

Thought Leadership on Thought Leadership: Mapping Out Thought Leadership Marketing Campaigns

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Executive Summary

The most effective thought leadership often requires a sequence of publications. Anticipating how the sequence of publications will be quickly developed makes it more likely that customers will pay attention and that investments in thought leadership will create more value.

Thought leadership is often confused with the more personal issue of being perceived as an expert on a topic with its implicit assumption that the individual is more expert and has currently understood more than other people. A more practical definition is that “thought leadership” covers the activities that change the way a prospect or customer perceives a problem or opportunity. In cognitive terms, it often requires teaching customers to “chunk” the information in a different way. Reframing the way that a client understands a problem may require a radical redefinition, but it will typically also require marketing communications frequency as is required with most marketing programs.

With thought leadership, illustration of experience with some aspect of the problem increases the understanding of and changes the perception of the benefits that the product or solution delivers. For example, with many information technology offerings, a key task is change the focus of a buyer or influencer from the total cost of ownership (TCO) to the increased value, i.e. revenues, profits, cash flow, increase in customer loyalty, that the new technology makes possible or more likely (Total Value of Opportunity or TVO). For many consulting services, a key element is explaining the components of a typical project so that there is less uncertainty about the nature of projects and the work involved. Phasing how different thought leadership pieces influence targeted audiences can include agile approaches to content development, involvement of external expertise and scenario analysis to quickly react to issue changes and ongoing measurement of the impact of launched thought leadership.

Table 1: Marketing Communications vs. Thought Leadership

	Regular Marketing Communications	Thought Leadership
Reframing understanding of the solution, deployment, benefits		Yes
Information about the ancillary impact of a product or service, e.g. ROI	Yes	Yes
Description of product or service	Yes	

Customer success story or case	Yes	
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Introduction

Traditional TV programs often wrap up their plot within a broadcast hour. In what some have called the Third Golden Age of Television [1], long *story arc* plots (e.g. *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *Six Feet Under*) have proven powerful and irresistible to many in spite of the explosion of programming choice. In the writers' rooms for each show, teams of writers map plots on 3X5 cards pinned to whiteboards and corkboards. They map the content of individual episodes and predict, not always reliably, how the story arc will unfurl. Their projections are not always right. Stories and characters have a habit of taking on a life of their own. But thinking through the evolution of the plot and characters is key requirement for consistency and creativity and the thinking process benefits from multiple minds being involved in forecasting the future.

This small example from television parallels something that *next generation thought leadership* must also address. In a world of abundant content, writing a *single* definitive article is insufficient. Frequency matters. Demand creation and the development of a prepared customer base must, like any marketing campaign, think beyond the individual thought leadership piece to its use and evolution. In a world with multiple channels for reaching a prospect or customer, the delivery of thought leadership must be mapped across channels, different types of readers (influencers, economic decision makers, specifiers, users) and also across time periods with all the attendant measurement complexity.

Thought Leadership Difficulties

Most companies find it difficult to develop thought leadership. Significant new ideas in business are in short supply and even when found, are difficult to extract from a single expert, particularly in the common case where the novel idea comes from combining more than one area of expertise.

Within companies, the most frequent thought leadership problems are two-fold: first, managers are distracted (which is a problem because writing is done fastest with few interruptions), and secondly, most managers are poor writers unable to reference or incorporate outside or 'foreign' ideas easily. Good writers are often high in introversion skills and less good at teamwork skills. In a typical large consulting firm, commissioning articles from internal partners, obtaining a 'close to publishable' draft and obtaining approval is almost always a slow process. Many authors fall in love with their work, resist editing, and are unable to take on the perspective of readers or think through what marketing program would best support their new idea or reframing of a problem. Company approval processes can complicate writing unless the author is sensitive to liability and risk issues such as alienating key customers. Anonymizing stories is often the fastest and safest approach. The cost of being slow is often a missed opportunity for perceived leadership and lowered marketing effectiveness.

As with a *long arc* story TV series, forecasting the interest in and adoption of new ideas is an unpredictable task. One leading edge thought leadership development solution is to apply ideas from strategy and technology adoption to the thought leadership development and marketing process. Examples might include:

1. Strategy models can be used to predict the likely topics that will emerge in a marketing program.
2. Scenario analysis provides a potential set of future maps for how a marketing program might change.
3. The use of an agile or scrum approach to iterating the thought leadership marketing program is likely to be highly cost effective, quickly eliminating planned content that is not striking chords with readers. Resources freed up can be devoted to supporting topics that are working or extending them in likely productive spaces.
4. Partnering with external stakeholders and experts who bring enrichment to the content being developed.

Table 2: Example topics over the life cycle of a product, technology or service

Pre-Market Launch	Early Stage Adopters	Growth Markets	Saturated Markets	Declining Markets	Replacement and Generational Upgrade
Education about the possibility of a technology, projection of its likely early adopters and usage patterns. Planning a trial or evaluation process.	Highly targeted content focusing upon the particular needs of those with high need. Avoiding general pieces when specifics are required. Scenarios for mass adoption.	Lessons learned from early adopters. Documentation of how the technology or product has evolved. New insights based upon more predictable performance and results. International shifts.	Best practices and approaches for driving down total cost of ownership. Modeling projects and quantifying previously unquantified aspects. Opportunities in new markets.	End of life planning. Consolidation of activities. Restructuring of activities. Exit costs. Upgrading staff and training recommendations.	Evaluation of next generation technologies. Adoption and dissemination scenarios.

How Sales, Marketing and Strategy Models Can Help Plan Content Development

Managers frequently think about launch strategies and the requirement for supporting content such as sales training materials, product brochures, white papers, ROI calculations and training content. But when it comes to thought leadership, it's rare to hear discussions that relate the stage of market development with a multi-stage or multi-phase thought leadership strategy. Part of the problem is that thought leadership is often considered a part-time activity and not well integrated into marketing and sales programs. Thought leadership is often believed to occur unpredictably, and insights in a normal organization are often rather randomly captured. The reality is that if managed, thought leadership can

be the result of disciplined process in exactly the same way that innovation does not have to be a more or less random process.

Successful demand creation can often be mapped with commonly used tools from sales models, marketing and strategy. For example,

1. **Purchase models of customers have often been articulated by market researchers.** Providing content that supports different stages of understanding by prospective purchasers and existing customers can often simplify the information for a customer and minimize the amount of searching they must do on large and complex web sites. It's very common for companies to have so much written and video content on their web site that a customer would have to spend many hours to find the information they need.
2. **Thought leadership instances should often be developed with Personas in mind.** A Persona is a profile of a prototypical user's knowledge, needs and goals. For example, an economic decision maker, i.e. someone who can write checks, is likely to have very different informational needs that a more technical evaluator. While ideally content would be customized for an individual, Personas often provide a short cut.
3. **Product and market life cycle models.** When a product is new or a technology novel, the informational needs of a reader will be different than later in the life cycle. It takes no brilliance to anticipate an evolving set of interests and requirements. The well-known Hype Cycle [2] suggest that new technologies often go through a common cycle: first they are overhyped when the promise of a new technology is overestimated and there are limited experiences with which to evaluate the technology; failures lead to conventional wisdom undervaluing a product that has been overhyped; and then, gradually over time, the technology and its surrounding ecosystem improve and lessons are learned about how to successfully deploy or harness the benefits of the technology.
4. **Complex or conceptual ideas can often be presented in a sequence, leading the reader to develop a clearer understanding in understandable chunks.** If you interest a reader in Chunk 1, then subsequent Chunks become something they wish to subscribe to, follow, or even learn more about in a seminar or certification program.

Making projections as to how trends will change is, of course, not quite as simple as it appears. It's often facilitated by involving a group of people. Their involvement also generates improved understanding and commitment to the ideas, products or services featured. It's also very easy to write a piece of thought leadership, think that having written it, you have nothing more to say, and then suddenly realize a few years later that you should have ridden the trend and continued to market the core idea and its subsequent evolution. Involving others may result in spin-off ideas suddenly becoming "obvious" and these ideas can reinforce the initial insight and messaging strategy. By actively projecting future thought leadership needs, you are less likely to run into follow-up problems from missed opportunities.

Scenario Analysis and Content Planning

With any new consulting idea or new technology, purchase interest, adoption and success with the approach are all difficult to predict. Uncertainty is, however, not unique to content development. The solution developed in other areas of business is to use scenario analysis to map out alternative futures. The virtue of this approach is that it provides a roadmap for multi-phased marketing programs involving thought leadership, demand creation and content development generally. And just as in mainstream scenario development, identification of trigger events can be used to cut off investment in unsuccessful efforts and redirect resources to more productive opportunities. Pro-active content development approaches are likely to be more tightly targeted to ongoing learning and produce higher returns on marketing investments.

Scenario analysis might include painting future adoption patterns, the success or failure of growing an ecosystem, and different patterns of viral adoption. In businesses where production costs are important, scenarios may have to include the problem of emerging break-through technologies or disruptive strategies from low end companies.

Agile Development Practices

The use of scenario analysis is a useful way of framing agile development practices. Scenarios can provide maps of how demand may emerge and imply what types of content are likely to be important. Prioritized content can be developed first and subsequent content only developed as the customer interest and knowledge evolve. In thought leadership development, quick time-boxed development is generally better than slow, particularly in fast changing markets such as consulting and technology. Agile development approaches such as Scrum, developed first in software projects, are based upon simple rules that include:

1. Focused individuals and teams have higher productivity.
2. Short windows for delivery ensure that content is delivered.
3. Measurement of feedback from customers speeds up the revision process and ensures increasing value in the thought leadership and demand creation content developed and used.

Coincidentally, agile processes such as Scrum are very similar to the development of TV scripts. The same 3X5 cards on whiteboards and cork-boards are common for identifying components of projects or deliverables. Sprints, or time-boxed project phases are similar to episode plots and similar issues of strategy and architecture across phases parallel the difficulty of managing a TV story arc. [3]

Not developing unneeded content is always a great way of improving marketing ROI. Measuring ongoing readership and resulting actions allows targeted improvement. Not surprisingly, learning more quickly about customers' interests allows the development of higher value content that produces more calls to action.

Partnering

Leading edge consulting firms and technology companies are, almost without exception, both knowledgeable and proud of their expertise or product. However, having too much knowledge about an

area or product offering can get in the way of demand creation and thought leadership activities. Involving customers, distributors and external thought leadership/demand creation experts can often reframe the writing so that it is more aligned with an Outside-In perspective. For example, consultants and engineers will often want to tell customers about the details of what they have slaved over when the client is more concerned with questions such as: “What are career consequences for me? Who will have to be involved for this to happen? What are the likely outcomes? How risky is this idea?”

One advantage of involving customers and outsiders generally is that they are often more interested in numbers that are avoided by internal managers, cognitively overwhelmed by the all moving parts of rapidly changing ideas and technologies. For example, I did some work with a major communications company on fixed mobile convergence – the implications of mobile, wireless and fixed line technologies coming together. To my surprise the company had not quantified the benefit of diverting voice traffic from the limited capacity of difficult to erect mobile cell towers to the pervasive WiFi networks inside the home and office. The ten year NPV benefit worked out to be in the range of \$3.2 billion per million customers and was obviously be of interest to potential purchasers.

The Overall Messaging Strategy

Building up the reputation of one or more individuals through a publication program may well have merits as a goal. But owning a stable of “Brilliants” is no guarantee of improved organization performance. As with any marketing program, a *messaging strategy* is a requirement. In the best Scrum tradition it need not necessarily be formal or detailed, but it should be focused and, the new twist proposed here, is that it should be phased, driven by a proposed overview model of how readers’ framing of the problem will evolve, and be contingent so that as phases are delivered, as customers and markets evolve, so can the goals and deliverables of thought leadership and demand creation.

References

[1] Brett Martin: *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From the Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad*, Penguin Press HC, 2013

[2] Jackie Fenn and Mark Raskino: *Mastering the Hype Cycle: How to Choose the Right Innovation at the Right Time*, Harvard Business Review Press, 2008

[3] See, for example, *The Agile Manifesto* at <http://agilemanifesto.org/> or <http://www.scrumalliance.org/>
