

You're Blogging All Wrong, Startup CEOs

Whatever you're writing, be sure to offer readers a 'why you should care' statement at the top.

April 11, 2019 8 min read

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These days, most startup companies understand the value of content marketing for driving revenue and generating sales leads. According to the Content Marketing Institute, the tactic can result in three times as many leads compared to search advertising – and cost far less.

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Content marketing is, after all, less intrusive, more educational and often more authentic than advertising or a cold hard sales pitch. No wonder it's so effective.

But content marketing in a slightly different form – often euphemistically called “thought leadership” – can also be extremely useful for small-company executives. It can help them build their personal and company brands; connect to potential customers and partners; and promote their business interests in a subtle, backdoor way.

The problem: Most executives are going about thought leadership *all wrong*, if they're doing it at all. How's that? First, many busy startup CEOs and other top executives don't or won't make the time to develop thought-leadership content. They view all content as the province of their data-driven

marketing department and find it difficult to see value in creating collateral that is not directly driving sales.

When they do take up a more-general content project, they use overtly promotional language and focus on *their* company, *their* product and *their* hot market.

This is, of course, the wrong mindset. Thought leadership is not meant to be promotional; it's meant to spark conversations and add to an industry dialogue. Done right, this type of marketing allows you to share timely insights and anecdotes with your audience to educate them about a topic and your particular point of view.

Thought leadership can pay big dividends. These range from making you a go-to expert on a particular issue – ideally one sought after by the press and industry leaders for comment – to someone who actually influences public policy. You might be asked to speak at a major economic conference, for example, or named to lead an industry group or task force as a result of your expertise.

Your increased visibility on a certain topic could attract a new board member to your company or get you in the door of a hard-to-reach customer.

Finally, with traditional, startup PR harder and harder to get these days – owing to the rapidly declining number of reporters and the continued erosion of journalism's business model –thought leadership has become a much more critical communications channel for small companies. It may be the only way your company ever gets its name in certain publications.

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So, how do you do thought leadership right? Here are four tips:

Be timely.

One of the reasons executives often fail in thought leadership is that they're too busy to do it at the right time. But with this type of content creation, timing is everything. If Congress, say, passes little-noticed legislation that would impact your market or business, the time to get your thoughts on the issue out there is *when* this is happening – usually within days. On-the-spot action will dramatically increase readership. That's just the reality of today's lightning-fast news cycle.

An example: Stephane Kasriel, a prolific blogger and the CEO of freelancer network UpWork, made a timely move last spring, when news of tech giant Amazon's search for a second corporate headquarters was picking up steam in the press.

Kasriel very quickly wrote a piece, published on CNBC.com, positing that all the hubbub over "HQ2" was actually misplaced. Cities would soon realize that massive, centralized corporate campuses weren't actually worth the money and effort, Kasriel argued. More companies would use distributed workforces and freelancers.

And this wasn't an isolated move by the CEO: Two years ago, he fired off a post riffing on a then-just-announced policy by IBM to crack down on remote working arrangements for employees.

Be provocative.

Executives have a lot of important constituencies to think about: customers, investors, employees and business partners, to name a few. So, execs are generally quite careful about what they say publicly. They don't want to offend anyone and adversely impact their business.

That's why it's so hard for many executives to stake out a

contrarian and provocative point of view in a blog post. But, to do thought leadership right, they *have to*. No one wants to read a boring essay listing the pros and cons of a particular issue, and no real journalistic publication will run it.

Thought leaders need to feel strongly about their topic and have something interesting and different to say about it. If they don't, it's just not worth writing – and no one will remember it anyway.

An example: Dharmesh Thakker, a partner at my venture capital firm, is actually great at stirring the pot. Last year he wrote a blog post comparing the new, low-commitment world of enterprise IT to dating app Tinder (the post was “Swipe Right for a Cloud Instance.”) In other pieces, Thakker has pulled no punches in predicting that big, legacy tech players like IBM, Dell and H-P will suffer if they don't latch on to new computing trends quickly enough.

Get to the point.

Despite what we all learned in high school English class about writing a strong thesis statement, many successful people still have trouble doing exactly that when they blog. Perhaps they're afraid of saying anything too controversial; but in any case, many CEOs meander when they write, not stating their main point until the end of their piece – as if they're afraid to even say it.

In the news business, editors have no patience for this: When I was a reporter, we talked openly about stories needing a “who cares” statement near the top of the piece. In other words, clearly articulate your point up high in your post – why a reader should care. Then, concisely expand on that point with well-organized, supporting material. And remember: Cut, cut, cut words and sentences when you edit. In writing, less is always more.

Show, don't tell.

In business, facts often tell the story. But in writing, stories and anecdotes almost always do a better job of getting a point across. If you read long feature stories about business issues in the *Wall Street Journal*, or *Forbes* or *Fortune*, you'll notice how often those stories begin with a personal anecdote, a story that relates the point the author is trying to make.

Telling a specific story about how an executive made a tough decision, or turned a business around, is far more interesting than just reciting numbers or facts. You should do this, too, when you blog.

An example: Consider the work of serial entrepreneur Hiten Shah. Shah wrote a lengthy blog post in October 2017, explaining in great detail why he felt collaboration-software company Trello, whose technology helps teams plan and organize projects, missed the boat with its business model. (Trello was bought by Atlassian for \$425 million but, Shah argued, could have been “the next \$1 billion SaaS application.”)

Shah's post was fairly wonky stuff. But he started it with a short anecdote, putting readers in a specific time and place by recalling exactly how Trello's co-founder first introduced the product at a big tech conference back in 2011, unveiling a product that looked like a white board filled with sticky notes. Similarly, Shah wrote a separate post about growth-hacking, by leading with an anecdote about drinking mint juleps and beers at a bar called Memphis in Southern California.

Related: Why Your Small Business Must Start a Blog

Obviously no one expects you, a busy startup CEO, to write like William Faulkner. But, if you're serious about thought leadership, you should make a commitment to doing it right –

both by allocating the time and trying to punch up your posts to make them readable, interesting and timely. The rewards for you, and your company, will definitely make up for the extra effort.

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