

# WARNER



# 9 IMMUTABLE TRUTHS OF SUCCESSFUL THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

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**If you're like most heads of corporate communications, getting your executives seen as thought leaders in your industry is probably one of your top priorities and a central goal of your communications plan. If you're an agency person, chances are you've been tasked with some aspect of building and executing thought leadership programs on behalf of your clients.**

While thought leadership is always top of mind for communicators, it's worth reflecting on what exactly makes for a good thought leadership; why is it important, and how to do it well.

But first, what thought leadership is not. Although tactics such as placing bylined articles, securing speaking opportunities and getting executives quoted on industry topics and breaking news are part of the program, that's not thought leadership. Those are a means to an end.

True thought leadership, as one of our longtime clients likes to say, first requires you to have thoughts. Thoughts about the issues, trends and ideas that matter to the your employees, customers, stakeholders, the larger business community and even to society as a whole.

Thought leadership is not a more clever way to sell products and services. It's not a veiled way to push the latest marketing message. Rather, the goal is to build trust and respect for your company, your executive team and your brand. Ultimately, to be a leader in the broader business conversation means contributing ideas and perspectives that are unique and make a difference.

So wherever you are on your thought leadership journey, we have curated these Nine Truths About Successful Thought Leadership we hope you will find useful for creating, delivering and improving your thought leadership program.



## 1. Thought Leadership Takes Time And Requires Commitment.

Building thought leadership is a long-term commitment. One might say a lifetime commitment. You don't just put up a billboard on HWY 101 or take out an ad in The Wall Street Journal to declare oneself a thought leader. Not only is there no such thing as "doing thought leadership" quickly, the process itself is complex, and the actual journey--the trudging and grinding--takes time.

Any thought leadership program must be on the corporate leadership agenda. Everyone, from CEO, the E.C., business unit heads, marketing, sales, corp comms, and all stakeholders must understand the scope and scale of the effort. Thought leadership isn't just magically conjured up by the PR team.

Great thought leadership is not an event, it's process and a worthy goal. The marathon vs. sprint metaphor is useful here. There is simply no substitute for commitment and a willingness to endure hardship and even reversal. Doing it well takes time and determination.

However, if there is commitment at the top and the program gets the resources needed, you'll be on the road to certain success. Take a long term view and stay on the high road. It will pay-off.

## 2. Thought Leadership Costs Money, But It Doesn't Have To Break The Bank.

Like time, money is the other resource in short supply in most organizations. We have all seen brilliant thought leadership programs done on a shoestring budget, and we've seen countless millions wasted on weak but lavishly executed ideas. There's no magic number. But you must invest to get the job done.

Not every company needs its CEO to be on the main stage at Davos. This is not a knock against the main stage at Davos, but rather recognition that are plenty of venues closer to home that are probably more resonant with customers, stakeholders and employees.

Thought leadership is not free. But you can do a lot with a little. Fund the effort to a level appropriate to your business.

## 3. Thought Leadership Can Accelerate The Sales Process — But Don't Focus On Selling.



The primary goal of any business is to increase revenue, which means selling more products and services each quarter. So, a question that often gets asked is, “Why do thought leadership if it doesn’t translate to sales?”

The corporate brand, elevated by true thought leadership, gives customers a shorthand for reducing risk. In high-dollar, complex business-to-business transactions with long sales cycles, risk mitigation is the central issue.

A successful thought leadership program slowly but steadily builds trust among your target audiences including current and prospective customers as they progress through the sales process. Specifically how to reduce downside decision risk in the mind of the buyer(s).

True thought leadership gets reflected back through the media, analysts firms and partners to help buyers validate their decisions about hiring your company and buying your products and services. Thought leadership contributes to the halo effect around your company and brand, which contributes to sales and the bottom line.

## **4. Thought Leadership Is A Powerful Tool For Recruiting Talent.**

Do not underestimate the role thought leadership can play in service to recruiting talent. Virtually every industry is experiencing increased demand for highly skilled workers, that pressure is only going to intensify and most companies struggle to fill those openings.

Part of the thought leadership program should focus on corporate values and vision. Programs often include securing rankings on relevant industry and business “Best of...” lists; securing executive participation on panels and podiums; and commentary on business issues such as digital transformation, culture and innovation.

Having visible, well-regarded thought leaders as part of the executive bench is a highly effective recruitment strategy. People want to work for people they look up to and respect. This is also true when building retention strategies for current employees.

## **5. Authenticity Is The Key. Don’t Try To Fake It.**

In the current era of the 24x7 social media-powered news cycle, the days of fake corporate communications are officially over. Everyone should have received that memo. The leadership team you put in field for your thought leadership campaign needs to be credible and authentic.

Be smart. It takes 10-seconds for anyone to dig-up dirt on anyone on the planet. If your executive is out there talking about ethical investing, make sure he didn’t just bribe a coach to get his kid



into Stanford (as a purely hypothetical example).

Authenticity has to be at the core of all communications efforts especially when tied to the leadership team and corporate brand. Solid ideas, executed consistently and delivered authentically by credible executives across all channels is what counts. It's not so much what you say that matters, it's also who says it and how they say it.

## **6. Your Thought Leadership Program Needs To Be Big, But Keep It Relevant To Your Brand.**

As discussed above, true thought leadership goes well beyond your product, services and even your company. You need to stake-out new intellectual territory.

Don't limit yourself to just providing commentary and analysis on issues or trends that are only relevant to your company. Address the economic, social, political and technological forces driving change, transformation and disruption locally, regionally and globally. Where appropriate, don't shy away from taking a well-reasoned, contrarian stance on a hot-button issue. There are plenty to choose from.

To put this into context, if your company makes software used in the production, distribution and monetization of video, you could reasonably delve into matters of consumer behavior, economics and culture. If you're an energy company, you may well want to build a platform around climate change, reducing carbon emissions and green jobs. Go big, just don't go astray.

## **7. Be aware of the risks that come with an increased thought leadership profile.**

Building a thought leadership program powered by authenticity, relevance and big ideas will attract attention. But remember: trolls will troll and haters will hate. You should expect some will disagree. You can't win over every heart and every mind. Stay your course, defend when necessary and engage appropriately.

## **8. You Can Measure Your Thought Leadership Program.**

Like any other aspect of your communications program, you should establish metrics to measure success and identify areas for improvement. Be clear about the role of thought leadership plays in the broader context of corporate reputation.



A couple of broad based metrics to consider include: what share of voice do your executives have in “blue sky” or “whitespace” conversations? Are we attracting the attention of other credible voices in the conversation? How are we being portrayed in the media? Are others amplifying and complementing our viewpoints and efforts?

You can also track media, analyst and influencer coverage for audience reach, impact, message pull-through, tone and detractor/contrarian perspectives. Set goals for the program and measure relentlessly.

## 9. Ultimately, Being A Thought Leader Is Something Others Say About You.

True thought leadership uses storytelling to set the agenda and inspire people. It involves every aspect of corporate marketing, brand building, reputation, customer advocacy, stakeholder engagement and community building.

So how do you know when you’ve done it well?

A well-run thought leadership program does result in favorable media coverage; your executives are feted at industry forums and noted as innovators and game-changers; there are positive halo effects for the company and the brand measured by inclusion in industry awards, business rankings and even improved Net Promoter scores. To name a few potential outcomes.

These are all positive outcomes, but the true test for being a thought leader is being recognized by others.

When influential people and organizations call-out and validate your company’s vision, strategy, culture, values and business performance, that’s how you know your program is successful. At that point, you will have created a thought leadership program that will have true and lasting impact.

Good luck on your journey!



### About the Author:

Michael is a career PR agency professional. He is passionate about thought leadership campaigns. He has learned more from his many mistakes than his few successes. Follow him on Twitter [@mby](#)



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