



**Thoughts on
thought
leadership for
B2B technology
and engineering
companies**

So you want to be a thought leader?

As well as the clear goal of being a leading source of products, technologies and solutions for their customers, a growing number of engineering-orientated or B2B technology businesses are seeking to establish themselves as ‘thought leaders’ - the ‘go-to’ organizations in their particular industry for informed comment and opinion.

In today’s increasingly competitive and fast-moving global markets the value of differentiation through thought leadership cannot be underestimated. If a firm can position itself as a trusted source of information and an authority on everything from market trends to legislation then, in the eyes of the industry, it becomes much more than simply a supplier of product. A strong thought leadership position will drive interest in a company’s views and widen opportunities for promotion. This, in turn, further raises awareness of the company and its solutions, fosters increased interest, improves credibility and, ultimately, generates leads and sales.

However, it is important to understand that it is the target audience and not senior management that ultimately decides if a company is going to be a thought leader. As a result, a thought leadership position is not something that is achieved overnight. But the real challenge for many technology and engineering companies is that thought leadership campaigns require different narratives than a company typically employs in its core B2B communications. In particular there is the need to create ideas and messages that go beyond – and may not even mention – the company’s products.

But even if this step can be taken there are many other issues to consider, including challenges from competitors and from companies who may not be perceived as competitors; identifying the appropriate channels for communication; generating the types of materials that need to be produced; and the training of suitable spokespersons.

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And while press relations will be important, there will also be opportunities to go beyond the media to support the thought leadership positioning – for example by participating in horizontal, vertical and higher level speaking opportunities; by engaging with the analyst community on a topic; or by creating a dedicated blog.

Irrespective of the route to the target audiences, a good thought leadership position is attained by positioning a company as a credible authority in a particular area and an 'enabler' and facilitator of discussions around the chosen topic.

And getting it right requires a strategic approach.

Taking a strategic approach

A strategic approach to thought leadership is typically going to start with planning and research.

Table 2 summarises the key elements of this phase of the campaign.

Identify target audience	Who are we trying to reach with our thought leadership messaging?
Survey target audience	To understand both the current awareness and perception of the company and to identify the key issues for business/general media, opinion leaders, policy makers and investors
Identify comms channels	Identify the relevant media and analysts, speaking opportunities, social media and other channels
Identify organisations with which to be affiliated	Research industry bodies and other organisations and third parties with whom an affiliation or partnership would support the thought leadership messaging
Agree campaign success metrics	e.g. Changes in perception/awareness using the audience survey as the baseline measurement
Create media/analyst messaging matrix	Create a matrix clearly identifying the topics and types of messaging of interest to the target media and analysts and the available opportunities for coverage/outreach
Create messaging and portfolio of topics	Create a broad range of messaging and ideas for stories and comment that can be used to communicate
Commission surveys and research	Sponsored surveys and research can be used as the 'hook' to create opportunities in the media for comment and opinion and to add credibility and authority

Table 1 - Thought Leadership Planning

Media challenges

A proactive approach to the media is fundamental to establishing a thought leadership position. And, while many technology and engineering companies may already have a technology-based press relations campaign, it is unlikely to encompass all of the media that will be important for thought leadership. What's more, the ways of approaching the media will differ from those used for campaigns ostensibly targeting the technical and trade press.

In terms of the media, some of the key challenges in creating and implementing a thought leadership campaign can be summarized in Table 1.

Target Media/Audience	Key Challenge
B2B technical and trade	Other engineering companies/ suppliers looking to 'own' the space
Vertical B2B technical and trade	Other vendors including & beyond engineering competitors looking to 'own' the space
Vertical end user Business/financial	Supply of proof/case study/customer stories Creating messaging that goes beyond technology and provides the bridge between what the company does and what the media wants to write about Identifying and training spokespersons who can talk 'beyond the technology' with authority
Lifestyle	Identifying 'household names' willing to partner for joint promotion
Social	Identifying where the online conversations are taking place and actively engaging in those conversations

Table 2: Thought Leadership and the Media

The key to addressing the challenges and exploiting the opportunities is to identify and match appropriate messaging and, where applicable, content to the needs of the target audience. The business media, for example, typically write all their own stories and want high-level comment and opinion or research-based input, while horizontal media are happy to accept contributed articles.

Tactics

When it comes to the thought leadership campaign itself there are a number of tactics that can be built into the plan.

Announcements

Regular announcements can associate a company with particular topics. For a thought leadership campaign this will not mean announcements of new component technologies, but news that will engage with a wider and higher level audience.

Examples may include:

- Results of surveys and research that the company has commissioned
- Launch of an award
- Launch of company sponsorships
- Announcement of speakers at key events
- Launch of partnerships with trade bodies and other relevant third parties
- Promotion of case studies and white papers

Content Creation

While the business and general media that form a key target for the thought leadership campaign rarely take submitted material they do want 'proof points' and supporting materials that infer credibility on the spokesperson and his/her organization. In addition, outreach to analysts and directly to the target audiences will often benefit from supporting content. Examples of such content could include survey results and conclusions; customer case studies; a series of white papers; speaker presentation scripts; webcast voiceovers; and discussion papers on the impact of legislation.

Tactics (cont)

Speaking Opportunities

A robust program of speaking engagements by senior management will be essential to extending the thought leadership campaign to reach opinion leaders and policy makers. While these speaking opportunities may be focused around technology it will also be important to secure 'higher level' opportunities that discuss issues, challenges, trends, legislation and other factors around the topic.

Press Meetings

As the daily and business press seek to create their own content, it will be important for senior management to meet with relevant journalists – either face-to-face or through virtual interviews – on a regular basis. Key to securing such meetings will be a brief synopsis highlighting the topics the spokesperson can cover and the relevance to the media outlet's readership.

Based on the nature of the target media, the ability to offer 'exclusives' will play an important role in ensuring good coverage.

Round Tables

As well as one-on-one briefings round tables with media and analysts can also prove valuable. Each roundtable could comprise one or more senior company spokespersons, a customer, a representative from a relevant trade body and, possibly, individuals from government departments, a journalist from a Tier 1 title and a key analyst.

Awards

Sponsoring, entering, being shortlisted for and winning relevant awards can also add credibility and authority to thought leadership positioning.

Tactics (cont)

Social Media Engagement

Opinion leaders, policy makers, investors, end users and other members of the target audience will use social media to obtain information, refine their views and make comment. As a result a social media strategy can play a key role in thought leadership campaigns.

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