sets it apart? Thought leadership is not the only way to improve visibility. An entire industry, the SEO industry, is devoted to developing and deploying the many tricks that can influence a website's popularity.

But SEO strategies, like the algorithms they try to influence, come and go. What worked last year - or last week - may not work today. Not only may it no longer work, a new algorithm may actually penalize a site that's deemed to be seeking an unfair advantage. Whenever Google rolls out a new approach, some tricks just stop working,

Content Marketing's Lasting Value

Thought leadership stands
above the fray.



As long as quality content is what drives website visibility - and there's no reason to think that quality will ever be irrelevant - the thought leaders in any given field will flourish. They're not trying to game the system.

If they're doing it right, they're publishing high quality content of lasting value and relevance, and they're *staying* relevant by updating that content regularly. In any future scenario that includes the internet, attaining thought leadership is a prize worth fighting for.

Creating True Thought Leadership

1. Establish a commitment to the process
2. Strive for quality
3. Be persistent



There is no real shortcut to becoming a thought leader.

The first step, in fact, is establishing a commitment to the process. The key factors that will drive that commitment are quality and persistence: Here, “quality” is comprised of several specific components that must be present before thought leadership can emerge:

FOCUS: Before you even begin to create the content that will make you a thought leader, identify your audience. You’re not speaking to the whole world. You’re addressing a particular subset of that world with particular interests, problems and needs. Tailor your content to that buyer and their journey.

ACCURACY: It should go without saying that anything you publish by way of factual statements should be accurate. You’re not expected to be absolutely accurate in matters of opinion or predictions about the future, but you must be seen as a reliable source to retain your audience.

RELEVANCE: Nothing stops you from using your platform to pontificate about just about anything. Presumably, however, you're not aiming for thought leadership when the subject is the meaning of life or the latest Batman movie – unless those subjects are somehow within your organization's scope.

EXPERIENCE: The most persuasive and engaging content speaks from experience. To establish the kind of credibility that thought leadership requires, nothing surpasses specific reference to your own history in your field and what you have learned from that experience.

STYLE: Thought leadership does not require prose that rivals those of the immortal men and women of letters, but nothing sabotages ambitions of leadership more effectively than content that's beset by grammatical errors, misspellings and typos. Those kinds of mistakes make you look careless at best, and they undercut the reliability and authority of the content itself by giving it a disconcertingly amateurish look.

Persistence Matters

Even when quality is in place, the climb up the mountain is not yet won.

A smattering of content, let alone a single instance, does not a thought leader make. This is where persistence matters and where a casual approach will not suffice.

What's needed is a commitment to creating, refining and publishing content as a discrete project unto itself, one with its own leadership, its own resources and its own road map. On the one hand, those resources need not be vast. On the other, however, they must be sufficient to see the project through its early days.

Attracting and developing an audience takes time, and any lack of immediate results has to be seen as an expectation, not a fatal flaw.

It can be hard going when budgetary pressures restrict resources for a project that can't promise an immediate payoff, but everyone involved, especially those responsible for resource allocation, should understand the time frame from the start. Patience will be needed, and not every enterprise can exercise that patience.

For those who can take the longer approach, however, thought leadership is a compelling opportunity. **With a sustained commitment, the payoff is real and potentially large.** And the road gets easier once an audience is established. Inbound links, one of the surest signs of domain authority, will increase as the body of quality content grows. The audience will snowball as content is added and updated and your digital footprint grows.

It's not easy to establish thought leadership, but, once established, it tends to endure.

What's more, it can sustain itself indefinitely with a surprisingly modest ongoing investment. If an organization can bring itself to delay gratification – even slightly – with an eye toward establishing lasting value, becoming a thought leader is well within its grasp.

You can become a genuine thought leader if you:

1. look to the present and the near-term future,
2. address actual problems, and,
3. offer revealing and original insights.

**People will come to you when
you are a thought leader because
they will believe in you.**

Are you ready?

Establishing yourself as a thought leader in an industry as competitive as technology requires more than great ideas. You must know how to present these ideas in a way that satisfies the three pillars discussed above.

If you're looking to uncover more about this invaluable concept, now's the time to act. Stop showing the world you're a follower, and take the necessary steps to solidify your stance as a leader.

Content Marketing Place *provides thought leadership strategy and execution.*

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