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Industry Perspectives

HOW TO WRITE FOR THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

STRUCTURE AND STYLE FOR EFFECTIVE THOUGHT LEADERSHIP WRITING

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Elements of thought leadership writing

In part one of our series, I talked about the importance of addressing both the intellectual and emotional issues your sales prospects are concerned about when they are considering a new solution. In this briefing we'll look at each of the elements of a true thought leadership article. I'll use the example of an article although many of the same principles apply to any thought leadership content such as scripting a webinar, video or podcast.

The first element is the title. Since thought leadership is about helping your prospects solve business problems, the title should be about a problem. It goes without saying that you should never use the old fashioned "white paper" title such as "How ABC Corp's Z-200 Solves the X Problem." That's advertising, not thought leadership. In fact, in the entire article you should never mention your company name or the name of your product or solution.

Thought leadership titles should sound something like "How Production Managers ...the X Problem" or "The X Problem: Industry Best Practices for IT Leaders" or "An Executive Briefing...the X problem" or "The CxO's Guide to...the X Problem." These title concepts are very specific to the audience and the problem. For example, if you are addressing a specific constituency within your target audience such as a CFO, then you would use "CFO" in your title. If multiple executives are involved in a purchase decision, then you may want to use the term "executive" in your title.

As a general guideline, the title should address your target audience (your reader) and their business issue as specifically as possible. The title of your content is incredibly important. Bear in mind that people within your target audience are barely scanning their email or your website. You have a nano-second to get their attention. So the WIIFM principle applies here, as in, **What's In It For Me?** Use your nano-second wisely. If your target audience is marketing executives struggling to justify their ROI for lead generation programs, the title "An Industry Briefing for Marketing Executives, Justifying ROI for Lead Generation" would probably catch their attention. Conversely, the title "Seven Myths about Marketing ROI" is too general and would likely fail the nano-second and WIIFM tests.

The next element is the opening paragraph. There are two schools of thought with regard to an opening paragraph. Some would argue that the opening paragraph should be an executive summary and others would argue for an intriguing "lead-in" paragraph.

In truth, both approaches can work if they are well written. The executive summary works well if it takes the form of “what you will learn” without summarizing the entire article. The what-you-will-learn format and for that matter a good opening paragraph should intrigue or tantalize the reader into reading further. In either approach, if you summarize every conclusion in the article or bore your reader to death with a tepid opening paragraph, you have lost the reader.

All great writers agonize over their opening paragraph because they know it is their one chance at enticing the reader into the body of the text. With an insincere apology to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, “It was a dark and stormy night” is going to lose your reader every time, so if you can’t make it intriguing, at least make it interesting. Another option is to plant the seeds of empathy by re-stating the title in a more personal fashion. Let the reader know that this article is written specifically for them and perhaps note some other directly related problems and concerns facing the reader and his peers.

How long should a good content marketing article be? As long as it needs to be, within reason. If you are writing about a complex, multi-faceted business issue, consider breaking it up into a series. Your article should be long enough to cover each issue you present in a cogent yet concise manner. Consider the content from the reader’s perspective. What information and supporting evidence are you presenting that your reader can act on? What information is utterly fascinating as opposed to moderately interesting? Consider that your reader has an urgent business problem. He needs to take action and make intelligent, well informed decisions. Edit out anything that does not help your reader accomplish this objective.

How you present information is just as important as how well you present it. I’m referring of course to layout. Here I will present what is either a brilliant pearl of wisdom or a personal pet peeve. Articles, briefings and even the dreaded white papers that are offered online should always be in single column format. Many busy decision makers quickly scan a PDF online before deciding to save it for later reading. Once they save it they will often read it on their computer or smart phone. A two column format forces the reader to scroll down to the bottom of the page and then scroll back up to the top of the page to read the second column. I find this annoying on a laptop and maddening on a smart phone.

Memo to the marketing department, the two column format is a relic of the print publishing industry. It does not translate well for on-screen reading. I shall leave it to you, dear reader to decide if I am imparting wisdom or ranting.

A good layout presents information in easy to read (or scan) “chunks”. One format that accomplishes this very naturally is the interview. The interview format allows the reader to skip over questions that are not of interest to them and hone in on questions that are. Introducing topics with a sub-heading accomplishes the same goal. The two formats can also be combined very effectively. Part or parts of the article can feature a subject matter expert speaking to one or two key points in different sections of the article. The combined format also breaks up the article in an easy to read manner or our aforementioned information chunks.

Never use arbitrary graphics for the sole purpose of breaking up a page. Every piece of content on the page should respect your reader’s time. If you use a graphic, make it a relevant infographic. Use a chart or graph to visually reinforce data that you are presenting in the appropriate information chunk. An image of happy business people in a conference room may appear esthetically pleasing, but it adds no value and gives your reader a reason not to print your article. Huge swatches of bright color also discourage people from printing your article. Meaningless images and graphic designers who have been left unsupervised produce PDFs that burn ink and take a long time to print.

It may seem like a minor point but a thought leadership article that gets printed has a much better chance of being read thoroughly rather than briefly scanned and then relegated to a stuff-to-read-later folder on a computer.

As a marketing professional, where would you prefer to have your thought leadership article, on your prospect’s desk or in a “read later” folder?

In part 3 of this series, we’ll explore how to design and plan a thought leadership marketing program.



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