

How to Become a Thought Leader

By Valerie Fontaine, Esq.

One way to raise your firm's profile or build your individual professional brand is through thought leadership—public speaking, presenting webinars, podcasting, writing for publication (online or print), blogging, and participating in social media. These activities increase visibility, develop credibility, demonstrate expertise, and plant seeds for attracting direct client and candidate contacts as well as increasing referrals. You and your firm want to be known, easily found, and top of mind by standing out from the competition.

An added bonus is that, as you prepare each piece for posting, publication, or presentation, you get further educated on the subject and clarify the issues in your mind—further building your expertise.

While there are significant benefits to you and your firm, the underlying purpose for every piece is to provide value to your audiences by imparting helpful, useable information on subjects that interest and concern them. You cannot be all things to all people and, although you want broad exposure, you don't want to spread yourself too thin. You need to target your efforts and develop thought leadership in specific, identifiable niches.

Audience

First, define your audience or audiences. Who are you trying to reach? Past, present, and prospective clients and candidates? A new industry sector? Get specific.

As legal search consultants at SeltzerFontaine LLC, for example, our target audiences are:

- Prospective candidates: lawyers, job seekers, and women/diversity job seekers specifically, as DEI is important to us and our clients;
- Prospective clients: law firms, in-house counsel, law firm recruiting professionals, in-house recruiting personnel, hiring partners, managing partners, other hiring authorities;
- Both prospective candidates and clients: State and local Bar associations, other legal industry and related trade organizations, alumni associations;
- Pipeline: law students, pre-law students, law school career services, career services personnel in other institutions of higher education; and
- Referrals and split deal/joint venture sources: other legal recruiters, career coaches, and related consultants.

Content

The next step is to determine content themes or general subject areas for your speeches, publications, and social media engagement. What would be of value to your defined audiences? What interests you? You'll be more effective in consistently and diligently researching, developing expertise, and presenting your knowledge if you're fascinated by the

subject.

For instance, at SeltzerFontaine LLC, our content generally revolves around the following themes:

- Job search and recruiting tips, career development, and topics applicable to the legal industry and in the broader marketplace;
- Trends in the legal profession;
- Women/diversity issues in the legal profession or the workplace generally; plus
- A few holiday-related posts and some highlights of our more interesting search assignments for variety.

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Social media

Focus! Stick to business (but be personable and approachable) and concentrate on only one or two social media channels to maximize your efforts and manage your time.

For professionals, LinkedIn is the primary social media channel. ABA's 2022 statistics show that the most popular site for law firm marketing purposes is LinkedIn (45%), followed by Facebook (31%), and Twitter (15%). Approximately 81% lawyers maintain a presence on social media for professional purposes. Of those, 95% are on LinkedIn, with only 29% on Facebook professionally, followed by Twitter (17%), and Instagram (13%). Therefore, it might be the best use of your time and effort to establish a strong presence on LinkedIn first and expand to other social media platforms later, if at all.

Create both an individual and a company page and fill them out fully. For how-to tips, you can find social media experts on LinkedIn—of course! Follow them and learn.

In addition to consistently posting new content, periodically pop online to like, comment, and share relevant posts by others. Even without creating and posting new content of your own, these activities alone make you more visible and amplifies the reach of other content posters—

with the hopes they'll do the same for you and your posts. Connect with and follow others who may be useful sources for you and whose posts you find interesting and thought-provoking. Furthermore, in everything you do online, stick to your content themes and avoid anything controversial.

You can designate one person in your firm to handle social media duties to promote your firm's regular online presence. To lighten the load, solicit post ideas from everyone and ask colleagues to “guest write” posts, as well.

Don't get discouraged by low engagement numbers – you probably have a much larger “ghost audience” than you thought (people who read your posts but don't engage for a variety of reasons). We're con-

stantly surprised by people who tell us they read our posts religiously but never leave a clue.

Results

Becoming a thought leader requires consistent effort and builds over time—but it pays off. We now are contacted regularly by potential candidates and, just recently, were contacted through LinkedIn by two companies to fill high level in-house positions. Recruiters across the country refer candidates and request to joint venture with us on searches because they know our name and, on the basis of what we've written and posted, are confident that we know the marketplace. Reporters reach out to us for quotes and information when writing their stories, which further bolsters our reputations as experts.

You can do it, too! To get started, you might consider “public speaking” at a NALSC event. You can send your suggested (and relevant) speaker topic to HQ at info@nalsc.org. If you'd like to publish an article in this

newsletter, send your idea either to HQ or to vfontaine@seltzerfontaine.com.

Keep working at it and your efforts will reap rewards.

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