

## Law Firm Management

WWW.NYLJ.COM

MONDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2012

# Thought Leadership: A Game to Share With Your Friends

BY JOHN HELLERMAN  
AND SPENCER BARETZ

‘P lay this game and share it with your friends.’

That phrase comes from a recent article in *The New York Times* about website promotional campaigns being run by large corporations such as McDonald’s, Viacom, and General Mills, which are being accused by children’s advocacy and health groups of collecting data on children who visit their sites. As Laura Moy, a lawyer for the Center for Digital Democracy, explains in the article:

Under the law, they can’t just collect e-mail addresses from kids and send them marketing material directly. So they are embedding messages saying, “Play this game and share it with your friends,” in order to target the friends.

When we read it, here is what we thought: Smart. Very smart. And it led to another thought: Lawyers could learn a lot from this particular marketing approach. That may be a strange thing to say given the vast differences between marketing tactics used

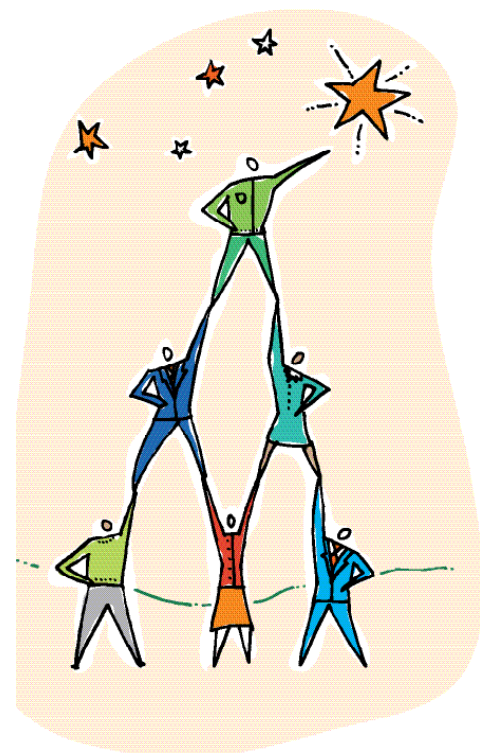
to attract young fast-food customers versus the clients of Am Law 200 law firms. Yet, when it comes to spreading word about their products, both face serious impediments and challenges. And the consumer companies’ strategy to get around their impediment is an ingenious one that works just as well for lawyers as it does for Happy Meals.

The consumer companies cannot collect personal information about children under 13 years of age without the verified consent of their parents—a restriction that prevents them from soliciting the business of their youngest customers directly. Law firms, of course, have no such legal obstacle to communicating with their clients and prospects. However, from a cultural standpoint, many lawyers and law firms are uncomfortable directly marketing to them (e.g., sending sales materials, and asking existing clients for referrals).

The consumer companies get around their data-collection challenge by engaging with their closest customers and turning them into ambassadors for their brand, relying on those customers to spread their content to a vast audience that (i) is highly likely to be interested in that content; and (ii) the consumer companies could not otherwise reach. Law firms, similar to their consumer brethren, need to find a way get past their marketing inhibitions and convert those closest to them into ambassadors for their brands. They have to get the people in their networks to “play this game, and share it with their friends.”

### THE POWER OF THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Thought leadership is an extremely powerful form of marketing for legal professionals, precisely because the audience can “share it with their friends.” The term “thought leadership,” while overused in marketing circles, refers to any form of content—an article, a quote in a prominent media outlet, a podcast, a blog post—that demonstrates the author’s expertise in an area of interest



JOHN HELLERMAN and SPENCER BARETZ are the cofounders of Hellerman Baretz Communications, a corporate communications agency specializing in thought leadership and branded content development, reputation management, and revenue growth for the world’s leading law, consulting, healthcare, and financial services firms.

to his or her intended audience. Particularly good pieces of thought leadership “advance the ball” on the subject matter in question. Consumers, after all, are most in the market for insight about “what is coming next.”

Speaking about the value of distribution networks, Rupert Murdoch once said, “Content is not just King, it is the Emperor of all things digital.” His point was that the value of a network’s content to the audience consuming it is what dictates that network’s success. But by necessity, he also meant the corollary, which is: Content is valueless if it is not distributed.

So, just as a game to engage retail consumers is only worthwhile to the marketer if it gleans an ever-expanding network of prospects, thought leadership too must be shared widely in order to be worth the effort. And to be shared, thought leadership content must, above all, be relevant (i.e., informative, interesting, and fresh) to the recipient, and it must be communicated in a manner that makes consuming and sharing it easy (if not actually enjoyable). Typically, when these criteria are met, a receiver will share with their network either important knowledge they gleaned from your content, or your content itself.

### Think SMART Leadership

Content must be actionable to be valuable. We call actionable content “SMART Leadership,” standing for “Sharable, Measurable, and Relevant Thought Leadership.” These are the ingredients for creating valuable thought leadership content that positively impacts relationship building and business development. Thought leadership saturated with these qualities achieves a very wide distribution. It succeeds, in other words, in getting its recipients to “share it with their friends.”

So, how do you make ordinary content SMART Leadership content? Follow these steps:

**1. Seek partnering opportunities.** These can be with clients, prospects, or even other

thought leaders. Byline articles are perfect for this. If you have a blog, make sure you are inviting others to post, and interviewing players in your field and related fields. All of these actions increase the initial distribution of your thought leadership material. It is great to have your law firm highlight your article on auto-industry bankruptcies on its Twitter page. It is much better, however, if it is simultaneously linked on the Twitter page of your coauthor.

**2. Tap into the culture.** Find ways to offer your expertise using existing conversations, hot topics, or popular news trends. Back in 2010, we coined the term “fame jacking” to define the practice of piggybacking on a celebrity’s brand value in order to drive visibility for one’s own PR efforts (e.g., a recent article by a Marquette University law professor used Lady Gaga, Madonna, and other pop singers as case studies to discuss the legal concepts of identity and the right of publicity). While it may not be in good taste to discuss the nuances of a corporate issue by comparing it to Lindsay Lohan’s latest criminal charges, it may, however, be incredibly powerful to relate such an issue to, say, recent speeches at the National Political Conventions. This would drive attention to the corporate issue by juxtaposing it with one that is nationally identifiable. The strategy, in either case, is the same: content becomes more compelling—and sharable—when it is entertaining and relatable to commonly known people or events.

**3. Give your audience something to do.** Asking your audience to take some action—preferably, with a nice carrot waiting for them on completion—is a great way to generate interest in your material. A blog on bankruptcy and corporate restructuring may sound dry, but one of our clients found a way to make it the talk of the industry. First, they livened up the subject by including a lighthearted, weekly haiku that referenced a topical development in the field. (This is a great

example of packaging thought leadership in a manner that makes it accessible and enjoyable to a wide audience). Next, they engaged their readership by offering a summer-long contest that awarded prime Yankees tickets to the best reader-submitted haikus. The lesson here: Games are not just for kids.

**4. Aggressively distribute your material.** Today, there is no shortage of distribution channels through which to spread your thought leadership. Do not rely merely on the venue that originally publishes your material. Instead, following its publication, you (or your firm) should be packaging it and putting it out over JD Supra, LinkedIn, and other social networks, as a link on your professional bio, etc. The wealth of distribution channels is so great—and so valuable—that for all of our firm’s placements, we execute an “after-action plan” to ensure that good thought leadership reaches the widest possible audience.

**5. Circle back.** If you appear in someone else’s content (for instance, if you are quoted in a reporter’s article on a subject, or contribute a post to an industry blog), after you are done telling the world about it, make sure to circle back to the original source. Tell the reporter you told the world, and tell the blog’s editor that you told the world. Doing so completes a circle of positive reinforcement that makes it much more likely the original source will return to you again. After all, they understand the importance of distribution to their brand and reputation—and will appreciate the fact that you do too.

Marketing dollars are too scarce to waste. So, no game: Create actionable content, (remember SMART Leadership), and make sure it “gets shared with friends.”

Reprinted with permission from the October 15, 2012 edition of the NEW YORK LAW JOURNAL © 2012 ALM Media Properties, LLC. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited. For information, contact 877-257-3382 or reprints@alm.com. #070-01-12-01