

Thought-Leadership

Content and Communications



It will always be important for growing companies to communicate their messages through publicity in the business and trade press. However, higher levels of thought-leadership content must be folded into the communications mix to gain business-building, public relations advantage.

Thought-leadership content and communications is founded on the conviction that companies should differentiate themselves based on the way they think as much as on the products or services they sell. Thought-leadership is somewhat about time-honored expertise and comprehensive capabilities. Its point-of-departure, however, is new thinking and original perspectives.

Thought-leadership focuses less on publicity tactics and more on public relations strategies. Not satisfied to rely solely on traditional media, thought-leadership strategies tap into innovative, direct communications channels that narrowcast directly and powerfully to a company's highest-potential customers.

The ultimate objective of thought-leadership content and communications is to build the company's business.

A SHIFTING PLATFORM

- Commoditization
- Clutter
- Convergence

CONTENT ORIGINATION

- Companies build their images based on what they have to say as much as what they have to sell.
- Thought-leadership flows out of the company's positioning, mission and business model.

- Thought-leadership builds a company's image by demonstrating its proprietary command over a challenging industry issue.
- A "white paper" provides an ideal foundation for a thought-leadership strategy.
- White paper content can be developed using a simple format.

COMMUNICATIONS

TRADITIONAL MEDIA

- The white paper is the strategic power grid for a full range of publicity executions.
- The classic array of publicity tactics is fully compatible with a thought-leadership platform.
- Building and sustaining strategic public relations communications demands more than traditional publicity alone.

NON-TRADITIONAL DYNAMICS

- The media are changing along with the messages.
- The recipients of the information are the new gatekeepers.
- The quality of a company's thought-leadership will carry the day.

BUILDING NEW BUSINESS

- Vision
- Organization
- Validation

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A SHIFTING PLATFORM

The nuances of building a public relations platform are changing.

■ **COMMODITIZATION.** PR's importance in the marketing mix is rising partly because of its potential to establish a bona-fide point-of-difference. However, PR too often is sub-optimized as a tactical exercise that results only in creating undifferentiated awareness. It should instead be developed — strategically — to build a proprietary, business-building image.

■ **CLUTTER.** Exploding interest in obtaining publicity for its own sake has resulted in PR clutter. Most visibly, the marketplace is flooded with press releases as never before. Gaining competitive advantage in today's cluttered environment requires new, more sophisticated, ideas.

■ **CONVERGENCE.** Even before the Web burst on the scene, the integration of information and marketing communications was well underway. The convergence of intellectual capital and public relations runs through a similar — although as yet underdeveloped — vein.

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CONTENT ORIGINATION

STRATEGY

■ **Thought-leaders build their images based on what they have to say as much as what they have to sell.** Thought-leadership drives a company's business strategy through the consistent communication of an original, forward-thinking perspective on a seminal industry challenge.

■ **Thought-leadership flows out of the company's positioning, mission and business model.** A company's positioning, mission and business model articulate a company's internal vision of itself. In contrast, thought-leadership projects a company's outward vision of its marketplace that addresses a specific, widespread, pivot-point problem.

■ **Thought-leadership builds a company's image by demonstrating its proprietary command over a challenging industry issue.** It seeks to demonstrate a company's capacity explicitly and its capabilities implicitly. Thought-leadership places emphasis behind every company's paramount, proprietary asset — its people and how they think.

TACTICS

A "white paper" provides an ideal foundation for a thought-leadership strategy. The objective is to articulate a "world view" or vision that will resonate with a company's highest-potential customers. The white paper not only provides a company with proprietary content, but suggests the organizing principles of the company's reason for being.

■ **White paper content can be developed using a simple format.** The formula is a variation of the classic, three-part "case study" construct: situation, solutions and results. However, the terms "problem," "process" and "payoff" are substituted, as they correspond more closely to the elements of thought-leadership.

→ *Problem.* The marketplace is described as conventional wisdom generally understands it. Added are a handful of key points that suggest that the marketplace is perhaps different than it is widely perceived. These points represent the insight that the company is bringing to bear, and immediately communicates that the company has a fresh and valuable point-of-view.

→ *Process.* The highlighted insights are the premise of the company's recommended plan-of-action. More important than the insights themselves are suggestions on how to leverage the insights to gain competitive advantage. The process can be communicated in a number of ways — as a set of principles to apply, a step-by-step plan to follow or a fundamental business re-model.

→ *Payoff.* Because thought-leadership, by definition, is new and ahead-of-the-curve, concrete evidence that the vision will measurably affect sales or profits is often lacking. It is essential that the white paper demonstrate — qualitatively if not quantitatively — that its thought-leadership is a probable formula for success.

3 COMMUNICATIONS

The strategy is implemented through a combination of traditional and proprietary media.

TRADITIONAL MEDIA

- **The white paper is the strategic power grid for a full range of publicity executions.** It provides the intellectual energy to sustain a thought-leadership strategy — to stay “on message” — over a year's time, or longer.
- **The classic array of publicity tactics is fully compatible with a thought-leadership platform.** The white paper is used as a basis for press releases, speaking engagements, opinion essays, media relations, research studies, newsletters and new business presentations.
- **Building and sustaining strategic public relations communications demands more than traditional publicity alone.** It is a serious mistake for growing companies to rely on publicity alone to support their business development objectives because neither timing, content nor frequency of publicity can be controlled completely.

NON-TRADITIONAL DYNAMICS

- **The media are changing along with the message.** True competitive advantage will go to those who pursue new communications channels that directly connect thought-leadership messages to their customers and prospects. A hybrid of direct marketing and public relations points to an ideal solution, both online and offline.
- **The recipients of the information are the new gatekeepers.** They are judge and jury of what is useful and relevant. Traditional information intermediaries — such as the news media — are no longer as critical as “third-party” gatekeepers as they once were.

■ **The quality of a company's thought-leadership will carry the day.** With the end-user taking greater control of the information-gathering process, it is now incumbent upon the communicator to see to it that each customer or prospect receives relevant and useful information. This requires companies to develop their own, proprietary media channels—online and offline—to carry their thought-leadership messages to their customers.

4 BUILDING NEW BUSINESS

Companies that aggressively pursue thought-leadership strategies through publicity and other communications channels are positioned to be the public relations—and business-building—success stories of the future:

- **VISION.** The company differentiates itself through the original exposition of pivotal industry issues.
- **ORGANIZATION.** The company is organized to deliver results against its vision. The company communicates not only that it knows *what* to do; it also knows *how* to do it.
- **VALIDATION.** The company establishes credibility that its business model works.



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