

Let's stop calling content marketing 'thought leadership'

By [Caroline Hillary](#), issued by [Clockwork](#)

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We're all nauseated by industry buzz words. Phrases adopted in the marketing world lose weight, meaning and gravitas through sheer misuse, ultimately reducing them to lesser or, in fact, incorrect versions of themselves.



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My latest buzz phrase gripe is 'thought leadership'; although, I am not innocent of dropping this phrase on a regular basis myself.

The phrase 'thought leadership' when applied to user-generated content is one that is often absolutely valid. When represented in its true form, we gain valuable knowledge from established and experienced authors, journalists and entrepreneurs – and we ultimately benefit from the interaction.

True thought leadership demonstrates an expertise in a particular field presented through writing, ideas or projects that have involved patience, education and a whole lot of research. Strategic experts, such as marketing wiz Seth Godin, LinkedIn expert Goldie Chan and world-famous strategist Ross Simmonds, all effortlessly qualify to be considered thought leaders through their approach to not only selling products and providing the right thinking streams, but through innovative marketing problem-solving. And therein lies the difference.

What many marketing companies consider thought leadership should be called what it is: content marketing. There's nothing wrong with content marketing. It provides ponder points, conversation starters, interesting opinions and sometimes humorous anecdotes – but selling it as thought leadership in a world where we are governed by the internet, SEO and clever keyword placement is just cringey.

Far too often, our misused 'thought leadership' gets absorbed into the minds of students and younger peers with a keen interest, setting a dangerous precedent for their future understanding of what it really takes to submerge yourself into a thought leadership position. It also has the potential to make companies look silly.

With marketing journalism in South Africa being largely fuelled by the user-generated content space, it is easy to get an article published through marketing platforms' paid-for packages and strong public relations. This is where content from independently-owned publications carry weight. Unfortunately, with small marketing audiences, we tend to look towards other strong thought leaders to get our opinions – and we all have our favourites. I personally read The Conversation and Tom Eaton's column, but neither hold much weight in my career when it comes to marketing advice or trends.

Relying on commentary from the company where I work and other agencies is as good as it gets at home, hence my outward search. This has its own challenges with different demographics and socio-economic factors at the heart of it.

At Clockwork, we consider all of our opinion pieces to be 'industry musings from our experts'. It's open-ended and interpretable enough to take it the way it is intended. Whether thought leadership, opinion or rant-based, we keep the claims simple - despite being largely backed up by a fierce and brilliant strategy team.

Ultimately, this particular opinion piece is about being able to spot experts and separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to a company's or an individual's self-promotion. Of course, good internal marketing requires an aggressive approach, but if not done with honesty and integrity, it will ultimately show up your efforts in the long run.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline Hillary is the marketing manager at Clockwork.

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