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Thought Leadership Isn't Necessary: Lessons for How You Can Flourish Without It

By Michael W. McLaughlin, Contributing Editor

As I wrapped up a recent workshop on the five essential strategies of professional services marketing, I knew one person in the audience was having none of it. You've probably seen a person like this before, or know how he felt. At each concluding point of the workshop, he'd shake his head in obvious disapproval, or simply stare at the ceiling.

When the meeting ended, he made a direct path to me and began a short rant, in a loud voice:

"Too much marketing advice is just plain wrong. I don't publish articles, white papers, or books. I gave one speech 12 years ago and bombed. I don't have a blog, LinkedIn account, and I never heard of Twitter until now. I only put up a website a year ago and I'll never publish a newsletter.

"In spite of all the marketing I don't do, I still have a seven-figure practice. This whole notion of being a thought leader to build marketplace eminence is nonsensical."

A small group of audience members had now gathered around us.

I understood his perspective. So much of the advice to services marketers focuses on building marketplace eminence through traditional strategies like publishing articles and books, and making presentations at industry conferences. And it's easy to understand why. No matter how strongly someone objects to those strategies, research conducted by *RainToday* and others tell us that these strategies work.

What's also true, though, is that thought leadership strategies do not and will not work for everyone. All professionals—and every services firm—must find their own marketing path which draws interest from prospective clients and is sustainable over the long-term. Remember, if you don't enjoy working on the marketing strategies you've chosen, don't expect big results.

The Aim of Marketing

Whatever method of marketing you choose, your ultimate goal is simple: create an issues-based conversation with prospective clients. In a perfect world, that conversation leads to interest in your service and eventually to a sale. If you're unable to create these one-on-one client conversations, expect your practice to flounder.

I eventually asked my questioner what he did to initiate conversations with prospective clients. His answer came quickly, "I have a group of influential colleagues who help me identify new business on a regular basis, and I have a great reputation among other service providers that result in sales leads."

After a few questions, I discovered just how much marketing this non-marketer actually does. His marketing strategy was based on contributing his time and expertise to improve the lives of people in his community and the effectiveness of his targeted industry associations.

To do that, he held a long-time leadership role on the board of a prominent, local charity and served as an adviser to an influential civic organization. He also offered his skills to his trade association by serving on the board of that group and leading special projects.

With this combination of activities, he could stay in touch with the people he already knew, establish new relationships, and generate referrals. Most importantly, he created conversations with colleagues and clients, and that fueled his sales efforts.

It's natural to think that this is a time-intensive way to market a professional practice, and it is. But keep in mind that the success of this type of strategy is well-documented. In a recent RainToday report, the two most popular methods clients use to learn about service providers are referrals from colleagues and referrals from other service providers. This individual's marketing strategy played to that reality.

Play to Your Strengths, Not What Others Want You to Do

When I asked why he chose to market his business in this way, he simply said that he enjoyed the work. He was convinced that his passion for the causes he worked on led others to trust him and to seek him out for help with their own business issues.

In short, this professional chose a marketing strategy that worked best for him, and it produced results. Why? Because it represented something he wanted to do, and it helped him to build his business.

Make no mistake, though. This individual is considered to be a leading authority by many in his field. He may not be out on the lecture circuit, but when he created a client conversation, he listened well, grasped the client's issues, and offered relevant insights.

He is a thought leader, but he came to that reputation by a different path than others.

The Only “Rule” of Services Marketing

The basis of any successful services marketing strategy boils down to a single idea. To generate productive client conversations, the marketer must have something to say and someone who wants to hear it. So, the first job of the marketer is to create a compelling point of view on the issues facing clients.

Without something interesting to say, nothing else matters. Once you've done that, then search for the people who want to hear your perspectives.

You have dozens of choices for reaching those prospective clients, from advertising to webcasts and everything in between. Some marketing strategies will work more effectively than others, but what matters most is whether or not your approach will create the client conversations you seek. You may find that direct mail or phone solicitation works best for you. If so, use those strategies and stick with them.

Some people swear by the power of their blogs and LinkedIn contacts, for example. If these tools work for you, it doesn't matter what others think about the strategy. You should keep doing it. And if you're not interested in public speaking or writing, then find another marketing path.

Your marketing effort isn't about means, but ends. It's too easy to adopt the conventional wisdom about marketing and miss the boat. Before you undertake any marketing strategy, ask yourself three simple questions. First, will this marketing tactic reach my targeted market? Second, can I effectively execute this tactic or quickly learn how. And third, do I want to try it?

If you answer yes to those three questions, you'll be well on your way to your ideal strategy for marketing your practice.

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