Thought Leadership

Contributed by Circle Research
Tuesday, 14 August 2012
Last Updated Thursday, 23 August 2012

In this article, Andrew Dalglish from business-to-business research agency Circle Research explores how those using research to create a thought leadership position can maximise their ROI.

Thought leadership.Â Everyoneâ€™s claiming it but, by very definition, only a handful ever delivers.Â So how do you ensure that your content marketing strategy positions you as one of the few? Â

Follow the seven Râ€™s of thought leadership â€“ Resonant, Rare, Road Mapped, Robust, Rounded, Rooted and Re-used (see how these principles were applied by the Santa Fe Group in a case study short-listed for the 2012 B2B Marketing Award for Best Content Marketing here: B2B thought leadership research case study).

Five reasons to develop a thought leadership strategy
B2B marketing has always been better suited to engagement over broadcast.Â Personal relationships and being part of the buyerâ€™s eco-system are usually critical.Â As part of this thereâ€™s an expectation that youâ€™ll have something useful an especially pertinent experience, fresh facts or unique insights to share.Â Those consistently doing so and coupling it with solid advice or lateral thinking become known as thought leaders.

Itâ€™s a valuable moniker for many reasons:
1.It sets you apart.Â Todayâ€™s marketing communications environment is noisier than ever.Â Offering your target market something of genuine benefit gives them a reason to sit up and listen.Â Do it consistently well and ultimately the tables will turn.Â Rather than slogging away trying to get the attention of potential buyers, theyâ€™ll start to proactively seek you out for your opinion

2.Itâ€™s a showcase.Â Demonstrating genuine, unparalleled expertise is especially critical in any sector where the product is, well, expertise.Â In these circumstances good thought leadership gives potential buyers confidence that the quality of service received will live up to the promise

3.Itâ€™s a conversation starter.Â Time pressured buyers have become much more discerning in the engagements they have.Â Why should they spend valuable time listening to your sales pitch?Â After all, to them it probably sounds just like the dozens they receive every week.Â Â Think how differently the conversation would start though if you could share something of value.Â Not â€œI want to tell you about meâ€¦â€• but â€œIâ€™d like to share something that could really help you

4.Itâ€™s a conversation changer.Â A content based marketing strategy means that rather than selling youâ€™re sharing; show empathy, understanding and a desire to build mutually beneficial partnerships.Â These are all traits valued highly by buyers

5.Itâ€™s social media â€˜foodâ€™ and SEO â€˜link baitâ€™.Â Social media channels, especially blogs and Twitter, have open opportunities to connect but require a constant stream of quality content.Â Thought leadership content gives you fuel for social media activity and helps form relationships early in the buying cycle.Â It also encourages linking to your website and thus benefits SEO

The seven Râ€™s of thought leadership
Unsurprisingly, many aspire to the accolade of â€˜thought leaderâ€™.Â But only a handful truly deserves the label.Â Whatâ€™s secret?Â They follow the seven Râ€™s of thought leadership.

Resonant.Â Rather than diving in and producing a piece on what seems to be the latest hot topic; pause.Â Speak with as many people in your market as possible.Â What are their pressures and priorities?Â What interests them?Â What information would they bite your hand off for?Â This will ensure your chosen angle is valuable and in demand.

Rare.Â Before committing to a particular route take each of the subject areas identified in your discussions with the market and identify competitors for similar mind space (remember, these are competitors for share of mind not necessarily direct competitors, e.g. trade bodies).Â Then audit everything already published, map out the angles taken and identify areas of white space.Â This will ensure that the thought leadership you produce is not only in demand, but unique.

Road mapped.Â Unique and compelling angle in hand, a thought leadership strategy is needed.Â At its core should be a theme which will guide all of your activity in a coherent manner and allow a series of complementary pieces to be created.Â This gives focus, establishes you as an authority in the subject area and ensures marketing of each

subsequent piece benefits from investment in the last.

Robust.Â The temptation now is to leap in and publish a paper detailing â€˜our view onâ€¦â€™.Â But nowadays readers demar more.Â They expect real substance.Â Conducting an exclusive survey is a great tool in this respect, but remember that B2B audiences are likely to be research savvy so settle for nothing less than a reliable, representative and solidly executed piece of work.Â Likewise, be careful not to turn the outputs into an explicit sales pitch that a smart audience will see straight through.

Rounded.Â The best thought leadership goes the extra mile in delivery.Â Each piece in the series contains not only exclusive survey findings, but other content which gives flavour and facilitates action.Â Ask yourself if the reader would value best practice guides.Â What about case studies?Â Would video or interactive content add another dimension?

Rooted.Â To become known as the â€˜go to placeâ€™ on a subject, you need to give people somewhere to go.Â Develop a separate brand for your thought leadership programme and a micro-site to call home.

Re-used.Â Youâ€™ve invested a lot of effort in producing highly valuable content.Â To ensure as high a return as possible it needs to be packaged in a way that appeals to diverse consumption preferences.Â Publish reports, create video, produce infographics, develop sales tool-kits, run seminarsâ€¦quite simply, milk the content dry.
So there we are; some thoughts on thought leadership.

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