

COMMUNICATIONS EXECUTIVE COUNCIL THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PANEL – SPEAKING POINTS

Ignacio Gonzalez (Shell)

<http://ignacio11.posterous.com>

WHAT EXACTLY IS THOUGHT LEADERSHIP?

- Term may have joined the stable of PR buzzwords, painted with intangible factors and subjective definitions
- There's a need to accurately describe thought leadership from a communications perspective and define the value it contributes to organizations and their stakeholders – Not sure that the right answer exists at the moment, but here's what I think:
 - There are behaviors that research shows define an organization as a thought leader, such as purpose, pioneer, rigorous, authentic, clarity (there may be more specific behaviors per industry)
 - These behaviors, if communicated clearly and aligned with company strategy and branding, lead to strong reputation, which in turn provides positive, tangible benefits to the organization (e.g., license to operate, pricing advantage, competitive advantage, stability, others)
 - As such, thought leadership is a means to an end
 - An important characteristic of thought leadership is “the power of people:” how leaders in the organization, who themselves drive thought leadership, become ambassadors and provide a channel toward communications and stakeholder relationships
- In today's economic and societal environment, which also includes very low levels of trust in corporations, there's a need for strong thought leadership engagement to:
 - Demonstrate relevancy
 - Share a “bigger than business” objective
 - Defined many times based on external economic and societal environment (e.g., sustainability)
 - Currently, given the economic challenges (“the forever recession”), the notion of “innovation” is very important; not just in invention and technology, but innovation's connection to the company's values and how the company is innovating to address stakeholder challenges
 - Not to bump social media to the strategic level (to me it is a tactic), but the buzz around social media is a recent driver for “people” to represent brands and interact transparently as thought leaders in their field
 - Communicate a compelling vision (based on actions, not just words)
 - Advocate for action

HOW DO YOU DEVELOP A STRATEGY AND OBJECTIVES?

- There needs to be an overall organizational and leadership motivation based on key market, business, and/or reputational drivers and conditions
- To develop a strategy:
 - Have a conversation with business leadership to outline the 5 biggest reputational challenges facing the organization (perceived and anticipated [think ahead to mitigate]), focusing on key areas of survival and/or growth (show stoppers)
 - Pick 2-3 of these challenges/issues to tackle by leveraging a thought leadership program
 - Unbundle ways in which the organization is leading (or can lead) in tackling these challenges
 - Key is to “own” the issue (everyone has thought leadership, but a few “own” an area or an issue)
 - Play to your strengths
- To develop objectives:
 - Make a clear link between priority challenges/issues and the audience with the power/influence to deliver on these challenges (importance of mapping, get very specific)
 - Focus on specific actions you need from your audience, and what specifically is needed from you to make these actions possible (e.g., opinion, advocacy, marketing) – Need clear deliverables to measure
 - Develop a highly targeted, integrated outreach program (beyond communications, communications leading stakeholder roundtable within the company)
 - Commit to regular monitoring/feedback, and a 12-month cycle to revisit strategy and planning
- Importance of strength of relationship between communications and business leaders
- Importance of communications really knowing the business (a challenge we have)
- The art of the opportunity: Recognize the opportunity-driven element of thought-leadership work and need for flexibility in operating (thinking on your feet)

WHAT IS SHELL’S THOUGHT LEADER STRATEGY AND OBJECTIVES?

- For Shell at this moment, from a corporate perspective which is where I sit, thought leadership strategy is about focusing on our innovation behind “hard to get” hydrocarbons, safety and sustainability, and solutions to lower carbon emissions – these are top priorities among other elements
- We have a “power of people” objective to have top leaders engage externally to share our story and take a leadership position and opinion (point of view) regarding our vision of energy and the future to key influential audiences and advocate for a better understanding of how we are a legitimate part of the solution among many other players.

- We have research to back up how this human-face/power-of-people approach is effective in changing understanding and acceptance and opening the door toward key stakeholder relationships
- The deliverable is mainly building relationships between leaders and key stakeholder influentials (including the bully pulpits who lead rings of influence)
- Good to note that “leadership” is part of Shell’s assessment of “non-technical risks,” specifically placing reputational importance in how we express who we are as a company (not just message, but strategically)

THE THOUGHT IN THOUGHT-LEADERSHIP

- What’s the leading thought? It’s about what you’re doing, not what you’re saying
- Must have elements of innovation, be provocative, defy conventional wisdom, be pioneering, have a point of view
- Importance of “owning” an issue (everyone has thought leadership to tap into, but it’s having a point of view and owning it that differentiates you from the pack)
 - Although, a good starting point many times is really just about sharing your strategy and identity in a compelling way with a clear call to action – this can lead to discovery of other elements
- Importance of clear and compelling communication (which is where we come in) – audience must clearly understand:
 - What are you doing?
 - Why are you doing it?
 - Why is this a good thing?
 - What’s in it for the audience/stakeholders?
 - What do you want people to do or understand better or think about? What tangibles do you have to share to enable action?

THE THOUGHT LEADERS (WHAT MAKES A GOOD LEADER?)

- Focusing on thought leadership efforts relying heavily on leaders as ambassadors (versus other elements demonstrating thought leadership)
- One leader (e.g. CEO) vs. a team of leaders (pros and cons for each)
 - CEO visibility very important for reputation (B-M research shows CEO is responsible for 50% of company reputation)
 - Challenge with leveraging CEO only is you don’t want thought leadership to leave when CEO leaves
 - For team of leaders, as in our case, each has his own business focus area but all tied to an umbrella vision
 - Team is a good approach for us because...

- Qualities of effective and credible thought leaders
 - Charisma, authenticity
 - Being “objective,” not just a commercial for the company
 - Have a vested interest on relevant issues (she is the “owner”)
 - Able to communicate “bigger than business” issues
 - Breakthrough thinking
 - Flexible
 - A certain X factor
- Methods to identify thought leaders
- Importance of leaders’ commitment to invest time, do follow-up per interaction, and keep up-to-speed on subject matter

COMMUNICATIONS

- Critical to execution – Brings thought leadership to life
- Main goal: diffusion of ideas/message to influence other thought-leaders and build mass toward spreading the message and causing action – Basically communicate frequently and honestly
- Integrated communications toolset approach, no silver bullet (methods for spreading ideas and engaging with people keep changing)
 - Targeted speaking program: strategically selected paid and earned opportunities
 - Media relations: driven by strength of idea/message
 - Social media / digital
 - Repurposing of content
 - Two-way dialogue tactics
- Importance of a “destination” to drive audiences to, a hub of information and action-driven tool
- Importance of keeping momentum going; campaign elements with renewal cycles
- Challenge of integration of communications sub-functions

MEASUREMENT

- What is success? Based on objectives and defined as outtakes or outcomes (versus outputs):
 - Sales?
 - Influence?
 - Relationships? Building connections?
 - Changing opinion?
 - Leader professional development?
- Concept of “return on investment” is too broad, just like the concept of overall reputation is too broad and a complex system
 - Focus on continuum between return on interaction and return on relationships
- Challenge is establishing “causation,” versus counting outputs or merely analyzing coverage