How to execute sales programs that engage your customers and differentiate your sales experience with education, ideas and insights
The Emergence of Thought Leadership as a Sales Discipline

The notion of thought leadership marketing has emerged as a top priority with sales and marketing executives, in particular business-to-business marketers. Growth-starved sales organizations are looking for ways to differentiate their customer experience with new ideas, education, relevant advice, and solutions that address unmet customer needs. Sales executives realize these are the things that really open doors, create quality customer conversations, and drive deeper relationships and profitable cross selling. And, as marketing executives watch traditional marketing approaches lose their effectiveness, they are learning that ideas, education and a strong point of view are essential to taking advantage of high growth media channels such as interactive, social, mobile, out-of-home, and e-mail.

What are your top B2B marketing objectives in the next 3 to 5 years?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building new business</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positioning our company as a thought leader</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standing out from the competition</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buildign awareness of our products and services</td>
<td>51%</td>
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(Economist Intelligence Unit, Megatrends in B2B Marketing Report)

Despite the growing visibility and importance of thought leadership as a sales discipline, it receives more lip service than program dollars in actual practice. Most organizations fail to put “muscle” behind the idea by executing disciplined thought leadership programs and promotions. There are several good reasons for this:

- First, thought leadership marketing is a relatively new discipline pioneered by professional services and technology industry leaders such as McKinsey, IBM, Cap Gemini and Apple.
- Second, most organizations lack processes for creating original selling content, managers to lead cross functional programs, and the agility to execute fast enough to lead the market with fresh ideas and insights.
- Finally, the traditional advertising agencies that sales and marketing executives look to for support cannot generate the depth of content or the level of sales process integration necessary for these programs to succeed.

What is a Thought Leadership Selling Program?

Thought Leadership Selling means taking a programmatic approach to helping your sales people deliver new ideas, relevant advice and compelling solutions to prospects and customers. A Thought Leadership Selling program provides salespeople with a sustained stream of education and advisory content that helps them open doors, make more effective sales calls, differentiate your organization and deliver trusted advice. A Thought Leadership Selling program is:

- Based on an integrated strategy that incorporates sales process, communications, branding and product sales goals
- Built upon a well thought out set of thought leadership assets including selling content, tools and resources
- Delivered to customers using disciplined multi-channel programs and a coordinated set of customer touches

This paper outlines how your organization can create tangible Thought Leadership Selling programs that immediately generate more quality customer meetings, referrals, profiles and conversations. It will outline the practical steps your organization can take to execute a systematic program for delivering new ideas and relevant solutions to your customers. You will learn how to:

1. Build the foundation of a scalable and sustainable Thought Leadership Selling program
2. Create thought leadership assets that support your strategy
3. Deliver these thought leadership assets to customers with disciplined multi-channel selling programs
The Business Case:
Why Thought Leadership Is So Important to Sales Success

A chorus of consultants—including the Gartner Group, the Corporate Advisory Board, McKinsey and the Economist Intelligence Unit—are emphasizing the importance of thought leadership to creating sales success.

- The Gartner Group cites Thought Leadership Marketing (TLM) as a major business trend that was incubated in high technology and consulting circles but is now rapidly becoming an established field in marketing and a basis of competitive differentiation

- The Economist Intelligence unit has identified Thought Leadership Marketing as a top B2B marketing “megatrend” in a series of reports. B2B marketers view “positioning the business as a thought leader in the industry” and “standing out from the competition” as top challenges as traditional marketing approaches lose their effectiveness. B2B customers emphasize the importance of customer education events and original ideas, research, best practices and insights as the top things they expect in the selling experience.

- A recent customer buying analysis by the Corporate Executive Board shows that high value customers like business customers, wealthy individuals or chief financial officers are increasingly demanding education and advice as part of the sales experience.

While the specific details of their recommendations may vary, one message is becoming clear—Thought Leadership Selling programs make it easier for your salespeople to open doors, educate customers and differentiate your offerings.

Adding thought leadership programs to your sales and marketing mix makes business sense if you want to improve sales effectiveness, differentiate your organization and give customers the education, engagement and sales experience they are seeking. Market leaders such as IBM, McKinsey, Apple and SunTrust Bank have demonstrated that thought leadership delivered by sales can be a key driver of differentiation, loyalty and sales and marketing effectiveness. They have used thought leadership sales content and assets to:

- Cut through the advertising clutter and more effectively take advantage of high growth media such as social networks, online video, mobile and out-of-home media networks.

- Drive sales with compelling ideas that open new doors and provide relevant reasons to continue to call on

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What will be the best way for providers of B2B services to market to you in the next 3 to 5 years?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meetings/Conferences</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original research</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thought leadership surveys and papers</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web advertising/Web 2.0</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article reprints and redistribution</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thought leadership is still developing as a sales and marketing discipline. So there are many points of view on what exactly thought leadership marketing or selling really means. Sales executives describe it a variety of ways:

- The selling of ideas
- Leading with ideas, information and education in exchange for trust, credibility and access
- Avoiding “product pushing”
- Showing vs. telling customers what your company can do

Based on our experience executing Thought Leadership Selling programs for market leaders such as Intuit, DuPont, CBS and SunTrust Bank, we define thought leadership selling as taking a programmatic approach to helping your sales people deliver new ideas, relevant advice and compelling solutions to prospects and customers. A successful Thought Leadership Selling program will provide your salespeople with a disciplined and coordinated stream of education and advisory content that helps them open doors, make more effective sales calls, differentiate your offerings, and deliver relevant advice.

There are three keys to designing and executing a Thought Leadership Selling program that will help your sales force generate measurable sales growth in the next sales quarter:

1. **Build the foundation of a scalable and successful program.** Like building a house, a Thought Leadership Selling program must be built on a sound foundation. To create business value your program needs to directly support your sales process and drive your communications, branding and product sales goals.

2. **Create thought leadership assets to support your strategy.** A Thought Leadership Selling program is based on a portfolio of well thought out set of sales assets – such as original advisory content, case studies, ideas, or “how to” guides - that support your sales process and can be combined into tangible sales programs.

3. **Deliver thought leadership in multi-channel sales programs.** A Thought Leadership Selling program delivers thought leadership assets to your customers such as education events, monthly “micro-sales campaigns”, and regular “you should know” phone calls, sales calls and e-mails.

The following section will outline six steps your organization can take to develop, execute and support a Thought Leadership Selling program, including examples and illustrations to make them more tangible. Executing a successful Thought Leadership Selling program is a lot like any other well organized marketing or sales campaign with two big exceptions. First, you will need to develop internal processes for generating original and high quality selling content. The second is you will have to find an executive willing to lead and integrate the programs across sales, marketing and product organizations.
Six Steps to Executing a Thought Leadership Selling Program

- Develop an integrated thought leadership strategy that can be funded
- Develop a Sales Process Enablement Map to define your priorities
- Create a Core Set of Thought Leadership Content Assets That Support Your Strategy
- Create Customer Education Websites That Support Your Selling Process
- Execute a Micro-Sales Campaign to Deliver New Ideas to Customers
- Execute Customer Education Events That Sustain Customer Contact

To move faster you might consider asking for help in outsourcing aspects of the process. Profitable Channels works with Global 2000 organizations to build and execute world class Thought Leadership Selling programs that quickly drive measurable sales results.

Six Steps to Executing a Profitable Thought Leadership Selling Program

This section explains how you can:

- Develop an integrated thought leadership strategy that makes sure your program is focused on the top growth goals of your organization.
- Create a sales process enablement roadmap that makes sure you invest in the highest impact thought leadership program assets.

Develop an integrated thought leadership strategy that can be funded
To generate measurable sales outcomes and results, a Thought Leadership Selling program must directly support your sales process and drive your communications, branding and product sales goals. Taking the time to integrate intelligence/market research and priorities across many different sales, marketing and product organizations will pay off with a strong Thought Leadership Selling plan.

Based on hard earned experience executing world class Thought Leadership Selling programs at large and silo-ed organizations, it makes sense to invest some energy into creating a strategic foundation for your program. As a practical matter, organizational integration almost always proves to be one of the most difficult parts of executing a successful program. So investing time in a little homework and coordination will likely have a big payoff.

A smart first step is to define a thought leadership selling strategy that directly supports your “go to market strategy”. This ensures your program will drive the right sales outcomes and will generate the ROI to receive funding and support. To do this, you should make sure your program goals factor in your organization’s market research on core customer needs, communications priorities, and sales objectives. The picture below outlines the different ingredients that go into developing the basis of your thought leadership programs. The goal is to draw on research and plans from across the organizations as the source of the themes and ideas you will generate and deliver to customers. An effective way to do this is to assemble existing market research, communications guidelines and sales process documentation into one place. Lead a brainstorming session that draws upon these different institutional assets to identify twelve to twenty-four topics and themes that could drive your organization’s selling program. This list is the basis of a unique thought leadership agenda that outlines issues, ideas or topics where your company is (or wants to be) a credible authority, or where it makes business sense to create new expertise.

Develop a Sales Process Enablement Map to define your priorities

The next step is to define exactly how and where your Thought Leadership Selling program will enable your sales process, energize your salespeople and engage your customers. A useful tool to do this is called a Sales Process Enablement Map. Essentially, this compares how your salespeople currently engage your customers with the marketing tools, content, collateral, tools and program resources they are given to help. This exercise helps you assess how well your existing marketing content, promotions, collateral and other sales support resources are supporting your salespeople and enabling a quality customer experience. Since our research shows that salespeople only attribute 10% of their sales success to marketing programs, there is a pretty good chance you will find big opportunities to improve.
Conducting this mapping exercise will help you define the high ROI thought leadership content, resources and tools that will enable your sales process the most and support more meaningful sales calls. To identify the thought leadership assets that can improve your particular sales process the most:

1. Outline your customer engagement process from initial impression all the way through relationship development. This will give you a picture of the sales experience from the customer’s viewpoint, and identify how and where your different sales resources interact with customers and prospects at every step of the process.

2. Brainstorm where better selling content would make the sales experience more engaging, compelling and valuable to your customers. For example, selling content could include either compelling “you should know” sales calls, proprietary insights and ideas conveyed in research reports, a well-placed cross selling conversation or a customer education event, case study or webcast. Rank the places where the content gaps are the greatest or the opportunity to enhance the customer experience is significant.

3. Starting with your biggest opportunity to improve sales value and effectiveness, define specific thought leadership content assets. Your overall thought leadership strategy should help keep these ideas directly aligned with your business goals, messaging priorities and sales model.

Below is an illustration of a sales process enablement map that supports a multi-channel selling system.
Create A Core Set Of Thought Leadership Content Assets That Support Your Strategy

An important step is to create an inventory of high quality selling content that help drive customer engagement and improve sales effectiveness. The thought leadership strategy you developed in step one should help you define and prioritize exactly what thought leadership content assets are needed to fuel your program. The table below illustrates the basic types of thought leadership content assets to consider. A portfolio of content assets can be combined into multi-channel selling programs that generate many quality sales contacts and efficiently move customer conversations from profiling needs to introducing relevant cross sell solutions.

Core Thought Leadership Content Assets

A menu of reasons to call including new ideas, compelling door openers, scripts, and e-mail/letter templates supported by a selling sheet that explains ways to start conversations, open doors and introduce new ideas to customers.

Workshops, webcasts or short videos that allow sales people to deliver new ideas, practical advice and relevant solutions to customers in the form of best practices, customer case examples or featured solutions. Delivered by phone, email, or printed invitation.

Short 1-2 page best practices reports with “how to” instructions to solve a client problem, customer case studies that illustrate a best practice and/or the successful execution of your solution; or brief articles promoting your products in a strategic context.

Sales tools and cross sell scripts that helps sales professionals cross sell effectively by naturally introducing relevant services and solutions with questions, diagnostic tools or product recommendations.

Create Customer Education Websites That Support Your Selling Process

One of the simplest ways to deliver sales advice is over the web. A practical way to deliver thought leadership content is a customer education website focused on the unique needs of a specific customer segment. Websites are a convenient place to house videos, research reports, podcasts,
customer surveys and online tools that support sales. A good example of a customer education website is the SunTrust Business Solutions Central website (bizsolutionscentral.com) which houses education, advice and solutions for small business owners.

This customer education website includes educational videos salespeople can send to their customers, best practices research reports about issues business owners really care about, and educational workshops that owners can register for to create face-to-face meetings. Bankers use this site as a reason to call customers and create quality sales contacts.

A website like this can serve as a multi-channel selling asset that can help all of your sales channels target and engage customers, improve marketing effectiveness, and differentiate your sales experience because:

- It supports quality sales contact through a mix of channels including: inbound service center conversations, outbound prospecting calls, face-to-face sales conversations, and self-directed customer discovery via online and social media.
- It differentiates your sales experience in the eyes of customers and prospects with thought leadership content and advice that addresses their unique issues and needs.
It helps you leverage online channels and social media. Forrester Research thinks customer education websites like these (called Segment Community Hubs) should be the foundation of a social media strategy that is persistent, consistent and scalable. Whatever your organization chooses to call it, a web presence that delivers unique and compelling thought leadership content will generate more interest in online and social media channels than the product-focused websites that command the bulk of online marketing budgets.

To create a customer education website that will develop your top market segment:

1. Find credible common ground to create a theme for your site by looking at your market research on core customer needs, your brand and communications priorities, and your sources of competitive advantage.
2. Outline a mix of thought leadership content to support the website. This might include relevant segment research, practical advice, customer case studies, or tools and solutions your company can provide.
3. Create a dedicated web presence that integrates with your sales channels. Your website can support selling activities by providing videos or content that can be emailed to customers, places to capture customer data such as event registration, and self-directed resources that allow prospects or influencers to tell you more about their needs while educating themselves more about your solutions.

**Execute A Micro-Sales Campaign To Deliver New Ideas to Customers**

The final steps involve assembling these thought leadership content assets into effective and measurable sales programs. This section will explain how to use the assets outlined above to create disciplined programs to deliver the thought leadership assets including customer education events and frequent “micro-sales campaigns” that deliver new ideas and relevant insights to customers in sales calls, e-mails and “you should know” phone calls.

**An Example of a Micro-Sales Campaign Calendar**

One of the biggest roadblocks to executing sales campaigns is the amount of training and program management time required to deliver a coordinated sales promotion. As a consequence, sales
promotions are usually an annual or bi-annual event. Unfortunately, in the eyes of the customer, establishing thought leadership usually requires more than just one customer contact or one big idea per year. Sales executives who seek more timely and frequent customer communications need to find more efficient "out-of-the-box" ways to deliver fresh ideas and relevant content to their customers.

One good idea is to execute frequent micro-sales campaigns that help your sales team to consistently deliver new ideas and compelling reasons to call customers, prospects and influencers again and again. Adding micro-sales campaigns as a core sales program makes sense because customers are demanding more education about how to solve their problems as part of the selling experience. A disciplined micro-sales campaign helps improve call quality, consistency, and effectiveness while positioning your organization as the thought leader in your industry.

The first step to executing a micro-sales campaign is to create a thought leadership calendar. A thought leadership calendar is an outline of 12-18 sales ideas that will be compelling and relevant to your customers, support your brand and messaging priorities, and make it easier for salespeople to open doors and make calls. This calendar should be based on the thought leadership selling assets developed in step two. The goal should be to have a quality customer contact every quarter or even monthly (e.g., in the form of a “sales idea of the month campaign”). Consider providing a mix of reasons to call to keep the program fresh by combining different types of content such as reports, online videos and event invitations. And, use different channels of communications (e.g., face-to-face, phone and email contact).

An Example of a Micro-Sales Campaign Packaging

![Business Insight of The Week]

Meet | Register | Call | Learn more
--- | --- | --- | ---
Winning Strategies for Turbulent Times
Learn five actions you can take to improve cash flow and position themselves to grow in the recovery

Our bank has developed a playbook for making the most of the economic recovery and navigating uncertain markets. The “winning strategies for turbulent times” program will outline five steps owners are taking to strengthen their business and thrive in uncertain times.

Learn about cash flow solutions
Stress test your cash flow
Get cash flow best practices

Cross-Sell Solution
Advisory Diagnostic Tool
Advisory Research Report

“You Should Know” Call

Educational Sales Video
In addition, you need to package your promotional campaigns in a way that makes it easy for the average salesperson to understand, execute and follow up on a “sales idea of the month” campaign. A practical way to streamline sales program execution is to create an efficient web-based process for delivering new sales campaigns to your sales organization on a frequent or even monthly basis without significant training or program management time. One good idea is to create a standard promotional execution template that gives salespeople everything they need to understand and execute a sales campaign with very little training or coaching.

**Execute Customer Education Events That Sustain Customer Contact**

Customer education events are sales programs that deliver education and advice through a series of high quality and coordinated customer contacts and face-to-face meetings. These programs are unique because they use the educational workshops as a reason to call customers and prospects, but usually engineer additional customer touch points before and after the events to maximize ROI and customer engagement.

Creating a customer education event series based on your thought leadership assets is valuable because customers are demanding more education and face-to-face interaction as a core part of the selling experience. And sales executives view face-to-face meetings as a key way to improve customer engagement and differentiate their organizations as industry thought leaders.

The key to profitable customer education event programs is disciplined program execution. It is essential to use customer education events as the basis of a coordinated stream of quality customer contact by sales. Coordinated events that deliver thought leadership have a much higher return on investment than standalone sales events or third party event sponsorships. Any investment in a sales event should give a salesperson a reason to contact a customer or prospect many times before, during, and after the event in a manner that fits with your sales process. If planned properly, your thought leadership assets should be able to support this process by providing interesting ideas to generate attendance before the event, quality education about an important issue during the event, and relevant cross sell recommendations after the event.

**Client Education Workshops Drive A Coordinated Stream Of Quality Customer Contact**
The Bottom Line

Thought Leadership Selling has become a core sales and marketing discipline. Taking the practical steps outlined above can help you create disciplined sales programs that help your sales organization to engage customers, consistently execute your sales model, and differentiate your offerings. The two biggest keys to executing a successful thought leadership program are: 1) developing internal processes for generating original and high quality selling content; and 2) finding an executive willing to lead and integrate the programs across sales, marketing and product organizations.

How we can help you become an industry thought leader

To leverage our thought leadership selling best practices and move faster than the competition you might consider asking for help or outsourcing aspects of this process. Profitable Channels works with Global 2000 organizations to build and execute world class Thought Leadership Selling programs that drive measurable sales results in one sales quarter.

We design, develop and execute thought leadership selling programs that support your salespeople with a sustained stream of education and advisory content that differentiates your sales model, drives repeat sales calls, and delivers trusted advice.

Profitable Channels designs and delivers sales enablement solutions and programs that help engage your customers, energize your salespeople, and enable your sales process. We help executives who own, manage and support selling channels measurably grow sales, improve productivity and differentiate the client experience. Some of our clients include: CBS, DuPont, PNC, SunTrust, U.S. Bank, and UPS

We are a one-stop-shop for deploying your sales enablement program – from strategy to development to execution and tracking. Our services include:

- Sales content reengineering, repackaging and creation
- Sales enablement solutions design, deployment and integration
- Sales enablement and process optimization programs

Together with our best-of-breed partners we have designed and delivered over 100 mobile sales enablement solutions to their clients. Our unique methodology and solutions ensure your e sales enablement investment will directly support the sales process – from calling to close – and generate more measurable sales results and higher ROI than traditional sales and marketing investments.

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Citations

1. Gartner Group, Marketing Essentials: How to Use Thought Leadership marketing report, 2010