

Why you shouldn't call yourself a thought leader

So before I start slandering this thing we call thought leadership, let's make one thing clear: it's generally a concept I approve of. In fact, I think it's great. I just don't think you should call yourself one. By all means, apply the principles. Just call it something else. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet as Shakespeare's Juliet would say.

To start, a short recap: thought leadership is a form of content marketing. It's a strategy where you answer the biggest questions of the day in your field. A thought leader is both an expert in their field and a leading authority. It usually comes in the form of 5 kinds of content: counter-narrative opinions, personal narrative, data storytelling, industry analysis, and network connections.

It's not just that you educate and illuminate consumers, clients and general interest people. It also requires you to distinguish yourself from your competition in the marketplace.

If you can pull it off, thought leadership is valuable. Studies show that done well, it delivers real return on investment. Having your brand associated with thought leadership bodes well for the opinion of consumers.

To what end? Well, for a start, you'll be seen as a company that's not only trustworthy but associated with excellence. What's more, if it's good, it gets

shared, and exposure is its own reward.

So now you're about to ask yourself, why shouldn't I pronounce myself a 'thought leader' if it's so great? A solid question. To which I not only have four reasons but some alternatives, too!

It's annoying business jargon

Forbes magazine anointed this concept as the most annoying business slang back in 2013. Without beating around the bush, that's as definitive as it gets. Do you want your brand to be associated with such a dubious prize?

What's more, its meaning is deemed frustrating, devolving into meaningless management speak.

It's over saturated

And since its ill-fated prize back in 2013, it hasn't exactly aged like a fine wine. It's like how funny people found Borat and Austin Powers impressions way back when. Try that now. See how many laughs you get.

Since the concept came on the scene, everyone started claiming it as a service. But by its definition, we can't all be thought leaders, right?

Just remind yourself of this cold truth: the business world isn't a nursery school sports day where we all get participation medals. It's the Olympics, with winners and losers. The minute everyone is a thought leader, then nobody is.

It has to be earned

The words of George R.R. Martin, "Any man who must say 'I am a king' is no true king at all", seem appropriate here. And in this context, it means a genuine thought leader shouldn't have to tell people they're 'thought leaders'. It should be intrinsically clear from their actions.

Here's the thing, if you're going to declare yourself a thought leader, you need to live up to it. Don't put yourself in the crossfire or risk looking a bit silly. If you realise you're not quite up to scratch, there are steps you can take to become an expert in your field.

Speaking to Spacehuntr CEO, Dietrich Moens on COVID-19 he said, "We wanted to keep growing, but couldn't do our usual work. If you rest, you rot. So our idea was to move resources to expert content."

Spacehuntr uses an in-house team to produce their *Expert Advice* section. However, he did say that they originally had been using freelance writers. So, if you don't have the team set up to execute thought leadership, you can always

just buy it.

Which begs an age-old business question – and another chance to reference some Shakespeare – to outsource or not to outsource?

It's arrogant and unrelatable

Thought leadership is just arrogant and unrelatable. It's a bit like showing off your money. It's a bit... unclassy. Nobody likes a show-off.

Thought leadership has been associated with being a bit egomaniacal. Perhaps *Dorie Clark* put it best when she said it was “very icky.”

So what do you call yourself?

Producing flagship content that is admired by peers, customers, and any passerby that happens to be interested is, of course, great. Thought leadership is great. But what do you call yourself if you shouldn't identify as one?

This is a discussion that hasn't been had in the marketing world. But there have been some notable ideas. How do you like the sound of being an Action Leader? This phrase is a thought leader with a wig. But it might just suffice. If Superman can fool people with a pair of glasses like Clark Kent, you can pull off thought leadership in the guise of an action leader.

Perhaps your content marketing strategy is more along the lines of differentiated thinking or differentiated content? This term is borrowed from the education sector, and in the context of content marketing, it's a fancy way of saying unique.

And finally, maybe you're actually an expert? An expert may sound similar to a thought leader, but it doesn't have the connotations of management jargon or share its intrinsic egotism. It also resolves the over-saturation fallacy of thought leadership: you can have many experts, but you can only have so many leaders.

Alternatively, throw my suggestions out the window. You and your team can always brainstorm your own ideas. Maybe have a look at what your direct competition is doing. I won't tell anyone. And, finally, if you really want to be a thought leader, then nobody is going to stop you!

