



## The Golden Rules For Creating Thoughtful Thought Leadership



Thought leadership isn't just for individuals. Here's how your business can use thought leadership to shape people's perception of your company and its products—the right way.

By Daniel W. Rasmus

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Firms large and small want to be thought leaders. Thought leadership extends from strategic differentiation, a proof point, a demonstration of differentiation. Amid the cacophony of corporate voices, those found to be additive to the dialogue, rather than distracting, can be considered thought leaders. Given our complex world, there are many things that need to be considered, so providing true thought leadership can be as valuable to a brand as the products or services it sells.

Successful thought leadership does not arrive with a published idea linked to a hope that someone will recognize brilliance and sweep your firm from obscurity into industry prominence. Establishing a firm or an individual as a thought leader requires consistent, diligent effort. Thought leadership is cumulative. Although thought leadership can and should have tactical elements that reveal the evolution of an idea from concept toward implementation, all thought leadership should be strategic at the onset.

Thought leadership should be about a big idea that changes how people perceive the world.

If an organization invests in the communication or “creation” of thought leadership, it should know what it wants from those who will consume that thought leadership. Most of the time the answer should be respect and recognition, though marketing may well have greater revenue-related ambitions. Thought leadership should also be an entry point to a relationship. Thought leadership should intrigue, challenge, and inspire even people already familiar with a company. It should help start a relationship where none exists, and it should enhance existing relationships.

After many years of developing thought leadership for companies large and small, I have discovered these 10 golden rules that can elevate thought leadership, from an organization talking to a small audience about small things, to an organization using whatever platform the market affords them to shape people’s perception of their company, their products, even their shared futures.

**1. Don’t sell anything except ideas.** Selling during a thought leadership presentation, discussion, or post is the number one sin, and therefore, *not selling* is the number-one rule. The target audience for thought leadership represents the most sophisticated of information consumers. The consumer of thought leadership knows that the company delivering them the insight is a commercial firm, and that they are in the business of making money. Don’t tell them that during the course of an article about the future of health care that you have the best answer to the problem, and then rattle off a bunch of product names or put up a bevy of logos to convince them of your leadership position. If your ideas are valuable and meaningful, buyers will come to you. They will ask how you uniquely deal with the problems you illuminate. When that happens, the thought leadership conversation becomes a pre-sales conversation and then you can shift into a more traditional sales relationship. But remember, thought leadership delivered the relationship, it brought the person to you, so don’t abandon it once they knock on the door (see rule 9).

**2. Always give it away.** Thought leadership is not a revenue stream unless you work for a thought leadership company (like an analyst firm). For most companies, from banks to retail, from health care to energy, thought leadership should be freely available. I even cringe at using it for lead generation because that context broadcasts a future sales call. Create your thought leadership with an eye toward accrual of brand value, not revenue. The dividends may be intangible, but when thought leadership flips from push to pull (writers are seeking out your opinion, conferences are inviting you to present), then you will know that you have a thought leadership hit.

**3. Have a unique perspective.** Two rules in and we finally get to a content-oriented rule. A unique perspective means taking a position on something meaningful and interpreting it for others. That's pretty vague, and it needs to be, because you don't want to place narrow constraints on thought leadership. Apple doesn't produce a lot of white papers on design, yet they are seen as a thought leader in hardware design. The result reflects their thought leadership.

**4. Focus on one thing at a time.** Individuals as thought leaders may be disjointed and avant-garde; companies, especially public ones, need to be focused. Companies need to focus on creating a new context or lens through which investors or consumers perceive the company, its brand, its products or its services. Microsoft, for instance, hosts the "Microsoft Home" on its campus, where it gives tours of a home where engineers demonstrate how software might change tomorrow's living experience. The "Microsoft Home" doesn't include how to use the next version of Excel to create grocery lists, but rather how interactive surfaces and software can integrate recipes directly into the cooking experience. The "Home" focuses on consumer innovation.

And this leads to one caveat for these rules when applied to conglomerates and holding companies: Individual businesses or brands can and should demonstrate thought leadership within their domains, separate from whatever corporate thought leadership exists. Down the hall from the "Microsoft Home," for instance, lies the "Center for Information Work," which demonstrates future office scenarios.

Like Microsoft, GE clearly needs to convey different thought leadership across various units like medical devices, aircraft engines and energy generation. GE's corporate thought leadership takes place at the imagination level. They want to be seen as innovative. On their website, innovation, which leads to stories and research, precedes their product menu. Again, those who want to buy wind turbines will go to the Energy page. But those who want to understand a potential supplier of wind turbines before committing will likely go to the innovation pages first--perhaps more importantly, people who only know GE as a light bulb company can start a very different relationship with the company through its innovation pages.

**5. Address a specific audience.** Thought leadership only matters if people read it. It is, therefore, created for people--and most people live a life, work in a job, and have very little bandwidth to take in new ideas unless those ideas improve their life or work. Thought leadership, therefore, needs to help people with their life or work. I often advise those developing thought leadership to "go vertical or go home." There is very little generic thought leadership that is useful. The best thought leadership helps people in an industry, or more likely, in a role within an industry, do something better or gain insight that helps them better

understand their market, or their job. Talking to banking people about manufacturing usually results in a big yawn. Good thought leaders know how to craft their messages for their audience. Like rule 4, you may want to concentrate on one, or just a few audiences, rather than get spread thin trying to find a way to attach to all markets, unless of course, you have the budget and the will to *go big*.

**6. Get involved.** If an organization cares passionately about something, then it should get involved in its passion. This does not imply just social issues. Project management companies need to be at project management societies. Workforce planning companies need to participate in workforce planning conferences. Electronics firms need to sponsor academic programs. You get the idea? And participate does not mean sponsor, not exclusively. It means run workshops, give presentations, host parties, run panels, lead societies, join standards bodies. But that is the easy stuff. Getting involved may also mean starting a not-for-profit that redefines an idea and creates a platform where other like-minded firms can invest. The bottom line for get involved: don't just say, do.

**7. Admit what you don't know.** Another way to say this: be humble. I've lost track of the number of times audiences award kudos to presenters who admit they don't know something. I don't mean uninformed defensive posturing—I mean the legitimate, sincere expression of uncertainty. A software company that admits it doesn't know what the future of communications will look like, that actively and thoughtfully explores a number of possible evolutions does a much bigger service to the industry than one who places a shaky stake in the ground to align its vision with its product roadmap. Thought leadership isn't about making the bet early and hoping you're not wrong; it's about actively pursuing possibilities and sharing that enthusiasm for exploration with customers and partners. Thought leadership should excite, and noting excites more than going on a journey into the unknown, be it to a cavern where a dragon named Smaug purportedly lives, or trying to figure out how people should work in the next decade.

**8. Make your audience feel smarter.** Thought leadership can be at its most effective when it is not only free, but has a perceived personal value. Think about a manager who attends a thought leadership session on social media in marketing and then comes back with some great ideas for his or her team. The person sharing his or her learning expresses a certain level of trust in the source, which they may well return to should any of the ideas stick, thus transforming a learning experience into a purchase. Those "transactions" can't be counted upon, but if the recipients of the thought leadership don't believe it somehow enhances what they know, then they are either the wrong audience, or the content isn't valuable. And if the individual recipient of thought leadership doesn't perceive value, they won't pursue a relationship.

**9. Market thought leadership like a product.** This rule may appear at first to be counterintuitive because it seems so crassly self-serving. The fact is, thought leaders can't be thought leaders if they aren't heard. A single speech at a conference, unless it goes viral (and chances are it won't), is much like placing a single advertisement on the television in one time slot and hoping that people catch it. Thought leadership needs to be turned into a campaign: tweeted, Facebooked, webinarred, even advertised. Thought leadership shows up in the op-ed pages of the *New York Times*. Thought leadership shows up in the pages of [Fast Company](#) in executive interviews. If you have a thought leadership team that thinks the ideas themselves will produce uptake, they will probably be disappointed. Most thought leadership isn't viral, it is marketing, and because it probably isn't directly related to a product, it needs to be treated like a product, and marketed in its own right, internally and externally.

**10. Hire thought leaders.** Some, like Shel Israel (["What Makes a Thought Leader?"](#)), believe that thought leaders are people, not companies. I disagree. Companies create a context and they permit thought leaders to thrive, but few thought leaders end up running the company and leading industry disruption. The people who understand CEOs at IBM may be big names in their circles, but their thought leadership accrues to the brand. IBM, through investments in CEO Global Study, the Center for the Business Government, or the Center for Social Business, employ thought leaders, and the output of those thought leaders shapes the dialogue. Those individual thought leaders may bring their own disruptive forces inside a company, but part of thought leadership involves the risk of allowing new ideas to flourish, and being brave enough to have smart people challenge assumptions and chew away at the status quo.

OK, 10 isn't enough...this one deserves its own call-out anyway:

### **Thought leaders should be thoughtful leaders.**

Being a thought leader, is quite frankly, a term that one has bestowed on them. They may aspire to be a thought leader, but the consumers of their speeches, rhetoric and writing ultimately determine if they are one or not. Organizations, be they public sector or private, retail or Rotarian, need to be thoughtful leaders. Because of their position, those creating perspectives and content have a leadership role, what they choose to do with their platform defines how they are viewed by consumers.

Being a thoughtful leader also means being a patient leader. Thought leadership does not immediately increase retail transactions, software license sales, or fill the consulting pipeline. Over time, thought leaders build trust, and build a following, but how long that takes depends on industry, investment and, perhaps most importantly, the value of the ideas and their commercial success. Thought leadership also requires perseverance and dedication, as well as a willingness to honestly examine why something you

think should work isn't working, and then, to refashion the idea into something more consumable, or abandon it for a new, better position.

If you want your organization to be a thought leader, you need to make sure that what you create comes infused with the DNA of the organization, and that it finds its way back into that DNA. To extend the metaphor, thought leadership can be considered a way of introducing positive mutations into an organization. Individual thought leaders can, and often are, independent standouts against the status quo. Successful organizations that exude thought leadership attract and retain customers, drive revenue, and get invited to all the best parties (like Davos) because they not only express thoughtful ideas and act as a thoughtful leader, but because their organizations reflect the thought leadership in how they behave, what they create, and how they treat their customers.

[Image: Flickr user [Cornelia Kopp](#)]



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