



Thought Leadership

The Secret to Successful Thought Leadership

By Lech Mintowt-Czyz



Thought Leadership

- When done well, thought leadership changes people's minds – it moves a given audience from one point of view to another.
- Its ability to change minds means a company can use thought leadership to drive trust, brand preference and sales.
- Pieces of thought leadership live on: they become resources to influence the media, staff and potential business partners.

Do you need people to follow you? Do you need people to agree with you? Do you need people to make choices in ways that benefit you and your company?

Of course you do. Everybody does. That is why companies value their brands in the billions and why advertising is a trillion-dollar industry.

But, while brand and advertising can be effective, they are broad and, sometimes, blunt. Thought leadership, done well, is highly focused, highly efficient and is exactly what you need when you have to change people's minds.

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The Mistake Most People Make

The problem is that many people – the vast majority, in fact – get it badly wrong. Why?

It starts with a fundamental misunderstanding about what thought leadership is.

It is not the mechanism by which you share a brilliant idea. It is not the way you make people understand company strategy. And it is absolutely not the way you prove to people that you know what you are doing.

People do these things all the time and call them “thought leadership”, and then wonder why they had no impact.

They have no impact because they have got things precisely the wrong way around. All of these failing strategies are about “the thought leader”. Consider this: when was the last time you heard somebody cry out in frustration because they could not find someone to tell them what to think? Or, more pointedly, the last time you were subjected to somebody's brilliant idea, strategy or attempt to prove competence... did you get anything from it? Probably not. Why? Because it was all about them. And what were you listening for? Value to you.

In the popular imagination, thought leadership is about connecting a firehose from the head of the “leader”, to the heads of the audience and then emptying the contents of a leader's head into the audience's head. But audiences do not work like that – people do not work like that. People never plug the firehose in. So, no impact.

The Secret to Successful Thought Leadership

It is not about leading people with your thoughts, but about leading the thoughts of other people.

The power of thought leadership lies somewhere else entirely. It lies in the ability to move a given audience from one point of view to another. It is not about leading people with your thoughts, but about leading the thoughts of other people.

In short, it is not a brain dump. It is the opposite. It is about understanding the brains of other people. It is about leading people so that they arrive where you want them to. Critically, it is about getting them there because you have made them feel that that is what they want.

What You Need to Change People's Minds

So, how can you make sure that you are one of the few people out there who is getting thought leadership right?

- First, you need to know your audience: who are you trying to move and where are they right now? It is simply impossible to move people if you do not even know where to pick them up.
- Second, you need to know where you want to move them to: what is your desired outcome?
- Third, you need to work out what you can tell them that can move them in the right direction. Critically, this has to be something they will value for their own reasons, or they just will not listen.

If you have all that, you have a shot at success. Those three things are all necessary, but still not sufficient. Because you also need control and the capacity to deliver.

Unfortunately, thanks to the digital shift imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is harder than ever to secure the control you need. The trend is heavily towards uncontrolled formats, because these work better on a screen. So, executives and leaders, and their teams, spend time and energy on panels, Q&As and fireside chats. Yet how many times do leaders finish these events without having delivered the core message they needed to? Or they did deliver it, but it was drowned out by another panellist, or a spiky question, or an off-topic digression? Or, possibly worst of all, the leader did deliver the core message but was forced to jam it into the session at an entirely inappropriate moment?

The bottom line: you cannot hope to be a thought leader if you do not even control how you deliver your thought leadership. Op-eds are one way, if you can negotiate your way into a publication worth publishing in and are able to persuade the editors not to massacre the message. Social media is another, with LinkedIn providing an op-ed self-publication platform that is hard to beat right now. And traditional speeches are a third way: a moment when you have a set time to say what you want to a given group of people.

And do not underestimate the power of a speech: there are good reasons people still give them, and good reasons people still listen. They may be scary to give, but that moment of apparent vulnerability is essential to their power. They may be easy to get wrong but, done right, they can open eyes, spark hope and ignite a fire. And the finely-crafted text lives on after delivery: as a document to share with the media and other audiences, as a statement of truth and as a resource for the business.

The Final Stage: Delivery

Once you have all of this – the audience, an understanding of what you can use to move them, and control over how you say what you need to say – then you are ready for the final stage: delivery.

For that you need an expert in persuasion, somebody who knows how to use language to change people's minds, somebody with deep experience of understanding how to use what a company is willing to say... to move an audience in a specific way.

“Maybe you already have that person in your team. If you do, consider giving them a pay rise because you want to keep them: their impact on your business can be extraordinary. If you do not, let's talk.”

Lech Mintowt-Czyz

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Lech Mintowt-Czyz is a thought leadership strategist and speechwriter for CEOs, senior executives and other prominent figures. Leaders turn to Lech when the words need to be exactly right and when the moment really matters. Despite his Polish name, Lech is London-born and has been a writer his entire career.

He started as a news reporter, covering everything from Harry Potter premieres to political scandals and terrorist attacks. He met people at the most extreme moments of their lives and helped them tell their stories.

Lech then worked as a news editor for nine years at The Times (of London) in both print and digital formats. After more than 20 years in newspapers, Lech joined Shell as speechwriter to the CEO. Together they won five Cicero awards in three years, an unprecedented haul.

More recently he has written for the CEO of ADNOC and the President of the UN's COP28 climate conference.

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Let's talk thought leadership: lech@thetantalusgroup.com