



Thought Leadership – Piercing The Bubble

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News Flash: If you value your own opinion more than others do, you might be suffering from a common form of self-delusion. Referring to yourself as a thought leader makes you a tone-deaf narcissist; not necessarily a great thinker.

For my part, I'm in the process of trying to eliminate the term "thought leadership" from my vocabulary. This week, after months of reflection, I'll be instructing our team to remove all references to thought leadership from our materials. I want to free our team to think bigger, better, and in new and different ways. I want to remove the constraints of dependence on our own thinking, and challenge us to allow others to test our limits and stretch our thoughts.

Virtually anything can be improved upon – especially thinking. Why limit the art of the possible with self-imposed constraints? The best thinkers are not the most cloistered and sequestered minds, but rather the most collaborative thinkers open to dissenting opinions. Static thinking sentences the mind to mediocrity and eventually obsolescence. Thinking should never be bound by a destination mentality, unless of course, you believe static application to be the key to success.



Thought Leadership was once a term reserved for a limited few. Regrettably, the label of thought leader has devolved to become a self-bestowed title for anyone who has something to say or promote, often without regard for qualitative issues. Some would say that the term thought leader, once synonymous with futurist and innovator, is more closely aligned with snake-oil salesman today. Don't get me wrong, true thought leaders still exist; they are just far fewer in number than all the marketing hype would lead you to believe.

What is a thought leader? As much as some wish it wasn't so, a thought leader is **not** someone who simply restates someone else's views and positions. Furthermore, beyond uniqueness of thought, a true thought leader's positions also challenge established norms and conventions. Moreover, the true litmus test for a thought leader is when their unique ideas are implemented in the marketplace, they tend to create disruptive innovation, and often change the way we view the world.

Let me begin by stating that authentic thought leaders, the real deals, are not created via great marketing and PR alone. While they are oft published, quite outspoken, and many times represented by marvelous publicists, they are not merely contrived, self-promoted legends in their own minds. Rather, true thought leaders are born out of real-world successes, achievements, and contributions that have been recognized by their peers and competitors alike. Their work is widely regarded as being innovative, disruptive, and market altering. They are not the posers, but the players. They are not spin masters trying to make it, but are the undisputed market leaders that have already arrived.

It is also important to draw a distinction between personal or corporate branding and thought leadership. While thought leaders often become well recognized brands, there are many well-crafted brands that have messaged thought leadership where none exists. Don't allow yourself to get caught-up in the spin and hype associated with great marketers who will gladly accept compensation, but will leave you woefully disappointed when it comes to living-up to their billing. Look for real results based upon market leadership, and not just brand leadership alone.

I have nothing against the term thought leader, however it is my opinion the label should be reserved as an honor to bestow upon a select few, and not a title to be adopted by the masses. Dilution has the opposite effect of scarcity in that it diminishes value.

Bottom line... judge people on their actions and results, not their rhetoric or their title. Don't accept conventional wisdom as gospel unless you can validate proof of concept, and then only accept it if you can innovate with it, or around it. Look for next practices rather than relying on best practices. Challenge everything in business by looking to improve upon the status quo and differentiate yourself from your competition.



Lastly, when you run across a real thought leader, you'll clearly recognize them as such for there is something truly unique in both their words and deeds. Look for those focused on *what if* and *what's next*, not those offering just more of the same.