



The DIY Guidebook for Authentic Thought-Leadership Publishing

By Bart King
Founder and Principal,
New Growth Communications

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Introduction

The DIY Guidebook for Authentic Thought-Leadership Publishing brings together and updates a series of articles I've written on the topic over the last few years. It's based on my experience writing and publishing literally hundreds of thought-leadership commentaries, white papers, Q&As and other formats under my own name and for clients.

The guide is written for two different types of professionals. The first is a **thought leader**, or someone who aspires to be. He or she may be an independent consultant, entrepreneur, ambitious executive, or any other professional who sees value in stepping out and sharing worthwhile ideas and opinions with colleagues or the broader public. This guide aims to answer all the questions you may have, as well as a few you might not have considered, while also motivating you to sit down and start writing.

The second type of professional who can benefit from this guide is a **marketing or corporate communications director** who needs to develop and promote the thought-leadership of people in his or her organization. Whether that means ghostwriting for busy executives or hand-holding for shy subject-matter experts, you'll pick up practical tips that I've used in these situations and many others.

Each section is short and can be read in five to ten minutes. The guide is meant to be read in order, but can also be dipped into for reference or curiosity, if there's a particular section title that catches your interest.

Here are seven things this guide will teach you:

1. What is and is not thought leadership
2. What thought leadership is used for, and by whom
3. How to promote your expertise with humility
4. How to overcome the fears that hold back some thought leaders
5. Different formats and strategies for publishing thought leadership
6. How ghostwriters can help produce legitimate thought leadership
7. Best practices for pitching your thought leadership to media outlets

I hope you find the guide useful. If after reading it, you decide DIY isn't the best approach for you or your organization, get in touch. We may be able to help.

Bart King, Founder and Principal
New Growth Communications
Bart.King@4NewGrowth.com | 706-340-3140



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What Marketers Have Wrong About Thought Leadership

Some people cringe when they hear the term “thought leadership.”

To them—and perhaps to you, too—it’s just another marketing buzzword without any real meaning or usefulness. But I disagree.

I understand how the term got a bad rep. And if you’ll give me a few minutes, I’ll explain how it’s been misused and why it’s worth rescuing.

It’s Not the Same as Content Marketing

Publishing thought leadership for marketing purposes—a.k.a. thought leadership marketing— isn’t the same as content marketing. This misunderstanding is what I think has given the term thought leadership a bad reputation.

For example, here’s how web marketing guru [Michael Brenner misrepresents thought leadership](#): “I define thought leadership as a type of content marketing where you tap into the talent, experience, and passion inside your business, or from your community, to consistently answer the biggest questions on the minds of your target audience, on a particular topic.”

I’m OK with the first half of his definition, but not the second.

Consistently publishing the answers to your target audience’s questions is a legitimate strategy for building affinity and search engine optimization (SEO). **But that’s rarely thought leadership.** It’s a task for a junior copywriter with a list of Google search terms.

For example, a true thought leader isn't going to write a blog post telling people how to recycle printer cartridges or where to find a decent gluten free beer. Calling that type of content "thought leadership" is just silly. In fact, thought leaders are probably more likely to ask questions than to answer them.

It's More Than Just *Leadership*

Thought leadership isn't the same thing as leadership. It's not a case of using two words, when one would work just fine.

Leadership refers to the action of leading an organization, or the roles of responsibility within an organizational structure. Shelves full of books have been written about these two definitions, and we don't need to burden them with any additional weight.

Thought leadership is more akin to "strategic leadership" in that it involves inquiry, judgment and decision making. But it's more than just setting goals and how to achieve them. Thought leadership is the act of communicating the reasoning used to determine strategic direction.

So What's the Point?

Real thought leaders wrestle with the ideas that turn heads within organizations, industries and sometimes entire disciplines of human endeavor. They know the critical issues that should have been solved yesterday, and the emerging ones that need to be addressed immediately.

Publishing a thought leader's ideas is valuable for internal debates and alignment within an organization. It serves the same purpose for external industry audiences and has the added value of raising the visibility and reputation of the thought leader and his or her organization. In this regard, thought leadership publishing has tremendous marketing value to an organization, but **it definitely is not putting a leader's name or time on a bunch of search engine-friendly blog posts.**

The job of marketing or PR directors working with thought leaders shouldn't be to tell them what to write. Instead, their task should be to help thought leaders clarify their ideas with editorial processes that make the best use of their time, and to publish the finished products in ways that reach target audiences.

Thought Leadership and the Danger of Self-Promotion

There's one big no-no when it comes to thought leadership.

It can't be self-promotional. That's the first guideline you'll receive if you reach out to an editor or event organizer about submitting an op-ed or proposing a talk. Self-promotion is for marketing brochures and advertising, not thought leadership.

When a reader or listener shows up for ideas, but what they get is a rundown of someone's products or services, they quickly turn away. At best, they forget about it. At worst, they hold a grudge. That's the opposite of what thought-leadership is meant to achieve—trust.

If you earn someone's trust with thought leadership, you also earn the opportunity to tell them what you offer. But that has to come later.

Thought Leadership Separates Ideas from Applications

So let's get clear on the difference between thought leadership and self-promotion. In my experience, innovators often struggle when asked to stay on the thought-leadership side of the line. Because they lived the creative process deeply, **it's difficult for them to talk about the value of the ideas behind their products or services without talking about the products or services themselves.**

That's understandable. However, for thought-leadership content, it's necessary—and worthwhile—to clearly separate ideas from their applications. Going through the process invariably provides new insights and improves other marketing communications as well.

Four Approaches to Avoid Self-Promotion in Thought Leadership

When it comes to a truly innovative category of product or service, avoiding self-promotion can be as simple as talking about the problem and solution without referencing branded names, pricing or other specific details. But in other situations, finding the right approach requires more thought. Here are four tips.

Build around the takeaways – This approach is particularly useful for academics and other researchers writing about their work for non-academic readers. The focus of the writing should be to lay out useful conclusions. Only describe the research process (what you did) to the extent that's needed to support the takeaways. (The Conversation is a terrific outlet for research-based articles, [such as this one](#) by a New Growth client at the Ray C. Anderson Center for Sustainable Business.)

Share the credit – Another good way to avoid self-promotion is to give examples from the work of colleagues and other organizations. This doesn't mean you have to promote your competitors. If you need to, look to other industries or fields to find parallels. This will also widen the appeal of your thought leadership by demonstrating broader applicability and emergence of the ideas. ([Here's a good example](#) by a New Growth Client who drew on a podcast he hosted with two other design leaders.)

Focus on the need – This approach is particularly good for consultants, who can shine the light on their clients. Essentially, you (the consultant) use one or more case studies from your work to support the central idea(s) of your content. But by focusing the narrative on the needs of a client, or even an entire industry, you avoid presenting yourself as the protagonist. This approach also has the added benefits of giving publicity to your clients and proving your industry experience. ([Here's an example](#) I helped sustainability consultant, Tim Greiner, publish on GreenBiz.)

Give your opinions – Thought leadership is NOT reporting the news. It requires opinions—often about things that are in the news and about the way things should be done. This is what people look to thought leaders for. So don't be shy about stating your opinions and recommendations. They aren't self-promotion, but a bold, substantiated opinion will promote your expertise and cause people to remember who you are. (Here's a strong opinion that we placed for an academic leader on Corporate Knights: "[It's Time We See Paying Taxes as a Sustainability Issue.](#)")

If you succeed in writing a useful piece of thought leadership, editors and readers will typically grant you a sentence or two of self-promotion at the end. Sometimes it can be a call to action that points to another article or a white paper. Other times you may be asked to restrict it to a link in your author bio. Ultimately, if you're consistently publishing good thought leadership, people will remember you when a relevant need arises.

7 Authoritative Formats for Thought-Leadership Content

In addition to being a valuable service to your industry, true thought leadership is also a tried-and-true way to gain visibility and attract new business opportunities. Below are seven different formats in which you can publish thought-leadership content

Commentary – Also called an op-ed, the commentary is a short piece of writing (650-900 words) that presents a leader's opinion and perspective on a timely topic. (Here's [a collection of examples](#) by New Growth clients.)

White Paper/Report – A good white paper or report captures the collective knowledge of an organization regarding a topic that's important for its industry or customers. This format typically has a somewhat academic tone and includes solid supporting evidence, if not detailed citations. (Here's a terrific example on [sustainable agriculture practices](#) by a New Growth client.)

Ebook – This longer format is effective when you have lots of practical advice and information to share, and when the reader will benefit from taking it in sequentially. In other words, the last chapters are more useful to someone who first reads the beginning and middle. (Here's a dynamic ebook example I edited on [Enterprise Design Sprints](#).)

Reference tool – Checklists, templates, process maps and swipe files are all examples of tools people may want to add to their desktops for quick access. They can be tremendously valuable, but not many organizations publish them.

Q&A – This is probably the easiest type of thought-leadership writing to produce. (It's also a great format for video.) Just send a list of questions to a leader or subject-matter expert and edit their responses for clarity. The alternating questions and answers are inherently readable and personal. (I'm particularly proud of this [Q&A with Janine Benyus](#).)

Webinar – With so many people working remotely these days, webinars are more prevalent than ever. Essentially, it's a slide presentation delivered as an online event. You know the drill, I'm sure.

TED-style Talk – Whether delivered at an actual TED event or not, this 20-minute format has set the bar for compelling public speaking. The best talks are tightly structured, well rehearsed, visual, humorous and deeply informative.

Next, I'll share three content-marketing tactics that will help you get the most mileage out of the energy you put into capturing and sharing your ideas in these formats.

Tried-and-True Marketing Tactics for Thought Leadership

While similar in effect, the thought-leadership formats described in the last section are typically applied for different purposes within a marketing strategy. Keep these three tactics in mind as you consider what format to use, and how.

Build a Cornerstone Campaign

Depending on your marketing capacity, this type of thought-leadership marketing campaign could be done quarterly, or every six to nine months. It's built around a valuable piece of "cornerstone" content such as a white paper or ebook, which is typically offered as a download in exchange for an email address. Concepts from the cornerstone piece are then spun out into promotional commentaries, Q&As and/or webinars to drive traffic to the download.

Use Multiple Channels of Distribution

Unless you already have a large, engaged audience, it's not enough to simply publish thought leadership to your own website. To get the eyeballs you want, you need to send it to people's inboxes via your email list and promote it on social media. Even better, place those commentaries and Q&As with media outlets that already have the audience you're trying to reach. Or try advertising your webinar. You can also pitch to a podcast that might want to hear about your latest report or ebook.

Repurpose, Repurpose, Repurpose

The underlying and most important tactic in thought-leadership marketing is to repurpose your content across formats. Important ideas need to live in more than one format to effectively serve your industry and organization. Once you've captured an idea for the first time, it will be quicker and easier to rework it. For example, a white paper, TED talk or webinar can spawn one or more op-eds or Q&As. If you have a lot of practical blog posts on your site, they could be combined into an ebook. Or check to see if any of the posts could be turned into a reference tool. Repurposing also means you don't need as many brilliant ideas (which is a good thing for some of us! ;)

Practical Tips for Reluctant Thought Leaders

Common wisdom tells us people who don't want power often make the best leaders. Similarly, quiet people often have the most interesting things to say. Both situations can be a dilemma when it comes to thought leadership.

Contacts in corporate communications or marketing often tell me they have people inside their organizations who would make terrific thought leaders, if only they could be convinced to step up to the plate. These reluctant thought leaders are usually subject matter experts with both detailed and big-picture knowledge about their industries.

They aren't buffeted by trends and buzz in the industry. But they're hesitant to project their voices beyond the walls of their organizations. As a result, their full potential to the company, the industry—heck, even the world—isn't realized.

What's Stopping Them?

Have you ever been to a conference where it seems every Tom, Schmuck and Harry takes a boring turn on stage? Or what about all the threadbare ideas that people publish and re-publish online?

If these people aren't afraid to step into the spotlight, what's stopping the legitimate and unique thought leaders from doing it? Usually, it's some combination of humility, skepticism and fear.

Below are some tips for getting past these common roadblocks.

Humility - Some folks don't recognize, or don't want to admit, they know as much as they do. I find this endearing in a person. But in the professional realm, it can be a problem. These same people often don't read the opinion pieces published by colleagues. Deep down, I think they know they could do better. That's why a little goading sometimes does the trick. Try sending them a not-so-great attempt at thought leadership with a short note letting them know YOU know they could do better.

Skepticism - Is thought leadership legit? I've heard this from people I know are true thought leaders. They're busy folks who don't want to waste time on what they think may be a useless marketing trend. I get it. As I explained in an earlier section, thought leadership got a bad reputation from misuse of the term. Generally, these skeptics just need to hear the true strategic value.

Privacy Concerns - Some thought leaders, particularly older ones, conflate thought leadership with social media and its inherent loss of privacy. From a tactical perspective, it's a bonus if thought leaders are active on social media. But it isn't necessary—especially if the organization has its own social profiles and other effective channels for promoting content.

Fear of Public Speaking - This one's pretty simple to address. A thought leader doesn't have to speak in public. His or her role can be limited to the published word. Once captured in writing, others in the organization can represent the opinions and information in person and on stage.

Poor Writing Skills - It's the job of the PR or marketing copywriter to make sure the grammar is sound, the anecdotes are crisp, and the opinions are supported. The thought leader just needs to be willing to open up to the writer and review drafts for factual accuracy. (I'll discuss this ghostwriting process further in the next sections.)

Lack of Time - As with the reason above, the time burden can be transferred to a professional copywriter. For a typical op-ed, a thought leader can spend as little as two or three hours advising the ghostwriting process over the course of two to three weeks.

The important thing is to have empathy for reluctant thought leaders. By trying to understand what's keeping them from stepping forward, we can help them achieve greater impact in the world. For me, that's the most gratifying part of the job.

Ghostwriting for Thought Leadership

As much as 25 percent of the books on the New York Times bestseller list are ghostwritten, by some estimates. And if it's a memoir by a politician, celebrity or well-known business person, you can almost be certain a ghostwriter was involved.

Does that mean the stories and information in those books were made up? No. It just means the person to whom they belong didn't have the time or skill to write them down. Instead, **the person shared the ideas and anecdotes with a professional writer**—often a former journalist—who asked probing questions, determined a compelling narrative structure, and then worked to capture the person's unique voice on the page.

The same thing is done all the time with short-form writing. Whether it's a blog post on a company website, or an op-ed in a business publication, ghostwritten articles are an effective way to increase the visibility of a thought leader or organization, and to generate web traffic and business leads.

Is It Thought Leadership If Someone Else Writes it?

The quality of the ideas put forward is what determines whether or not a piece of writing is thought leadership.

It's true there are plenty of organizations out there hiring writers to crank out articles on their behalf, with little or no guidance. They may do it for SEO purposes, or because they want to provide followers with a steady stream of useful or entertaining content. Both are valid strategies, but that's not the kind of ghostwriting we're talking about here.

Thought leadership is when a credible expert shares unique opinions or information on the way that something can or should be done. It may be an op-ed on education policy. Or a whitepaper on best practices for supply-chain engagement. Or an e-book about the connection between urban planning and zoning laws. Whether the bylined author typed every word of the article is irrelevant to the purpose and effect of sharing the expertise.

How Does Ghostwriting Thought Leadership Work?

True thought leaders usually have enough ideas in their heads at any one time to generate several different articles.

As a result, the first task of the ghostwriter is often to help determine which ideas are most compelling. That's one reason former journalists make good ghostwriters—because they keep up with hot topics in the news.

After selecting and discussing a topic, the ghostwriter will usually create an outline for approval or revision. (I highly recommend using shared documents to track changes and suggestions.)

While ghostwriters do their best to write in the voice of the thought leader, the first draft is just to capture and present the ideas as accurately as possible. Then, as the thought leader reviews the content for accuracy, he or she can easily suggest stylistic revisions for “how they would say it.” (More on this in the next section.)

The complexity of the topic and the experience of the ghostwriter will determine how much revision is necessary. But on average, the ghostwriting process for a 1,000-word article should require no more than two or three hours of a thought leader's time. The ghostwriter, on the other hand, may spend up to 12 hours on an article of that length.

Ghostwriter as Interviewer or Editor

I find most thought leaders in need of ghostwriting fall into one of two categories—sometimes both.

The first is a busy leader who doesn't have the time that's necessary to write well. The second is a person who has important information and ideas to share, but doesn't have the skill to write well.

A good ghostwriter can adjust the development process as needed. For the busy leader, this typically means recording one or more interviews to gather insights and supporting details before taking the lead on the process described above.

For the thought leader who lacks writing skills but has the time and interest to be involved, the ghostwriter often acts more like an editor. For instance, **some thought leaders will lack the discipline to structure their ideas before beginning to write.** They're comfortable spilling lots of ideas onto the page, but it quickly becomes a frustrating mess. Here, the job of the ghostwriter is to help clarify the theme and logical progression of ideas, chopping away irrelevant text and ordering what's left.

Some leaders have the opposite problem. They struggle to overcome the blank page and need interviewing, outlining and maybe even a first draft before their gears begin turning. Once they do, I find these types of people (who would make great editors themselves) need little additional help—perhaps just a final pass for light copyediting and proofreading.

Make Them Sound Good, Coach

Ultimately, the ghostwriter's job is to make sure the quality of the final draft is as high as possible.

Often that means digging for additional examples and anecdotes to make concepts clearer. Or it may mean insisting on better structure or narrative pacing. For my academic clients who want to share research with practitioners in the field, it usually means pushing them to turn dry conclusions into timely opinions.

Lastly, the role of the ghostwriter can be to provide encouragement and accountability—like a coach. Thought leaders often have good intentions when committing to writing projects, but they get pushed down the priority list when things get busy. Friendly reminders and deadline agreements are key to keeping the collaborations moving forward.

Capturing a Thought Leader's Unique Voice

In the previous section we discussed customizing the ghostwriting process to gather a thought leader's knowledge and opinions. But there's more to it than that, because good ghostwriting also captures a leader's unique voice.

Two things constitute voice: the stories a person tells and the style with which he or she tells them. It's the ghostwriter's job to get both elements onto the page.

What's the Story Behind That?

Humans are hardwired to think in terms of stories. It's how we create meaning and remember information.

Good leaders naturally use stories to explain their ideas and connect with people's emotions. The ghostwriter works to harness the power of these stories in writing.

If a leader has been talking publicly about a particular idea for a while, he or she will likely already know what stories are most effective for getting points across. In these instances, the ghostwriter's task is simply to polish the narratives and find the best way to work them into the piece.

However, if the topic is relatively new for the thought leader, he or she may not have settled on the most effective anecdotes and examples. Here the job is to help **select the best material, make sure the narrative details are in place, and work out the timing.**

The writing process is even more valuable in these instances, because upon completion, the leader will have a confident, new arrow in the quiver. Finalizing the writing requires the leader to crystalize his or her thoughts and explanation. This is great preparation for future conversations and speaking engagements.

Say That Again?

Capturing a leader's communication style is a more nuanced task.

I record my interviews with thought leaders, because the written notes I take are invariably in my own voice and arranged in my own way of thinking. The notes help me understand what we're trying to communicate, and I use them to create a writing outline. But recordings allow me to go back and focus on style.

Good writing, of course, is different from speech. And the job of the ghostwriter is much more difficult than just transcribing a conversation. **However, a thought leader's rhetorical constructs, timing and phrasing can be lifted from a recording, especially when it's a well-rehearsed subject.**

In the end, it's up to the thought leader to make final copy edits for accuracy and voice. If the ghostwriting is well done, all the heavy lifting will be finished, and the content, stories and style will be faithfully captured. The leader only has to make minor tweaks, if any at all.

Bonus: 8 Tips for Placing Articles in Publications

So you're ready to start producing thought-leadership writing, but you're wondering how to get it in front of readers. Contributing to existing publications is a great solution. Here are some best practices to guide your efforts.

Aim High – If you've got a groundbreaking idea you believe belongs in *The New York Times*, go for it. You can always resubmit to lower-tier, industry publications later, if the Times passes. All you lose is time.

Consider Regional Publications, Too – Everyone wants to appear in national publications, but is it necessary? There are many more state and regional publications that could be just as valuable for your purposes—and much easier to appear in.

Pitch Your Idea First – Before you spend too much time writing, it's a good idea to pitch your idea—or several—to an editor. Rarely will he or she commit to publishing something before seeing it, but you can get good feedback and direction that will keep you from wasting time and effort.

Be Patient – You won't always get a response from editors. This is where it takes dedicated effort to follow up and stay on top of submissions. Hire a solo PR practitioner if you don't have someone in house who can do it.

Don't Pay for Play – There are a few exceptions to the rule, but in general, you should not pay to publish your thought-leadership writing. You also won't get paid. The publication is getting good content, and in return, you're getting exposure to their audience.

Don't Be Too Self-Promotional – Editors won't publish articles explaining how great your product or service is. They will, however, consider an article that explains how general products or services like yours are helping the industry. (Go back to section two in this guidebook for more detailed advice.)

Keep It Brief – This is especially true for online content. The sweet spot is typically between 650-900 words.

Hire a Professional Writer – True thought leaders can rattle off a half-dozen good ideas for articles. But they tend to be too busy, or too close to the subjects, to write them effectively. A good ghostwriter can capture a leader's ideas and voice in relatively little time.

This list was first published in the report, [21 Green Building Publications That Want Your Articles.](#)

Let's Wrap This Up

I hope this guide answered most of your questions about thought leadership.

At New Growth Communications we're passionate about helping clients express their expertise. In bringing our skills and effort to their ideas, we feel we're helping to make the world a better place.

If you have a thought leadership program for which you're trying to get better results, or if you're trying to launch one, I'm happy to talk about how we might help.

Bart King, Founder and Principal
New Growth Communications
Bart.King@4NewGrowth.com | 706-340-3140

