

What thought leadership isn't

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If ideas are the currency of the 21st century, who is buying into all these new points of view? When it's done right, with a clearly defined strategy, innovating thinking worth sharing will find willing customers, says **Samantha Page, group editor: health for John Brown Media.**



Samantha Page

Credit: Angie Lazaro

Do you remember your first ever TED Talk? For me, the year was 2008. The screen was black at first, like a darkened auditorium, and then the tell-tale tinkle – a drop of water causing a ripple effect – spreading ideas. I leaned in. The stage was lit, the house lights were turned down and 37-year-old neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor started to recount how she had had a front-row seat to her own brain haemorrhage. In four hours, she said, she had lost the ability to walk, talk, read, write and remember parts of her past. She had to relearn everything but, in a fleeting moment of lucidity during the cerebral chaos, Jill realised that she didn't want to reacquire the restless, constantly-driven, sometimes-not-so-pleasant parts of her former self. She would hold on to the peace she had discovered during abject physical trauma. We could all do it, Jill encouraged. The insight she had gained about the meaning of life was there for everyone. For 18 minutes, I was captivated.

Thirteen years later, when I think about that passionate, persuasive encounter, I posit that TED Talks were the precursor to today's thought leadership. TED was, and still is, wildly addictive and presents 'thinkfluencers' in a highly curated, choreographed space delivering memorable and shareable ideas that motivate action and agitate the audience to think differently, to examine their values and share what they've learnt with a colleague, partner or friend. Thought leadership can, and should, do the same.

But where does the train leave the tracks? Nowadays, everyone with a LinkedIn profile fancies themselves a thought leader. These creative soliloquies, which are often merely well-written articles, have been sliding into DMs (figuratively, of course) and virtual platforms around the world as marketing agencies attempt to woo prospective clients and demonstrate that they are a company of not just campaigns, solutions and data, but also experts, thinkers and futurists.

There's a fine line between true thought leadership (a distinctly original idea, a powerful top-of-funnel marketing tool, a journey of shared experiences) and the cheap imitation (blog posts, thinly disguised sales pitches, repurposed content

strats and a BuzzFeed-style listicle in response to a push from a manager). Ubiquity has, perhaps, diluted instead of distilled this invigorating storytelling vehicle at a time when we need it most. And, as that most excellent and villainous antagonist Syndrome declared in *The Incredibles*, 'If everyone's super, no one will be.'

So how do you do thought leadership right?

Thought leaders have the creative courage to move past the now and demonstrate a vision for how things could be. They share ideas about a topic that seems radical and ahead of its time, but these independent thinkers are fuelled by a confidence that drives them forward, and their vision is inexplicably contagious to their intended audience. There is no time to waste discussing the current zeitgeist when what can be is more exhilarating. Their ideas might not be completely new, but their take on it most certainly is, and the writer is leading the thinking on a topic or theme – not just reporting on it.

There's already a healthy scepticism given the rampant rise of fake news, so thought leaders can't simply wax lyrical about a revolutionary idea. They have to be able to support their assertions with reputable research and a coherent intellectual thread that ultimately answers the questions, 'Why should this information matter to me? Can it improve the ROI of my business, make me happier or bring clarity where there is confusion?'

If thought leadership is a strategic objective for your business, think about how each piece you put out contributes to the overarching brand story you want to tell, and what formats are most effective in conveying that message. Does all thought leadership have to be blog-style articles? What about a podcast or a 60-second video? How do you cut through the clutter with a magnetic message that attracts the right kind of attention? Instead of disparate elements that seem cobbled together, build trust and connection with cohesive ideas that teach you something in three minutes that you can apply for a lifetime.

All the most memorable thought leadership content has one essential element in common: there's an actionable takeaway, a friendly dare or a call to action. Don't allude to it, but rather tell your audience what you want them to do: be kinder, use data to dream, tell a compelling story, create the change you want to see, find peace amid chaos... Whether your platform is an actual stage or a virtual one, if you choose to lead, be clear about what you want to say, how best to say it and understand why you think it is important to say it at all. Now that's an idea worth spreading.

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