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Become a “Thought Leader” and Separate Yourself from the Pack

By Ken Lizotte

Lately, the age-old business development dilemma of how to stand out from the crowd has been haunting professional service firms more than ever before. Too many firms nowadays look alike, with marketing strategies seemingly unable to distinguish them from the competition. Glossy brochures, snazzy Web sites, press releases, and advertising: when everyone employs the same methods, everyone ends up on the same overused channels to reach clients and prospects.

To escape this marketing black hole, many consultants are increasingly adopting a strategy that elevates both principal and firm above the fray. This approach positions the firm's expert professionals as “thought leaders.”

Names of superstar thought leaders are not only well known, but the stuff of legend: Bill Gates and Tom Peters are two examples. Rather than abandoning marketing to a marketing department, they inject themselves into the heart of the process, churning out books, articles, speeches, and media interviews to keep their visibility machines boiling.

Amid the resulting excitement and industry debate, they simultaneously personalize their companies, expand their products' exposure, and deepen both market share and loyalty from their customers.

This capacity to reach beyond traditional marketing approaches is available to us all. It's a process that only needs to be committed to and then implemented through often-ignored channels. There are two main vehicles to employ: (a) publishing articles and/or books; and (b) delivering talks and presentations. Such center-spotlight marketing attracts attention and recognition from a target market in ways that more commonplace marketing tools cannot.

One consultant, for example, has published articles in leading benefits planning journals in the US, Canada, and the UK. Because of the publicity generated by these publishing credits, the consultant has been interviewed by such high-profile media outlets as *Institutional Investor* and *Wall Street Journal Radio*.

As a result, he is known for his benefits planning expertise far beyond the borders of his own client/prospect community. And he never fails to call attention to these thought-leading credits when strategically advantageous occasions arise, such as during a marketing campaign or in the middle of a sales call.

Given thought leadership's competitive advantages, taking the plunge would seem to be a no-brainer. Yet many consultants hesitate, either out of fear that the process will not work for them or

out of ignorance about where to begin. However, embarking on just two simple stages will get the process moving in the right direction, building confidence as the effort succeeds.

Stage One: Publish your ideas as articles in business publications, a seemingly daunting task until this challenge is broken down into key baby steps. Compose a list of article ideas that align with your business objectives, and then ask yourself, which services do I most wish to promote? What expertise/service do I most want to be known for? Are there services even my oldest customers may not realize my company has to offer? Your answers will translate into publishing ideas.

After answering those questions, search for editors who see a fit for your ideas with their publications. Pitch to magazines read by decision-makers who typically hire your firm or by referral sources that can spread word of mouth about your firm. Create this list using library directories or by googling on the Web.

Example: You offer strategic management consulting services primarily to high technology start-up companies. You pitch an idea titled "Five Biggest Strategy Mistakes of Hi-Tech Start-Ups" to Hi Tech Digest (fictitious magazine).

What's important to realize is that business editors regularly depend on professionals to feed them publishable ideas. After all, they only know what to include in their pages as a result of input from those of us on the "front lines." So don't underestimate the publishability of your day-to-day client work, consulting knowledge, expertise, value, or insights. Ideas that might seem mundane to you may be viewed by an editor as the best-kept, leading-edge secrets in the business world.

After getting published, Stage Two is to speak at business events. Some speaking opportunities may come about simply because a conference planner read your article and invited you to come and speak about it. Most gigs, however, come about because a published article is leveraged as a promotional tool.

To do this, send email announcements to your business contacts e-list, plus a news release announcing your published article with a link to your article posted on your company's website. You should also pass out your article to customers, colleagues, prospects, employees, even vendors. Don't just sit around waiting for people to see it. Instead, leap into action, insuring that your work gets read. Build yourself a buzz!

At your actual talks, don't forget to distribute your article for free, and add a line that announces your availability as a speaker for future events. And when you get offered any kind of speaking gig, don't turn it down! Larry Winget, a highly sought-after motivational speaker, says, "The very best way to get speaking engagements is to simply go out and speak!"

Exposure breeds exposure, and promotion breeds promotion, all of which will exponentially grow your speaking schedule. And speaking can lead to more article assignments. You never know when an editor may be sitting out there in your audience and may approach you afterwards to ask you to turn your talk into an article.

By taking these actions, your credibility, and that of your firm, will rise dramatically, leapfrogging you past your competitors. Third party "endorsements" from publications and conference planners will solidly establish you as an author/speaker and a leading thinker in your field, elevating your firm's services as well. Once this happens, you will have officially arrived as a bona fide thought leader. From there on, enjoy the ride!

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