Leading with
THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PR

Learn how to build, message and market leadership

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THE POWER OF THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

A thought leader is a person or organization with an expertise and vision that makes an impact on business, industry or society – sometimes all three. A thought leader brand drives the conversation, priorities and points of focus on topics critical to their audiences. This leadership can extend, not only within a sector, but to a wider audience that includes the mainstream media. When a public relations thought leadership campaign is successfully crafted, not for an individual, but more broadly for an entire brand – that brand is rewarded with a growing reputation, a higher valuation and, most importantly, greater awareness of its core differentiators.

anthonyBarnum collaborates and represents many companies that seek to develop and refine thought leadership platforms built on a differentiated product or service offering.

One of anthonyBarnum’s core capabilities is developing leading complex sector companies into thought leadership positions. An example is a midmarket, highly innovative learning and development company anthonyBarnum currently works with which had never before launched a PR campaign. Within a year, the firm secured placements in Harvard Business Review, Investor’s Business Daily, U.S. News & World Report, Fortune and other top tier publications, and, as result, transformed the company from a services provider to a thought-leading organization. anthonyBarnum also has developed thought leadership campaigns for one of the nation’s top immigration law firms; one of the world’s most respected design, engineering and project management consultancies; a leading health care company; and many others.

In each case, anthonyBarnum helped these companies analyze markets, identify key differentiators, create a compelling messaging platform and successfully garner thought-leading earned media.

Over time, anthonyBarnum has found that thought leaders can drive the value of their brand, which translates into more media attention, greater interest from customers, better hiring opportunities and even higher margins. Here are some best practices anthonyBarnum considers essential to developing a tier one thought leadership campaign.
A good thought leadership message creates a new context or lens through which investors, stakeholders and customers can perceive a company, its brand, its products or services, and an entire market. It requires careful planning and intensive orchestration based on revenue-driving priorities. Thought leadership campaigns also need solid organizational support and capable, articulate ambassadors.

**Thoroughly analyze the market and a thought leader’s current place in it.**

A successful initiative requires a thought leader to bring to the world either technical expertise or vision. To build a meaningful strategy, a robust context of the environment is critical to mapping what concepts will resonate. Before launching a thought leadership campaign, it’s essential to have a very clear and up-to-date view of where an organization’s market is today and how it’s perceived. That means understanding and assessing, not only how its own products and services are performing compared to its own expectations, but how the general public and media view the organization, its competitors and key differentiators. anthonyBarnum conducts this research as a core component of campaigns to become fully aware of the intersection of a client’s differentiators and the trends surrounding perceived issues in the media. An analysis of a potential thought leader’s company vis-à-vis competitors from a business plan or strategy document from five years ago, isn’t enough.

When anthonyBarnum engages with clients on a thought leadership campaign, the firm does it in conjunction with other strategic efforts, including a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis, and a thorough research report analyzing current media coverage, not only of the client company, but of the industry, competitors and trends. This deep dive generates the data needed to examine assumptions, find out what is below the surface, and get the company executives entirely up-to-date on both what their competition is doing and what they are not doing. The analysis provides anthonyBarnum clients with the insight necessary to contextualize key differentiators — and how to own a segment or sub-section of its industry.
Define a thought leadership topic to speak to.
One of the best ways to provide thought leadership is to sponsor deep research that nobody else has conducted on a topic of wide concern in an industry. Sometimes companies do this by designing a survey. Other examples include gathering information by interviewing top leaders (and potential partners and customers) in their own industry. Absent this sort of research, companies can also approach thought leadership by introducing a unique point of view on an existing industry issue. Or, they might evangelize for the development of a specific, futuristic solution to solve one of the critical barriers facing the industry at present. There are lots of ways to do this: Companies can build thought leadership around an abstract vision, or alternately, build it around positioning itself as the leading booster for a very specific set of benefits and features that solve a market segment’s key business issues.

The sorts of questions anthonyBarnum considers in collaborations with clients to find, define and articulate a thought leadership message includes: What are the unanswered questions in this industry? What are the pain-points the product/service solves and how to level up the concept for maximum relevance? What does a thought leader, or a thought leading company, believe in that nobody else in its industry does?

Build a thought leadership platform that supports a key point.
anthonyBarnum helps clients put together messaging that has several layers which mesh together in an interconnected framework, all building upon and providing reinforcement for primary key points. For instance, it’s important to define a top vision, develop key messages that support that vision, document proof points that demonstrate and reinforce each key message, and finally, craft sound bites for interviews that best articulate these same key messages. Sometimes, a company’s expertise is technical, and it makes sense to build thought leadership around a vision exemplified by a specific product set. In these cases, anthonyBarnum works to develop, articulate and measure both lists of specific benefits and features, as well as thorough explanations of why they’re essential and superior. FAQs, videos, white papers and case studies can support thought leadership messaging by anticipating objections and providing detail.

Set specific goals. anthonyBarnum always works with clients crafting a thought leadership campaign to develop what we call an Objectives Map – a document that establishes a very specific set of business strategic and tactical goals for the campaign to better measure and gauge its effectiveness. An Objectives Map will outline specific actions to attract competitors’ customers, showcase a client’s role as a market disruptor and position the company as innovators. The more specifics attached to a thought leadership position, both in terms of milestone goals, supporting details and proof points, the better.
Produce quality content.
To run a thought leadership campaign, it’s absolutely critical to have a world-class writer. anthonyBarnum strategists have come to the firm with experience at some of the finest outlets in journalism, public relations and marketing, and the team works collaboratively to help clients craft the most concise, powerful and articulate ways to generate thought leadership positions. Messages also need to be presented and designed well. anthonyBarnum helps clients fill in their public relations asset arsenal with stunning visuals, infographics and the most current styles of video to highlight points in powerful ways.

Content is a broad category and can encompass a range of asset types – out of the box ideas include signing folks up for a beta version of a new product, which allows a thought leader to regularly gather their most current input and concerns. A well-designed quiz, slide show or survey can also be leveraged for thought leadership.

Once the public relations team at anthonyBarnum has synthesized the client’s own assumptions, what the competition is or isn’t doing, how the media is currently portraying the state of its industry, and concisely defined the bedrock of the company’s own differentiators, it’s time to add breadth in preparation for rollout. One of the first and most important steps here is to be sure organizational support is in place.

Get buy-in and support from senior management.
If a thought leadership message champions a way a brand does business, anthonyBarnum knows it’s critical that this message not be something just spun out by marketing, and only promoted via PR and a few ads. A thought leadership platform must be messaging that senior executives believe in, support and will be happy to speak to. It also must be something that can be rolled out as a consistent vision across the company. That way, everyone is fully on board, acting in concert, putting thought leadership principles into practice daily, and automatically generating their own proof points naturally through their work.

Be selective when selecting spokespeople.
When developing a thought leadership message, anthonyBarnum has found that it’s important to have senior management buy-in and critical to not overdo it in terms of trying to get full consensus on every word of a thought leadership platform. Often, messaging designed by committee ends up softened with so many caveats and that it lacks power and concision. Find a bold statement to make that has full executive support, and choose a select group of people to best deliver that message to customers, investors, partners and other targeted audiences.
Test it first on mission-critical subjects. Before rolling out a thought leadership campaign to the public, anthonyBarnum often works with clients to check in with some of that client’s most valued advisors and ask them for feedback. If a thought leadership platform has a vision about the direction of a certain industry, and provides recommendations and solutions in that industry, one such advisor that will have weight is one of a client’s largest customers. anthonyBarnum clients that have partners they interact with regularly as part of an industry association or multi-company initiative can also serve this role. So can existing thought leaders in an industry, especially if other thought leaders are focused on a different but complementary set of issues. This allows anthonyBarnum to work with clients to fine-tune the thought leadership message, and better anticipate and prepare for any objections at rollout.

When it comes time to launch a campaign, go all out. A thought leadership campaign is premised on the idea that a company has something new and important to say. These are the type of clients anthonyBarnum works with. People respond when they hear a well-crafted thought leadership message, but they need to hear it first, and to make sure they hear it, it’s important to put together a strong enough rollout to make a splash.

Market thought leadership as if it was a product—flood the zone.
A single speech at a single conference introducing a new idea is like running one ad in a single time slot—it’s unlikely to be very effective. An Objectives Map approach provides a thought leadership roadmap that documents specific tactics everyone will execute, staggered over coming weeks and months. anthonyBarnum also works with clients to develop a wide array of content platforms to carry a thought leadership message, including press releases, cross-platform social media, case studies, videos and more. Podcasts, e-newsletters and checklists all may also be part of the mix. This is a lot of work, and often beyond the capabilities of most companies’ internal staff. anthonyBarnum was built to be a strong partner, provide amplification to a client’s efforts and be versatile enough to fill in gaps.

Distribute Messages Boldly

Pitch masterfully.
A title is worth 1,000 words. anthonyBarnum knows it’s important to craft media concepts carefully and keep them short. The first sentence or two needs to capture the problem a thought leadership position is solving, and a proposed call to action—with plenty of information about why this is relevant to the receiving audience.
Repurpose content.
The content anthonyBarnum works with clients to create can be tweaked to work in multiple mediums. This helps because it allows a thought leader to slice and dice the already created content for new audiences, which is more efficient. A white paper can be repurposed into several blogs. Statistics cited in thought leadership messages can be recreated as infographics. A video presentation of thought leadership pitches and proposals can echo the internal messaging a thought leader creates.

Take a thought leadership campaign on the road.
Don’t rely upon documents alone to get a thought leadership message out. A common recommendation anthonyBarnum has for clients is: Take thought leadership on the road. Go to conferences to present and interact. Repurpose presentations as webinars. Join industry societies and participate. Host parties, run panels and be a mentor. Think about launching a branded event devoted to thought leadership principles that might attract potential customers, partners and investors.

Solve, don’t sell.
Don’t sell anything but ideas. anthonyBarnum advises its clients that being a thought leader is not about the company itself. It’s about solving a problem, delivering value and helping those among the campaign’s intended audience, which probably includes potential customers, media and partner companies. A similar caveat is: no one should ever call themselves a thought leader, somebody else needs to.

If a strategy is on target that will naturally happen. If a thought leader’s ideas are valuable and meaningful, buyers will come. When a respondent to a thought leadership campaign asks how the subject matter might apply in the respondent’s own specific situation, the conversation becomes a presales conversation. Then, it makes sense to shift into a more traditional sales relationship.

Make audiences feel smart.
It should almost go without saying that a thought leader needs to take its message to a carefully chosen audience that cares about what it’s talking about. Bankers, for instance, won’t be much interested in how to solve manufacturing process problems. A thought leader wants people to feel like they’ve heard something that applies to them and genuinely solves a problem they have. Grab attention with numbers. Tell a story. Use visuals. When a member of the audience is sparked with excitement, they’re more likely to take a thought leader’s idea back to their own internal meetings, and suggest it as a topic for conversation there. Ideally, the new concept or approach will resonate with the new audience, and the person who brought it up as a possible solution will be appreciated and given additional regard.
Once anthonyBarnum has worked with a client to execute on a thought leadership Objectives Map for a few months, the firm meets with the client to go over what the campaign has accomplished. It’s helpful to assess whether goals were realistic, how (if at all) to evolve and update a thought leadership message, and plan the best way forward.

**Compare results to initial goals.**
A post mortem analysis is helpful in identifying not only the strengths the campaign has uncovered pushing marketing efforts forward but also the weaknesses or assumptions that a thought leader can address in subsequent campaigns. Campaigns can also help uncover new topics of interest to the industry that weren’t included in the planning process. Were goals realistic? Did the campaign exceed them? If not, why not?

**Take the long view.**
While it’s critical to track performance on tactical goals, it’s also important to realize that brand value is sometimes hard to measure – building it requires patience. A successful thought leadership campaign isn’t always reflected immediately in new sales. Allow time for a campaign to grow and have a full effect. When an audience sees a thought leader repeatedly in the role of owning and defining its space, that audience begins to give feedback. Look for a good deal of payback in respect and recognition, not in revenue.

**Begin to think about the next layer of the vision.**
What’s the best follow up effort that can deepen a company’s position as a thought leader? It could be something on a larger scale. If a company’s granted backing and budget, it might think about sponsoring original research, recruiting and hiring existing thought leaders from complementery industries, growing a series of branded events, or even building an internal think tank. In other cases, a follow up effort might be something a bit simpler — it could be a strategy as straightforward as taking the existing thought leadership messages to new markets and audiences as a company grows, adapts and expands. Once a thought leader begins to occupy a leadership role in its industry, they want to be sure not to give it up. That requires follow through.

Sometimes a tipping point in a thought leadership campaign will happen quickly and unexpectedly— rather like popcorn popping. At first, results will be achieved incrementally. However, the cadence will quicken as thought leader concepts and reporter timing begin to coalesce. In anthonyBarnum’s experience, campaigns go from incremental to rapid results around six to nine months of consistent campaign execution.
Await the Tipping Point (cont.)

A thought leadership campaign will establish a vision that differentiates an anthonyBarnum client from competitors, builds reputation and informs the work of every division in the company. The best thought leadership campaigns are convincing because they are an authentic reflection of differentiation and corporate culture.

What anthonyBarnum works with its clients to create in a thought leadership campaign becomes infused with the DNA of the client organization. Thought leadership most often captures and distills insight a company is already executing on. It’s usually an extension of the attitudes, priorities and approaches that are deeply ingrained in the company, and are already driving everything from development and marketing to team structure. Almost invariably, that’s how a thought leader gained its unique expertise in the first place. And that’s why a thought leader knows its ideas work.