



White Paper

The Seven Steps to Thought Leadership

By Joy Scott
Scott Public Relations
21700 Oxnard St, Suite 1840
Woodland Hills, CA 91367
(818) 610-0270
joy@scottpublicrelations.com



The Seven Steps to Thought Leadership

Most companies want to be known as thought leaders. Those few that do not probably don't understand how this positioning would positively impact their reputation, their ability to meet their business goals, the value of their company, and their sales.

There are four major benefits to successful thought leadership:

- A successful “push” strategy. Your brand and your expertise are invaluable to customers and stakeholders seeking advice and information
- A successful “pull” strategy. As your reputation grows, it opens doors to new business prospects, trading partners, and interest from news media
- Stronger relationships. Current customers and stakeholders feel validated for choosing such a forward-thinking company
- High ROI. The materials created for thought leader campaigns generate higher returns because they are used for multiple purposes and multiple audiences

The path to becoming - and remaining - a thought leader has changed radically, with online and social media re-defining how we receive information and communicate.

Scott Public Relations (www.scottpublicrelations.com), an agency specializing in the healthcare, insurance and technology industries, has developed seven key elements for a successful thought leader campaign for companies in the B2B space. These seven steps are effective in today's web-driven environment and have proven themselves with numerous clients to date:

Step 1: Self-publishing

Never has the saying, “publish or perish” been more true than in today's content-driven world. It's no longer about interrupting what people are doing and getting them to listen to your message; it's about having your message in front of customers' eyes exactly when they are looking for information.

What does this mean for marketing and PR? Companies need to build their brand by publishing their own intellectual capital. While the news media is still an important influencer, online information has become so omnipresent that most people now use the Internet as their primary source of information.

SPR's proven approach is to work with companies to identify areas of expertise and translate them into practical, timely information that customers and other audiences can use. Consumers are much more receptive to information they can use, when they need it, than they are to an overt sales pitch. Building these information-based relationships will establish you as a trusted resource they can turn to for information, to ask questions, and eventually to make a purchasing decision.

Self-publishing for your marketing campaign can take several forms:

The Branded Bulletin

This is the foundation of your in-house publishing program and your Internet marketing and PR campaign. We work with our clients to create eight to 10 bulletins on relevant and compelling topics, such as:

- “Best practices”
- Growing issues/problems and how they can be solved
- Customer problems and solutions
- Tips or advice

You do not need to be the “first” or “only” company to have discovered this information. The novelty is in the way you articulate and package it to make it useful and interesting.

The bulletins themselves are short (approximately 250 words) and link to additional content on your website (another 500-1,000 words, depending on the topic). They are formatted to be electronically distributed and/or desktop published as traditional hard copies.

Each bulletin can then be adapted for multiple purposes:

- A direct mail piece for sales
- A client communication
- An employee article
- A communication for other stakeholders
- A trade show leave-behind
- Timely material for your sales proposals
- A website update
- A news release

Not only is this fresh, new content merchandisable to different audiences, it’s measurable. You can track website hits, analyze audience sourcing, and monitor your search engine positioning to see if the bulletins are driving traffic to your website.

Our clients report that these bulletins are:

- Opened by 30 to 40 percent of those receiving them
- Effective lead-ins to a website (most recipients click through to read the rest of the article)
- “Virally” circulated among multiple individuals

Bylined Articles

The trade news media - both print and online - is increasingly interested in bylined articles. These articles - written by industry guest experts - are important components of your self-publishing program. SPR can identify these opportunities for you and draft articles that will serve as a forum for you to address an important problem or issue faced by your customers or industry.

While most publications charge a fee for reprints of a published article, this cost can be a very worthwhile investment. You can post the article on your website, send it to clients and prospects, or use it as a trade show or sales handout.

White Papers

White papers were once the sole purview of the technology industry; now they are suitable communication vehicles for any industry, focusing on a particular industry trend or problem and laying a foundation for understanding for how your company solves that problem. White papers lend considerable credibility to you and are a door-opener with opinion leaders of all kinds.

White papers can also be utilized in marketing. Our clients have had considerable success offering white papers through online ads in well-read newsletters and news sites to generate new business leads.

Videos

Video is expanding to become the most dominant form of content on digital social media channels, open to anyone and not restricted to any single industry or profession. Video content provides a powerful way to connect with your audience on multiple levels by telling stories—client stories, employee stories, success stories. It's a very flexible format that can rely on actual footage or completely computer-generated material.

Videos are an excellent marketing tool for their engagement value. They can be shared easily across many social media channels and their length can vary to suit the message to be communicated.

Step 2. The Executive Forum Blog

B2B companies often wonder about the usefulness of blogging, and are wary of the time commitment required and the risk of negative comments on the blog. SPR has developed an approach that virtually eliminates risk and controls the time commitment, while maximizing all the relationship-building benefits of blogging for your thought leadership campaign. We accomplish this by presenting individual blog postings as mini executive forums, i.e., vehicles to publish searchable opinions and establish thought leader positioning. Blog entries serve multiple marketing purposes and can be circulated to clients, prospects, opinion leaders, internal audiences, and media, too.

Our Executive Forum Blog program involves:

- Interviewing the executive(s) who will author the blog to determine their communication goals
- Identifying key and emerging issues as blog topics that dovetail with the executive's interests and the company's marketing messages
- Writing blog entries which are reviewed and approved by the executive and marketing staff
- Posting new blog entries
- SPR can also monitor blogs that are read by your target audiences and identify opportunities to offer comments that are in line with your company messaging

The benefits of the Executive Forum Blog approach are:

- Thought leader positioning in the “blogosphere” and online
- Control over posts. Comments from readers of the blog are not automatically posted; they are reviewed to filter out “rants” and other inappropriate entries
- Control of the time commitment; blog entries could be as infrequently as twice a month, for example
- Robust online content raises your company's visibility and search engine position,

giving you more credibility and more leads

Step 3. The Online Speaker Series

Hosting online speaking forums is another thought leadership tactic that is a component of the “Content Is King” communication universe we now inhabit. SPR often recommends quarterly online presentations (hosted on your website or via a webinar company), highlighting an important topic of interest that reinforces your company’s messaging.

Your executive can serve as the host/moderator or as a member of the panel. Having multiple speakers increases your audience and strengthens your relationships with co-panelists who can be clients, consultants, or other key influencers. Inviting members of the media as panelists and moderators is another strategy that increases interest in the topic and strengthens relationships.

Ideas presented in the webinars can also become content for the multi-channel bulletin program and for the Executive Forum blog. The presentations themselves can be archived on the company’s website as podcasts and/or made available through iTunes and other online sharing sites.

SPR will work with you to select the topic(s), identify the speaker(s), develop the marketing plan, and coordinate logistics if needed.

If you have the time and the resources, creating a regular podcast either about your brand or your company’s industry can attract good attention in the modern media marketplace. A podcast done once a month creates regular and dependable interaction with your audience while communicating important news at consistent intervals.

The company executive or vice president can act as host, either having a conversation on the day’s topic with other personnel from the company or interviewing an invited guest. Collaborating with industry leaders and experts from other organizations can benefit the brand in several ways. It creates connections between your brand and theirs, provides access to their audience as well as your own, demonstrates recognition of your thought leadership by peers, and signals the opportunity to work with you to other influencers and leaders.

Step 4. Traditional Speaking Engagements

Speaking engagements at conferences, trade shows, and other industry gatherings are a traditional component of a thought leadership program. While these opportunities are declining in number and increasingly competitive, they can still be invaluable as PR opportunities. SPR’s approach to obtaining these engagements includes:

- Strategically selecting timely topics that will appeal to conference managers and attendees
- Identifying worthwhile opportunities through research and SPR’s proprietary database
- Developing compelling speaker proposals
- Submitting proposals and following-up to obtain the engagement
- Assisting with preparing the speech, if desired
- Counseling or coordinating invitations to the event
- Developing pre and/or post-event news releases
- Conducting outreach to media attending the conference to obtain coverage of the event

Step 5. The Thought Leader Website

Your website is one of your company's most important showcases, demonstrating the depth of your intellectual capital, your industry leadership, and your dynamic growth. SPR recommends two initiatives to maximize your website's thought leader capability:

- Providing a constant stream of new content. This can be created with blog entries and posted bulletins, news releases, articles, etc.
- Creating a "knowledge center" of insightful information, such as your own bulletins, white papers, and bylined articles, as well as commentary on interesting articles written by people outside your company. You can achieve the thought leadership impact and the SEO boost of new content, without having to obtain permission or pay for reprint rights by writing a short intro or commentary and including a link to the full article

Step 6. Media Relations

There are two components to media relations, both of which contribute to thought leadership:

The first is the type of activity that has traditionally been considered "public relations" -- news releases on company events and accomplishments, with outreach to media likely to write about these announcements.

These days, almost all news releases are distributed electronically via online wire services. Maintaining a consistent schedule of news releases is very important, as it demonstrates your company's growth and vitality, enhances search engine optimization, and provides greater visibility where your customers access their daily industry news: online news feeds.

With the exploding popularity of online news sources, print and broadcast media are becoming less and less likely to use news releases as ideas for stories. As media outlets are downsizing and possibly ceasing publication, the survivors are looking for exclusive "high impact" stories, and are using their own resources and ideas for mainstream stories.

This is the second component of how thought leadership campaigns come into play in today's media relations. These activities include:

- Issuing news releases that provide commentary on new industry, economic, market, regulatory, or social developments
- Offering white papers, briefings, and other content on key industry topics to thought leader media on an ongoing basis
- Opinion editorials (op eds)
- Participation in industry, regulatory, and/or association committees and Boards, and leveraging these positions for commentary and appropriate visibility
- Posting insightful comments on the blogs of key journalists who write stories relevant to your company or area of expertise
- Establishing your executives as expert resources available for media
- Suggesting story ideas that are potential vehicles for your expert commentary

Thought leadership in media relations does not happen overnight. It is an evolving process that takes time and investment, but the long term benefits are significant. Executives and companies with successful media relations programs possess a powerful brand-building tool in

the court of public opinion.

Step 7. Leveraging Online Social Media

Facebook, blogs, LinkedIn, Twitter -- these social media tools are becoming more ubiquitous every day. But is social networking relevant to B2B companies? Is it a threat, a gold mine, or a non-starter in their marketing and PR efforts?

Handled appropriately, these new communication channels will not only enhance existing communications, they offer access to new audiences. They can strengthen your thought leader program, positively influence customers and stakeholders, and minimize the risk of a “social media firestorm,” a conflagration that can sink your company’s reputation with a real-time online crisis.

So yes, these social media channels are relevant to a B2B audience. The question is “How relevant?” And what exactly should you do?

SPR’s social media thought leader program begins with an audit of how your company, your executives, your industry and the problems you solve are being discussed and/or represented online. Based on the results of this audit and our understanding of your business goals and resources, SPR will develop a online communication campaign for you. This may involve:

- Setting up a corporate Facebook page and using it to share company information with constituents
- Developing a lead generation strategy for LinkedIn and other business networking sites
- Re-broadcasting company news on Twitter, following key journalists, and cultivating your own following
- Selective blogging on appropriate thought leader and industry blogs

Establishing a YouTube channel for sharing a combination of original and popular video content, and engaging with wider audiences on more platforms.

It’s important to remember that social media networking is not a one shot affair. It’s about engagement and relationship-building and conversation. That’s why a well thought out social media plan is so important.

It’s also important to add a social media component to your company’s crisis communications plan and to have internal guidelines addressing employees’ use of social media, both professionally and personally.

These seven steps to thought leadership in today’s world will take you to the pinnacle you’re seeking in terms of reputation, brand equity, and lead generation. It may be via an entirely unfamiliar and different path than you might have taken five years ago, but the payoff will be an expanded online presence and the ability to reach a larger audience with even higher impact.

For more information, please contact Joy Scott:

Scott Public Relations
21700 Oxnard St, Suite 1840
Woodland Hills, CA 91367
(818) 610-0270
www.scottpublicrelations.com