

Mastering Thought Leadership Writing

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One of the key principles of thought leadership writing is to tell stories.

So I'm going to tell you a story that doesn't yet have an ending.

I'm going to tell you a story that has surprisingly little to do with writing.

And I'm going to tell you a story that involves interviews with successful thought leaders, much reading and the occasional scenic interlude.

Yes, I'm going to tell you the story of me trying to write a book about writing thought leadership. This is designed to be a book for people who are experts in a field, such as medicine, science, accounting, engineering or law, but want to learn more about the art of writing and participating in public debate.

In doing so, I hope you'll see a mirror of many of your own experiences and, I hope, gain some new insights into this fascinating topic.

Let me start with a man called Dr Naren Chitty. Dr Chitty grew up in Sri Lanka with loose ties to the Royal Family. He remembers having a leopardess cub in his backyard as a child. He went on to help establish the nation's broadcasting and communications policies in his 20s. He was close to President Premadasa, who was killed by a suicide bomber in a crowded Sri Lankan street.

Dr Chitty also worked in a range of prestigious diplomatic and academic roles in the US before settling in Australia in the 1990s to become a professor at Macquarie University. That was where I came across him, as a lecturer during my undergraduate degree then later as my Masters professor. I found myself thinking about Dr Chitty when I started to try to answer the very first question that came up when researching the book:

What is a thought leader? Who is a thought leader?

To me, Dr Chitty has been a thought leader. He literally led my thoughts in exciting new directions, about communications but also the developing world versus the first world and many other things within a framework that I continue to call on today.

Then there was a high-school English teacher who used to cancel class talks and get us to listen to opera instead, or a few big authors from Milan Kundera through to Aldous Huxley and

business writers such as Jim Collins, who wrote *Built to Last*, and Michael Gerber, author of the small business bible the *E-Myth*.

It's worth noting the power of the written word here. The right book at the right time, even when it's written by a stranger, can change your mind and even the course of your life.

There are also my parents of course, and the grandfather that taught me to patiently turn wood on a lathe. Then there are many smaller contributions from bosses and colleagues and many others, right down to the daily flow of news, information and trivia that float over us and tweak our world view.

But what is it like for you? How many genuine thought leaders have you hit in your life?

You're all here presumably because you have something to do with creating thought leadership or a desire to be a thought leader. That's fantastic, but this simple process of trying to discern who made your mind what it is today makes you realise how high the bar really is.

It makes you realise how important it is for the thought leadership material you produce to be genuinely compelling, new and memorable. Otherwise you simply won't change people's minds or develop followers. And a leader without followers is, well, kind of like Tony Abbott or half the people on Twitter.

But back to the book. After this sort of soul searching and other reading I have settled on some working definitions of who might count as a thought leader and what constitutes thought leadership material.

The first thing to focus on is that term 'thought leadership'. It turns out that it was invented in 1994 by a Joel Kurtzman, Editor of *Strategy + Business* magazine in the US. He came up with it as a collective noun for management thinkers such as Charles Handy.

Lots of people hate it but I've got to admit I've become fairly fond of it. I prefer it to the alternatives, such as expert or specialist, because I feel like it captures a more narrow idea. This is that thought leaders are people who deal in ideas (that's the 'thought' part) and who are intent on changing other peoples' minds (that is the 'leader' part).

When coming up with definitions for books, you also need to consider what works in practice. There are plenty of people with ideas and intent to change other people's behaviour, but they're not all effective. Just take the real estate agent who wants you to pay 20 percent too much for a house. He has an idea. He is going to try to lead you towards its merits. But you're unlikely to bite. Why is that?

The reason is that he lacks the first characteristic of a successful thought leader: trustworthiness, or some source of credibility.

I was fortunate enough to interview a thought leader who simply oozes credibility for the book just this week. That was this man, Sir Gustav Nossal, the Australian scientist who made

breakthroughs in our understanding of the human immune system and was Director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne for over 30 years.

He is mind numbingly smart and, for the past 14 years of his 'retirement', has been a global advocate for vaccination programs with the World Health Organization and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, among others.

I asked the spritely, 79-year-old Sir Gustav whether he regarded himself as a thought leader. He didn't bite on the term but later responded obliquely with an analogy he'd once heard. This was that leadership was like a capital T. That the stem of the T is your area of focus, your specialty and your source of credibility. If this was deeply rooted in the ground then it provided the strength for a leader to branch out quite widely at the top of the T. It gave them a base from which to provide leadership on their own topic and many others.

Wow, I thought. That explains why Professor Nossal has the clout to be heard around the world not only on immunology and vaccination but also topics such as asylum seekers. He discusses this because another part of his stem is that he came here when he was eight as a refugee from Europe. It also explains why Bono can become a thought leader on both rock and roll and third-world debt. And it explains why no-one listens to Posh Spice or Mark Latham about anything.

So, the most important characteristic of a thought leader is that they have credibility.

The second characteristic of a genuine thought leader is that they have an interesting, useful and potentially correct idea. Or better still, lots of them, like the economist Paul Krugman, filmmaker Michael Moore or anti-religion author Richard Dawkins.

Third, they have the communications ability to convey that idea. This is really when they can go from being smart and right to being heard. A great example here is the environmental writer Tim Flannery.

Fourth, they have to be sincere. They have to be motivated by a genuine passion for their topic. The reason is that it takes a lot of time, effort and repetition to become recognised as a thought leader on a topic. Just think how long Edward de Bono has been banging on about lateral thinking and hats.

The other key reason is that people can smell a rat a mile off. There is nothing worse than watching a speaker who really doesn't seem to believe what they're saying, for instance.

So, how did you go? Do the individuals or organisation you are looking to position as thought leaders pass these tests? Do they have credibility, even if it's within a smaller circle than Sir Gustav or Bono? Do they have ideas? Can they communicate? And are they passionate about their topic?

I hope you've just ticked yes to all those so we can move on to the next challenge, which is to define what is meant by 'thought leadership material' – or at least, those types of material that involve writing.

In practice, only certain formats lend themselves to thought leadership writing. These include articles, columns, books, essays, white papers, reports, speeches, presentations, scripts for videos and podcasts, strategy papers and contributions to blogs and microblogs. These are the formats that let you introduce and argue for ideas.

Excluded are items such as ads, brochures, product data sheets and news stories – all worthwhile material, but focused on providing sales or factual information about something that already exists rather than ideas for the future.

For the purposes of the book, I've sought to distil these factors into some rules. But just before we look at those, I'd like to give you the scenic interlude I promised earlier.

SCENIC INTERLUDE



This photo is taken from the window of the house in Gerroa, on the South Coast, where I hid from this office and my children for 5 days to delete 10,000 words from my book. I then wrote a new 20,000 or so words to take the book to the 35,000 it stands, somewhat stuck, at today.

One of the hardest things about thought leadership writing is finding the time and the headspace to actually write. For that reason, I've written more of the book during two short bursts on the South Coast than I have here in the office.

I raise this to highlight how important it is to give yourself, or your writers, some real space in which to write. I'm sorry, but you or your organisation is not going to come up with truly exciting and leading ideas in one or two-hour internal group meetings.

Do you think Einstein developed $E=MC^2$ on a conference call? No, he did it as at a beach house like this. I'm sure of it and that's why my week is definitely tax deductible.

RULES FOR THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

But let's return to the rules. Here are some guidelines for what – in my view – makes something thought leadership material.

Rule #1: The document should *advocate an idea*

As I said above, this is really the difference between expertise and thought leadership. The crux of thought leadership is the idea of advocacy – and in particular, the advocacy of ideas.

Almost by definition, the idea in question will be about something in the future – something that could happen. And it should be a new and different idea – one that hasn't been said or written before. If not, it's just repetition.

As one of my clients said with some passion in a meeting the other day, “If you're not saying anything new, then it's not thought leadership.”

Rule #2: Any facts or existing ideas in a thought leadership document should be true, provable and accurately sourced, to the best of the author's ability, or noted as opinions

This is something that I would argue is second nature to academics and journalists but really quite confusing to salespeople and many others in the corporate sphere.

It matters because to change someone's mind you need to persuade them and to really persuade most people you need a rock solid argument that's backed by facts.

That said, people will also be swayed by opinion, especially on topics where facts are hard to come by, like God or mining taxes. They just need to know where you're coming from.

Rule #3: The document should not directly sell a product or service

This one is really inconvenient. But I'm sorry, if people think you're selling something they will be really suspect about your thought leading ideas.

This leads to quite an interesting philosophical discussion about thought leadership. If you look into it for long enough, and particularly if you consider what's happening with the Internet, you begin to see that there is an important karmic loop. That you give to receive and that the more you give freely and altruistically, the more you tend to receive.

This is the beauty of thought leadership. It's an indirect way of attracting attention. You might attract the attention of a motorbike buyer with photos of girls in bikinis but how do you catch the buyer for a million-dollar IT services contract or audit mandate? The answer is thought leadership. Dazzle with your mind then sell later.

Rule #3.5: Thought leadership should have an author

This one is really inconvenient as well and is expressed as rule 3.5 because it can be broken – and regularly is – but probably shouldn't be.

The idea here is that ultimately individuals get their best ideas from other individuals. There's something about human nature that we like to learn from other people, not a 'team' or, worse still, a whole company or a government.

Just consider why most major religions are built around a single spokesperson – like Jesus, Mohammad or Confucius – or why politics has more and more become about an individual leader like Kevin Rudd or Barack Obama, rather than the tens, hundreds or even thousands of minds within their organisations.

But highlighting those names might take you towards some of the reasons that large organisations are often very reluctant to position individuals as thought leaders.

Let's do a Q&A. Can anyone think of some reasons why most large organisations, except political parties, really seem to hate creating and promoting stars?

Here are some reasons I prepared earlier:

- Stars might ask for more money
- Stars might be lured elsewhere
- Stars might outshine senior management
- Stars might start saying things that shape the organisation's direction
- Stars might be smart but personally off-brand
- Stars might crash and take you with them...

But let's go back to the beginning. When you were all thinking of the people who had shaped your thoughts, did you think of the brand names of schools, universities, book publishers or companies? Or did you think of individuals within those types of organisations who had touched you?

I'd bet it's the latter and I would argue that it's worth fighting for stars. Just find strategies to manage the risk – these will be forthcoming in the book but include assessing your long-termers, making stardom attractive, renting stars, and making hay while sun shines and accepting that you will move on to new stars.

THE WRITING PART

Have you noticed that I haven't really talked about writing yet?

I'm sorry if that's been bugging you but my experience has been that you can't put lipstick on a pig. If a document hasn't been conceived as a piece of thought leadership from the beginning then it's really hard to make it thought leadership through flashy writing.

Just before I get into the writing I'd like to flag one more issue that I suspect creates more problems for you as producers of thought leadership than any comma or adjective. That is the question of rocking the boat.

In journalism there is a phrase, from William Hearst, that news is something that someone somewhere doesn't want to read. The same is true of thought leadership. Anything truly interesting will offend or upset somebody.

It's just the nature of the beast and best captured in the phrase, if you want to make an omelet you're going to have to break some eggs.

Another thing I've noticed, by the way, is that almost all thought leaders have what I like to call their 'schtick'. They have some attribute that defines them.

Former Qantas CEO James Strong has his bow ties, Richard Branson has his girls and grin, and Christopher Hitchens has made a brand persona out of smoking and generally looking like an English slob. That's his schtick and he's sticking to it... even if it kills him.

CAPTURE, CONVINCING AND CLOSE

But let's say you've got all your ducks in a row – you've identified a genuinely credible and interesting thought leader, you're prepared to name them and they've got something new to say, then how should you go about writing this material?

From a writing point of view, almost all thought leadership material falls into the neat structure of capture, convince and close.

I've outlined this in more detail in the article that appeared in PSF Journal (see editorgroup.com for a copy) so I'll keep my comments relatively brief.

Capture, convince and close says that you need to do anything within your literary power to arrest your reader. There are myriad devices here, from a shocking statistic in a headline to asking a question or telling a story.

Here's one example from the book by a Sydney lawyer called Andrew Lumsden. This is the first paragraph from a column published in the Financial Review last year.

In 2005 behavioural economists working at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, devised an experiment that involved one group looking at several jars of coins from a distance and estimating the value of the contents. The more accurate their estimates, the more they were paid.

This is a nice way to start a thought leadership article for a few reasons. First, he's not selling anything. He's starting by *giving* us an interesting story. Second, he's gone around the world for that story – to a university worth name dropping like Carnegie Mellon. Third, he's going to intrigue us with one of those experiments where psychology students always end up doing nasty things to each other.

I spoke to Lumsden about the piece and he said: “My main thing is make it interesting! So much of the stuff I see is just dreary. If you don’t get people captured by the first three pars, they’re moving on.”

The rest of Lumsden’s article goes on to do the second big part which is to convince. The trick here is to use every one of Aristotle’s main rhetorical groups to articulate your point of view and persuade your audience that it’s true. Those groups are logos, pathos and ethos.

As the Latin suggests, the first two are about the logic of your argument and any appeal to the emotions that you can make. Interestingly the third, Ethos, refers to the credibility of the speaker.

You see, even Aristotle would want your organisation to have stars and to name them, which was kind of mandatory in his day given that the only mode of public communication back then was standing on a step and shouting.

The most important writing technique in the Convince stage is the art of clear and concise writing and the well structured document. You want some literary flair and humour to keep your reader with you, but for the most part this is where you get down to business. That means conveying a maximum amount of information in minimal space, with absolute clarity. This is also a great place for analogies and metaphors, especially where you might be dealing with dry or abstract topics.

The final step is to close. In thought leadership, this typically means a rousing conclusion where you draw together the strings of your argument and call your reader to some form of action. Some common devices here are to end on an explicit call for action, a compelling quote, to return to some idea listed at the start or often to simply hand the thinking over to the reader.



I’ll delve into all these writing aspects in far more detail in the book, but I can send you to at least one great website if you’d like to see all these techniques and more on a daily basis. This is project-syndicate.org, the place where authors such as Nouriel Roubini (aka Dr Doom), Jeffrey Sachs and Joseph Stiglitz pool their columns after they’ve appeared in newspapers around the world.

The photo is Roubini, by the way. See, thought leadership also gets you chicks. I suggest you try this photo rather than any sensible argument next time you’re trying to get the cooperation of a partner or executive...

BENEFITS

That brings us to the question of why you should pursue thought leadership at all, and especially as a marketing technique.

The reason is that thought leadership works very well when your selling something intangible, such as the quality of your professional's skills, a government policy idea or a technology roadmap.

People's decisions about such intangible items are an act of faith so you can see why they are acutely interested in the credibility of the person or organisation they they're considering engaging with, and the quality of their thought.

Thought leadership helps you open doors, demonstrate expertise and build reputations. It also helps you shape agendas and, at best, will build trust.

Thought leadership then is a bit like dating. It gives you and the other party some time to check each other out and see what you think. They might look good but do they have a brain? If they have a brain, can you trust them?

The thought leadership material itself – whether it's a blog post or a book – is the conversation starter. It's the pick up line at the party. It's the hook.

In writing the book I wanted to find someone who demonstrated the raw power of thought leadership as a business development strategy.

By chance I found a wonderful book on the design of PowerPoint slides in a shop in Sydney by a lady called Nancy Duarte.

She runs a design firm of the same name, Duarte, in Silicon Valley which designed Al Gore's Inconvenient Truth slides, along with many others. Her clients include many top US technology companies and brands such as Patagonia. However, in 2006 and 2007 she was nervous. She could see the US economy slipping towards a hole even then and, having lived through the dot-com crash was seriously worried about her agency.

Her response was to lock herself away every night and weekend for two years to put down every piece of her best intellectual property into a book. I'll come back to whether or not that was sane, but the book itself has certainly done the trick.

The copy I bought in Sydney is one of more than 50,000 sold worldwide. At about US\$50 a pop that's already a \$2.5 million business. Let's assume she got \$500,000 of that personally.

But it gets better. The book has hit a nerve, in part because she's positioned it as the cornerstone of a campaign to save us all from bad PowerPoints – rather than just an ad. She even called the book Slide:ology. Using the 'ology' to allude to her new religion.

In turn, she's been interviewed by the *New York Times*, *Wired* and many other publications and media outlets. She's run herself ragged presenting and talking across America and around the world. She's also spun a whole new training business out of her agency and now runs a blog site that has been joined by other thought leaders.

But what about the impact on her agency? Not only has it survived the US recession, it has doubled in size to around 50 people. She's become the respected leader in her field.

In fact, she's defined a field that barely existed and in doing so also made it easier to hire staff. By single-handedly making slide design cool, she's now finding it much easier to hire talented designers.

Most interestingly, Duarte herself has discovered that she likes to write. When I interviewed her she had just returned from three weeks in Hawaii where she was finishing a second book. See, everyone likes to write at a beach house!

But what about that act of giving away intellectual property, because I know that many of you struggle with that? Your professionals are so reluctant to give away their hard-earned knowledge, but are they making a mistake? I think they often are; for two reasons.

The first is the karmic loop I mentioned before and that Duarte demonstrates. Give and you will probably receive.

However, the second reason is that people are often protecting IP that either isn't very unique or, even if it is unique, could help grow an entire pie within their industry.

Here is what Duarte herself told me on this topic:

“Some of my staff felt like we gave away too much in the book but I'm a big believer in sowing and reaping. Giving information away is important in this age. Several small firms have popped up offering similar services to ours which to me isn't as much a threat as it is a validation that there is demand to support (and create) a presentation industry.”

I like the Duarte story because it shows how a professional can paddle along for 20 years – as it was in her case – and do great work and be among the best and yet not be recognised for it.

By committing to thought leadership she has been suddenly elevated herself to world leadership status in this niche field. I'm sure that your organisation could do the same.

CONCLUSION

If I had to leave you with one call to action today it is to develop an understanding of what real thought leadership looks like then fight for it.

Far too many teams are generating long and worthy documents that are really quite derivative. They're based on large amounts of material that is already in the public domain and they're pulling their punches when it comes to furthering debate.

I know from our daily work that there are many reasons to pull punches, from difficult ministers to sensitive clients or a fear of releasing competitive information.

However, at some point material fails to qualify as thought leadership and, at that point, it also fails to achieve its objectives of opening doors, starting conversations, demonstrating expertise and, most importantly, convincing others.

Thought leadership is not for the faint hearted. But when it works, it really works. And, I would argue, it can be an awful lot of fun!

Finally, I'd like to share perhaps the most interesting and unexpected insight I've gained so far from the whole book process. That insight keeps coming up and was, strangely enough, captured by Tony Abbott at the Writers' Festival the other day. He said that 'writing leads to clear thinking'.

Whatever you think of Abbott, he's right on that point. Perhaps the biggest benefit of thought leadership writing is that it forces you to organise and refine your thoughts. This in turn will have a profound impact on your understanding of your field and your actions, no matter how many people read your writing.

As I say in the rather snappy Introduction to my book, which really will appear one day, I promise, "Writing isn't just something you do once you have become a thought leader; it will help to make you one."

Thank you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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