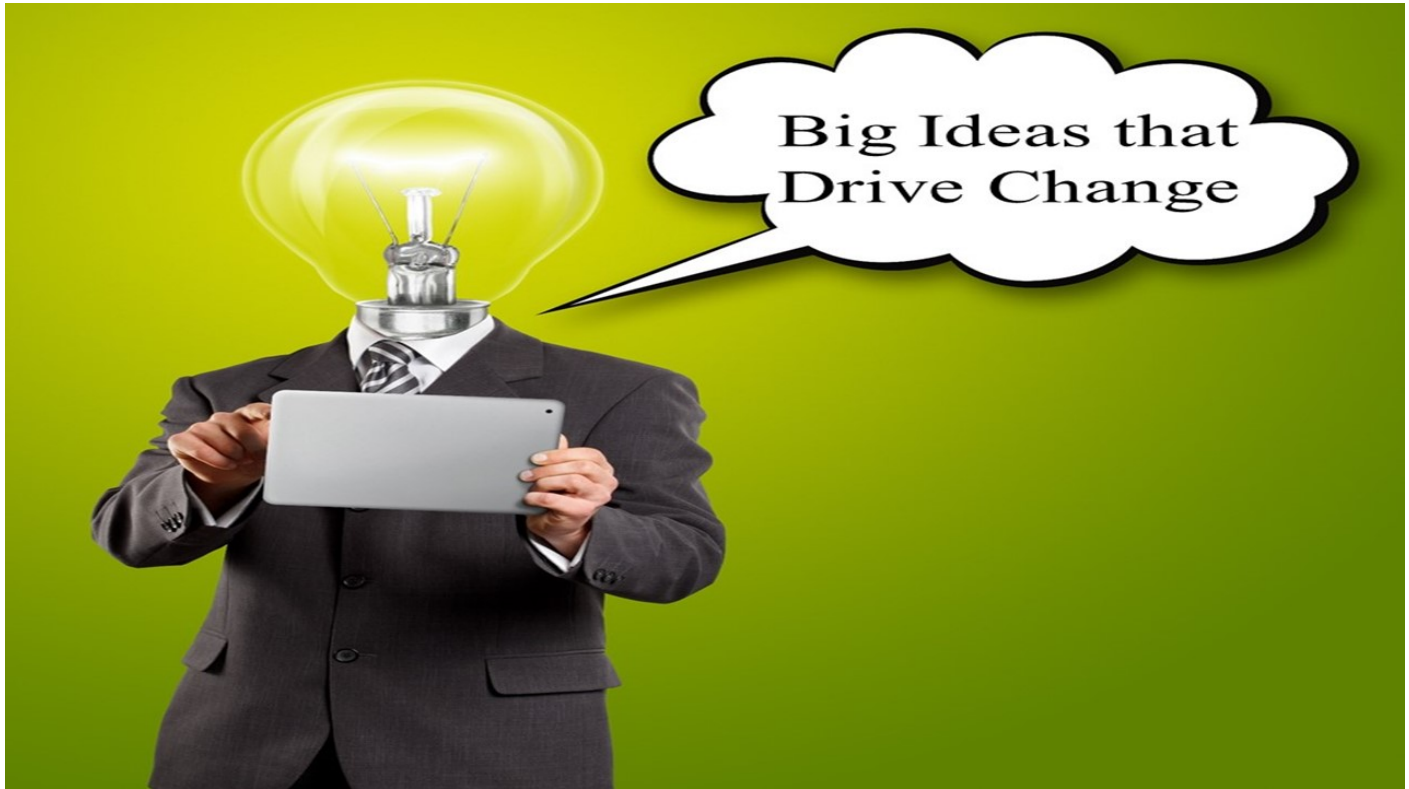


Thought Leadership Wins Social Media Votes in B2B

Posted At : May 1, 2017 11:13 AM | Posted By : Dr. James Barry
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Did you ever wonder what builds social media audiences in B2B circles?

An empirical study of 171 leading influencers by Dr. John Gironda and yours truly found that thought leadership out ranks helpful advice, engagement, entertainment, inspiration, empathy and content credibility.

So what is thought leadership and what does it mean for marketing and sales representatives?

Aspiring thought leaders must champion groundbreaking ideas that provoke new mindsets around a different way of doing business. Think Steve Jobs and the way he fomented change. But for you to gain credibility for your forward thinking insights, the research suggests you must first earn your stripes with trails of content perceived as timely, relevant and useful (i.e., instructional tips that help buyers with their operational challenges).

This is where a lot of sales and marketing personnel bail out. After all, who has the time to brainstorm fresh perspectives and helpful tips?

But imagine the trust built if buyers see you generously sharing your digital content (e.g., blog posts, videos, live broadcasts, white papers, etc.). Your empathy speaks volumes. And don't underestimate the confidence built as each shared piece sheds more light on your expertise and relevance to your prospective buyer.

On the *thought* side of thought leadership, buyers need original ideas or unique perspectives before they consider you a trusted authority. High on their list is your *market foresight*. How can you help them navigate through turbulent times or uncertain futures? In the social media world, this is often done by consultants who regularly forewarn their customers of risky technologies.

The combination of forward looking insights and operational helpfulness then sets the stage for showcasing your expertise. Without this, your claims for cutting-edge ideas cannot be validated. So start with instructional tips to show what you know. Periodically lay out some predictions for what is coming down the pike, and then provoke a new mindset that signals to your buyers that you are worthy of their selective attention and patronage.

On the *leadership* side of thought leadership, marketers with the most social clout are often known for their inspiration appeal. You have to be able to drive conversations that literally spark a movement. One way to do this is to *edu-tain* them. Our research showed no direct influence between entertainment and social influence. But it did show an indirect influence through inspirational motivation. The suggestion here is to dress up your content with humor and visual storytelling as a way to inspire your audience.

Why is this important? Imagine a buyer in total control of the sales process (i.e. inbound marketing). Most of the buyer journey is done digitally, and 60% of the cycle is complete before they contact sales. With over 850 million websites equipped for blogging, everyone wants the buyer's attention. So who do they follow? Their go-to advisors are opinion leaders that could help in innovative brainstorming. This sounds more like *helping* than *selling*.

So what do you think falls next on the list of ways to build social influence?

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