

DON'T PLAY FOLLOW THE LEADER WITH YOUR TECHNOLOGY COMPANY

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These days, it's all the rage for a technology company to claim it's a leader. The problem is, very few really are. In most cases "leadership" either means a company is the largest, or is so small that it makes the leadership claim in an effort to seem relevant. In those cases, the claim is typically made in regard to a specific technology. For example,

"We're the leader in network storage solutions."

"We're the leader in total number of installations in the US."

"We're the global leader in desktop computer systems."

What do those claims really mean and what's their real benefit to the customer? Leading in size or technology today isn't enough to ensure that consumers will perceive your products as valuable or unique tomorrow. In fact, most B2B consumers believe that one product is just as good as the other, and often choose based on price. Or they're patient enough to wait the four months it will take for their vendor to copy your technology.

To be a true leader is to create real preference for your brand by leveraging and displaying qualities of leadership that others can't or won't match. Leaders don't just sell technology; they dedicate themselves to helping entire markets, as well as customers and companies, succeed. This is the essence of Brand Leadership. Competitors may quickly churn out their own version of your latest and greatest gizmo. But true Brand Leadership takes years to be overcome.

Buyers Follow the Leader

Not surprisingly, Brand Leadership also takes years to build. Leaders are the pioneers out in front, investing their time, resources and energy into discovering things that will help their customers. Brand Leaders freely provide information and insights that can benefit others. By doing so, they benefit themselves, kind of the old "the more you give, the more you receive" in action.

Such companies focus not just on what technology can do, but what it can help the end user accomplish. Because of their earnest interest in helping customers and not just selling technology, they become trusted advisors. No one follows a leader that is self-interested. But they will follow a leader that is dedicated, committed and shows integrity.

Here are a few ideas to help your company build and demonstrate Brand Leadership.

1. Build Brand Leadership — If you build it, they will care

Like building anything, building a brand takes vision, a solid blueprint, and craftsmanship. It also takes commitment. You must allocate long-term budget and resources to firmly establish leadership. It might take a year; more likely it will take three to five. But once it happens, your customers will no longer think of you as just a vendor. You'll be positioned to tell them—and they'll want to know—what you believe is best for their organization. Think Apple, IBM, Symantec—companies that people look to for guidance, consultation, and community. That's a powerful position to be in.

2. Show Brand Leadership — Show me yours and I'll show you mine

When you commit to Brand Leadership, your constituents become committed to you. Building this loyalty takes time, though, and it requires consistent demonstration. One strategy is to become a “thought leader.” Thought leaders dedicate themselves to developing communities centered on an industry, a segment, a technology or a specific group of people. It is not centered on your brand or product, but around that which is most important to prospects – themselves.

Thought leaders have resources that end users do not have—budget, experts and R&D. Sharing these freely places your company squarely at the very front of the end user experience—i.e., the information gathering process. Thought leaders serve on standards-setting organizations, hold symposia on industry issues, and publish unbiased research. They're positioned to shape the industry and help people navigate more effectively through the technology selection process. Hopefully concluding with a sale for and relationship with you.

3. Share Brand Leadership — Share and share alike

Think of the incredible information already within your organization waiting to be leveraged for your prospects' benefit. By sharing your expertise freely, you'll create loyal consumers of that information. That can become the basis for trust in your brand.

Thought Leader PR programs are a great way to do this. Unlike standard PR, which focuses on promoting your product or service, Thought Leader PR provides broader information to help end users /companies be more successful. E-newsletters are an efficient way to share information and promote your company at the same time. Such information helps demonstrate your expertise, delivers value and eventually leads prospects to understand why your solution is what they need.

Blogs, or weblogs, are another rising star in building Brand Leadership. The best ones are company-neutral and community-oriented, an online gathering ground where people with similar interests can discuss and share information and opinions. Blogs enable participants to share information and experiences that you simply don't have, and that's valuable for all. Brand Leaders understand this and use the information to fuel more innovation, relevance and value for the end user.

Finally, don't forget about the good old-fashioned tradeshow. Unlike in years past when shows were a source for leads, today's attendees aren't there for to buy. They're attending to see what's new in the market in order to roadmap their technology planning. Help them, don't sell them. You'll find that these people will become interested prospects before you know it.

4. Live Brand Leadership — Live to brand, brand to live

Lastly, don't forget about the element that makes leadership truly come alive — your people. Train them, not once, but quarterly. Communicate with them, not once, but monthly. Demonstrate from the top echelon of your company your dedication to leadership, and you'll begin to see your vision shared throughout the organization. Soon, your prospects and customers will see it as well. That's when you'll start seeing loyal customers and higher-margin relationships develop.

The Rewards of Leadership

As you plan your marketing strategies, consider what it means and what it takes to become a Brand Leader. The commitment is great, but the rewards are greater. You'll enjoy more loyalty, increased buyer preference, less pricing sensitivity, and insulation against competitive and market pressures.

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