



3 Steps to Becoming a Thought Leader

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The struggle in differentiating yourself in a fiercely competitive marketplace was recently summed up on the TV show "The Newsroom," when the brusque news anchor played by Jeff Daniels interrupts his vacating executive producer, who is clumsily explaining his departure, to inform him, "Please - I'll replace you in five minutes."

Unfortunately, while the show is fictional, the sentiment behind the statement is not. In today's hypercompetitive workforce, it's increasingly difficult to make yourself irreplaceable and separate yourself from your peers. Make no mistake – clients have more options than ever these days when it comes to meeting their legal needs. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that the number of attorneys in the United States will grow by nearly 10 percent between 2010 and 2020, creating even more competition. More than ever, clients are going to be drawn to the attorney who offers something above and beyond the industry standard. That's why becoming a thought leader is so important to not only increasing your value to clients, but also in setting yourself apart from the crowd.

Becoming a thought leader is not a process that occurs overnight. But the sooner you start taking steps toward establishing yourself as one of the "go-to" voices in your industry, the sooner you start reaping the rewards. Here are three ways you can improve your presence as a thought leader.

Writing

A glance through any legal publications reveals a number of articles authored by attorneys, ranging from legal analysis on current topics to best practices and "how-to" pieces. These articles accomplish more than providing an attorney with fodder for their resume; they also serve to position them as leaders in their field. You may only be one of dozens of lawyers at your firm who focus on employment law, but by getting your name attached to a creative or innovative article, you've immediately jumped to the forefront of potential clients' minds.

Marketers and advertisers typically refer to the phrase "top of mind awareness" when describing the relevancy of a brand name or product. One commercial for a soft drink may not persuade you to run to the store. But commercials consistently promoting that same soft drink can eventually slip into your subconscious and before you realize it, it's the first name you think about. It's why companies with some of the most familiar and well-known brands in the world still spend millions of dollars on advertising. When it comes to promoting a product or service, not doing anything is akin to falling behind.

The same process works for attorneys. Pretend that a new general counsel has been tasked with finding an attorney to handle their patent work. They've heard good things about XYZ Firm, but all their website reveals is a laundry list of attorneys whose biographies all, quite frankly, sound the same. But in flipping through a couple legal industry publications, they notice that one of those attorneys has authored several pieces in recent months on the impacts of the America Invents Act. Now, this attorney may not be the best intellectual property attorney in the area; he may not even be the best at his own firm. But by consistently getting his name out in the right circles, he's jumped to the front of the line and achieved top of mind awareness.

Speaking

Speaking is another great avenue for establishing yourself as a leader in your industry. Given that national studies estimate nearly 75 percent of people have a fear of public speaking, the ability to stand in a room and deliver a message provides you with instant credibility. Whether it's speaking at regional and national conferences, or at local workshops and seminars, building a reputation as an informative and engaging speaker will drive your personal brand and separate you from the pack.

Going further, speaking also provides strategic opportunities for networking. Serving as a featured speaker at conferences and workshops not only places you in the company of scores of people interested in your topic, but also establishes you as an authority on the topic. Whether you're speaking to an audience of 10 or 10,000, your name will become synonymous with your topic, and with a good performance, each conference attendee will go back to their own networks with your name in their heads.

Online presence

In addition to becoming a frequent writer and speaker, social media offers free exposure in promoting your efforts. LinkedIn is the most prominent professional networking site, but Twitter and Facebook are also now common outlets for promoting business-related events and programs. Attorney blogs are becoming more popular, and with firms looking to increase their presence on the internet, some or all of the technical setup and design may be done for you by your firm. While there's no shortage of search engine optimization techniques, the basic premise remains simple - the more places your name appears on the Internet, the better chance there is of a client finding it.

As the market becomes flooded with more attorneys, becoming a thought leader is vital to growing and maintaining your practice. It enables you to drive conversation, showcase your experience and helps you stand out from the crowd in your field. There's no question that building your personal brand will take some effort, but in the end, it may just make you irreplaceable.

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