

Best Practices in Raising the Profile and Protecting Professional Services Brands

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From global law and management consulting firms to accounting and engineering firms, the competitive need to aggressively promote brand, talent and POV on key business issues has become imperative to differentiating and achieving a thought leader status. That thought leadership is the heart of business development at professional services firms and core to the DNA of the best rainmakers. It is something that needs to be constantly attended to and refreshed with new ideas and content, or irrelevancy and loss of leadership can quickly set in.

Developing an effective thought leadership plan involves many ingredients, including top PR professionals, thoughtful messaging, and careful orchestration. Here are some of the key steps to driving a successful thought leadership campaign:

- Building out a roster of engaging spokespersons that can represent the company well and offer strategic insights
- Determining the key themes and trends generating news while focusing the messaging and positioning for each spokesperson
- Developing an immediate response agency team that is dedicated to the client
- Establishing a media strategy and interaction approach for key media
- Creating an integrated program that combines content, visibility and digital initiatives
- Staying vigilant and inoculating the brand for potential crises

First, when we work with professional services spokespersons, we try to understand the burning business issues they are advising clients on at that moment and what potential pitfalls lie ahead. We determine what clients are struggling with and the consequences for non-compliance, especially with new regulations. In many cases, we identify opportunities for businesses, where there is great potential for revenue growth, or tax and cost savings associated with change in laws or tax code. Recent trending topics where we have brought clarity of consequences or opportunity to interact with the media include tax reform, GDPR, cannabis legislation, data breaches, and wealth transfer.

A campaign's success is dependent on understanding the news and selecting emerging trends that will become bigger, sustained stories in the near future. Tracking themes related to a spokesperson's expertise is a 24/7 diligence where our team is monitoring for opportunities to have spokespersons address the latest business issue or industry trend. The agency team is critical to making this work seamlessly and pay-off. The team must be dedicated and have relationships with influential journalists to be in the right place at the right time. Speed is critical, especially with the breaking news cycle, where the agency must secure national print and broadcast appearances before the rest of the world piles on.

Just as important, each spokesperson needs to build strong relationships with the media. We've found one of the most effective methods is by having introductory conversations with the media where the spokesperson can offer insights and information to key reporters ahead of any breaking news stories. For a partner at a law firm, we arranged a briefing for an editorial team at a major newspaper and a group of producers at a national network on GDPR. The meeting cemented the relationship by featuring our expert in a purposeful manner and the media received valuable information to better report on how the upcoming event could affect business.

This method led to many additional interviews on topics addressed during the briefing. For an accounting firm that competes with larger, Big Four competitors, we started our campaign by making media introductions and providing background calls where the firm's top partners would explain complex tax reform issues to reporters and editors over 45 minutes. The time invested and relationship building phase with key reporters led to our team delivering over 60 media placements with top tier print and online media in one year, as well as broadcast TV appearances on Fox Business, Bloomberg, Fox News, NBC, and MSNBC. By nurturing relationships with top-tier business and financial media and bringing spokespersons and media together to collaborate on story development, our team was able to position this accounting firm as the "Go-To Tax-Experts" with the most influential media outlets.

Once a media thought leadership campaign is in place and off to a good start, the next step is to integrate it with executive visibility, digital and content-building efforts. The goal is to expand reach and influence using myriad initiatives.

We submit our spokespersons for speaking roles at industry conferences or key events where they can speak directly to executive decision makers. This includes keynotes, serving as a panelist, or simply networking with key players and industry media. On the content end, some of the most successful thought leadership campaigns are fueled by a pithy and punchy blog focused on key themes driving the program or a series of byline articles in top-tier and key trade outlets. Many media outlets are looking for new perspectives on national business issues so there are plenty of opportunities for top-notch visibility. In fact, we recently introduced a new partner specializing in the food industry at an accounting firm to a reporter at Forbes. The conversation went so well, the Forbes reporter asked the partner to serve as a monthly contributor to the news outlet. For an attorney specializing in privacy and litigation, we were able to use a national news item to place a byline in a well-respected Washington, D.C. outlet.

Digital is also a powerful thought leadership tool. The thought leadership media coverage generated for spokespersons and their firm is "gold" on all social media channels carrying the endorsement of the top media in the world. We also utilize video to help breakdown and explain complex issues, which can be repackaged easily for social media channels. In addition, Facebook Live allows your spokespersons to hold their own events, such as roundtables and panels, where you can invite interested executives as guests to join the conversation. LinkedIn is hungry for original business content on their platform and will use SEO and powerful algorithms to bring the most readers to the new content as an incentive. An influencer campaign also works well to target and engage interested Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) that are driving conversations around key themes. The right approach can result in them carrying forward your message and brand.

Finally, every effort towards building thought leadership and strengthening the brand of spokespersons and the firm is the strongest defense strategy in preparation for a crisis. The reputation and goodwill developed through a thought leadership program helps businesses weather unanticipated crisis events. Still, how a firm responds to and manages crises can either strengthen or erode reputation and affect stakeholder confidence for many years to come. For professional services firms, we have managed many crises, including data breaches, litigation, regulatory scrutiny of audits and compliance, top partner or CEO departures, misconduct in the workplace, regulatory impact on business, etc. What matters most in these situations is an open channel with the client, scenario planning and messaging, strong reporter relationships and a team of crisis experts ready to act. With the right process and team, you can successfully communicate broadly to the full range of stakeholders and ensure your positive messaging and brand is protected.

Developing a successful thought leadership plan is critical for gaining visibility as an industry expert and attracting new business. Having a dedicated team of public relations professionals to advance your message, build key media relationships, protect your brand, and raise your profile is essential to your campaign's success.