

Raise your Profile through Thought Leadership

by Shelley Dunstone

Two professionals are experts in their field of practice. One is frequently published, quoted in the press and invited to speak at industry conferences. The other isn't. Why?

The answer is that one engages in thought leadership, and the other doesn't.

The term "thought leader" was coined in 1994 by Joel Kurtzman, the founding editor of *Strategy + Business* magazine. He used the term to select people to be interviewed for the magazine. A thought leader is recognised by peers, customers and industry experts as someone who deeply understands the business they are in, the needs of their customers and the broader marketplace in which they operate. They have distinctively original ideas, unique points of view and new insights.

Becoming a thought leader is a great way to build a client following. It helps you to stand out from the crowd and to elevate yourself out of a category. It showcases your subject-matter expertise and helps position you as an expert. It builds "profile" so that clients are attracted to you and what you have to offer.

Thought leadership goes beyond getting the occasional photo or quote published in the press. To get publicity, you need something original to say. It doesn't come across as advertising, because the views you express are different and thought-provoking. Offering original insights and ideas to your clients and potential clients helps to confer "trusted adviser" status.

Once you are known for your unique insights, you become the "go-to" person for the media. Speaking at conferences, too, is a powerful marketing tool. Research shows that clients often make their purchasing decisions at conferences. There, they can see a range of advisers in action and get a feel for what they are like. If you have something new and interesting to say, you will stand out from the crowd of boring and unimaginative speakers.

A thought leader is able to shift people's perspectives and get them to adopt new ways of thinking about an issue. Why is this useful? It opens the door for you to offer new types of services to help your clients. If clients are not currently asking for these services, you need to show them a new way of looking at a problem, and explain how you can help.

A thought leader has the courage to challenge the conventional wisdom, rather than echoing what everyone else is saying.

Why would professional service firms develop their practitioners as thought leaders? Increasing the number of thought leaders in your firm competitively differentiates the firm, and positions it as a thought leader in its own right. For example, the accounting firm KPMG gains profile from Bernard Salt's thought leadership on demography (he heads up their Property group). Imagine if every partner in your firm was a published author on a topic of interest to clients.

At a personal level, thought leadership helps you find greater enthusiasm for your work. Why did you choose your field of practice? What is your expertise really about at a higher level? What does it do for your clients? How can you creatively use your professional skills to improve a client's situation?

To become a thought leader, there are nine key skills that you need to develop:

1. **Foresight.** What is going on around you? Learn to spot new trends that will affect your clients. What is the next big thing in terms of service offerings? How can you better prepare your clients to deal with the future?
2. **Communication.** How do you share ideas? Develop your communication skills to help you get your point across in a meaningful, effective and engaging way. You might do this by giving a presentation, writing an article, running a training program, facilitating a discussion or just having a one-on-one conversation. Each requires a different set of skills.
3. **Comprehension.** How do others best receive information? When you are preparing to present at a seminar or conference, build in a variety of presentation techniques, to get attention from more of the people, more of the time.
4. **Expertise.** What do you know? You'd be surprised! This goes well beyond substantive information. Draw deeply on your unique experience. Learn to unpack what you know, and find engaging ways of expressing it.
5. **Uniqueness.** Who are you? All of us are a product of our unique upbringing, education and experiences. What's your personal value proposition that effectively differentiates you?
6. **Positioning.** What do you do? What's your answer, when someone asks this question at a networking event? What do you say when someone asks "Why should we use you?" Know how to position yourself, your business or your organisation so people know exactly what you do and why.
7. **Commitment.** How do you sell your vision? Learn how to influence others so they engage with your ideas. For professionals, marketing is personal; clients tend to consult an individual rather than a firm. You need to be able to explain why they need you.

8. **Pitching.** How do you get it out? You need to sell your services in a variety of settings, whether in a formal bid process or one to one with a potential client. Learn how to invite people to buy you, your business or your ideas more effectively.
9. **Execution.** How do you launch a concept? Take your great ideas and help your clients put them into action.

You may have thought that those high-profile professionals were just lucky. It's not luck! The techniques of thought leadership are available for anyone to learn. Then it's up to you to apply effort and ingenuity.



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