

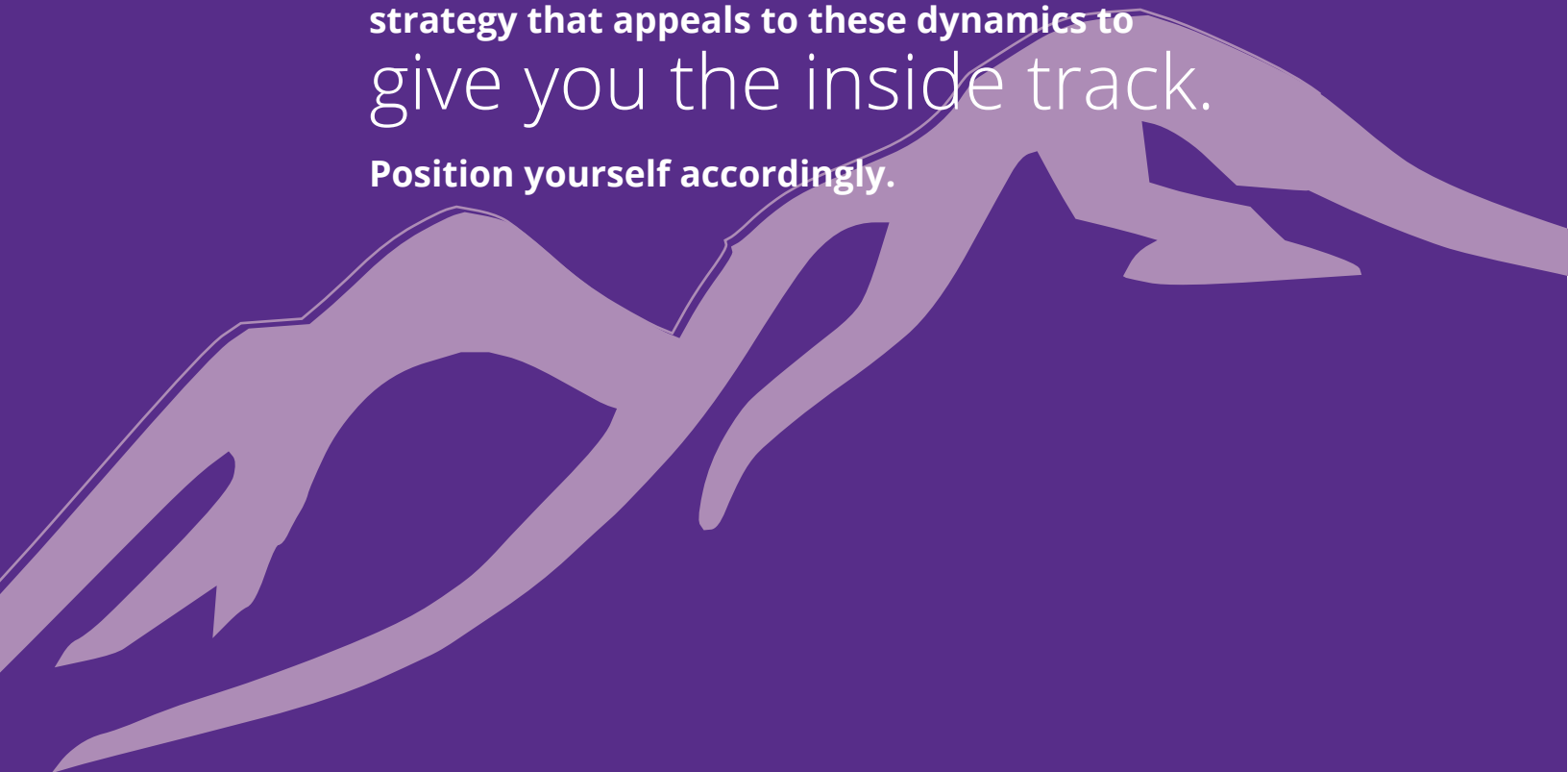
From Smart & Talented to Sought-After Thought Leader:
Ten Trends to Position
You Ahead of The Crowd

BY VICKIE K. SULLIVAN



Massive content marketing on the Internet has made good ideas free and plentiful. Slick websites and case studies make anyone look competent. How do prominent thought leaders rise above this avalanche of good ideas to get attention and the high-end opportunities? By taking advantage of how the marketplace chooses thought leaders.

In this report you'll find ten trends that impact those decisions, along with market and brand strategy that appeals to these dynamics to give you the inside track. Position yourself accordingly.



Trend #1:

CONTENT IS NOW COMMODITIZED.

Content marketing — the idea that sharing information engages potential buyers — has reached critical mass. The cheap and easy ways to distribute our point of view has created an education arms race via the Internet. Ideas — good, bad, and ugly — are distributed at a faster pace for the marketplace to admire.

The result: Thought-provoking insights on specific challenges have become commoditized. Everyone and their brother knows how to frame a situation. Rhetorical questions are everywhere. The price tag for these pearls of wisdom: free. Buyers are accustomed to getting the view at 30,000 feet, which means that more of that same information is not enough.

If you keep throwing out good ideas, buyers will think highly of you. They may even follow you — for a while. They will not buy from you. Why? Because you've just shown these decision makers that you are good at giving what they can get for free.

The antidote: Stop worrying about frequency. Pay more attention to what you send out. Instead of those overviews, drill down on a particular topic and demonstrate you know where the bodies are buried. (See trend #2 below.)





Trend #2:



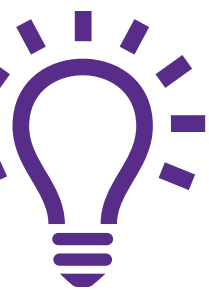
RELEVANCE IS REDEFINED.

Another result of content commodity, “relevance” is now the benchmark buyers use in the thought leadership space. What buyers think but won’t tell you: I don’t have time to digest the flood of information, so I’m only going to pay attention to what I need right now. If I need something else later, I can always circle back. (Nothing ever goes away on the Internet.) Translation: Relevance is a plea for “help me with (enter big to-do item here)”.

We all know it’s a crazy world out there. We all know the personal attributes we need to navigate the chaos. Again, that can be had for free. The real questions high-fee buyers have: 1) what is our best response when @#\$! hits the fan; and, 2) how do we use what’s going on to our advantage?

What’s hot now: life on the front lines. For the dark side: What to do right now when (enter bad thing here) happens. How to keep fire-fighting to a minimum. How to avoid that disaster lurking on the sidelines. And for a positive spin: how to take advantage of the latest trends. What’s the next big thing just around the corner? And the more specific, the better.

In short, we are officially out of the, “hey it’s crazy out there” mode. It’s all about implementation in the chaos. It’s all about taking advantage of the hidden opportunities.



Trend #3:

NOT ALL PLATFORMS ARE CREATED EQUAL.

By now, we all know we need a platform. That killer concept or big idea that buyers point to and say, “I gotta have more of that”. The big challenge now: choosing the best one. And that’s harder than it looks.

The problem: many experts have too many choices and not enough market intelligence to make the best decision. (I call this the dark side of brilliance.) So what happens? They guess based on personal preference or faulty data.

The result: high five figures spent — and at least six months lost — with

nothing to show for the effort. This is the leading cause of failure for thought leaders.

Think about this from a buyer’s perspective: Working with thought leaders is a high-risk endeavor. With the right choice, the buyer gets the needed help and “wins” with goals attained or business growth. With the wrong choice, the buyer’s experience equates to wasted time and money that isn’t easily replaced. And the risks are even higher in public venues such as events, where choosing the wrong speaker can end a career.

Buyers respond to this risk by being clear on what they want, and only hiring thought leaders with a platform that resonates with them. All others are ignored. This “all or nothing” dynamic

makes our selection of platform risky. High-end thought leaders make this choice with great care.



Trend #4:

IT'S ALL RELATIVE.

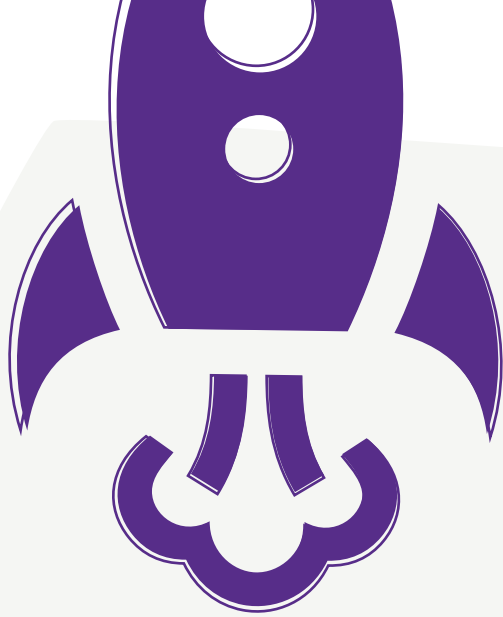
Buyers don't work with thought leaders in a vacuum. They choose whom to hire based on a comparison of other options and other thought leaders who are "out there". They compare what they know about the thought leader with what they need. And, finally, they compare approaches. They ask themselves: is working with this person going to cause a lot of collateral damage? Will I need a cleanup crew afterwards?

This is why high-end thought leaders don't create market strategy based only on their gifts and passions. They go beyond their desires and compare their value with the buyer's other options. They find that secret intersection between their best gifts and what buyers will pay top dollar for.

This is easier said than done. It's tempting to skew market dynamics toward what you want to do anyway. (There's a name for that: confirmation bias.) It's difficult to be objective when you have skin in the game. The sharpest knife can't carve its own handle.

The antidote: Get a pair of fresh eyes on your story, your platform, your big idea. An objective perspective is a good start — but not enough. Instead, focus on getting feedback from someone who not only knows you and your message, but also knows the marketplace and your unique competitive environment. This is why your biggest fans can be your worst brand strategist.





Trend #5:

BOOKS NO LONGER LAUNCH THOUGHT LEADERS.

In the good old days, a smart person would write a great book. Publishers would love the provocative ideas in the book, publish it, and then Oprah would call and gush about it. And the rest, as they say, is history...

There are many reasons why this doesn't happen anymore. The publishing world is different right now. The biggest reason is the flood of books coming out every year. Buyers still like working with authors — books do create

credibility. Many thought leaders think the book will launch their struggling business. It won't. This tactic is overused with disastrous results.

Books are a fabulous tool. They just need to be used strategically and in a different way. Instead of using books as a launch pad, high-end thought leaders use books as jet fuel.

They write books to augment the momentum they already have. They use books to get national media attention and to launch a campaign that attracts better buyers. They use books later — when they already have marketing momentum — rather than sooner.

How do you know when you've written a book too soon? When all you get in return is offers to speak for free. When your media doesn't leverage into better opportunities. But by then, it's too late for many experts to fix the problem. Their only option is to start over.

Trend #6:

STORIES ARE STICKY.

Yes, stories are powerful tools. They create context and allow buyers to experience more of who you are. They make your content come alive. And... their power has limits.

Many thought leaders think their story is enough — just add platitudes and poof! A star is born. That worked before the Great Recession, but not anymore. Why? One reason is because everyone is telling stories. At this point, it's a race to the bottom.

Yes, the marketplace needs to hear our stories. And... buyers expect us to go beyond our background. Those who don't are perceived as has-beens who are coasting on past glories. (Which is why many sports figures have fewer invitations to speak.)

What works now: use your story as a springboard to something bigger. Ask yourself, "As a result of my story, what do I stand for now?" And, that platform needs to be specific and be a credible alternative to the status quo. Your big idea needs to compare favorably with the buyer's other options. (See trend #4.)



Trend #7:

BUYERS ARE VISUAL.

It's true — no one reads anymore. Not at work anyway. Between the flood of emails, interruptions, and that never-ending to do list, concentration is a luxury seldom available.

What's happening now:

the best-case scenario is skimming. And the best way to skim? With visuals such as slide shows, videos, and infographics.

Yes, visual consumption of content has been around for a long time. (Charts and graphs have been around since meetings were born.)

Those still work for primary research and academic white papers.

What's hot now: those top-ten lists complete with photos and short explanations. Especially those lists your buyers want to be on.

For younger buyers, infographics and videos have exploded on the scene and are now a standard benchmark for cutting-edge thought leaders. They package their content beyond the boring reports that few people read anyway. High-end thought leaders consider the format most popular for their buyers and apply accordingly.



Trend #8:

PROMINENCE IS A PRIORITY.

When most ideas appear similar, how does the marketplace decide who is the thought leader? Buyers use prominence. The thinking, “Hey, if I heard of them often enough, they must be good”. Another reason why prominence pays: the person who becomes known for the idea first, owns the concept.

Buyers love to jump on bandwagons. Why? There is safety in numbers. You are less of a risk. And going to the dark side: Prominence provides political air cover if you are hired but don't work out. The story: “Hey, hiring them was a mistake that couldn't be avoided. Look how prominent they are!”

They will put more emphasis on what others say about you than what YOU say about you. Therefore, media coverage and social media momentum

is critical. The higher the profile, the more people believe in what you stand for. After all, how can so many people be wrong?



And what drives media coverage? An intriguing story combined with a compelling storyteller. And a cause people care about enough to take action on. (Pay attention to those last

three words: take action on is the difference between low-end and high-end thought leaders.)





Trend #9:

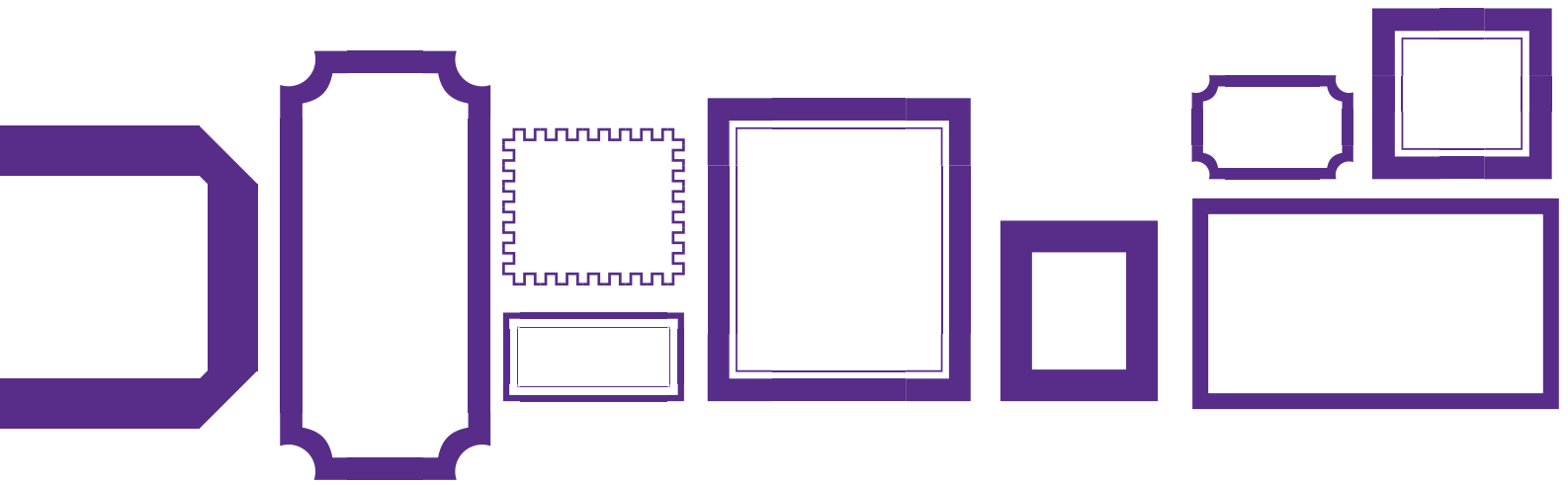
SIGNATURE STYLES CREATE MOMENTUM.

Communication style and public speaking skills are no longer a luxury. They are also commoditized and now considered standard. Result: having these skills is no longer a differentiator. This is the ticket to get into the thought leadership game.

The marketplace perceives good communications skills like it does a clean house: if you are great, buyers say nothing and focus on your message. If you are lacking, they put you in the “boring” category and ignore you. **The style behind the ideas drives momentum for your brand.** Do this right and you will create followers who will come back again and again.

What separates the high-end from the wannabe: a consistent voice that you “own”.

What’s hot now: accessible truth-tellers. What’s out: the obnoxious without a cause. (And unless you are going mass market, the silly gimmicks are also out.) High-end thought leaders balance hope, accessibility, and realism. And they do it in a way that isn’t easily copied.



Trend #10:

CURATED CONTENT IS OK - TO A POINT.

Many thought leaders have become curators — gathering cutting-edge content from others instead of highlighting their own thinking. And that's OK — high-end events, such as TED, have made curating cool. Buyers appreciate a source for information they don't have to hunt for.

The problem: this technique is easily copied. Between Google, Wikipedia, and other shiny, disruptive objects, anyone can find good ideas from invisible sources. Larger organizations build huge portals of information from different sources. As more people use this tactic, buyers will get bored.

High-end thought leaders don't base their brand on content that can be commoditized. Instead, they create their big idea first, then use the content to support their point of view. They will use killer rhetorical questions as a springboard for their own color commentary. The poster child for this strategy: best-selling author, Malcolm Gladwell.

Always remember this

Since 1987, I've launched thousands of thought leaders. While they all are unique, their journey to get there has some similarities. Let's send you on your way with these three things to remember.

First, there's a thousand ways to say the same thing. Too many people get stuck – they are stuck in their story, they are stuck on using certain words. It's OK to know yourself. And... there are many articulations out there about how to describe who you are and what you do. And they are all true. And if all else appears equally true, why not use the words your community will resonate with?

Second, there's a thousand ways to serve. People also get stuck in what they want to do. They think all they have to do is show up and the money will follow. Not anymore folks.... the money follows those who serve their best cause. So let's expand our thinking beyond what we want to do and look at where we can make the biggest impact. Many people are surprised at where they can play for fun and profit.

Third, you will be tested. Many times. The marketplace wants to know how bad you want to make an impact. Sooner rather than later, you will have to choose between staying small and safe or getting out of your comfort zone and going for broke. There is no middle ground. To influence and change the world, you have to go beyond what is comfortable to give. Thought leaders who bet big on themselves make it to the top.

The journey to prominent thought leadership is like any other grand adventure – it has a lot of twists and turns. You'll learn stuff you never knew before. You'll let go of stuff you once thought was important. And you'll meet people and go places you'll never forget. If you navigate this wild and wacky world right, you'll look back and say, **"Wow...what a ride."**

Good luck on your journey and may our paths cross again soon.



VICKIE SULLIVAN

Market Strategy for Thought Leaders

Vickie Sullivan is internationally recognized as the top market strategist for thought leaders and influencers. Specializing in branding in competitive markets, she has launched thousands of thought leaders since 1987. Ms. Sullivan is a popular speaker throughout the U.S. and Canada on why buyers buy in lucrative markets and strategies that position experts for those opportunities. Her market intelligence updates are distributed to experts in the U.S. as well as 17 other countries.

Ms. Sullivan has served twice on the editorial board for Professional Speaker Magazine, and currently serves as contributing editor for RainToday.com, a prominent community of 120,000 service professionals. Her articles have been published in other publications such as Presentations and USA Today magazines and the Handbook of Business Strategy. Ms. Sullivan has also been quoted in mainstream media such as Fortune.com, The New York Times, and Investor's Business Daily. Her work and views have appeared in books such as Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America by Barbara Ehrenreich, Secrets of Six-Figure Women by Barbara Stanney, and Getting Started in Consulting by Alan Weiss.

Ms. Sullivan's groundbreaking work has earned her an appointment on the Women's Leadership Board for the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. As a former member of the mentoring committee, she has given three presentations to the student body there on personal branding and prominence. She is also an avid TEDster and supports their SupportED fellows program by acting as a branding and thought leadership advisor at the 2015 Collaboratorium.

The first in her family to graduate from college, Ms. Sullivan earned her bachelor's degree in Journalism, Public Relations emphasis at the University of Oklahoma. She lives in Tempe, AZ with her husband Larry, her favorite geek.



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