



STRATEGY GUIDE

How to Become a **THOUGHT LEADER** in Your Industry



How to Become a Thought Leader in Your Industry



What is a Thought Leader?

Though the term “thought leader” is commonplace in business, its actual definition is hard to come by. *Forbes*¹ defined a thought leader as both **“an individual or firm that prospects, clients, referral sources, intermediaries and even competitors recognize as one of the foremost authorities in selected areas of specialization, resulting in its being the go-to individual or organization for said expertise”** and **“an individual or firm that significantly profits from being recognized as such.”**

The first part of the definition alludes to brilliance and genuine talent.

There are many brilliant and talented professionals at all levels, possibly even including that mid-level manager you subscribed to on Facebook. However, most thought leaders tend to be the most successful individuals or firms in their respective fields, which leads to the second part of the definition: **Thought leaders are more often than not handsomely compensated for their brilliance.**



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There's a popular idea that all thought leaders are forward-looking, but foresight isn't necessarily required to be considered a thought leader.

According to an *Inc.*² interview with Stern & Associates Vice President Ned Ward, some thought leaders simply provide clarity to confusing and complicated situations and business scenarios. In some industries, thought leaders can be much more observational, preferring to look back, analyze what's already happened and possibly apply it to current events.

To be a true thought leader, you must have original, innovative thoughts and the ability and desire to lead. **In other words, you must exemplify both components of the term.**

A Thought Leader:

- ✓ Has a passion and commitment to spreading ideas to help others
- ✓ Can prove expertise with an impressive track record
- ✓ Offers a unique perspective on industry happenings
- ✓ Creates and shares high-quality content
- ✓ Leads the industry toward new visions
- ✓ Conducts and shares research
- ✓ Has ambitious goals
- ✓ Pushes the envelope

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Are You Ready to be a Thought Leader?

You have the characteristics possessed by most thought leaders, but how do you know you're ready?

Ned Ward shares his thoughts:



Additionally, you must be willing to talk about what you're doing at your company or within your industry that's exceeding goals.

People who lead companies are always looking for best practices from successful leaders to help grow. **Everything else is just talking points.**



A good time for entrepreneurs to start thinking about thought leadership is when their companies have reached a point that they no longer have the capabilities to run them. Those people have a unique opportunity to do the thinking and the research to develop the context necessary to become seen as a thought leader, while the COO or someone else runs the business. They can spend time speaking, writing articles and showing people that their companies know more than other companies."

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Become a Thought Leader in 7 Steps

Do you still fit the thought leader bill? While there is no foolproof plan to garner your thought leader glory, there are seven tactics most marketing experts agree can get you on the right path to establishing yourself as a trusted expert in your industry.

1. Develop Your Personal Brand and Voice
2. Create and Maintain a Blog
3. Produce a Variety of Interesting and Engaging Advanced Content
4. Establish Yourself on Social Media
5. Answer Reporter Queries and Other Questions
6. Write Guest Articles and Blogs
7. Speak at Conferences and Events



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1. Develop Your Personal Brand and Voice

Companies spend outrageous sums of money and countless hours creating, building and monitoring their brands. Creating a brand is more than a company being known for its service or product; it's about standing for something in consumers' minds. Take Zappos, for example. Yes, Zappos sells shoes, but the Zappos brand is more than that. The company is about great products and even greater customer service.

Personal brands work similarly.

A personal brand is becoming increasingly vital simply to score a job. To become a thought leader, it's essential. So how do you build your personal brand? In a *Forbes* article³, Brand strategist and author Laura Ries advises to begin by defining who you are and your unique abilities. Then take the time to speak with many different people in your life and industry to better understand their perceptions of your strengths and overall image.

And developing your personal brand is only the beginning.

Developing your voice comes next. Ask yourself, **“What is it that I want to say, and how do I want to sound when saying it?”** Think carefully about your subject matter and audience. If you're in academics or engineering, your subject matter and audience are both highly intellectual, so a sarcastic, unorthodox voice is probably the wrong way to go. If you're a video game developer or media critic, however, an unconventional voice such as this could be perfect.



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2. Create and Maintain a Blog

According to *HubSpot*⁴, **“Launching a blog that covers important topics relating to the industry in which you’re selling is perhaps the best way to establish and uphold your image as a thought leader... Not only will maintaining an active business blog reward you with a more credible industry presence, but when done right, it will also afford you additional business benefits such as improved lead generation and a boost in search engine optimization.”**

Google and other search engines continue to *favor websites*⁵ that produce informative or entertaining content on a regular basis via blogging. And it doesn’t exclusively apply to companies; individuals can benefit from search engine boosts, too. When beginning blogging, try to post as often as possible, but realize this may mean you can only produce two or three well-researched blogs per week. It’s okay to start small as long as the content is worthwhile and you have the goal to increase production.

As for blog post content, avoid regurgitating industry facts without any additional insight or opinion. Remember, thought leaders always offer a unique perspective on industry happenings.

Here are a few blog post ideas to get you started:

- Tips or ideas on how to do something more efficiently or effectively
- Lessons learned from failed business strategy
- Interview with a current industry thought leader
- Review of a new product or service
- Short, educational “how to” video

▶ **Read More: Blog Post Optimization Playbook**



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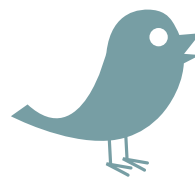
3. Produce a Variety of Interesting and Engaging Advanced Content

Blogging, while effective, is only one type of content that can help achieve thought leadership goals. Advanced content like whitepapers, webinars, infographics and industry cheat sheets shows industry professionals your knowledge expands beyond short blog posts, proving you're capable of thought leadership on an even greater scale.

[▶ Read More: Creating Content for Marketing Automation](#)

4. Establish Yourself on Social Media

Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+ and even Pinterest are all-around valuable tools for thought leaders. Not only are they valuable for pushing out content, they're also instrumental in measuring your audience's receptivity. If you're already established on social media networks, consider if your previous content aligns with your new personal brand. If it doesn't, you may want to delete the old profiles and start from scratch.



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4. Establish Yourself on Social Media cont.

Begin establishing yourself on social media by conducting a little research:

- ✓ Identify and follow the top influencers in your industry as well as other industry professionals.
- ✓ Monitor what they're saying, when they're saying it and how responsive their audiences are.
- ✓ Search for topics central to your industry for sharing and blogging inspiration.
- ✓ Share your content and the content of others, tagging whenever possible.
- ✓ Engage with comments and questions.

▶ [Read More: Enterprise Guide to Social Media](#)

Potential thought leaders should consider investing time and effort in more than just the big players. Niche social networks (like *Houzz*⁶ for interior designers, remodelers and builders) provide you with a smaller, yet pre-segmented audience. You may already know of a popular industry network, but if you don't, research to see where others professionals are engaging.

These efforts will build your audience slowly over time, so if you're looking for something a little quicker, consider researching third-party audience-building tools. (Just ensure they're connecting you with quality contacts!)



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5. Answer Reporter Queries and Other Questions

Once you've established yourself as a thought leader, it's likely you'll receive media requests frequently. Until then, you must seek out the journalists.

Social tools like *HARO*⁷ (Help A Reporter Out) and *ProfNet*⁸ connect expert sources with busy journalists. Answering journalistic queries doesn't guarantee media coverage, but by following the guidelines and time frame provided by a journalist significantly increases your chances of being quoted for an article or blog.

6. Write Guest Articles and Blogs

Contributing guest content works well for both increasing your visibility and promoting your blog. Additionally, writing guest articles and/or blogs helps you establish high-quality relationships with journalists and other industry professionals that can benefit you. Remember, though these guest contributions are appearing on another publication, they need to be on par with the quality content you create for your blog.



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7. Speak at Conferences and Events

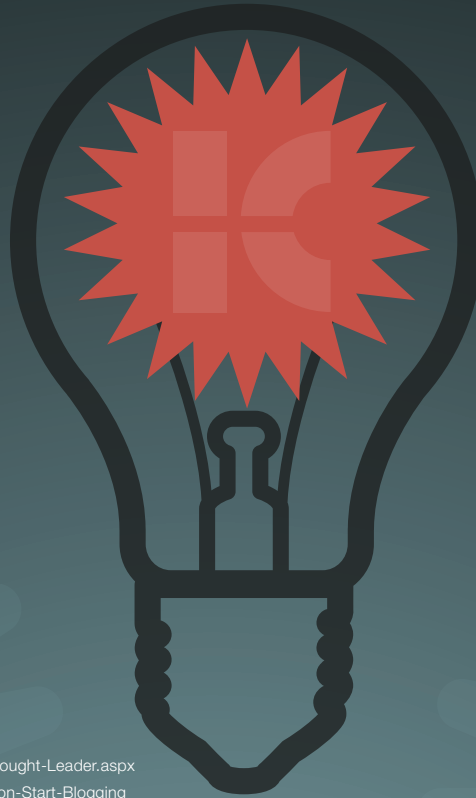
Being selected to speak at huge business conferences like TED should be the ultimate goal of all thought leaders, but that comes with time, dedication and proven results. Research and apply to speak at general business industry events: Start with smaller events to introduce yourself into your industry's speaking circuit and work your way up to larger, more prestigious events. If selected as a speaker, ensure your presentations are educational, entertaining and non-promotional to achieve maximum credibility.

By ensuring you have the characteristics needed to be a thought leader, including proven expertise and a passion and commitment to spreading ideas to help others, following these seven tactics drastically increases the likeliness of acquiring thought leader status in your chosen industry.

Don't limit yourself geographically with speaking engagements, either!

Webinars and podcasts allow you to speak to anyone in the world at any time.





RESOURCES:

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3. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/lisaquast/2012/11/19/build-a-personal-brand-not-just-a-career/>
4. <http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/22170/6-Ways-to-Establish-Yourself-as-an-Industry-Thought-Leader.aspx>
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6. <http://www.houzz.com/>
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