

Develop Your Business and Enthusiasm by Becoming a “Thought Leader” in Your Field

by Amy Kosterlitz

In order to control their destinies and find greater fulfillment in the practice of law, newer attorneys must be able to build their client base. This is especially true in these tough economic times, where law firms are using the ability to generate business as a major criterion for determining partnership status and compensation. Thus, more lawyers, including young associates, are recognizing the importance of generating business. While the ability to generate business is more important than ever, the vision and skills required to make it happen are not always easy to come by. To be effective, business development efforts require genuine enthusiasm, sustained and focused effort, and memorable content.

Your approach to generating business should focus not only on how you're going to market your services, but also on what unique values and ideas you have to offer. A highly effective way to capitalize on the value you offer, and to get others to seek your services, is to position yourself as a “thought leader” in your field. A major benefit of becoming a thought leader is that you're likely to engage more deeply with your areas of interest, thereby increasing your enjoyment of your practice.

So what is a “thought leader”? The term has become a bit of a buzzword in professional services marketing. It was apparently coined by Joel Kurtzman, founding editor of *Strategy + Business* magazine, as the selection criterion for people to be profiled by the magazine. A thought leader is a person recognized by peers, customers, and industry experts as someone who fully understands their business, their customers' needs, and the broader context in which they operate. Thought leaders increase their visibility by becoming recognized thinkers and contributors in their practice areas. Thought leaders have original ideas and insights or reframe what we know in an innovative and more effective way.

Legal marketing expert Shelley Dunstone explains the value for lawyers: “Becoming a thought leader is a great way to build a client following. It helps you to stand out from the crowd and to elevate yourself out of a category. It showcases your subject matter expertise and helps position you as an expert. It builds ‘profile’ so that clients are attracted to you and what you have to offer.” This approach to marketing stands in stark contrast to more conventional marketing efforts that merely advertise one's credentials or expertise. The thought leader approach also stands out from more traditional marketing speeches or articles that simply summarize the state of the law without adding an original take on the important issues and how they should be addressed.

How does one become a thought leader? While the title sounds grandiose, there are numerous ways to stand out in your area of practice, and many examples of ordinary lawyers who have achieved this status. While thought leadership generally involves a thorough understanding of one's area of practice, a strong grasp of current events, and the ability to spot emerging trends, it can also result from simple willingness to come up with fresh ideas or new perspectives. Rather than merely summarizing

the law, thought leaders change the law, predict trends, and take stands on controversial issues. Thought leaders address the concerns and needs in their industry, give guidance, and are sought after as a trusted source of information and advice for clients, peers, and the media.

For example, the diversity of “creative contributors” (thought leaders) in the field of environmental law is described by University of Washington law professor William H. Rodgers Jr. in his article, “The Most Creative Moments in the History of Environmental Law: The Who's.”¹ Rodgers defines a creative contribution worthy of recognition as “any legal initiative that advances the subject with new levels of analysis, structure, or institutional bridges.”² He categorizes types of creative contributors variously as “risk-takers, mimics, optimists, symbolists, geniuses, subversives, leveragers, opportunists, paradigm-shifters and workaholics.” He catalogues creative contributions as small as a shared “aha” moment and as large as years of persistence in complex litigation. Rodgers concludes his article with the observation that “this survey of the ‘who’s’ of the subject is meant to be encouraging. There are many ways to be creative and many types of personalities who have won recognition for their creativity.”³ Most attorneys could fit somewhere in Rodgers's creative categories.

Next, consider how becoming a thought leader can help you develop your practice and what contributions you can make. As part of this exercise, ponder the following questions: What kind of law practice or clients do you want? What issues interest you? What is the unique value or perspective that you offer? What is original or engaging about your style? What would you like to be known for? Whom do you want to be known amongst? The answer to these important questions will allow you to focus your energy in the areas most suited to your strengths, passions, and abilities, where you are most likely to make a meaningful contribution and gain recognition.

It is also important to understand what your prospective clients need and how you can meet those needs. To better assess potential clients' needs, read up on trends in your industry, ask existing clients questions, and listen. Your efforts should be focused on finding that “sweet spot” where your strengths and interests converge with marketplace demand.

Becoming a thought leader can be a daunting challenge, especially given the daily demands of a busy law practice. However, in the end, the thought leader approach to marketing may end up saving you time and energy over more traditional and less effective marketing strategies. And it may not be as difficult as it appears — you likely have more to say than you realize if you carefully reflect on your experiences and the valuable lessons and insights these experiences have provided to you.

Finally, the process of becoming a thought leader can renew your enthusiasm for your field and remind you why you decided to concentrate on that area in the first place. Being a thought leader will also better enable you to solve your clients' problems. With so many benefits, what are you waiting for? ♦

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Notes

1. William H. Rogers Jr., *The Most Creative Moments in the History of Environmental Law: The Who's*, 39 Washburn L.J. (1999).

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.* at 27.

