

# Thought Leadership 101

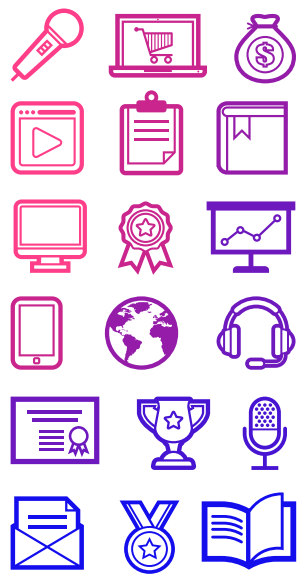
---

Building Your Brand Beyond The Stage

SPEAKERFLOW  
speakerflow.com

# INTRODUCTION

Within the **speaking industry** – and especially within the United States – one of the most commonly shared phrases of the last 20 years has been “thought leadership.” From **TED Talks** to book covers to online courses, the term “thought leader” has become synonymous with value. However, it also appears incredibly frequently, leading many established speakers to brush it off and many new and aspiring speakers to ask, “What is thought leadership, why does it matter, and how can I become a thought leader?”



With these questions in mind, this guide is all about the basics of thought leadership. In the following sections, we'll break down the origin of the term and to whom it applies. Plus, for any aspiring thought leaders out there, we'll also cover how to become a thought leader. That way, you can avoid the most common pitfalls and hit the ground running.

In a nutshell, although many consider it a buzzword, we'd argue that the term “thought leadership” still comes with immense value, and, by becoming a thought leader, you can dramatically distance

yourself from your competitors. After all, the more impactful and insightful your content, the more likely audiences are to pay attention.

So, without further ado, let's dive in!

# WHAT IS THOUGHT LEADERSHIP?

---

For starters, let's break down the definition of thought leadership. Created in 1994, the term "thought leadership" was originally used by **Strategy & Business** magazine's founding editor, Joel Kurtzman. According to Kurtzman, "A thought leader is recognized by peers, customers and industry experts as someone who deeply understands the business they are in, the needs of their customers and the broader marketplace in which they operate."

Kurtzman also explained, "They have distinctively original ideas, unique points of view and new insights." In other words, a thought leader doesn't merely contribute to their focus industries. They lead them, sharing new ideas and strategies to push the industry(ies) forward.

## THE MODERN DEFINITION

In more recent publications, a similar definition of thought leadership comes from Influence & Co's CEO, Kelsey Raymond. Like Kurtzman, Raymond **describes thought leaders** as "industry expert[s] who share [their] expertise with a broader audience for the purpose of educating, improving, and adding value to the industry as a whole."

She also stresses the distinction between mere industries participants and the thought leaders that lead them forwards. In her words, "Thought leaders are people who fully immerse themselves in everything about their industries; they not only understand the inner workings of their businesses, but they also know their audiences and competitors to a T."

## THE SPEAKERFLOW DEFINITION

Our definition of thought leadership is simple. In our eyes, true thought leaders are industry professionals who share and contribute to content in their focus industry(ies) in order to provide answers. These answers can address industry trends, challenges, or changes. But, above all, the goal is to provide education, direction, and motivation for everyone with whom the thought leader interacts and, in doing so, drive positive change in the industry as a whole. Essentially, everything a thought leader shares is intended to make the receiving industry better.

# WHO CAN BE A THOUGHT LEADER?

As broad and varied as the definition of thought leadership is, you may be wondering who can be a thought leader. The short answer is that, ultimately, anyone can be a thought leader. Although you may face obstacles depending on your age, gender, economic status, or background (among other factors), the greatest driving force for most thought leaders is their desire to help people. It sounds corny, but it's like the old saying goes: "Where there's a will, there's a way."

More specifically, however, the vast majority of thought leaders reach success through extensive experience. If you're in a scientific field, for example, your research experience will inevitably play into your conclusions and insights in that field. Whatever field you're focused on, the more experience you have, the deeper your conviction will be and the more audiences will be interested in what you have to say. This is true for a few reasons.

First, experience provides understanding. The more people you've known, problems you've solved, and successes you've achieved, the better you'll understand the nuances of each one. You'll also be more quickly perceived as an authority figure, making your content all the more valuable.

From there, understanding lays the foundation for relatability. If an audience knows you've been through the same ups and downs they have, you're no longer an outsider trying to "should" on their personal or professional lives. You're an expert that's there to provide guidance and support, which, again, will make your content all the more attractive.

And finally, relatability is key to building an audience. People follow thought



leaders when they can see themselves in the leader's shoes. By staying humble and continuing to build your industry experience, you foster that relatability, building your audience and your impact in the process.

# HOW DOES THOUGHT LEADERSHIP RELATE TO SPEAKING?

---

Speaking of audiences, in the beginning, I mentioned thought leadership in the context of [speaking](#). But how are thought leadership and speaking related, and can you do one without the other?

Although you can, theoretically, become a thought leader without speaking, the vast majority of thought leaders do speak. This is largely due to the added exposure you gain from speaking events, as the event itself can host anywhere from a handful of executives to several thousand people. Events also have the potential to be shared, after the fact, on a variety of online platforms. A perfect example of this is TED, which is shared on social media and marketed on the [TED website](#). In this case, even though the TED speaker isn't paid for the speech itself, their exposure can be wide-reaching, allowing them to sell their other products or services to online viewers afterward.

Additionally, from a sales standpoint, offering speaking programs as part of your thought leadership business is a convenient way to upsell potential or past customers. If you're giving a [keynote](#), for instance, you can recommend workbooks or post-event consulting. You could also recommend exclusive add-on services for which you can charge a premium, such as executive coaching.

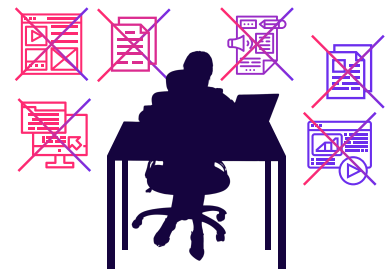
While events shared online can lead to future sales without your intervention, you have the opportunity, when delivering live speeches, to increase the monetary value of the relationship immediately after having an impact on your client. In either case, speaking functions as an important link in the positive feedback loop of thought leadership. More speaking leads to more exposure which leads to greater authority as a thought leader which leads to more gigs, and so on. The reward from that loop is huge, even if you're not a fan of public speaking.

# WHEN DOES THOUGHT LEADERSHIP FAIL?

At this point, it's important to note that not all thought leaders succeed in changing their industries for the better. In fact, there are many all-too-common practices that can cause a thought leadership business to fail, no matter how experienced the expert behind it is.

One of the biggest mistakes aspiring thought leaders make is producing content based on their desires rather than those of their audience. In sales, for example, it's easy to assume that your audience wants to hear about how to close deals. But what about the interaction between marketing and sales roles? What about the evolution of sales strategy in an increasingly automated, digital marketplace? Both of these questions are essential considerations when planning sales-related content.

Likewise, in your focus industries, look to your audience first. Then, plan your content based on the questions they're asking, the struggles they're facing, the changes they're seeing. Again, the more relatable you and your content are, the more your audiences will listen.



After choosing your topics, another common mistake is producing thought leadership content that's too vague. Now more than ever, audience members – and potential audience members – have a seemingly endless stream of content and information at their fingertips, thanks to the Internet. To stand out, your content has to not only focus on your audience's questions but also go into detail. This means including stats, quotes, recommendations, and clear next steps.

Summarily, thought leaders fail when they don't focus on their audience or drive them to action. Your job is to do the opposite and provide your audience with the tools and resources to implement your guidance in their own lives. That way, you're not just another speaker, author, or social media personality. You're a reliable source of information and positive change.

# HOW CAN I BECOME A SUCCESSFUL THOUGHT LEADER?

On the flip side, while there are certainly actions guaranteed to drive a thought leadership business into the ground, there are also strategies guaranteed to help it take off. Among these strategies, the most obvious is a consistent focus on improving your focus industry(ies). Nevertheless, there are also a handful of best practices, proven by existing thought leaders, as mentioned in [previous guides](#). Below, we'll cover eight of these best practices as well as additional resources to actualize them.



## REFINE THE FOCUS OF YOUR THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

First and foremost, narrow down your focus to a few key industries, if not a single one. Previously, I mentioned the common mistake of being vague in your content.

However, being specific is vital in

other areas of your business, too, especially in order to provide high-quality content and prevent yourself from burning out.

For example, when you visit a retail store, there are a wide variety of team member roles in action at a given time. At the front of the store, you'll see service representatives and cashiers, both helping customers. You'll also see team members organizing shopping carts and baskets, stocking shelves near the registers, and keeping the entrance clean. You've only just stepped into the store, and that's already five different jobs, all of which happen smoothly and simultaneously because everyone's focused on their specific role.

In the same way, your thought leadership can't focus on a dozen different causes or audiences at once. If you want to stand out and produce valuable content, you have to focus on your specific role. You have to think about where you have experience and in which industry(ies) you can have the



most impact. Within those industries, depending on which you've chosen, it may also be worth considering which team role you serve. Do you want to focus on C-suite executives or the team as a whole? Do you want to work with for-profit companies, non-profit organizations, or both? Giving your full attention to a few sub-groups is better than providing mediocre service to all at once.

In short, the best thought leaders know who they serve. No "pivoting", no "reinvention", no "overhaul". They stay the course and go deep in their expertise, so they're always serving their audience exceptionally well.



## CLARIFY YOUR MESSAGE AND VALUE PROPOSITION.

Second, after choosing which industries or groups to focus on, finetune your messaging. Even if you're working solely with non-profit organizations, part of thought leadership is selling

your ideas. That way, whether someone's thinking about hiring you or just signing up for your newsletter, they know what you stand for. To ensure your messaging is clear, there are a few areas of your brand to polish. Below is a non-exhaustive list for you to consider as you build your thought leadership business.

- **Promise Statement:** Usually displayed at the top of your website's homepage, your promise statement summarizes the benefits of working with you. These include increased sales, engaged teams, etc. Visit our [guide to writing a promise statement](#) to get started (or update your existing statement).
- **Value Proposition:** Your value proposition is an extension of your promise statement. Where the latter is only a few words, the former is usually 2-3 sentences that explain your value and how you provide it.
- **Mission Statement:** Your mission statement is a 1-2 sentence summary of your ultimate goal. Our team's, for example, is "Helping experts build better businesses through technology, strategy, and community."

In each of these areas, the key component of effective communication is clarity. Whatever your primary message is, it's important to be consistent throughout all aspects of your brand and firm in your conviction. If you're unsure about a message – or simply not passionate about it – convincing audiences of its value is going to be impossible. Even worse, if your messaging is ambiguous, they won't know what your point was, making

them unlikely to return for more.

As [Life is Good](#) CEO Bert Jacobs told [Entrepreneur](#), "Take a black and white stance on the issues you're an expert on; allow no gray. Gray positions don't attract followers."



## DITCH THE SELF-PROMOTION AND FOCUS ON YOUR CLIENTS

Step 3 of successful thought leadership is a simple one: focus on your clients. In a previous section, I mentioned that one of the biggest mistakes speakers make is writing content for themselves instead of

their audience. The same concern applies to every other aspect of your business, too. To put it bluntly, if you're talking about yourself too much, you are going to lose the attention of your audience. In fact, according to a [Grist survey](#) of 350 executives, over 80% said that good thought leadership content added value for their role.

But, when asked why a thought leader failed to add value, 53% said that their biggest complaint was the thought leader's focus on their own self-promotion. As a thought leader, that's a huge opportunity to make connections, generate referrals, and create a long-term relationship, all of which disappear.

To avoid this, center your content – from speeches to podcasts to blogs – on your focus industry(ies). If you share a personal experience, tie it back to your primary message and how that message impacts your audience. If you share a success story, keep it short and sweet, and stay humble.

Remember: you're not there to pat yourself on the back and talk about what an expert you are. Nine times out of ten, everyone in your audience already knows that. Instead, you're there – physically or virtually – to provide education, insight, and encouragement.

Looking over your content, consider each of these traits and ask yourself, "Am I meeting these requirements?" If not, and especially if you're saying "I" or "me" over and over, scrap it. It's better you have to start over if it keeps you from putting your foot in your mouth later.



## KEEP ALL ASPECTS OF YOUR THOUGHT LEADERSHIP POSITIVE

In addition to focusing on your audience, remember also to keep things positive. In many businesses and organizations, executives opt for the “carrot and stick” method of leadership. If you haven’t heard of it, the “carrots” represent the rewards and positive treatment employees receive for exceptional performance. On the other hand, the “sticks” represent punishments and negative treatment for poor performance.

It sounds common sense and, when balanced, it’s not inherently a bad idea. Unfortunately, many businesses using the “carrot and stick” method of leadership emphasize the “stick” aspect, assuming that fear will not only motivate employees but also prevent undesired behavior. Netflix, for example, **made headlines** when it emerged that they shared reasons for firing someone with remaining employees, usually without giving that person a chance to explain their side of the story.

As you’ve probably guessed, this strategy doesn’t produce improved results long term. Instead, in many cases, such as a **2016 study** from Harvard Business School, it actually inhibits productivity as employees hide mistakes rather than seeking assistance, leading to repeat work later on. Essentially, even though the threat of a negative outcome seems to work in the short term, it ultimately slows down the entire team.

Within thought leadership, the same dichotomy of tension and support exists. To drive your “team” – i.e. your audience – towards positive growth, focus on the latter. Give them direction and clear next steps, then treat them with positivity and encouragement. Only then will you empower them to tackle difficult problems and ask questions when they’re stuck.



## CONTRIBUTE TO CONTENT CHANNELS WITHIN THAT AREA OF FOCUS

Speaking of content, the fifth element of impactful thought leadership is support for other industry leaders. In the initial stages of building your business, your goal may be to

outshine everyone around you. Nevertheless, the more value you can provide in existing industry circles, the more quickly you'll gain acclaim there. It's also helpful to keep in mind that with every collaboration, you increase your chances of appearing in front of a potential client. That's an incredible return on investment for a few hours of your time.

Within the speaking industry, for example, we host our own podcast, **Technically Speaking**. But, long before it launched, we contributed to existing podcasts in the industry, too, such as the **Speaker Launcher** and **Speaker Lab** podcasts. We also shared written content through guest blog posts for industry partners, such as the **Motivational Speakers Agency** and **Virtual Assist USA**. In each of these instances, many visitors to the podcast or post went on to visit our website. Then, a percentage of them went on to make purchases, connect directly with members of our team, or subscribe to our marketing channels. In the end, we made countless connections, and it only cost us a few hours of time.

In your own business, identical potential exists for capturing leads. Even if you're just starting out and have yet to create your own content, contributing to that of other industry leaders helps establish your expertise and authority on the matter at hand.

Plus, sharing throughout your focus industry(ies) also adds to your approachability. People like – and, more importantly, like to hire – people that are generous with their time and knowledge. So, if you want to boost your chance of getting hired, be easy to collaborate with and giving with your resources, plain and simple.



## **CREATE YOUR OWN CONTENT (AND SHARE IT WIDELY)**

The sixth step is one we've touched on repeatedly in this guide, namely creating content for your audience. All thought leadership businesses are, at their core, content creation centers. Consequently,

the more detailed and valuable your content, the more successful you're likely to be. If you're not already creating content, there are a few essential elements you need to know.

- 1.** All of your content should be centered around the questions your audience is asking. To find those questions, conduct **keyword research** related to your focus industry(ies). Then, move on to the step below.
- 2.** Optimize your content for search engines. This practice (more commonly known as "**SEO-optimization**") entails strategically using keywords to ensure your content ranks at the top of a Google search list for that keyword. By extension, this also means more people in your audience will see that content.
- 3.** Create a wide variety of content, not solely blogs. We recommend blogs, podcasts, videos, social media posts, guest blog posts from other industry experts – anything that shares ideas and boosts your authority.

Aside from creating content, it's also useful to share your content across multiple platforms. If you wrote a blog, share the URL on your social media channels. If you recorded a podcast, link to it in your blogs and share it on social media, too. This multichannel approach means more eyes on your content and more exposure for your thought leadership.

So, to summarize, if you take away nothing else from this guide, remember that content is king. If you consistently share content within your focus industry(ies) – especially SEO-optimized content – you'll establish authority quickly and attract attention in no time. Win, win!



## **DELIVER YOUR MESSAGE THROUGH MULTIPLE FORMATS**

Step 7 of thought leadership is all about diversification, most importantly in how you communicate with your audience. In many speaking businesses, it's tempting for the owner to promote their speaking programs

above all else. After all, they make the most money for their business. Why shouldn't they push those most?

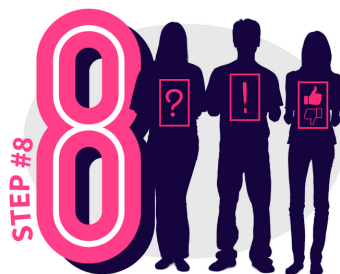
The answer to this question centers around the idea of a sales funnel. At its core, sales is a numbers game, so the eyes you can catch – and, by

extension, the more leads you can capture – the more likely you are to make a sale. This is true for everything from \$5 books to \$5,000 speaking packages.

That said, in order to consistently feed the sales funnel, the most profitable businesses produce small offerings, too. Think things like workbooks, online courses, even merchandise. These offerings, although small, allow you to catch people's attention and show them you know your sh\*t. Then, you can upsell them into more expensive offerings, such as speaking or consulting. Essentially, you're asking for their trust and attention in a small way, then using that established trust to expand your professional relationship.

Depending on your speaking topics, the formats appropriate to building this relationship may vary. The most important thing to remember, as mentioned above, is to focus on what your audience wants. If your audience is listening to podcasts, start a podcast. If they're watching videos more than reading blogs, bump up your video production efforts.

Whether you're offering books, speaking programs, consulting contracts, podcasts, blogs, videos, email marketing – you name it – operate with your audience in mind. Not only will it hold their attention. It'll also provide valuable information, leading them to share your awesome-ness with others, generating referrals without you lifting a finger.



## **ALWAYS LEARN FROM AND LISTEN TO YOUR AUDIENCE**

Finally, the last value of a successful thought leader is consistent and continuous growth. In recent years, thought leadership has become increasingly popular, leading to a similarly steep rise in competition.

Regardless of your focus, background, or experiences, you're almost guaranteed to be in a sea of other thought leaders like you. For potential clients and event organizers, this begs the question, "What makes you stand out?"

Fortunately, although this level of competition can be frustrating, there's one easy way to consistently rise above the crowd, namely staying vigilant about what is and isn't working in your business. In other words, rather than

always comparing yourself to others, remember to also compare your present with your past.

Take marketing, for example. If you switched your focus from one topic to another, then saw a drop in blog subscribers, you'd think, "Maybe that switch wasn't a good idea." Alternatively, if you saw a blog was attracting a lot of website traffic, you'd think, "I should write more on this topic!"

Another example is speaking styles. Let's say you gave two speeches, one that was formal and one that was more relaxed. If the relaxed one appealed more to the audience and helped them better remember your message after the event was over, you'd continue using that style in the future.

In every area of your thought leadership business, this attitude applies. Content types? Check. Sales strategies? Check. Even small details like the clothes you wear or words you use in speaking programs? Check and check.

Every aspect of your thought leadership should be based on the simple comparison of what's working and what isn't. That way – combined with the feedback you receive from clients – you can be confident you're moving in the right direction.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, establishing your authority as a thought leader is a long game. Whether you're an experienced entrepreneur or a brand new one, looking to share your ideas through a personal brand, thought leadership takes time and dedication above all else. That said, you can never have too many resources, and no aspiring thought leader failed because of too much help. Hopefully, as you build your own personal brand and thought leadership, this guide is one of those resources that helps you take off.

For more information about becoming a thought leader and building your brand, as an expert, join us at SpeakerFlow University! Between our coaches, content, coursework, and cutting-edge strategy, our mission to help you build your business as efficiently (and with as little stress as possible). Plus, with a community of speakers in SFU, you'll have a support system when an obstacle arises – guaranteed.

Visit our SFU page or shoot us an email at [hello@speakerflow.com](mailto:hello@speakerflow.com) to learn more, and hope to see you there!

# Questions or Comments?

---

Contact us at  
**hello@speakerflow.com**  
and let us know what you  
think!

SPEAKERFLOW  
speakerflow.com