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THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Thought-leading companies offer thought-provoking insights on issues that truly matter to their customers and other stakeholders. As a result, these companies are positioned more favorably when compared with others they are referenced against. Over the past several years, thought leadership has been the object of increased interest on the part of scholars and practitioners in the fields of public relations, corporate communication, branding, and reputation management. This entry explains thought leadership as a positioning strategy by outlining two types of logic on thought leadership. It then discusses how the two types of logic should be blended for organizations to strengthen their positioning for the future, including the role of corporate communication professionals in this process.

Strategic-Driven Thought Leadership

By the 1970s, consulting companies such as McKinsey and the Boston Consulting Group started to embrace new ways of setting themselves apart from their competitors by showcasing their intellectual capacities in order to be seen by clients as their "trusted voice" on the problems and issues that mattered to them. They started to circulate publications in which they shared their intellectual ideas and insight, reframing how clients think about their business problems. Since then, these publications have been dubbed "thought leadership publications"; the intellectual content was referred to as "thought leadership."

Today, more and more companies have embraced thought leadership, and public relations agencies are developing full-on thought leadership strategies for their clients. By leveraging their intellectual capacities, conducting in-depth research, and packaging their insights in the form of white papers, articles, or videos, organizations seek to be seen as the authority on complex matters that concern their clients.

Today, organizations increasingly connect these complex matters to societal issues. The technology and consulting corporation IBM is a case in point. IBM's clients in the business-to-government field are not so much interested in IBM selling information technology solutions as they are in gaining insights and solutions that help them overcome today's challenges concerning important themes such as city infrastructure or global water management. Packaged as their Smarter Planet campaign, IBM addressed clients' concerns by challenging their conventional thinking on how some of the world's issues should be viewed. The campaign was aimed at strengthening IBM's position in its market.

Transformation-Driven Thought Leadership

Transformation-driven thought leaders take on a visible role in driving the desired societal changes. They are prepared to openly challenge the status quo thinking and acting on important societal themes and to drive substantial change, starting with their own strategic choices and actions. They are not just pursuing thought leadership for the sake of achieving position or status; they have a revolutionary drive. An example of such a challenger to the established order is the American developer of electronic cars, Tesla. In a market still dominated by cars that run on gas, Tesla wants to drive the world's transition to electric cars. Through compelling actions, it continuously shows how it lives up to its thought-provoking vision. Tesla's purpose goes beyond the mere maximization of profits; it attaches social meaning to what it does.

Transformation-driven thought leaders are certainly meaning driven, but there is something more specific to them that makes them thought leading. Transformation-driven thought leaders are known for articulating their purpose in such a way that it becomes a status quo–unlocking, inspiring, and mobilizing viewpoint. Organizations become characterized as thought leading in a revolutionary sense when people see them openly and visibly speaking up about and standing up for their alternative viewpoints on important themes in society. They desire shifts in worldviews and believe in a future reality that better responds to the problems, needs, desired values, and lifestyles that we recognize these days. Since transformation-driven thought leaders seek change in collective thought and actions, they back up their viewpoints with their own actions.

Blending Both Types of Logic

Taken separately, the two types of logic reflect different motivations for organizations to embrace thought leadership. Yet having only a strategic view on thought leadership is problematic as it ignores the transformative landscape that our society is currently in and the mounting expectations set by stakeholders to be a positive force in these changes. A strictly revolutionary focus is also problematic as it ignores the reality that most companies simply have to survive in an increasingly competitive landscape.

Increasingly, more companies are embracing both types of logic. Unilever, a consumer goods company, is a good example. Unilever's viewpoint is reflected in the vision that it can double the size of its business while reducing its environmental footprint and increasing its positive social impact. To achieve this, the company is undergoing a transformative change—it is radically changing its own business model and encourages its suppliers and other business partners to do the same. While this may at first glance appear to be a form of transformative thought leadership, the company is clear about the fact that its viewpoints on sustainability and the resulting behavior reflect positively on its brands, strengthening their positioning.

Blending both types of logic has implications for communication professionals as they play an important role in shaping and expressing the company's novel viewpoints, living up to them and mobilizing stakeholders to actively support their viewpoints. This means that they need to balance strategic objectives with transformative objectives, encourage their leaders to articulate and live up to their novel viewpoints, contribute to an internal culture that encourages unconventional thinking and acting, and develop reputation measurements that embrace both types of logic. Organizations that combine these capabilities have enormous leverage in strengthening their reputations.

Mignon van Halderen

See also Guru Theory; Key Messages; Public Relations; Strategy

Further Readings

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TIMING

Timing is the choice of when to act—or not act. Timing is ultimately the choice of location—where to place an action amid an ongoing stream of events that are unfolding moment by moment. Any time one can ask when is the right time to do something—or not do it—one has found a timing question.

Reputations are built and destroyed not merely by what is done, or how it is done or by whom, but by getting the timing wrong, being too late in responding to a threat or acting prematurely. As yet, there is no encyclopedic understanding of how to decide issues of timing. It is too early for that. Getting the timing right is difficult, and mistakes, which can damage a company's reputation, are common.