

Of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle:

How Thought
Leadership Drives
Stronger Sales,
Marketing and Ethics

*The Definitive Guide To Implementing
Thought Leadership In Your Organization*

TMA+
Peritus

MARKETING STRATEGY
WEBSITE DESIGN
THOUGHT LEADERSHIP



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Tom implements thought leadership positions within companies and organizations of all shapes and sizes. Over the course of his 41 year career, he has worked with clients including McDonald's, Foot Locker, Honeywell, American Family Insurance, Bombardier, Finish Line Sports, Lactalis, CUNA Mutual, Rakuten OverDrive, Bally, University of Wisconsin, PowerSchool and countless others.

By looking to the past, actually way in the past to 399 BC, Tom Marks guides us through the compelling process of implementing thought leadership into an organization's brand, sales approach and marketing positions. Summoning the beliefs from the world's first philosophers, we can better understand the derivation of thought leadership and its ethical implications on a company's purpose.

Of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle: How Thought Leadership Drives Stronger Sales, Marketing and Ethics

By most accounts, Plato shaped western philosophy more than anyone else. His mentor, Socrates, was notorious for refusing to chronicle his own beliefs declining to put anything in writing. Consequently, philosophical understanding prior to Plato is documented most frequently by Plato in his dialogues and his publication, *The Republic*, as well as through the writing of Plato's prized student, Aristotle, most specifically in his work on *Virtue Ethics*. But more on this later.

To understand [thought leadership](#), businesses need to first comprehend its true meaning and recognize how it co-exists with other *Disciplines of Market Leadership*. Then, executives can determine if it's an appropriate sales and marketing proposition to pursue, if it can further their business objectives, and finally how it interplays with their corporate purpose. Any cadence other than this will result in shortcuts ending in messaging that is disingenuous at the very least, or downright fabricated at its worst.

Let me begin by setting the record straight. Content marketers will tell you that thought leadership is a component of content marketing; this just isn't the case. Content marketing is one means to the end — and the end in this case is being a thought leader. But you won't get there without research, without powerful and deeply-rooted insights, without a keen eye and discerning ear regarding the beliefs of your buyer segments, and content marketing.

Plus some Socrates, Plato and Aristotle for good measure.

“When thought leadership is presented in the right place, at the right time, and in the right light it adds relevant differentiation, respect, trust, and the enviable position of being knowledgeable and resourceful to an organization's purpose. Thought leaders produce critical insights that help businesses understand the behaviors of their audience from hesitancy to consideration and from affinity to preference, and all touch points in between.”

Tom Marks

Voice-of-Customer Research is the Backbone of Thought Leadership

But know this, you'll absolutely never get there if you aren't a great listener. The world is already filled with fast talkers, blowhards who value their opinion above others, and gasbags who are seldom right but never in doubt. Remember what Plato, a brilliant thought leader in his own right, said, "*Wise men speak because they have something to say; fools speak because they have to say something.*"

Thought leaders are always great listeners. They're skillful researchers who have the pulse of their audience at their fingertips. And that's how the process begins. The critical first step on the way to thought leadership is always Voice-of-Customer (VOC) research. With the dozens of companies we've worked with that have implemented thought leadership as part of their brand, every one of them has applied ongoing VOC strategies to first verify the legitimacy of their thought leadership position, and second to discover the wants and needs, subjects, and pain-points of customers and prospects within key buyer segments. We follow this with *IAPW Discovery* – *in a perfect world* what would your business look like; *in a perfect world* who is your ideal customer and what are their expectations; *in a perfect world* what does the customer relationship look like? And the beat goes on.

But there's one more thing to remember about VOC. It can't be executed internally, at least not effectively. In the thousands of VOC interviews we've conducted, there's never been any indication that your customers, vendors and lost customers will talk to you the same way they talk to us.

But it's listening, not talk, that made Socrates the first arbiter of VOC. According to the *Oracle of Delphi*, he was known as the wisest man in Athens, perhaps the entire world, but Socrates wasn't buying what the high priestess of Apollo was selling. He took to the streets of Athens, talking to men he thought wiser than he, only to learn that their opinions were fraught with contradictions and corruption. Over time, he began to believe that perhaps the Oracle was correct, that maybe, just maybe, he was the wisest man in Athens; but not because of what he knew – no, it wasn't that simple; it was because, as he later said, "*True knowledge exists in knowing you know nothing.*" He listened where others promulgated, he questioned (Socratic Irony) where others kowtowed to the God's du jour, and he soundly rejected the belief of Thrasymachus who viewed strength, cheating and theft as the way to dominate life where Socrates much preferred an existence dominated by ethics.

Socrates – VOC aficionado, thought leader, ethicist.



Understanding the Disciplines of Market Leadership and the Power of Insights

After the VOC is completed and the data is synthesized — and assuming your thought leadership discipline is valid and confirmed — you can now take the next steps forward. This requires a close examination of the four *Disciplines of Market Leadership* and a clear understanding of where you hold the strongest position or positions. Your business can either be a *Service, Value, Innovation or Thought Leader*, and many businesses can be more than one; but if you're lacking at least one of these, you're going to have a hard row to hoe. Through strategic market planning, we're able to assess the positions that are your strongest, and if you have the people, the proof points and the knowledge to be a thought leader.

"And what, Socrates, is the food of the soul? Surely, I said, knowledge is the food of the soul," remarked Plato. Now you'll need to prove your knowledge in order to prove that you're a thought leader.

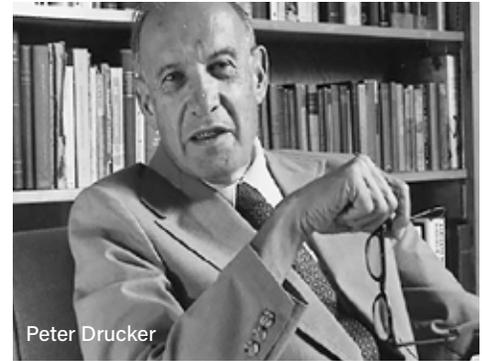
When all systems are go, you can begin the process of positioning your company for thought leadership. This involves developing at least five critical insights about your industry based on your primary research (VOC) and any secondary research you'll need to support your insights. Only then can you begin producing content that will fortify your thought leadership claim.

"Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas," exclaimed Aristotle. *Plato is my friend, but truth is a better friend.* And that's the concept you'll need to understand when you develop your insights. Look for a truth that's not well documented, hasn't been researched fully, and lacks search activity on Google. And always remember this, theorists connect the dots, but thought leaders connect the dots when there are no dots to connect.

Let me give you some examples. For a K-12 software company with a presence in over 70 countries, our critical insights for one year included the following:

1. Why the way K-12 Education is delivered makes no sense anymore.
2. The endless struggle administrators have with data assurances and accuracies.
3. Technology's role in solving teacher shortages.
4. How technology can increase dwindling Superintendent tenure.
5. How ROV (Return on Value) is the new ROI in school districts.

Pretty heady stuff to be sure. But these were the topics educators wanted more information about. And that's where the content creation and syndication begins. From white papers, POVs and insightful blogs, to video equivalents, manifestos, story pitching to the trade press and infographics, over time, this steady drumbeat of knowledge sharing will transition to conversations within the framework of *these guys really know their stuff*, which, in turn, leads to directives like *you really need to call these guys*.



In fact, in one white paper for the same company detailing how Peter Drucker's business principles of 50 years ago can be effectively applied to the management of school districts — a topic never written before — so much interest was generated among key buyer groups that this became the playbook on how to transcend thought leadership beyond being part of your brand to including thought leadership as part of your lead generation, prospect nurturing and sales conversion processes.

Imagine, if you will, the ability of your sales force to move beyond tired and worn activities like cold calling, which is nothing more than old calling, and selling by espousing the insights you've developed from thought leadership. Who wouldn't be interested in the pitch *we've developed five never before seen critical insights about your industry that you can use to strengthen your position and bolster market share. I'd like to discuss some of those insights with you.*

I'm in...all in.

Understanding the Disciplines of Market Leadership and the Power of Insights (Continued)

That's how thought leadership not only positions a business as knowledgeable and resourceful to its customers, but also doubles in brass as a sales tool for new business acquisition.

When researched and implemented correctly, thought leadership can be a powerful standalone *Discipline of Market Leadership*, or a companion discipline aligning tightly with *Innovation*, but still effective when accompanied with *Value* and *Service* disciplines.

Just as the slinky builds momentum descending the stairs, thought leadership begets other perceptions about your company including being [ethical, trustworthy and honorable](#). Plato's beliefs on ethics, many of which were documented by Aristotle, are based on the cornerstone of balance. For us to be morally balanced we need *Reason*, *Spirit* and *Appetite* in our lives and that includes our work — *Reason* for solid thinking, *Spirit* for empathy, and *Appetite* for a desire to learn and seek understanding.

That's thought leadership to a T.



Rules Govern Thought Leadership

As you integrate thought leadership into your sales and marketing efforts it's important to understand the six rules of the game.

RULE NUMBER ONE:

You don't need to be promotional to be promotional. People understand that it's you. They know that if you can make sense out of the nonsensical, or if you can understand what's rarely understood, you'll be able to take care of their needs.

RULE NUMBER TWO:

You're not the only thought leader who's a thought leader. If you're really a thought leader then you're going to enlist other thought leaders into the fold. That's the whole concept behind influencer marketing is it not? Use others to drive deeper engagement with your customers and prospects.

RULE NUMBER THREE:

Don't confuse thought leadership with being the smartest person in the room. Thought leaders are thoughtful and mindful of the needs of others. When the time is right, they own the room, or as the Apache proverb goes, "It's better to have less thunder in the mouth and more lightening in the hand."

RULE NUMBER FOUR:

Thought leadership is like saffron, a little goes a long way. You don't need to force your hand, push your brilliance, or pound your chest every time you have an insight. Let your writing do the talking, and if you're talking, let your stories control the narrative.

RULE NUMBER FIVE:

Thought leaders know how to tell a great story about themselves and an even better story about someone else. As Howard Gardner, the John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, said, "And do you know what is the most-often missing ingredient in a sales message? It's the sales message that doesn't tell an interesting story. Storytelling, good storytelling, is a vital component of a marketing campaign." Well, I've got news for you Howard, it's a vital component of thought leadership, too.

RULE NUMBER SIX:

What's very, very old is really, really new again. As in 399 BC old. There's a lot to be learned from the pioneers of learning. About thought leadership, market leadership, ethics, storytelling, your brand and propositions. Today, it takes a lot of research and reading to stay ahead of the curve. But thought leaders always have a slightly different perspective, less than obvious optics, and unconventional insights that don't always jibe with what others think. You can see that play-out in the discourse of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, time and again.

And you see it here. Looking forward is obvious, going back is compelling.

Thought Leaders Know That Story Telling is Supported by Brain Science

There is an art and a science to storytelling and thought leaders understand both. The art is the delivery, how the story is told, its structure, but not necessarily its texture. The science is what's remembered, the sentiment, insights, opinion and even the bias. Storytelling, as a component of thought leadership is as much about biology as it is psychology. This isn't my opinion, this is a well-researched and documented fact from neuroscientists throughout the world.

Thought leaders understand that by injecting story telling into their writing and speeches their insights become more memorable for a longer period of time than if they merely relied on paragraphs of narrative void of metaphors and analogies.

Over the course of the last 10 years, Neuroscience has taught us that other parts of the brain than *Broca's Area and Wernicke's Area*, the two language regions, can also stimulate emotions particularly in the olfactory cortex and also the sensory and motor cortexes. In study after study, and brain scan after brain scan, words that were deemed as familiar or mundane received no emotional triggers, yet phrases with motion, touch, smell and texture activated multiple regions of our brains which, in turn, released dopamine making the words, then sentences, and then stories easier to remember and with far greater accuracy.

That's why, in some of the most complex topics ranging from education and technology, to investments and health, I invoke stories that seem to be initially disparate from the subject and then elevate those stories to a level that not only supports the insights, but adds simplicity to the complexity. From Iron Mike Tyson and the lost languages of Wyandot, Jersey Dutch and Pamlico, to Plato and Peter Drucker, the story telling we include in our assignments accentuates the insights and extends the shelf life of the thought leadership content.

And don't forget that story telling was a big part of the philosophies of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Behold this:



"Employ your time in improving yourself by other men's writings so that you should come easily by what others have labored hard for."

Socrates



"Those who tell stories rule society."

Plato



"When the storytelling goes bad in a society, the result is decadence."

Aristotle

It's Worth the Effort

Thought leadership might be the most dominant discipline in all of the *Disciplines of Market Leadership*. It might not be easy to get there, but there is a well-defined process, and once you've elevated your company to thought leadership status, you've distanced yourselves from the pack through relevant differentiation, stronger messaging, deeper trust, and a level of ethics that drives preference and loyalty for your brand.

Oh sure, we can talk all we want about brand voice, brand promise, personality, tone and structure. But they all ride shotgun to thought leadership. You want the strongest messaging in the industry? Wisdom wins hands down.

And always remember this, theorists connect the dots, but thought leaders connect the dots when there are no dots to connect.



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