

But Mom Told Me Never to Brag

RAISING YOUR REPUTATION WITH THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Ed Barks

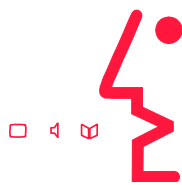
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Remember a time not so long ago when you could generate some marketing copy, put it on your website or in a brochure, and try to separate yourself from the competition? Those days are over. If all your messaging says is “Buy from me,” you lose. When clients seek services today, they want to deal with thought leaders — executives, professionals, and business owners who share useful knowledge verbally, visually, and in writing.

What Is Thought Leadership?

Some refer to it as “thought leadership,” others as “content marketing.” Regardless of your chosen term of art, reaching out to clients, customers, members, political constituencies, and other publics with expert, useful information is key to raising your professional profile. There is value in an approach that says, “Here are some informative ideas you can implement right away,” rather than one saying, “Here’s what I sell. Don’t you need some of this?”

In essence, you want your content to be the subject of water cooler conversation. Give your readers, listeners, or viewers a reason to think. Spur them to make your idea the topic du jour. Encourage them to give your idea traction.

What type of value might accrue? One example comes from Joyce Bosc, President of [Boscobel Marketing Communications](#). When discussing research her firm conducted into how trade show cancellations hinder government contractors from keeping pace with new technology, she explains that the research “benefited our organization because it gave us visibility via news coverage and it positioned us as a thought leader. Since we serve both government and contractors, this certainly is positive to build our brand reputation.”

Blogs answer questions that readers are likely to have. This type of content is intended to produce longer and deeper stays. This, in turn, is designed to lead to a greater inclination to

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contact the resident expert and begin a conversation that eventually results in ordering goods or services.

To be sure, some websites still cling to the method of churning out marketing copy. It is likely that, as these sites are revamped, savvy businesses will adopt an internet presence richer in content and more useful to visitors.

In reality, thought leadership is nothing new. “Content marketing has been around for over 100 years,” according to [Content Marketing Institute](#) founder Joe Pulizzi. The approach “is hot right now because the consumer is in complete control of the buying process and there are no barriers to entry for corporate publishing.”

Mom’s Seal of Approval

It is important to note that a content-oriented approach goes beyond selling a handful more widgets or signing a few additional consulting contracts. Certainly there would be no complaints from businesses that attained such results. However, the benefit of providing valuable content goes beyond a few random sales.

Rich content promotes the reputation of both you and your company in a dignified way. Even Mom would approve.

Thought leadership leads to greater prestige for both your organization and your career. Take Joyce Bosc’s efforts as an example. She views the research as a pie. “We serve the



whole pie in a white paper,” she says. “We divide the pie up into slices and blog them. We tweet bites about the blogs and the white paper. In some cases, we do events to share the research.”

Such an approach can lead to a bump in sales. It creates an aura of the “go-to” authority. When a prospective buyer wants the best (and despite sometimes crimped budgets, who really doesn’t want the top of the line?), they will seek out the expert capable of answering questions they may not even know they had. The loser? The marketer whose only goal is sell, sell, sell.

The heightened profile created by content marketing can lead to everything from more frequent quotes in newspaper articles to superior speaking engagements, from greater achievement of public policy objectives to higher professional fees.

Mom-accepted Thought Leadership Techniques

Let's get down to the nitty gritty and discuss the specific tools you can use to launch a thought leadership campaign, either for yourself, your CEO, or a subject expert seeking to raise their profile. This report examines four principal means of delivering high value content:

- Speaking
- Writing
- Research
- Video

Didn't Mom Tell You to Speak Up?

One way to remove the thought leadership barriers is to stand in front of an audience and deliver a value-packed presentation. This certainly puts you in the limelight. Plus, the event's organizers have placed their stamp of approval on you by virtue of inviting you to speak. Once you are on the dais, be it in person or remote, it is up to you to supply the real world knowledge that listeners can use, and to do so in an engaging fashion.

[Social Driver](#) has established itself as a top of the line digital marketing agency. Despite daily business demands, Chief Strategy Officer and Co-Founder Anthony

Shop maintains a busy schedule of appearances centering on his expertise in digital marketing. Says Shop, "My approach is not to 'sell' Social Driver's capabilities or services as much as to educate [audiences] about what we have learned from working with a variety of clients. I've often gotten feedback that my colleagues and I are requested back because of this softer approach."

*Four principal means of
delivering high value
content:*

- *Speaking*
- *Writing*
- *Research*
- *Video*

“To me, whether the audience will be comprised of potential business leads is not my sole concern. I also am interested in an engaging discussion where the audience and I can learn from one another,” he adds.

Pro bono speaking opportunities can boost thought leadership and top of mind awareness of the speaker. My own approach is to accept (and, in some cases, to pursue) this type of engagement if it puts me in front of an audience I want to reach. Even if speaking for no fee, it is a good idea to request something in return from the sponsoring organization. It might take the form of introductions to potential paying clients, permission to sell your books at the back of the room, a complimentary membership in the organization, or any number of other ideas. Whatever the deal, it’s only fair that those who provide pro bono services receive something of value to them.

One important note: No holding back on your content when speaking pro bono. You still have the obligation to deliver beneficial subject matter.

Write Nice and Neat, Mom Always Said

Some thought leaders break down the barriers to braggadocio through their writing, for this can pay off in a heightened reputation. The biggest bang comes from a book. I’ve landed consulting engagements well into five figures due solely to the fact that an executive has read my book, contacted me, and hired me to help with his firm’s public speaking and media endeavors. Note that these are rare cases. I don’t advise publishing a book and waiting for the phone to ring.

A book has other advantages. For instance, authors are able to separate themselves from the pack and lend legitimacy to their reputations. How? By sending prospective clients a copy of their book instead of a raft of marketing material.

If you don’t feel that you have an entire book in you, certain commercial publishers and associations put together anthologies consisting of chapters or shorter thought pieces written by outside contributors. One place to start: Check the website of associations to which you belong for publications that will accept a thought piece with your byline.

There is a range of other publications, both print and electronic, seeking articles from expert writers. Define the target market you are trying to reach, determine what they read, and

approach the editors with some ideas for content-rich articles. This affords you a tactful way to brag that would make Mom proud.

Mom Knows that Visibility Over Time Matters

“A constant article-writing stream keeps one’s visibility and credibility high and constant,” advises Ken Lizotte, Chief Imaginative Officer of [emerson consulting group](#). “To produce only one or two articles means people will soon forget you. But keeping articles coming



conveys the message that the author is a thought leader year in and year out.”

The membership organizations to which you belong are likely to distribute a newsletter or two to members and others. Why not contact the editor and kick around some story ideas (always remind them that you are a member; that helps a lot). The best thing about this

approach is your ability to submit multiple articles over time.

Your website is another good place to feature articles. While it doesn’t have quite the cachet of someone else publishing them, it still gets your content into the public domain and can raise your visibility on search engines. Moreover, it’s far easier to post something on your own than to deal with an editor. I recommend combining these techniques — aim to place articles in external publications with some regularity while rotating content on your website more frequently.

Frequency matters. “Studies of the ‘ROI of thought leading’ which primarily means writing and publishing articles and/or books have consistently shown a definite correlation between publishing one’s ideas and higher levels of revenue, profit and word of mouth referrals,” says Lizotte, also the author of [The Expert’s Edge: Become the Go-To Authority that People Turn to Every Time](#). “Anecdotal evidence also bears this out. So publishing one’s ideas absolutely separates the business author from his or her competition.”

A blog represents another means of consistently sharing your viewpoint and expertise with the world. One important note: If you start a blog, you’ve got to contribute regularly. There is little that shatters reputation more effectively in the online world than a blog that

someone has not updated in months or years. If you've made a conscious decision to retire the blog, you have two choices:

1. Take it down
2. If the content is still timely, add a note explaining your decision to halt the addition of new posts.

If you are not up to maintaining your own, consider chiming in on other blogs with enough persistence and merit that you eventually gain a reputation as a respected member of that community.

You may find that some of these methods work better for you than others. That is as it should be. If you want to focus all your energy on writing a book, great. If you'd prefer to operate a blog rather than deal with editors, fine. The trick is to find the combination of approaches that is best for your individual situation.

Research Sets You Apart

Your Mom probably told you more than once to finish your homework. I know mine did. Little did we realize it at the time, but those school research projects formed a foundation for our careers. How? Well, there are few things that position you head and shoulders above the competition as conducting original research into a subject your target audience cares about (and, of course, in which you hold expertise).

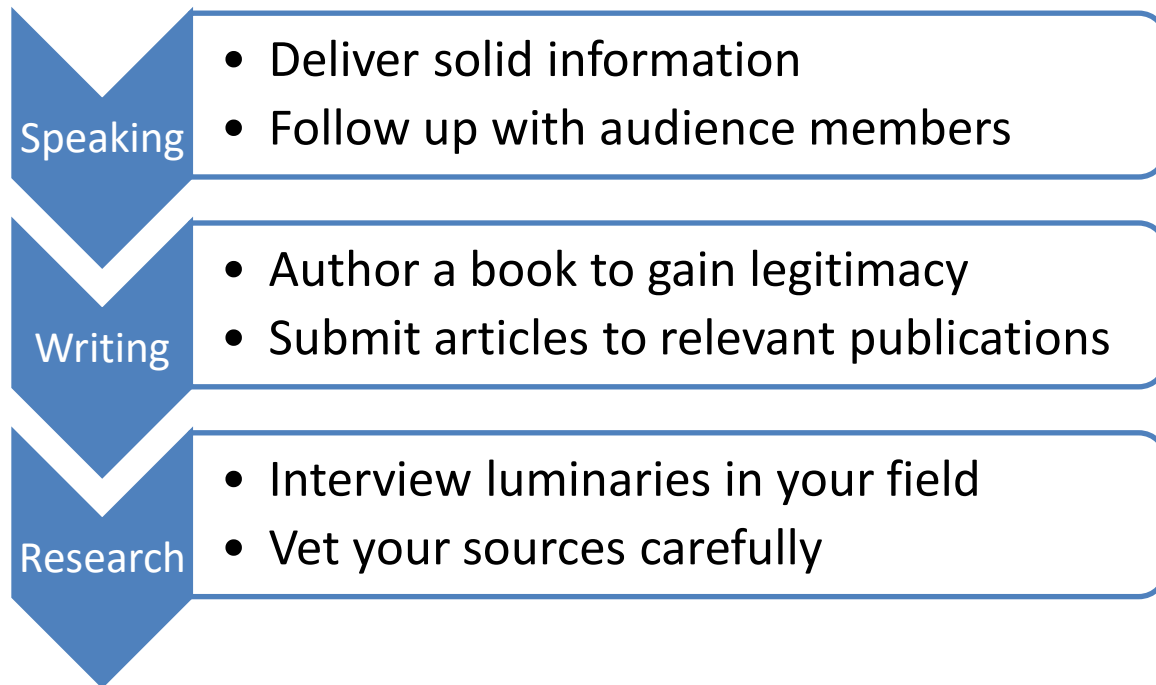
Research is more demanding for it requires lots of preparation time. A note of caution: Not everyone is capable of conducting and publishing honest to goodness original research. If this is not one of your strengths, that's fine. Find another vehicle for advancing your thought leadership.

At the same time, you don't need a PhD. There is no rule dictating that research papers be thick tomes heavily annotated with footnotes written in dense academic language. Pick a topic in your wheelhouse and dig deeper. The internet can be a good starting point (beware that there is a lot of misinformation out there, so always verify your findings using legitimate sources, as any professional must).

“Whether the audience will be comprised of potential business leads is not my sole concern. I also am interested in an engaging discussion where the audience and I can learn from one another.”

-- Anthony Shop

Don't stop with a cursory internet search. Dig deeper with visits to research libraries (librarians are terrific resources who are eager to help you find what you need). Interview colleagues and luminaries in the field, and quote them in your report. Conduct surveys. Use digital media channels to gather opinions.



Additionally, your local research librarian is often a treasure trove of information. If you are in the Washington, D.C., area there is no finer place to work things through than the Library of Congress, where I have conducted a good deal of my research.

Contact others whose work and reputations you admire. Ask them a couple of questions, making it clear that you wish to quote them in your research report. Be sure to keep your questions brief so you don't come across as a pest. Approached with respect and courtesy, many high profile authorities are happy to respond. After all, it's another place for *them* to be quoted as an expert, adding a layer of sheen to their reputations.

When seeking out publication options for your research, I am not necessarily suggesting that you aim for a peer reviewed journal (though if you are in science or academia that is certainly the way to go). You need to have your findings published in a respected source, such as a magazine that reaches your intended audience.

And regardless of the type of publication or depth of your research, there is value in having some type of peer review process. In fact, peer review for most writing is a good idea. Why not send drafts of your research reports to a handful of colleagues as part of a review process, one that provides helpful feedback and error-checking capabilities.

You can also advance your research — and your thought leadership profile — by making it part of your speaking and writing endeavors. Target groups you want to reach with news of your research, seeking out presentation and article opportunities (note how the speaking/writing/research triad elements support one another).

Speaking and writing outreach represents one part of your promotional plan that highlights your research. And don't neglect creating a plan to get it out to the public, for the best information is useless if no one knows about it. Your plan doesn't need to be multiple pages replete with charts and graphs. A one-pager listing such factors as your intended audience, tactics you plan to employ, and timing will suffice. Include digital media tools as part of your strategy, deciding which options make sense to broadcast your findings. Never, however, default to use of digital media just because it's there. If it is a good means of reaching your target audience, use it; if not, why waste time?

“A constant article-writing stream keeps one’s visibility and credibility high and constant.”

-- Ken Lizotte

The Value of Video

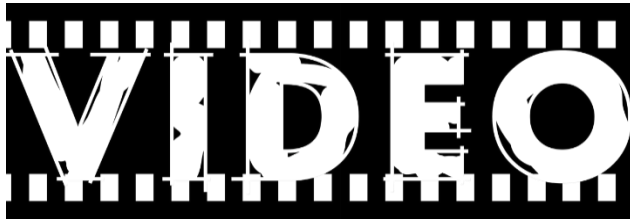
Video is taking on a heightened role in the content arena. As with other tools, if you enjoy shooting videos and you are good at it (quality is a must), work this into your output.

As you delve into video production, it's important to keep a few things in mind. First, content is king, so you should never wing it. Create either a script or decide on your talking points — both replete with your message — before you hit that “record” button.

Once that content is in hand, you need to select your production tools. On one end of the spectrum, you could shoot and edit the video on your mobile device. The quality of such shoots has become quite good. If you do self-produce, it is wise to invest in a tripod and lighting kit. These tools help you avoid the shakiness and harsh shadows evident in so many

amateur-looking videos. Remember, you need to come across as a professional if you hope to have your content respected.

Many novice video creators pay close attention the video quality only to ignore audio. They settle for the microphone on their device. Big mistake. Research shows that viewers will bail out on poor audio quicker than poor video. Think about it. You probably do the same



thing when you strain to hear when the audio is low and the background hissing is pronounced. There's an easy solution: Invest in a solid external microphone. It will pay big dividends.

The other end of the spectrum: Hire a professional videographer experienced in video production (some have great in the field shooting skills, but little experience in production; be sure to ask). This is a more expensive option I recommend when quality really matters. I've used both this method and the do-it-yourself approach depending on the situation.

Of course, you need to decide how to distribute your video once you have it in hand. The easiest solution is to place them on a service like Vimeo or YouTube. Once there, you can embed them on your website or blog. Plus, you can direct potential viewers to your channel on your chosen service where they can check out all your recordings.

There is a longer form video worth mentioning, especially if your strategy includes public speaking. Posting video of your speaking engagements online adds to your thought leadership quotient. It gives you a ready made video vehicle. Record your presentation, then add it to your website and video channels. A word of advice: Work with a videographer in these instances. Too often I've observed inadequate audio and video quality that reflects poorly on the speaker. You've probably seen these inferior offerings, too — a static camera set up in the back of the room that captures a tiny figure that somewhat resembles the expert, and tinny audio that is barely, if at all, discernable. A skilled videographer and crew can produce a two or three camera shoot, and mic you (and your audience for Q&A) effectively.

Mom Taught Us Not to Show Off, But...

Most of us no doubt recall Mom scolding us not to toot our own horn. And we can vividly grasp her wisdom every time we are cornered by someone with a bloviating, salesy manner

who tells us how great they are, or when we visit the website of a company that claims to be the best choice for every situation.

To be clear, there is a big difference between a prima donna bent on puffery and an executive who shares useful opinion and analysis about issues that affect the business, the marketplace, and its clients.

The point here is to try to overcome the “mom hurdle” and realize that bragging — done diplomatically — can help you advance your career, your business, and the causes you hold near and dear.

The Mom-approved Method of Bragging

“Content marketing is just advertising with the added element of engagement. It’s the natural, evolved state of advertising today,” says Will Burns, CEO of [Ideasicle X](#). In today’s business world, digital media tools have the benefit of allowing thought leaders to reach previously unknown or hard to find audiences.



“Advertising in any form is inherently boastful,” he adds. “That’s the point. To boast. But underlying any advertising boast is the belief that what’s being boasted about is worthwhile to a certain audience in the first place.”

Much of effective bragging revolves around solid content. Effective thought leaders provide valuable information and show how target audiences can use it. It is no longer about what you can sell them.

Consider the change in websites (or, at least, appealing websites) in recent years. Not so long ago, most sites were basically a glorified marketing brochure: Here’s what we do and here’s why you should buy from us. That has changed. Businesses now try to attract clients and customers by providing articles, speeches, research reports, blogs, and videos that are chock full of content that visitors can put to good use.

Boosting Your Own Thought Leadership Profile

Now comes time to decide how you want to use these four tools — speaking, writing, research, and video — to enhance your personal thought leadership résumé. How can you go about this task? One of the best routes is to ask colleagues for their opinions.

A personal story: I did just that a number of years ago, and, based on that trusted feedback, decided to place my eggs in the speaking and writing baskets. Research and video came into the picture for me a bit later. You may well find that you, too, add on various components as your career progresses.

It was only after I had systems in place for speaking and writing that I turned to research. It happens that my education in political science — a discipline dependent upon research — helped in this area. Your background may steer you in another direction that better



suits you. There is no one-size-fits-all template. Your approach will center upon some very personal decisions on the most appropriate thought leadership ventures for you.

One added thought: Don't ignore your inner voice. Even if you've never considered your strengths in areas such as speaking or research, for example, you have a sense of what you are good at and what you enjoy. And let me emphasize that last point. This should be a course of action in which you take some pleasure. After all, why bother hauling yourself out of bed in the morning to face a day filled with drudgery?

The Bottom Line: Improvement Strategies Mom Would Like

The next obvious question regarding your content marketing venture: How can you sharpen your speaking, writing, and research skills? What steps should you take to enhance your thought leadership profile without seeming boastful, in the process making Mom proud?

With speaking, the key is practice, practice, practice. Begin with low-risk situations, perhaps at your child's school or your neighborhood association. Then branch out to small community groups, eventually progressing to larger audiences that hold more weight relative to your career and profession.

Read what you can about the craft of speaking, too. Just be alert to the fact that there is a lot of bad advice out there. You will either have to sift through it yourself or find an advisor with expertise in helping you sharpen your communications edge.

The approach to writing is much the same — do it. Start small by contributing comments to others’ blogs or launch a blog of your own. Next, pitch editors at smaller publications with articles focusing on your area of proficiency. Eventually, you may be able to work your way up to a regular column at a prestigious publication.

As for research, decide whether that approach is something you have the desire and background to pursue. If you give yourself a green light, set up a system that you can use to identify topics, conduct your studies, publish, and promote.

If you take the video route, commit to keeping up with the shifting sands of both technical challenges and ideal length. Tools are bound to keep getting better, and some genius will eventually tell us that we should be shooting hour-long videos (and people will be gullible enough to heed that call). The point is keep your ear to the ground.

“There is nothing better on the planet than content marketing to increase one’s reputation and business,” concludes the [Content Marketing Institute’s](#) Pulizzi, also the author of [Epic Content Marketing](#). “To build both an audience and authority on a topic, you need to deliver consistent amounts of valuable and helpful information in a niche topic. If you don’t have a billion dollars to spend, becoming the go-to informational resource in the industry is a close second.”

Get ready to position yourself as a content expert in your field. Assess your abilities, decide where you want to improve, then chart a course designed to get you to your destination in a diplomatic, non-arrogant manner.

Now’s the time to make Mom proud of you while demonstrating the modesty she taught you. Start that online exploration. Schedule those conversations with trusted colleagues. Make that phone call, send that email, reach out via digital media to experts capable of helping you improve your thought leadership capabilities. Act as if your career and business goals depend on it. They do, you know.



Appendix A

Purpose of the Research

In today's business environment, "thought leadership" or "content marketing" is proving an ever more popular promotional approach. Yet American culture typically frowns upon self-aggrandizement. Many of us still quiver at childhood memories of our mothers warning us not to show off.

This research is intended to provide value to CEOs and other C-suite executives — and those communicators who counsel them — as they work to build their thought leadership profiles.

The report attempts to assuage some of those deep-seated concerns by presenting background on why thought leadership matters when it comes to raising your professional profile, how taking on a thought leadership role benefits your business and your career, what thought leadership vehicles exist, and how to brag without appearing boastful. Finally, it also offers tangible next steps to increase your thought leadership capabilities.

Appendix B

Methodology

Interviews were conducted with luminaries in the thought leadership field. The majority of those interviews were conducted via email. The author thanks all who generously lent their time and wisdom to this endeavor.

Direct quotations are used wherever possible. Any errors of interpretation can be attributed to the author, and not the experts interviewed.

About the Author

Author and communications strategy consultant **Ed Barks** works with communications and government relations executives who counsel their C-suite leaders, and with businesses and associations that need their communications strategy and messaging to deliver bottom line results. They gain an enhanced reputation, greater confidence, more opportunities for career advancement, and achievement of long-term business and public policy goals.



He is the **author of [four business books](#)**:

- *Insider Strategies for the Confident Communicator: How to Master Meetings, Presentations, Interviews, and Advocacy*
- *Reporters Don't Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies*
- *A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications: Turning Today's Leaders into Tomorrow's Influencers*
- *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*

Ed contributes to a variety of publications and is the former “Speaking Sense” columnist for the *Washington Business Journal*. He has also published numerous research reports and position papers, including **[“A Buyer’s Guide To Communications Strategy Consultants.”](#)**

More than 5700 business leaders, association executives, scientists, government officials, entertainers, and other thought leaders thank Ed for sharpening their communications edge.

According to his clients, he “knows how to elicit peak performance.” They call him “a master at connecting with his audience” and “an effective educator,” and give his communications training workshops “two thumbs up!”

He has served as President of Barks Communications since founding it in 1997. He served a nine-year tenure on the Board of Governors of the **National Press Club** and joined the faculty of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Institute for Organization Management. He is a former member of the board of directors of the Institute of Management Consultants National Capital Region, and the Consultants Section Council of the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE).

An inside-the-Beltway veteran, Ed has spent more than three decades in Washington, D.C. He brings another critical perspective to his clients’ communications needs — that of a broadcaster and journalist. He knows firsthand the traits and techniques of the reporting trade, thanks to a decade of experience in radio broadcasting.

Ed also publishes the **C-suite Blueprint blog**. [Follow him there](#) to receive notification of each post.