

think<shift

BREAK THROUGH THE NOISE!

Secrets of successful PR & thought leadership

strategyShift GUIDE

STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD TAKES MORE THAN GOOD IDEAS.

When it comes to PR and thought leadership, revolutionary organizations have an edge. They're in the vanguard. They have intriguing ideas and new approaches. They operate in relatively newsworthy arenas: sustainable business, renewable energy, clean transportation, green technology and the like.

But being new and ahead of the curve won't guarantee lasting success. To bring results, a PR and thought leadership program requires a strategic approach, newsworthy content, relationship building and persistence, among other things.

This collection of Thinkshift articles looks at the challenges from all the angles. The common thread: with original thinking, a good sense of story and a strategic approach, organizations can achieve media recognition that helps them expand their influence, raise their profile and build brand value.

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THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IS AN ESSENTIAL B2B STRATEGY

It's becoming clearer all the time: any B2B company that doesn't have a content strategy with a strong thought leadership component had better get one, pronto.



Two recent data points add to an accumulating pile: The Content Marketing Institute's [2016 B2B content marketing report](#) found that B2B marketers are churning out more content than ever—76 percent of those surveyed said they had increased their output in the past year.

Yet a [survey of B2B technology buyers](#) reported by MarketingProfs found that quantity is no substitute for quality: most buyers read five

or fewer pieces of content from a vendor. Product brochures, data sheets, white papers and case studies are the most influential content, according to the survey.

Product data sheets are a no-brainer. But white papers—those are pure thought leadership, if done well. Done poorly, they can be one of the two to five things prospects will start to read and then abandon before deciding against you. The best case studies also show your

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leading thoughts in action. (An aside: we know we are not alone in thinking thought leadership is a dopey term—it's pompous and vague, among other things—but it's the term we have, so, onward.) These pieces, executed well, can nudge your company to the top of the A list.

Going beyond the buy

A successful thought leadership strategy does far more than influence buying decisions, though. It can be key to getting people to consider your products or services in the first place—especially in markets that are crowded or commodified, and when you're selling something that's cutting edge.

Articles, white papers and talks that convey genuine insights, well-supported opinions on issues in the

field, or fresh thinking about longstanding problems can deliver multiple benefits:

- Better brand recognition and positioning, making your company more attractive to customers, top talent and investors (a strong brand also contributes to company valuation)
- Increased chances the media will tap your executives as expert sources
- The opportunity to join and spark conversations with influencers and industry leaders

In a sea of copyright-infringing rehashes, producing quality bread-and-butter content marketing (how-to posts, guides, videos and the like) will show off your expertise. Add original thinking, and you'll stand out.

January 2015

DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A THOUGHT LEADER?

We think almost any business *can* have what it takes to be a thought leader. And sustainable businesses have an edge here because they often have a novel approach.



That's good, because thought leadership has become an essential strategy—for B2B companies, at least. But long-term success requires structure, discipline and persistence. Here are five things you should have to move forward.

1. Thoughts

Well, OK, everybody has thoughts. But thought leadership requires sharing intellectual capital—views on where your industry is headed, analysis of market opportunities

and so on—as well as lessons and insights from your work. You'll have an edge if you're provocative.

2. An audience

Almost any B2B company has an existing audience—customers and prospects, colleagues, partners and others who are interested in your expertise. That's a start. Consider potential new audiences as well—expanding your zone of influence is the whole point.

**Substantive,
high-quality
content is
the essence
of thought
leadership.**

3. A platform

Preferably, you have several, as you want to share your thoughts beyond immediate circles. Platforms could include your own marketing channels, partner channels, media outlets, conferences and third-party publishing platforms like Medium and YouTube.

Keep in mind that publishing blog posts and hoping people read them isn't going to build a following. Create a content strategy—a roadmap that defines topics you'll cover, formats you'll use and how you'll reach your target audiences.

4. Ability to create content

Not everything (or even most things) needs to be a brilliant piece of research or a sharply honed essay, but thought leadership requires creating meaningful articles, presentations,

blog posts or whatever on a regular basis. If you already have a content marketing program, you're a few steps ahead.

5. Commitment

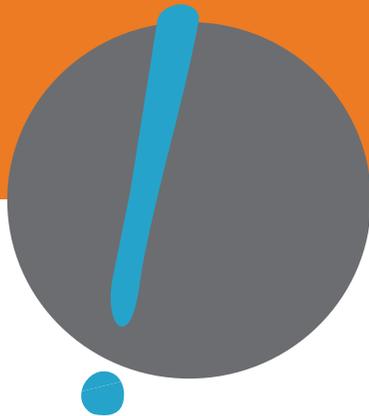
Thought leadership is a long-term strategy. Programs are typically iterative: test, adjust, repeat. It takes a while to see the benefits—expanded brand awareness, valuable new connections and increased leads are typical goals. Achieving them takes consistent effort.

True thought leaders share their knowledge selflessly. They ask questions, respond to feedback and exchange ideas. They not only build their business and expand their world, they also learn as they go. Combine those habits with hitting all the marks above, and you'll have what it takes to succeed.

July 2015

ARE YOU READY FOR PR? HERE'S A SIX-POINT CHECKLIST

As you might guess, given our business, “We want PR!” is something we hear regularly. But to reap the benefits of PR, you have to be ready for PR.



Many organizations underestimate the resources required for PR success. They may be unable to commit to a long-term strategy. Or they may be missing an essential element.

How can you tell if you're ready? Here's a six-point checklist, based on our process for determining what clients need to do to before media relations begin.

1. You have a good story (and stories) to tell.

Your focus on the triple bottom line is not a story to most journalists, unless you're part of a significant trend or leading your category. To get press, you need something unique—an approach, business model, position or product—and you need to be able to support your claims. If you want to position yourself as a thought leader, you'll need

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actual thoughts—about trends, innovations, markets, and so on—and the ability to generate them regularly over time. (See page 5.)

2. You are prepared for critical examination.

Almost every organization has challenges. If you're putting yourself in front of journalists, they may dig for yours. You need to be ready to talk about problems honestly, without looking bad or sounding defensive. If you don't want to do this, now is not the time to seek attention.

No skeletons? You still need to be ready to respond to tough questions.

3. You have your messaging down.

You not only have a story, you know how to tell it. You have an up-to-date messaging platform that succinctly describes your

organization, vision, what you do, who you do it for, and your value and values. You also have messages for the initiatives or products you're promoting.

4. You have a spokesperson.

You have an executive or two who can tell your stories with confidence. They have a deep well of expertise and information, will make themselves available at a moment's notice and are comfortable talking to reporters. They should be open to media training (even the best talkers benefit from it).

You'll also want them to write articles or collaborate with others on contributed articles.

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5. You have concrete goals.

Get crystal-clear on what you want PR to accomplish. Is it brand awareness? Impressing potential investors with your know-how and market savvy? Spreading the word about a new model of sustainable business? You'll tailor the work to those goals and determine metrics (both qualitative and quantitative) that will measure progress.

6. You are in it for the long haul.

Be ready to commit to a sustained effort. You need consistent exposure in the right places to see lasting results from PR, and building a reputation as a thought leader requires more than one or two articles.

If you can check all these boxes, you're good to go—and you're much more likely to get the results you want from a PR program.

May 2015

5 SECRETS OF QUOTABLE THOUGHT LEADERS

Ever read the news and wonder, “Why does that guy get quoted all the time?” Here’s your answer: that guy worked a smart strategy to get in front of journalists.



Then he made himself invaluable by having something smart and relevant to say most of the time—and being willing to help all of the time.

If you have expertise and can express it clearly, ideally with a bit of flair and an anecdote, you can become that guy or that woman. Just adopt the following habits of go-to expert sources.

Have opinions. It’s not enough to know what’s going on in your field—you have to have opinions that you’re willing to express publicly. What’s important about X? Why should we all be looking at Y? Is this a trend? You get the idea.

Reporters appreciate information but opinions get quoted—and the more quotable you are, the more often reporters will come back.

Get those opinions out there. Don’t wait to be asked. Write articles and

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blog posts, do video interviews and podcasts. Get them in front of journalists and other influencers. These pieces serve as calling cards that demonstrate your expertise and voice, and give interviewers an idea of what you might say.

Know the facts. Never wing it. Stating as a fact something you're pretty sure you know, but haven't confirmed, is a bad idea. If you're wrong and the reporter checks facts, you become an unreliable source—the opposite of a go-to expert. And if the reporter doesn't check facts, others are likely to point out the error, embarrassing both you and the reporter—the worst possible situation.

Share your network. You probably won't have something to say every time a writer calls. But you probably know someone who does, or an organization or other resource that's a great source of information on the

topic. Be generous—provide as much help as you can, even if it gets you no ink. It demonstrates your expertise and encourages reporters to keep coming back to you.

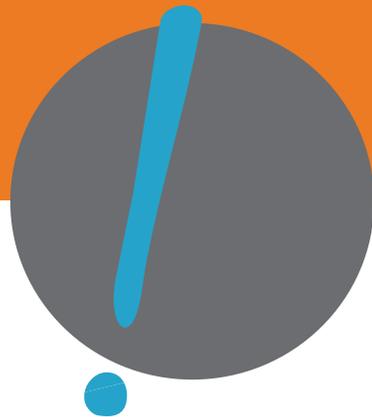
Answer questions that aren't asked. Point reporters in directions they haven't thought of, and if they're not asking all the right questions, ask and answer them yourself. Even better, reach out now and then with a “Hey, here's a soon-to-be hot topic you might want to jump on.”

Of course, the more prestigious your company is, the easier it will be to get on reporters' radar. But if you have the goods, the patience and the right strategic foundation, these are the secrets to success.

October 2014

HOW TO BE PROVOCATIVE—WITHOUT BEING A JERK

The quickest way to get attention is to be provocative. Challenging received wisdom or jolting people out of complacency can create a buzz and show that you're really thinking.



Questioning conventional approaches in your field, prodding people to reexamine assumptions and pointing out naked emperors are all ways to break through the noise.

Here are a couple of examples from the sustainable finance world:

Ears in any audience perk up when New Resource Bank President and CEO Vince Siciliano asks the question, “Do you know where your money spends the night?” Most

people don't consider (or would rather not think about) what their bank does with their deposits, and many assume they don't have positive options. This provocative question gets people to think about taking control of how their money is used.

Taking that theme further, Don Shaffer, CEO of RSF Social Finance, recently wrote about why his organization is walking off Wall Street—and challenged others to consider their complicity in a broken financial system.

If you have support for a controversial position, go ahead and stir up the pot.

A few tips on making this work:

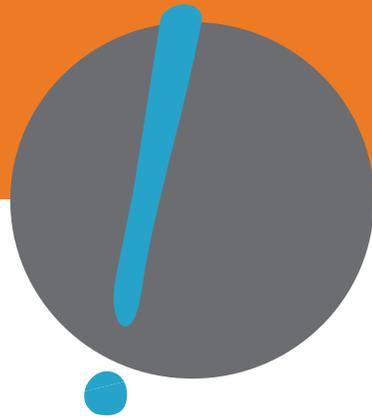
- Be sure you can support your claims.
- Offer solutions. It's easy to point out what's wrong; you'll have more credibility (and avoid being branded a crank) if you can also suggest ways to make it right.
- Focus on the big stuff. Pointing out that the emperor has no clothes is a civic duty; saying his new haircut makes him look 10 years older is just petty.

Provocation for its own sake will seem like a cheap ploy. But if you have strong support for a controversial position or a good reason to blast people out of complacency, go ahead and stir up the pot. Even if people disagree or feel uncomfortable, you'll earn respect for making them think.

May 2014

HOW TO TELL IF A STORY IDEA IS WORTH PURSUING

Story generation is the engine that makes PR and thought leadership programs run. When you don't have news (which is most of the time for most of us), you have to have stories to pitch.



We're talking about stories in the journalistic sense—topics worth exploring because of their relationship to current events, novelty, relevance to audience concerns or pure human interest. But it's not always easy to tell if your idea will fly—especially when you're a true believer working to solve social and environmental problems or create a model for others to follow. You may see every step forward as important

and worthy of coverage. That's not necessarily how the wider world will see it, however.

We use three tests to determine whether a story idea has a chance with editors and reporters.

1. The cocktail party test

Would you tell this story to someone you just met—or even someone you know but don't work with—at a social gathering? If not, why? Is the story too complicated?

Most people would rather eat bugs than endure a story without characters.

Hard to translate to an outsider? Something you're not sure other people want to hear about? These are signs that the idea needs to be boiled down to its essence, is inside baseball that isn't going to play for a crowd, or is too self-serving or navel-gazing to pique interest.

2. The smartphone test

If you were speaking about the idea at a conference, how likely is it that people would surreptitiously check their email and tune you out? If your honest assessment (not taking into account your enormous personal charisma, of course) is “pretty likely,” the story needs a hook and enough substance to keep people on the line. Why is this important right now? Do you have a dramatic result or surprising analysis that will grab attention? How broadly can you extend the topic's significance? Do you have enough detail to make it meaningful? A good anecdote?

3. The “Where's Waldo?” test

Where are the people in your story? Will the audience relate to them? Can you tell the story through them? The more you can use human experiences—including your own—to explore the topic and make your points, the stronger your story will be. In how-to articles, the reader can be the main character. And companies can sometimes stand in for people if you're talking business to business. But those of us with a fondness for abstract analysis just have to face facts: most people would rather eat bugs than endure a story without characters.

When the story idea well dries up, it's easy to start seeing weak ideas as strong. These three tests reveal the real winners.

April 2014



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Thinkshift Communications is a team of strategists, thinkers, writers and campaigners inspired by the power of business to address pressing social and environmental problems.

We build brand value, fuel growth and advance mission goals for trailblazing sustainable businesses, cleantech companies and social enterprises. We do it by uncovering what's best in their brand, expressing it in rich stories, and amplifying it through PR, thought leadership and content marketing programs.

thinkshiftcom.com

start@thinkshiftcom.com

415.391.4446

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