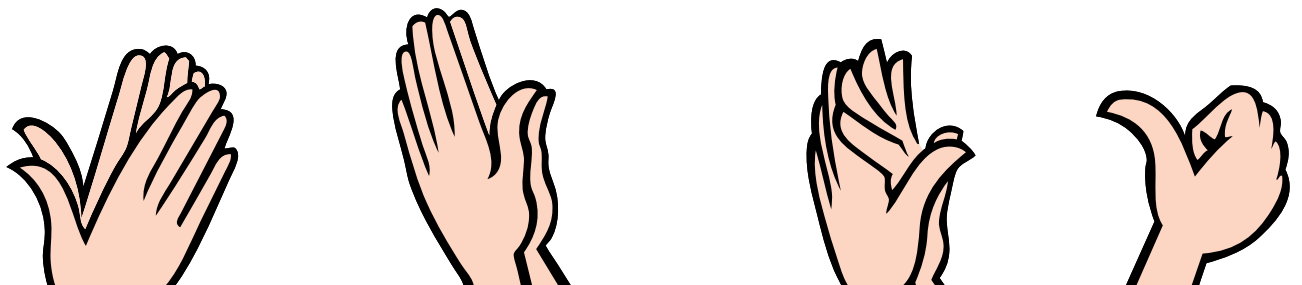




WALKING THE LINE: WRITING THOUGHT LEADERSHIP MATERIAL

Producing thought leadership material is one of the most important things a professional service firm can do to build business. But what is it, why do it and how should you write it?

BY GRANT BUTLER



Where on earth is the pizza? It's pushing 8 pm and for the past three hours I've been sitting in a conference room with about 10 fast-talking, frightfully well-informed professionals, plus more on video-conference, grappling with the minutiae of 600 pages of some just-released climate change legislation. Ordinarily there would be food on tap from the firm's in-house catering, but we're in the midst of the financial crisis so all those niceties have been cut to the bone. And the pressure is on – we're just one of several crews around town holed up in the top of large office towers trying to make sense of the new laws and produce a uniquely valuable summary to send out to clients. In fact, some other firms have already got theirs out, so we're under pressure to deliver something phenomenal.

Finally we hit 'send' on a draft for the partners to review at about 3:30 am. It'll be picked up, read, corrected, circulated, laid out and sent to clients by about midday the next day, which shows how agile large firms can be when they want to produce an important piece of thought leadership material. But as the writer, I've got to confess that anything written after midnight won't necessarily be my best work.

So, what are some simple guidelines for quality writing that you can keep in mind while walking the tightrope of generating thought leadership within a professional service firm? How do you ensure material is produced on the right topic at the right time and written well enough that it is positively received by clients?

WHAT IS THOUGHT LEADERSHIP?

Let's start by taking a step back – what is thought leadership material and why is it so crucial in service firm marketing?

Wikipedia defines 'thought leader' as "a buzzword or article of jargon used to describe a futurist or person who is recognised among peers and mentors for innovative ideas and demonstrates the confidence to promote or share those ideas as actionable distilled insights". The online encyclopedia goes on to say that the term was first coined in 1994 by Joel Kurtzman, Editor-in-Chief of *Strategy & Business* magazine, which is published by Booz & Company, to describe a group of figures such as Charles Handy and Paul Romer who had contributed new ideas to business.

'Thought leader' has since spread into other fields beyond management to capture the idea of any individual or organisation that progresses the thinking in a field. Along the way, it has seemed to vacuum up the good old-fashioned term 'expert'. In many ways the two terms are synonymous, but 'thought leader' is a bigger concept because it says that someone is both an expert and that they want to change other people's views. This gives it an evangelical edge that can be easily seen in the likes of property developer Donald Trump, self-help guru Anthony Robbins or the famous economist Paul Krugman.

THE BENEFITS

In practice, thought leadership material typically includes articles, books, white papers, columns, speeches and research studies. The benefits of producing such items are myriad. They build a person's or firm's profile, telegraph expertise, establish credibility, start new conversations with clients, bust into other people's accounts through novelty of thought and shape agendas. Thought leadership can play a powerful role in building trust between your firm and its clients.

Andrew Lumsden, a partner at national law firm Corrs Chambers Westgarth, says he finds value in writing occasional newspaper columns. In late 2009, he wrote an article called 'Son of Wallis – disclosure for the 21st century' that was published in *The Australian Financial Review*, discussing how the global downturn may have raised the need for a new inquiry into Australia's finance system.

According to Lumsden, writing such pieces helps him stir debate. "Usually it doesn't take too long to write it," he says, adding it might take him four hours to write a column. "Polishing is the hard bit. Op ed-style pieces are tricky; it's 800 words and you've got to try to make a point quickly and in a way that's interesting and topical.

"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 paragraphs, they're moving on."

STRUCTURE: CAPTURE, CONVINCING AND CLOSE

A first key principle is that almost all persuasive material should capture the audience's attention, build a convincing case and then close in a way that motivates the reader to some course of action – from simply changing their mind to making a phone call.

A great place to seek inspiration is journalism or the opinion pages of newspapers. Here, almost every article has been carefully constructed to hook you in and then keep you reading. From a writing point of view this means the linguistic equivalent of bright flashing lights: strong language, colourful anecdotes, unexpected statistics, thought-provoking questions, heartbreaking pathos and so on. And yes, this is possible even in rarefied worlds like law, accounting, management consulting or engineering.

An example is this elegant start to a long piece on consumerism by economist Henry Ergas that appeared in *The Weekend Australian*: "Will we run out of things to consume? John Maynard Keynes thought so. He explained his reasoning in an essay, 'Economic Prospects for our Grandchildren'."

Ergas went on to argue his case at length with various points, facts and figures – which was the convincing part – then closed with this matching bookend: "It is that tension, between private dynamism and public inertia, that will continue to frame our lives in ways not even Keynes could have imagined."

"Thought leaders earn trust by delivering valuable information with no strings attached."

STEVEN VAN YODER

STORYTELLING

From the Bible onwards, another powerful technique is storytelling. An excellent book here is *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling* (Wiley, 2005) by Australian-born Stephen Denning. Denning tells of his experiences trying to effect change within the World Bank and how he achieved breakthroughs by moving from stilted PowerPoints full of numbers and dot points to telling simple stories about real human beings and how the Bank's work had impacted their lives.

The power of storytelling is twofold in writing. First, it helps to give material a flow and, like the Bible to *Pride and Prejudice* and *Grey's Anatomy*, to embed information and morals in an easy-to-digest form. The second is that it forces an author to come up with an example of what they're talking about – either drawn from their own life, the organisation or further afield. If a tax partner can't list one business that has gone broke because of a particular law they're arguing against, will anyone believe it's a problem?

USE ANALOGIES AND METAPHORS

Analogies and metaphors are key rhetorical devices for making complex ideas simple and memorable. They're also great for humour, as the current Lord Mayor of London and often brilliant writer Boris Johnson uses to devastating effect. Here's Boris talking about Tony Blair: "He is a mixture of Harry Houdini and a greased piglet. He is barely human in his elusiveness. Nailing Blair is like trying to pin jelly to a wall."

Of course, it can be hard to be so colourful when writing within a large, blue-chip professional service firm. But even then there are plenty of word images and allusions that can be used to convey a point. A famous wielder of metaphors who, unlike Boris, has never been known to drink, smoke or make racist jokes, is Warren Buffett. For example: "In the business world, the rear-view mirror is always clearer than the windshield."

HARNESS HISTORY

As Henry Ergas showed, one of the most powerful techniques you can use to prove a point is to cite historical events or great figures, thinkers or institutions. This tends to show you or the person you're ghost writing for is well read and has done their homework. It adds instant weight and is terribly easy to do these days because the Internet makes it so quick to find a related idea, quote or anecdote. As an author, it also tends to give you a great way to add 'colour' to an article or speech in situations where you can't find a human story to illustrate a point that you are trying to make.

"The reason reporters call these people gurus is that they're not sure how to spell 'charlatan'."

PETER F. DRUCKER

SHOW SOME STYLE

Your copy should be succinct, to the point and precise. This means cutting out 'flabby' words which add little value, like 'that' and 'in relation to'. It also means ensuring each sentence and paragraph provides valuable information, any facts are correct and your phrasing is unambiguous.

Such buttoned-down English can be very dull, so look for ways to add a bit of flair and retain your authorial voice. Try to ensure the piece has some underlying poetry (rhythm and alliteration and so on); avoiding tired words like 'leverage', 'innovation' and even up-to-date clichés like 'new normal'; and spice up your copy with an occasional interesting or unexpected word.

Here's an example from an article in *McKinsey Quarterly* about doing business in emerging markets. This author borrows the word 'blowback' from the military as a metaphor, and simply because it's an interesting, onomatopoeic word: "In the days of the rudimentary pistol, unlucky shooters were now and then hurt when unburned gunpowder escaped backward toward their faces. They came to describe this unpleasant experience as 'blowback', a term that has subsequently gained wider application in military affairs – to any event that turns on its maker.

"Blowback is an apt term for the unexpected consequences of Western companies' investments in emerging markets."

You just know the article is going to be more interesting than something that starts, "In today's ever-more competitive emerging markets where leverage and ...".

FOLLOW A PASSION

No amount of great writing will hide a lack of passion on the part of your firm or the thought leaders it puts forward. Thought leadership is a tough grind that involves communicating often and with great fervour, and extensive background reading.

In turn, it's vital thought leaders develop their material around topics that genuinely interest them or else they simply won't read, write or speak enough – and with enough sincerity – to succeed. As US business and marketing thought leader Dr Martha Rogers says in a recent RainToday.com report: "You can't put the cart before the horse ... you don't sit down and decide to become well-known for something. What happens is that you have this 'something' that drives you so hard, that if you have the energy behind it and any communication capabilities, you end up becoming known for it." ■

Grant Butler is Managing Director of Editor Group and Editor of *PSF Journal*. Editor Group provides writing, editing, proofreading and training services. gbutler@editorgroup.com