

Thought Leadership is the **New Sales Pitch**

RETHINKING YOUR BRAND IN THE INFORMATION-OVERLOADED WORLD OF HIGH-TECH,
BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS MARKETING.

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Every single day 100 billion spam emails and 700 million direct mail pieces are bestowed upon a beleaguered public. People everywhere are saturated with unsolicited information, and they are quickly learning to be suspicious of everything thrown their direction. To make a mark in this atmosphere, skilled marketers need to find a new way to be heard above the din in order to win the affections of their intended audience. **It's time to rethink the role of cold calling and mass emails.** Thought leadership is the new sales pitch.

STOP SELLING; START LEADING

Thought leadership is a powerful marketing tool in any industry. However, nowhere is it more pertinent than in the unrelenting landscape of the high-tech, business-to-business sector. This might be one of the most over saturated industries in terms of marketers screaming their mantra of, "SELL, SELL, SELL." C-level executives here are constantly hit over the head with electronic product data sheets and creative direct mail campaigns trying to entice an expensive purchase. **In response, these tech-savvy business people no longer passively accept marketing information. They are putting their technological prowess to work for their own good and actively seeking out the information they desire.** In order to make an impact in the world of high-tech, B2B marketing, you must stop pushing your product and start demonstrating your expertise.

In any industry centered on technology, change is the only constant. Business executives are no longer merely looking for vendors or even solution providers who will simply sell the latest innovation in technology. Customers are seeking experts who will help them combat the direct and indirect forces that are pressuring them now as well as in the future. **Your clients want more than products; they crave relationships and resources.** This is the basis of thought leadership.

B2B

When you demonstrate real industry leadership, customers will seek you out because they respect and trust what you have to say.

Ultimately, thought leadership is no different than any other type of leadership. The most effective leaders do more than carry a big stick and demand that people fall in line behind them. A true leader inspires others to follow by demonstrating their command of the current situation as well as their vision for the future. They earn the trust of their followers. To be a successful high-tech, B2B marketer you must do the same thing by sharpening your understanding of the current marketplace while preparing your clients for the opportunities and pitfalls waiting just around the corner.

Of course, this changes the entire dynamic of marketing. Your initial message can no longer be about you. You need to talk to your audience about them, offering valuable insight and ideas that allow them to overcome the obstacles, including those they aren't even aware of. **When you take a thought-leadership approach to marketing, you must forsake the idea of the quick sell.** This is about long-term investment.

BRANDING IS STILL THE BOTTOM LINE

Now, don't be misled. Traditional marketing is still the meat and bones of your sales efforts; you are simply re-ordering the process. When you begin your marketing efforts by establishing trust and demonstrating thought leadership, you create a new and more effective entry point for your brand message. Your thought leadership will innately reinforce your brand as long as your brand clearly reflects the leadership position you are projecting. In order to achieve successful thought leadership you cannot underestimate the value of an accurate, truthful and unwavering brand.

The problem many companies face is they have created a great divide between their corporate intentions and their corporate brand. **This is often the case when a company structures a brand message around the ebb and flow of the market rather than around their true core competencies.** This is a fruitless effort and it renders your brand—your greatest corporate asset—powerless because it is not reliable.

In order to make thought leadership an effective approach to marketing, you must develop a clear vision inwardly as well as outwardly. You must be explicit about who you are as a company as well as what are your values, your mission and your true market differentiation. Then you must apply these insights to your marketplace to positively impact your customers. Compelling thought leadership is transparent because it is not created to manipulate a sale. It is established to build trust. In other words, your brand must have conviction.

At its core, particularly in B2B marketing, your brand is far more than your logo, color palette or even your product line. **Thought leadership centers around the idea that your brand is a promise you make to your customers about your company.** It embodies

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all that you are, and it must be tenable. Know who you are and don’t stray from it. When you are confident about your core competencies, your customers will be too, and they will follow you through market fluctuations because they trust you to lead them.

WHEN CUSTOMERS SEEK YOU OUT

A thought leadership approach to marketing certainly changes the way you conduct yourself within the sales process. But it also alters the way in which you benefit. When you market yourself based upon your expertise, by the time you present your offering the sale is half way there. Your customers have defined exactly what they need and decided you are an asset to their business. You no longer need to make that argument. You simply need to make good on the brand promise your customer has already taken to heart.

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ACCOMPLISHING THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Now the question arises. How do you actually establish yourself as a viable industry leader? Of course, it would be simple if there were four short and definable steps that would lead you directly to the head of the pack. While there's no tried and true algorithmic approach to thought leadership, there are some solid guidelines to consider.

1. KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW.

This is the idea that thought leadership and branding are intricately interwoven. In its most basic form, a thought leadership approach to B2B marketing centers on truthfulness, authority and an intimate knowledge of yourself, your marketplace and your audience. Before you can be viewed as an innovator in your industry, **you must understand what you do better than anyone else, how this benefits your industry, and how you can make your customers' jobs easier.** Once you have defined your core competencies, it's all about being available and being generous. Give away your knowledge with reckless abandon to the people you want to impress.

2. UNDERSTAND WHAT YOUR CUSTOMERS ARE UP AGAINST.

It's not enough to define the demographics of your target audience. **You need to be acutely aware of the pain they are feeling and the market environment that is inflicting it.** When you communicate your understanding of their real world challenges you will have their ear and their trust. In order to bolster your position as a thought leader, you need to be an advisor who is looking out for your customers' best interests, not your own. Ultimately, your best interests will be served, too.

3. DEFINE YOUR SIGNATURE SOLUTIONS.

Establishing your place at the front of your industry takes time, focus and an interesting narrative. Once you have identified your brand message, draw from that knowledge pool to define your leadership position. Create meaningful content that takes advantage of your core strengths and focuses on real market

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issues for a variety of audiences. Look at your industry and your audience, decide where the problems reside then communicate your strategy for conquering them. **Just make sure this is about improving the business environment and not selling your products.** Make yourself an advocate, not an advertisement.

4. DON'T BE AFRAID TO LEARN WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW.

The high-tech, B2B landscape changes with the wind. **To be a thought leader you need to be at the front of the curve understanding the paradigm shifts before they happen.** This means you need to be in constant study so you can be the one with the answers before everyone else. Thought leadership is about innovation, so be innovative. If you don't immediately have the solutions your customers need, go create them and communicate them.

5. SHARE, LEARN AND GROW.

It's time to be ubiquitous. To establish yourself in a position of leadership you need to be seen as an industry activist. This goes beyond having all the right answers. **You need to be out in your marketplace talking to people, learning what they know, discussing ideas, taking the pulse of the industry to see where it's going,** responding to concerns and expanding your understanding of what is needed. This is the best kind of leadership because it demonstrates your intimacy with your audience and your industry.

6. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE INTERNET.

When used appropriately, the internet can be the best vehicle for making your expertise available to your audience. You simply need to get creative about how and where you are seen. The possibilities are endless.

Transform your industry insight into white papers, and then post them on your website, on industry portals, anywhere your audience goes for information. Start a blog that deals with the everyday issues your customers face. Respond to blogs written by others. Sometimes you can demonstrate your knowledge

by asking the best questions rather than by providing the best answers. Host webinars that explore industry trends. Join social networking groups and online community groups where you can toss around ideas with others facing the same struggles. **In other words, be seen in all the right places and start handing out your wisdom the way you used to hand out your business card.**

7. TAKE YOUR MESSAGE TO THE STREETS.

While the internet is a powerful forum, don't hide there. There are countless other ways to communicate your message that don't involve a download. Turn your white papers into books, magazine articles, business reports and industry analyses. Publish as much as you can that is relevant and useful to your audience.

8. DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE VALUE OF YOUR OWN FACE.

A hand shake and smile can go a long way toward building trust and establishing leadership. Be physically present in your own community and interact with your people. Speak at conferences, attend trade shows, give workshops. Talk...talk...talk...but always measure what you say, being certain your viewpoint focuses on serving the needs of your customers and your industry.

IN THE END

As the business world becomes more and more inundated with information, business innovators need to find new ways to connect with their audiences without making them feel manipulated. **A thought leadership approach to marketing interweaves the ideas of relationship building and brand promises to provide customers with market information, ideas and insight they can put their faith in.** By coming alongside your audience rather than coming at them, you will rise above the role of vendor and become a trusted business partner that has garnered the loyalty of your customers and the respect of your industry.

ABOUT THE BASIS GROUP

Founded in 2000, The Basis Group, Longmont, Colorado, is a marketing and brand development agency servicing the high-tech, business-to-business market. TBG has developed a proprietary branding methodology that begins by objectively defining key branding factors that act as the foundation for all organizational branding activities. TBG has successfully served such organizations as CVS/Caremark, IRM, Digital Globe, Genesys Conferencing, CS Stars, TrapTek and Premiere Systems.

CONTACT TBG

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