THE MAKING OF A THOUGHT LEADER:

Five Steps to Designing a Thought Leadership Strategy that Converts Purpose Into Profit

A.wordsmith
PR \ MARKETING \ COMMUNICATIONS

Fake news, digital ubiquity and a socially managed information system with few checks and balances have created an environment in which everyone is an expert. This democratization of expertise has its pros and cons. The cons are readily apparent: Misinformation runs rampant, and the general public is left with a distrust of the media they consume.

The upside of this distrust, however, is the resulting market for trustworthy experts. Consumers are willing to invest their resources, brand loyalty and time in content that is credible and expert. The market is craving something real.

When thought leadership content is done right, it is a uniquely powerful tool. It challenges. It differentiates. It starts relationships and enhances existing ones. And it drives sales with high-value customers like no other.

Here's why: Customers, particularly those in the business-to-business (B2B) space seeking premium services, are increasingly demanding education and advice as part of the sales experience. They see through the bright and shiny marketing speak. They want proof.

Real thought leadership is that proof. And when it's done right, thought leadership monetizes that proof with content that converts customers into brand loyalists and a product into a purposeful platform.

"What's your story?"

FINDING YOUR EXPERT PERSPECTIVE

"God made man because He loves stories."
—Elie Wiesel, "The Gates of the Forest"

Storytelling makes us human. Stories give us a way to maintain some control over the world. They allow people to see patterns where there is chaos. And, ultimately, they serve as an evolutionary tool that helps keep us alive, because **people remember information when it is weaved into narratives "up to 22 times more than facts alone."**[1] At an early evolutionary state, humans realized that stories were more effective vehicles for sharing cautionary tales of dangers and predators than straight information alone.

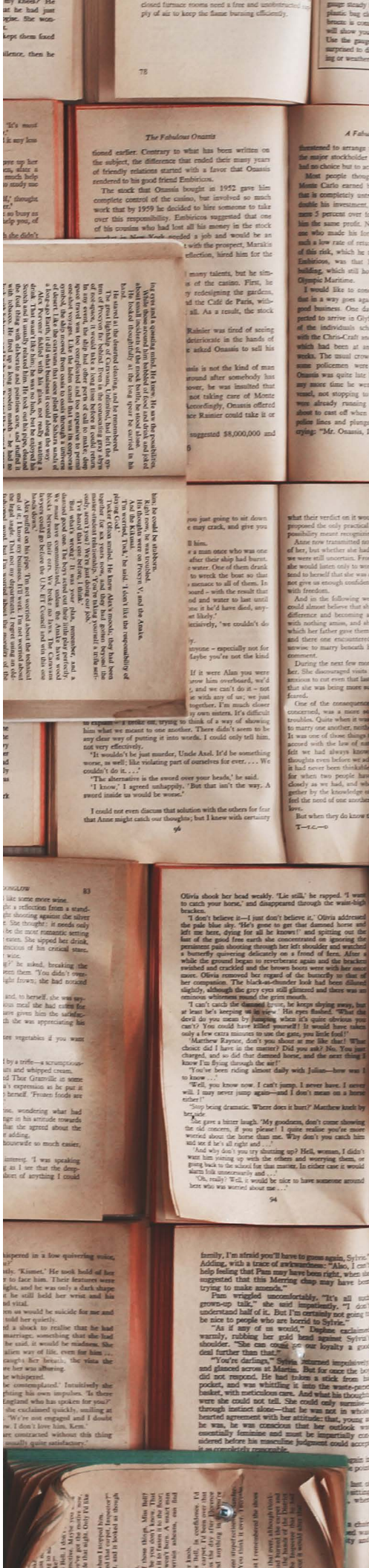
The requirements of survival have changed. To survive and thrive today amidst the cacophony of marketing noise and general information overload, leaders must find a unique platform that is authentic, valuable and compelling. They must find their story and then share it in ways that foster two-way engagement with the audiences that matter most.

1. START WITH THE LEADER(S).

While most marketing efforts start with the customer (especially as customer experience grows as an overall strategic priority), thought leadership starts with the leader. Working in the opposite order—trying to create a thought leadership platform around what you believe your customer wants—misses the core point of authenticity and will ultimately fall flat in being valuable or compelling to your customer.

Thought leaders can come from all functions and levels of an organization. Howard Schultz is the paramount thought leader for Starbucks, but the company's blog features articles from "coffee masters," baristas and director- and VP-level employees. The more publicly recognized the thought leader and the more credential he or she has, the bigger the resulting media coverage. But there can be great value in using lower-profile thought leaders to reach micro-communities or take a position on fringe topics.

1. Jennifer Aaker, "Harnessing the Power of Stories"



Smart marketing leaders can be proactively identified with internal campaigns that collect and analyze stories and spotlight potential thought leaders.

2. IF THE LEADERS AREN'T OBVIOUS, SEARCH FOR THE STORIES.

Identifying thought leaders within an organization can be simple. In the case of Starbucks, Schultz is an obvious choice in terms of his position and passion. But the CEO of a company may not always be the best option due to any number of factors, ranging from temperament to ideology. In that case, it may be beneficial for marketing organizations to start with the story.

In 2006, Dove's marketing director was struggling with a moral dilemma. After years of marketing Dove's products using traditional models, Stacie Bright noticed a shift in her daughter's self-esteem for a simple reason: Her daughter didn't look like the models in Dove's ads. Bright was inspired, and she had a story to tell.

Bright created a mock-up advertisement using pictures of the company directors' own daughters with text alongside each image describing how the girls believed they weren't beautiful. The mock-ups were presented, executives bought in, and a "Campaign for Real Beauty" launched in 2004. It has won a plethora of ad awards and sold a heap of products. Sales jumped from $2.5 billion in its inaugural year top $4 billion today.[2]

The "Campaign for Real Beauty" continues to be a successful ad campaign, and Bright was a brilliant thought leader. She wasn't utilized as such, but organizations are full of Stacie Brights. Smart marketing leaders can be proactively identified with internal campaigns that collect and analyze stories and spotlight potential thought leaders.

2. Jack Neff, "Ten Years In, Dove's 'Real Beauty' Seems to Be Aging Well," Advertising Age, Jan. 22, 2014.

3. ENTER THE CUSTOMER.

Great stories and the thought leaders who deliver them can powerfully contribute to the bottom line, even if they don't seem to directly tie in to the product or service the company delivers. Schultz, for example, has used his thought leadership platform to promote social causes that have very little to do with coffee.

However, a thought leadership campaign must give that one great story legs and dimension in order to bring it to life. Doing that, particularly in the B2B space, where customer preferences are more opaque, requires direct consumer insights to narrow in on story angles most likely to activate your target audience.

Marketing leaders should consider targeted market research or one-on-one customer interviews to pinpoint where and how a thought leader's story should be expanded. Starting with the story, these consumer insights can help identify specific campaign elements—partnerships, engagement methods, and subtopics—that will most effectively drive engagement with an emotional investment in the greater theme.

4. IDENTIFY THE PLATFORM(S).

The type of content your customers want will help define the platforms you deliver it on. Thought leadership content can come in every possible form, from 20-page white papers to 20-second how-to videos. Again, market research and honest conversations with your customers can help identify the platforms that will be most compelling and convenient to consume.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IS AN EXTREME SPORT

When iFLY, a pioneer in indoor skydiving, initially engaged A.wordsmith in 2015 to promote the opening of its newest wind tunnel outside Portland, Oregon, the project was fairly straightforward. In the process of successfully launching the new location, the team identified a thought leadership opportunity that would ultimately generate far greater media coverage and consumer loyalty than any grand-opening blitz ever could.

In describing the indoor skydiving experience, iFLY employees regularly referred to the tunnel as "the great equalizer." The stable wall-to-wall cushion of air opened the thrill of flight to anyone, regardless of age, ability or gender. This equality and accessibility put iFLY in a unique position in the extreme sport industry—an industry typically reserved for the most muscular and macho.

A.wordsmith worked closely with the Portland tunnel first to launch "All Abilities" events that offered free flights to families and individuals of differing abilities. Additional events were geared toward female skydivers and hosted residents of area retirement homes, giving flight to customers as old as 103.

The program was a massive success that generated coverage along the West Coast and in national skydiving publications. A.wordsmith was engaged to promote iFLY's accessibility platform in three additional markets—Seattle, Sacramento and San Francisco—and the program has been heralded as a pillar of equal access in the extreme sport industry and in communities that advocate for the rights of women, the handicapped and seniors.

One reporter who flew with his blind spouse and special-needs son in Portland called it "a safe space, free of judgment." Another customer flew with from her active aging community and told reporters, "I don't feel like a senior citizen doing that."

5. CREATE THE CONTENT.

Thought leadership content shouldn't appeal to everyone. It should take a stance. It should make a mark. While the form it takes and the platform it is delivered on should be influenced by consumer insights, the voice should be unwaveringly authentic and true.

Creating your thought leadership story starts with the moral. What is the story that will best demonstrate your thought leader's credibility, experience and divergent thinking? That is the story you should tell.

From there, the form the story takes is less important than the elements it contains. With the moral at the core, these five classic storytelling elements are absolutes for truly powerful thought leadership content.

The Protagonist. Give the reader someone to root for. Humanize the protagonist, even if it is a corporate entity. The protagonist depends on the story you're telling; it could be the client you saved, the product you launched or the agency you work for. Choose the protagonist your target audience is most likely to relate to.

The protagonist needs to stand for something. He or she must possess and act from a unique point of view. If your protagonist doesn't have one, consider using your thought leadership content as the framework from which your points of view can be developed and honed.

The Villain. Find your big bad wolf. In PR, it could be a competing client's product or service, a product recall, consumer backlash or even time (or lack thereof).

A PERFECTLY NICE MULTI-CHANNEL APPROACH

Establishing a thought leadership platform and voice in a commoditized market is no small task. Seeking a way to stand out in a highly saturated enterprise software solutions category, NICE, a leading provider of cloud and on-premises software for contact centers and back-office environments, partnered with A.wordsmith to create a thought leadership campaign that was uniquely its own.

NICE had a story to tell: Its leadership and employees were some of the best in the industry, and they were pioneering new ways to work that enabled better engagement internally between teams and with customers. However, their clients were not one-size-fits-all. They ranged from C-suite executives at Fortune 100 companies to owners of small and medium-sized businesses.

The NICE thought leadership story and voice had to be authentically consistent, but the platforms and channels on which that story was delivered had to be diverse.

Through a series of engagements over the course of more than a year, A.wordsmith led the development of multi-dimensional content covering industry issues, best practices, and current and future developments in management and customer experience. This content took the form of a series of blog posts, ebooks (including one deemed by NICE to be its most successful gated asset to date), white papers, long- and short-form brochures, web copy, sales promotions and email campaigns, in addition to content published in a leading industry publication. The A.wordsmith team also developed and created multiple thought leadership webinars on topics that included the cloud, employee feedback and performance management.

For NICE, the proof of thought leadership success is coming directly from its customers. After participating in a performance management webinar, one customer wrote "This was my favorite NICE webinar to date. Content was perfect!"

The Crisis. Put your protagonist to work. Create a colorful, engaging narrative to describe the moment of crisis. Finding your most compelling crisis point is easy: At what point do your clients seek your help? What is the common turning point? That, described with flair, is the kind of thought leadership crisis that converts to success.

The Backstory. Give it context. What are the external market forces or cultural forces exacerbating the crisis? An isolated retail product recall is ho-hum. A retail product recall three days before Black Friday on the heels of a multimillion-dollar global ad campaign is a page-turner.

In addition to being compelling, the backstory gives thought leadership content greater dimension than a one-off case study does. It allows a thought leader to contribute to a larger conversation, giving the content legs to be leveraged with multiple audiences—everyone from current and potential customers to media outlets.

The Resolution. Prove it. Balance hard data and real testimonials with emotion and transparency. Describe challenges, explain the process and demonstrate your humanity. This is your opportunity to outline your worth as a professional and a partner. Use journalistic rigor throughout. Proper attribution and thorough research prove your worth honestly and with integrity.

Turning Thought into Action

Thought leadership has become a marketing buzzword—one that's teetering dangerously close to jargon territory—but thought leadership, like storytelling, is human. It is human to want to share our expertise, better our communities and build something bigger than ourselves. And as consumers, it is human to want to align ourselves with organizations that support a stronger collective future and our own individual growth.

Every leader—and every enterprise—has thought leadership potential. Transforming that potential into an effective thought leadership strategy requires the ability to identify the platforms and storytelling techniques that will most effectively reach your target audience. It demands authenticity, conviction and purpose. And it calls for leaders and their organizations to stand for something and to have the confidence that sharing their expertise will not only impact the bottom line but also positively influence the broader conversations happening all around us.

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ABOUT A.WORDSMITH

A.Wordsmith is a boutique communications firm, specializing in thought leadership PR and writing for leading business-to-business and consumer organizations.

We build meaningful communications that propel our clients forward. We serve as an integrated partner with smart, passionate, innovative businesses that have complex stories to tell and manage. We believe strongly in the power of strategy, collaboration and words.

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