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# The Development and Care of Thought Leaders ... And How It Gives You the Marketing Advantage

By: *Melanie Brenneman*

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Let's face it – we live in a crowded world and *everyone is talking at the same time*.

Between blogs, articles, emails, tweets, ads and posts, we're flooded with news, opinions, merchandise, hypotheses, calls to action and unsolicited advice. Every company is vying for your prospective clients' attention selling everything from grocery store delivery to mortgages to candles.

And that's just on the consumer side.

If you're a technology company selling to law firms, corporate legal or accounting firms, a highly competitive market adds to the complications. If 500 businesses are selling to a managing partner, how will your voice be heard?

Add a new perspective to the onslaught.

It's time to double down on thought leadership. No matter the mode of communication, fresh and visionary topics will gain greater traction than recycled ideas.

## **What is a thought leader?**

A thought leader is, basically, someone recognized as an expert in a given field.

## **How would thought leaders help our marketing efforts?**

Make no mistake about it: The payoff for thought leadership doesn't happen overnight. It works best as a component of a larger marketing strategy and plans since it takes time and a lot of hard work from both you and the leaders.

The rewards, however, can be significant and include invitations to present at conferences, media interviews and coverage, referrals, a higher level of engagement and conversion online and increased brand recognition to name a few.

## **How can I find thought leaders within my company?**

Most companies look from the top down. They target figures already serving as public faces for the enterprise, such as CEOs, CTOs and so on. This approach offers advantages. Since the C-suite



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leads the company, they're already looking at the big picture, not in the trenches. They're familiar with representing the business and can speak to trends and large issues. The disadvantages of this plan include time limitations and perhaps the inability to take a deep dive into issues (for example, technical specifications, etc.).

I recommend a blended approach. Pull from the top, but also add employees from other levels within the company. Ideally, these could be employees who work in close collaboration with clients and can offer a niche complement to the high-level thought leaders. The blended approach also builds your thought leadership team, which is helpful for planning (article calendars, blog posts, etc.) and last-minute opportunities (interviews with media under deadline, for example). It's easier to answer a last-minute media interview request when you have more than one expert who can respond.

### **What type of person makes a good thought leader?**

Look for employees who are experienced, knowledgeable, passionate and curious. They should be eloquent (or have the capacity to develop that skill), able to listen well and not afraid to ask questions. Also, find out if they have auxiliary skills that would complement your marketing strategy and speak to the industry. For example, is your thought leader a Six Sigma Black Belt, or does he or she have a CSM or PMP?

### **How can I develop thought leaders?**

Thought leaders aren't made overnight; it's a continual process. On a logistics side, ensure they are attuned to corporate and product messages and positions. Train them on the basics of public speaking, interviews, presentations and the use social media as a corporate spokesperson. Make sure they understand the business, its vision and plan and its clients. Work hand in hand with them to help them develop topics, angles and insight for your industry – ones that will catch the eye of decision makers and start valuable conversations.

### **How can I work with thought leaders to create new ideas?**

Your thought leaders can't flourish in a void. They have to be actively involved in the community. Ask them to join associations and attend conferences. Have them speak or work with clients on a regular basis. Introduce them to other thought leaders in the field – such as those working with partner organizations or consultants. Share thought-provoking articles or social media posts with them and ask for their feedback. You can even schedule a time to interview them yourself about trends, challenges, how these apply to clients and prospects and what can be expected in the future. That session could illuminate valuable new strategies or build a repository of ideas for articles, media pitches, blog posts and more.

Now, you have a qualified and passionate thought leader. How do you establish him or her in the industry? Well, that's a topic for a whole new article. Reach out to me if you're interested.

### *About the author*

Melanie Brenneman, a senior account manager for Edge Marketing, has been involved in the care, feeding and establishing of many successful thought leaders. Every day, she helps technology companies successfully market their solutions to law firms, corporate law departments and accounting firms. She is a past president of the Austin chapter of the American Marketing Association (AMA).



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