



# Launch Your Thought Leadership Program in Four Steps



By Tami Hausman, Ph.D.

As marketers, you know that it's not only what you do, but how you promote it, that builds more business. And while your firm may have a strong portfolio that demonstrates your track record with project types, you must generate a variety of high-level, content-focused activities to get noticed.

Most companies trumpet the unique challenges of completed projects, but firms need to be forward-thinking about key trends changing the A/E/C industries. These days, leading firms sell big ideas. Instead of talking about their latest multifamily residential building, they talk about the future of housing. Instead of touting their most recent hospital, they talk about the patient experience.

There's good reasoning behind this approach. Professional services firms don't sell products or even services. Instead, they sell a promise that they can meet their clients' goals, overcome their challenges, and achieve their aspirations (what they want, not what they must have). That's why thought leadership is so

critical for A/E/C firms, because it gives you the opportunity to use your vision, expertise, and knowledge in ways that put your firm ahead of the proverbial pack.

If you're not engaged in any kind of thought leadership—or even if you are—here are four quick tips that will get you moving on the right track.

## 1. Define your terms.

Thought leaders are professional experts who are ready to answer the biggest questions and highlight important A/E/C trends and/or their clients' businesses. If your firm works in different sectors, you can promote multiple topics simultaneously, each targeted to a particular audience. These could include new systems or practices that help colleagues work more efficiently, or cutting-edge research that has wide impact across many disciplines and project types.

Even though A/E/C professionals work in teams, thought leadership is driven by individual experts. And, while thought leadership boosts the

reputation of those individuals, their collective knowledge contributes to and enhances your firm's reputation as a whole.

## 2. Generate compelling content.

Marketers play a critical role in the development of thought leadership, because they're the bridge between those who have the expertise, and your clients and potential clients who seek it. It's up to you to help your technical staff develop compelling topics that engage clients without being too broad or too technical, align with key markets and service areas, and achieve desired outcomes. You'll also need to inspire the technical staff to participate—some will jump at the chance to write or speak, others won't.

On the other hand, if your firm is like most, you probably have a great deal of content at your fingertips, such as materials produced for client reviews, in-house presentations about a project or topic, or a lecture given by a staff member at a conference or school. Maybe someone presented

an interesting idea at a meeting—why not promote it? And if you're coming up short, you can ask your colleagues for quick bullet points about a topic of interest or an opinion about a current trend or news story.

Keep in mind that the thought leader will need to know the answers to basic questions as they develop a topic. Who is the targeted audience? How do their unique insights compare to previous writings about the topic? What (if any) research supports the thesis? And what will the audience learn? Last, consider incorporating strong graphics, typography, and interactive charts to hit the points home.

### 3. Create a strategy for distribution.

After developing thought leadership topics that will resonate with potential clients, shape them into content pieces, such as articles or blog posts. Then, identify the right communication channels for distributing them.

Not all channels are equal; make sure you know which will be most visible to your various client groups. For example, a bylined article for a hospitality trade publication can put you in touch with decision-makers who select design teams for new hotels, while speaking at an industry conference might open doors to hospital administrators. Also consider writing blog posts with SEO-rich keywords, developing a monthly newsletter about infrastructure, or, for ambitious thought leaders, writing a book or a chapter of a book about resiliency. Finally, use social media to distribute your content, especially after it has been published or posted, and urge your thought leaders to post it on their personal accounts as well.

It's important to coordinate your timing and topics, and always strive to be relevant. For example, pitch or post your content about educational trends in August, when people are looking for back-to-school stories. Send out your year-in-review and/or forecast commentaries in early November.



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### 4. Get started.

It can be tough, but it's not impossible to rally your team around thought leadership. However, don't try to tackle everything at once. It's best if you roll out the program by breaking down the process into incremental steps. Start by thinking about what kinds of problems you're helping your clients to solve, then coach your experts to articulate ways that they've excelled in addressing those problems. Remember to use simple language, because your clients and potential clients may not understand design or technical jargon.

And last but not least, quantify your outreach with some metrics, such as numbers of impressions or circulation statistics. Metrics can help you reach a goal, but they're not the endgame. You also want to be consistent with your messaging, getting into the right types of publications, and covering the topics that will reach—and impress—your core audiences. Don't forget that clients want to interact and engage with your firm and its top experts. By launching a thought leadership program, you'll give them plenty of reasons to reach out to you. ■



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