



The Definitive Guide To Thought Leadership



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*Demystifying the Holy Grail of Content,
Brand Marketing, and Expert PR*

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Forward

If you've been anywhere near PR and marketing in the past seven to eight years, you've heard the term thought leadership. Everybody knows they need it, everybody wants it, but few organizations genuinely understand what it is or how to put it to work in advancing their business.

In this ebook, we'll provide a framework to demystify thought leadership—what it is, what it isn't, how it overlaps and leverages content marketing, and most importantly, how to put the concept to work in building reputation, authority, and business traction for you. And we'll conclude with five examples—three organizations and two individuals—who've grown their businesses as well as their reputations by engaging in the new breed of communications known as thought leadership. In summary, this book will show you how to make yourself a champion in the growing arena of value-added content and authentic PR.

What is Thought Leadership?

In the increasingly connected world, there's a term that began to emerge with more frequency over the past seven to eight years: thought leadership. Initially, the concept began as the natural outgrowth of educative marketing—the concept of developing relationships with prospective customers by engaging them with non-promotional and industry oriented conversations.

They provide value-added information, coming from an expert source point of view. Next, thought leaders forged their way into the public relations and journalism arena, becoming the go-to sources for research, insight, and interpretation of the latest news and industry trends.

And finally, successful thought leaders have achieved the Holy Grail of marketing and public relations: audience engagement. When a customer is ready to step up and make a purchase, having been educated and nurtured along the area of need and interest, they turn to their most trusted source: the thought leader individual or organization who has guided the listener and participant along the path of understanding, with no hype or promotion and with no strings attached.

Yes, thought leadership is an effective way to build reputation, awareness, and brand. But all of these things can (and should) be achieved through content marketing as well.

True thought leadership is a much rarer thing. As expressed by Marketo co-founder Jon Miller, true thought leadership is about providing ideas that require attention, that offer guidance and clarity, and that can lead people in surprising and unexpected directions.

For example, iconic author and presenter Seth Godin, who epitomizes the concept of true thought leadership, began his career as a journalist. As time progressed, his role evolved. Instead of reporting and analyzing the news, he began to create it. He wrote and spoke about ideas that were innovative and provocative, that demanded thoughtfulness and provided education—in short, ideas that became a precursor for change. Seth Godin's ideas not only make him effective, but they establish him as a true thought leader.

Functionally, thought leadership is comprised of the following actions:

- **Authorship.** In every case, thought leaders write. Whether by themselves or (in most every case) with the help of collaborators and assisting experts, thought leaders are columnists, bloggers, and authors of reports, in-depth articles, and full-length books.
- **Authentic PR.** Yes, thought leaders engage in PR. For the most part, this is not the old-school PR of hype and promotion. True thought leaders engage fully in the world of authentic PR—they are the source matter experts that appear in interviews, on podcasts, as the interview guests on broadcast programs and news.
- **Speaking.** Thought leaders present. Many are highly paid keynote speakers. Many speak and present through webinars, webcasts, or broadcast programs. As they speak, they teach and inspire. Their ideas are compelling. Their audiences come away not necessarily entertained, but highly enriched and are educated and motivated toward specific and measurable business and personal changes.

In summary, true thought leaders are expert communicators of the highest classification. They have reputations that are easily findable in web search and are both thorough and accurate. In the areas they are expert in, they are a “part of the conversation,” regionally, by industry, and even worldwide.

True thought leaders are present in the online communities where their audiences live. Many are social media experts. But all are at least accessible and visible to the audiences who can benefit from their expertise.

Their visual image is a positive representation of the individual and their message. Not all thought leaders are style mavens, nor do they necessarily possess great beauty. But they have learned to present themselves in a way that reflects their personal and professional personality and style. They have learned to put their best foot forward within their unique and personal brand.

Most importantly, true thought leaders are experts in the creation of social influence, market and industry understanding, and perception—and in marshaling that perception toward specific actions and change.

What True Thought Leadership is Not

It is vital in a discussion of thought leadership to examine the things that thought leadership is not.

• Thought Leadership is Not Lead Generation

First and foremost, thought leadership is not lead generation. Far and away, marketers name lead generation as their highest priority (71.3% in both 2013 and 2014 according to Marketing Profs) for the content they generate and share. The number two priority, at 49.9%, is thought leadership and market education.

Make no mistake, lead generation is a vital goal for virtually every organization. It cannot be overlooked and ignored. But the single greatest mistake in thought leadership PR is to expect thought leadership—particularly because of its incredibly high value in credibility, in education, and even in SEO authority and ranking—to do the job of lead generation as well.

“We were on the cover of Inc. Magazine, and in CNN Money, showing our ability to do something that has never been done before, ever,” is a common lament of leaders who misunderstand this distinction. “Yet I can’t name a single sale that occurred from that coverage.”

Or “Why did you share that infographic with Forbes where they get all of the leads and we get none of the leads?”

Both of these statements reflect the typical gap in appropriate PR and thought leadership thinking. While strong thought leadership is the form of communication that stands at the very pinnacle of authority and influence, and while it may be an invaluable resource to include and incorporate into lead generation campaigns, it is not lead generation. Nor does thought leadership replace the function of sales. Strong thought leadership is the gasoline you pour on top of an effective sales and lead generation engine for maximum impact and sales conversion result.

• Thought Leadership is Not a Commodity

“Make me a thought leader,” is the frequent request of executives, often even deserving executives, who lack the vision of what a commitment to excellent thought leadership will entail.

Many assume that obtaining a masthead and an opportunity to contribute to a prestigious publication is an instant path to thought leadership that can be simply “purchased” by paying a person or an agency a sum to “get me connected” and then showing up now and then with content for the publication to publish (and even being angry and disgruntled at the expectation that it’s the publication’s job to drive traffic and interest to the pieces the author presents).

In any genuine setting, the opportunity for an author to contribute to a prestigious publication is a hard-earned achievement, both to obtain and then to continue to earn by attracting a continuous audience and following that crowns the initial achievement of getting themselves into print.

Far too many self-considered “thought leaders” contribute columns to even high-ranking publications in the current world of journalism upheaval that draw few views and are of little avail. Some are even a net negative to the executives’ reputations as they show poor form and style, lack of innovative thinking, or serve as thinly veiled excuses for the executive to sneak in callouts and promotional references to their organizations or themselves.

In the worst cases, individuals with marginal PR and thought leadership ability have worked to “score” contributor rights to multiple publications as a means of sneaking in advertorial information or SEO links to clients who are asked to pay them a fee. These activities are the very antithesis of genuine thought leadership and authentic PR.

• Thought Leadership is Not About You

“We need to tell the piece about how our company ____.” No, you don’t.

“This is my voice, and I must stay authentic to my voice, my thoughts and my experiences and expertise. I’m a columnist now.” Well, not for long. Your readers are not interested in your personal ethos.

“Other entrepreneurs should be inspired by what I’ve done.” Perhaps they should. But they won’t be.

The golden rule of genuine thought leadership is that every aspect of the communication is generated with the readers’ needs and interests in mind. “What’s in this for me” is the crux of every reader’s willingness to care for even a moment about what you think or what you or your organization has done. The ability to provide information that applies directly and even urgently to the reader in a way they can put to immediate use is genuine thought leadership. The rest is simply an expensive waste of resource in the creation of an ode that will please and inspire only you and perhaps a few of your family and friends (and if they’re being honest with you, perhaps they’re not reading either).

True thought leaders work closely with a team of trusted advisors to ensure that the subjects they share and the material they generate is truly hitting the mark.

• Thought Leadership is a Highly Specialized Form of Content Marketing

Expert opinions vary on the ways thought leadership differs from content marketing. In our opinion, thought leadership is a highly specialized form of content marketing. The concepts align and overlap.

The content that drives leads and conversions most effectively is a specialized form of communication as well. Strong content marketing materials employ many of the same attributes as thought leadership—educative content with a strong value-add that is interesting, compelling, and perhaps even provocative or entertaining at times. True thought leadership materials can serve as the foundation for great lead generation campaigns, as the genesis of a thought leadership article can be expanded to give specific company and product examples, and can (and should) include a direct call to action. Each form of content, however, must be clearly authentic and identifiable for just what it is.

An authoritative article should not bend itself into a subtle or not-so-subtle marketing bid. And a company’s content marketing material should not pretend to be an independent industry article or an authoritative research report.

Transparency and integrity is vital to the relationship of trust with prospective customers and to achieving the goals that either form of communication can bring.

How to Accomplish Thought Leadership

Every week as a national columnist and also as the founder of a PR organization, I hear the same question again and again. “So I need you to make me a contributor to Forbes. What does it take for you to hook me up? I’ll pay you \$XXX.” Or “I need to be published in Harvard Business Review. You’ve got the connections to do that, correct?”

In actual fact, a national column is not the first thing a prospective thought leader should look for. It is most probably last.

However, thought leadership at some level is within the reach of most every individual and organization. It brings professional credentials, social influence, and community following that will stay with an individual throughout their entire career. In fact thought leadership is a tremendous way to accelerate a company’s influence and valuation and can dramatically advance a career.

Few people are inherently well suited to a thought leadership role. And even in the best cases, thought leaders who are naturally skilled at one area, such as speaking or writing, can amplify their impact many fold when they are guided in the process of scaling their abilities and influence to additional media such as videos, book authorship, or advanced advocacy arenas as well.

Furthermore, even great contributors and writers benefit from the collaboration of experts who can provide specialized editing, assistance with research and selection of the most compelling topics, and even assistance in the creation of headlines that rock.

Solid thought leadership requires focus and a long-term mindset. Of all forms of advanced communication, thought leadership is an arena where specialized expertise is required.

What can Thought Leadership Mean to You and Your Organization?

Here are a few examples of superb thought leadership outcomes from the organizations Snapp Conner PR continues to serve:

• Zenger Folkman | www.ZengerFolkman.com

Zenger Folkman is an organization that epitomizes thought leadership strength. As an organization that espouses the value of “strengths-based” leadership development (honing in on the emphasis of building stand-out strengths instead of grinding away on areas of weakness) the company has leveraged its access to extensive databases of 360-degree leader and employee reviews. This data provides surprising insights that benefit leaders and employees at every level.

Zenger Folkman began its focus on thought leadership in late 2011 with the publication of a feature article in Harvard Business Review. From there, the founders and key executives have become regular and high-ranking contributors to

- HBR Blogs
- Forbes.com
- Business Insider
- Chief Learning Officer



*Jack Zenger
CEO and Co-founder*



*Robert H. Sherwin, Jr.
Chief Operating Officer*



*Joe Folkman
President and Co-Founder*

Today, the thought leadership snowball is rapidly growing and the company enjoys regular and even spontaneous coverage throughout the world in publications including WSJ, CNN.com, Bloomberg/Businessweek, New York Times, The Washington Post and Huffington Post as well as broadcast appearances on national news programs. Co-founder and CEO Jack Zenger was presented with the first ever ASTD Thought Leader award. More importantly, the crux of this company's thought leadership efforts has provided the topics and content for the webinars, downloadable research reports, and self analysis tools that are the company's primary sources of lead generation and sales.

• **InsideSales.com | www.insidesales.com**

InsideSales.com, a provider of cloud-based sales acceleration technology and predictive analytics tools, has been lauded as one of Utah's newest billion-dollar companies. The company began its foray into thought leadership early, by conducting a research study to identify the surprising realization that most companies are shockingly slow to respond to incoming internet leads (and that speedy response is one of the most sure avenues to accelerating sales). With this research the company achieved immediate coverage even as a start up in publications such as Harvard Business Review.

With Snapp Conner's help, the company maximized the expert voice of its resources such as co-founder Ken Krogue, who is now a popular contributor to Forbes' Entrepreneurs Channel, and CMO Mick Hollison, who is an emerging and increasingly popular contributor to Inc. Ken Krogue's strengths and work as a global thought leader on sales acceleration led to his being named in 2013 as one of the top three social selling authorities in the world.



Ken Krogue, Co-founder, InsideSales.com



Mick Hollison, CMO, InsideSales.com

• **Fishbowl | www.fishbowlinventory.com**

If you think your company's topics are too niche or too boring to make for interesting content, Fishbowl CEO David K. Williams and President Mary Michelle Scott can serve as a great example of the business benefits an organization can gain from thought leadership work. Fishbowl is provider of the popular Fishbowl Inventory software that is fully integrated with QuickBooks. Many of the company's clients work in blue-collar industries such as supply chain fulfillment and manufacturing.

But Fishbowl is also an inspiring company that has grown itself from just a handful of people to a global company that has been named to the Inc. 500/5000 for six consecutive years and has achieved a global Red Herring Award.



*David K. Williams
CEO, Fishbowl*



*Mary Michelle Scott
President, Fishbowl*

The core integrity principles that Fishbowl has used have found national acclaim in the form of a book, *The 7 Non Negotiables of Winning*, published by Wiley & Sons in 2012 (and acknowledged by Amazon immediately after its release as a top book of the month). The 7 Non Negotiable principles, along with David Williams' unique strategies for selling, have been the focus of the most read columns by Williams and Scott in Harvard Business Review Blogs, and Williams is a popular contributor to Forbes Entrepreneurs. Fishbowl's thought leadership efforts have contributed strongly to the company's global awareness. Today the company has even invested in the creation of its own publishing and education division to assist client companies and other small businesses.

Meanwhile, in addition to its sales metrics, the company has achieved top SEO results, moving from position 17 in generic Google searches for inventory software to position one when its thought leadership efforts began, a position the company has continued to hold ever since.

• **Cheryl Snapp Conner** | www.snappconner.com
and www.forbes.com/sites/cherylsnappconner

As a strong proponent of authentic PR and thought leadership since the beginning of her PR career in the mid 1980s, Cheryl Snapp Conner and her agency team have led the educative marketing and spokesperson development roles of hundreds of clients and their organizations over the past 25-plus years. However, Snapp Conner's own role as a thought leader began in earnest when she began her ongoing role as a business and communications contributor to Forbes.com in mid 2012.



*Cheryl Snapp Conner
CEO and Founder
Snapp Conner PR*

She invested herself in the effort fully, using the advantage of Forbes' massive readership base of more than 60 million viewers each month to learn first hand what works and what doesn't in engaging entrepreneurial readers online. Her articles have become increasingly popular and she has progressively become one of the channel's most followed and most prolific contributors. She has become regarded as a national authority in online reputation and has contributed on the topic to WSJ, and has become an increasingly popular national keynote speaker.

In late 2013, one of Snapp Conner's articles, "Mentally Strong People: The 13 Things They Avoid," went massively viral and is currently approaching 10 million views.

These thought leadership efforts have contributed highly to Snapp Conner PR's current success as one of the nation's top 100 agencies and as a fast growing organization with an increasingly strong reputation for unique and world-class expertise in thought leadership and content marketing skills.

• **Lauren Solomon**

National image consultant Lauren Solomon was renowned as a keynote speaker, author, a contributor to a best selling book on the role of image in business, and a leading authority on personal image when a health crisis required her to drop out of circulation in her formerly highly visible role in late 2012.

In 2014, now fully recovered, she joined with the team at Snapp Conner at a point of readiness to regain and even increase the highly visible role she had formerly played. Solomon had ample ideas and material, and with the help of the Snapp Conner team, began to put her talents to use in a much more visible way. Today she serves as an ongoing contributor to Huffington Post on issues of personal image and branding, and is a guest contributor to Forbes. She is currently in discussions with a major national women's magazine to become an ongoing featured source and contributing author, as well as working as an advisor and future guest for national broadcast programs, and she is a national business development representative for Worth New York, a provider of high-end couture fashion for professional women.

Strong thought leadership has expedited Solomon's fast return to authority and visibility on a national and international stage. Additionally, her role with the Snapp Conner team has become so vital that she is now partnered with the agency to provide personal and professional image guidance to many of the clients of Snapp Conner PR.



Lauren Solomon is Image Expert and Author and a National Columnist for Huffington Post and Guest Contributor to Forbes

How To Initiate Or Increase Your Own Thought Leadership Program

Are you ready to examine your own thought leadership strengths and your future thought leadership and content marketing goals? Let the expert team at Snapp Conner help you initiate the thought leadership and content program that will help you to accomplish your own highest business and personal goals.

Virtually every organization can benefit from either a dedicated thought leadership program or a stronger thought leadership focus within their current programs.

As an organization, Snapp Conner PR can help you determine your current capabilities and level of need in the following areas:

- Advanced authorship
- Development and use of subject matter experts
- Blog and columnist skills
- Live and recorded video presentation skills
- Personal branding and visual image
- Media and public relations campaigns
- Speaker bureau support

We are able to work with or without the presence of internal or existing content or PR agency teams. Email us today for a free consultation to determine the ways our expertise can be of value to you.

For a Free Consultation

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