

*The Proven Path to Visibility, Impact
and Leveling Up Your Company in 2021*

BUSINESS LEADER TO THOUGHT-LEADER IN 9 STEPS

OLIVER AUST

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Why Thought-Leadership is Essential for Business Leaders Today

This e-book gives you a proven path to visibility, impact and levelling up your company in 2021. The formula works for everyone from start-up CEOs to the heads of large corporations and anyone in between. It is relevant for anyone who wants to stand out in business today, as well as for senior communicators who aim to position their C-level executives.

We have developed and perfected this proven path with numerous clients over the past decade. I have covered most of the steps in my three books on leadership communications and in over 100 CEO interviews on our podcast, *Speak like a CEO*. However, this is the first time I lay out all 9 steps in a single, step-by-step guide.

Why is thought-leadership essential for business leaders today? As we all know, there's a battle raging for our attention and it makes it very hard for anyone to stand out among the crowd. Communication is also more personalised today: people trust people. Of course, organisations communicate, but we all want to hear from people rather than abstract entities.

On top of that, opinions are formed online today, and social media thrive on human to human (H2H) communication. Forget about B2B and B2C. H2H is the new way to communicate and stand out among the crowd. What's more, companies and consumers are becoming more purpose-driven. This reinforces the importance of thought-leadership, because customers and business partners want to know who they are dealing with and what their values are.

Don't leave money (or attention) on the table

If you're a founder and don't pursue thought-leadership, your company's valuation is likely to be harmed. As a CEO, you won't reach your company's full revenue potential without thought-leadership. And as a communications professional, if you are not trying to turn your organisation's leaders into thought-leaders, you are missing out on one of the most effective tools you have at your disposal.

There is plenty of data to prove this. In the *BRANDfog CEO, Social Media and Leadership Survey*, 82% of respondents said they are much more likely to trust the brand when its leadership and CEO use social media. Customers are not the only ones who demand more visibility from CEOs – employees want it too. In the *New Times, New Leaders* study by PR360, 89% of employees said that regular communication from the

head of the company was good for morale and productivity, yet strikingly 44% of employees stated that their CEO is not visible to staff.

When CEOs and other C-level executives are forced out, it is now mostly because of reputational issues. In the eye-opening study *Perception beats Performance* by management consultancy Roland Berger, it was revealed that in 71% of cases in which top managers left prematurely, the reason was reputational. Similarly, research by consultancy Weber Shandwick found that executives estimate that a staggering 44% of their company's market value is attributable to the reputation of their CEO.

Therefore, the traditional, corporate approach to communications and PR simply doesn't work anymore and a different approach is needed if you want to make your voice heard. Whether you want to increase revenue, have a positive impact on the world, or get your message across on an issue you care deeply about, becoming a thought-leader paves the way.

Thought-leaders make trends, don't follow them

Quoting from my book *Unignorable*, “the invisible don't build great businesses. The unignorable do.” And thought-leaders are unignorable by definition.

You may wonder: what exactly is a thought-leader? A thought-leader is a business leader, perceived as a leading voice on a relevant topic or in his or her industry. Thought-leaders don't follow trends, they make trends. They're future-oriented and think long-term. Thought-leaders see past the day-to-day running of their business and their industry. They make meaningful contributions to current debates and anticipate issues and trends that will occur a few months or years down the line. This is why people listen to what they have to say.

There is substance to what thought-leaders have to say. Thought-leaders are not influencers and they are not famous for being famous. Often they are famous for the few, not the many. In fact, thought-leaders often speak to a small audience, because they are experts in that particular field or niche.

Now, can anyone become a thought-leader? In principle, yes: the playing field is really level these days. We all have access to the same tools, and most of them cost little or nothing. Everyone can leverage technology and social media.

It follows that anyone can become a thought-leader – but not everyone. By definition, there can only be a few in every sector. If everyone were a thought-leader, then no one actually is.

But you may ask: who should become a thought-leader? Ambitious business leaders from start-ups to large corporations may have the necessary expertise in their field to become thought-leaders. Communications and/or marketing departments may want to push their C-levels to become thought-leaders. This is a strategic choice, as it will boost the visibility and credibility of the company. I can only recommend you consider thought-leadership as a strategic business choice. You won't regret it.

A proven path to impact and visibility

It's now time for me to outline my methodology and the nine steps to becoming a thought-leader. We apply this formula with our clients and have done so for many years. Time and time again, this methodology has helped turn them from business leaders to thought-leaders.

The examples provided below are all taken from our podcast *Speak Like a CEO*, and this e-book was first recorded as a special episode. If you want to hear more about how these CEOs and founders did it, just click on their names to check out the episode.

Step 1: Devise your strategy

A strategy is a masterplan for how to get from the place you are now to the place you want to be in the fastest and most effective way. Without a strategy, you risk ending up with a series of unconnected and confused actions that will have little impact on your goals.

Developing a strategy entails several steps. First of all, you need to be clear about the objective. What do you want to achieve by becoming a thought-leader? Your objective should be specific.

Second, your audience. Ideally, you want to know exactly who your audience is. With my clients, I recommend drawing up a list of your dream customers or key stakeholders, with one question in mind: for whom do you want to be a thought-leader? Once you have established this, think about how you can provide value to this target audience. For instance, draft a list of the ten most salient questions or the ten biggest challenges they face. Ask them if you are not sure what these are. As a thought-leader, it is your role to help them solve those challenges with your content (mass communications) and in personal interactions (bespoke communications).

Finally, you need to be clear about your positioning, as it must be unique and specific. For instance, if you want to be a

thought-leader in the fitness industry, it's not specific enough to say that you are a personal trainer. Be specific about who you serve and with what objective, e.g. that you help entrepreneurs get in shape so that they reach peak performance. This can make a real difference to your positioning, because you are establishing a personal monopoly. Combine your strengths and qualifications to create something unique and memorable for your audience.

Anna Franziska Michel, a recent guest on our podcast, is the CEO and founder of Yoona, an AI-based B2B software solution, which shortens the value chain of the fashion industry to one click. She has set herself the mission to create the Tesla of the fashion industry. To fulfil her objective, she targets decision-makers from high street fashion companies with clear messages about saving time, money and reducing waste. Her objective is clear and it guides all the business decisions she makes and whom she targets.

Maximilian Rofagha, CEO of Finimize, started a financial newsletter, targeting millennials. He has built a one million strong community with his newsletter, which is the basis for his thriving business. He was clear about who he wanted to reach, and the numbers show this.

To summarise, if you're clear about your objective, your audience and your unique positioning, you are already well under way to becoming a thought-leader.

Step 2: Develop your narrative

Since we all have a reputation, it makes sense to take control of it. Why not curate a personal narrative that reflects our values and achievements?

As Donald Miller, CEO of marketing company StoryBrand argues, “if you confuse, you lose.” Your audience needs to be able to immediately understand your narrative. Based on your strategy, audience and positioning, you now have the perfect toolkit to present and talk about yourself. With a strong narrative in hand, you will be able to introduce herself, talk about yourself and write about yourself, in any given situation.

With a strong and personal narrative, you will gain the trust of your audience. This is why I insist on the importance of a personal story in your narrative, and not just your professional narrative. We still sometimes see business leaders fall into the trap of a cold-hearted corporate narrative. Instead, be someone who cares, have a clear purpose and make it part of your personal narrative. Once again, uniqueness stands out.

In addition to your personal and professional story, you need a topic that can be summarised in one word and an original point of view on that topic. Let’s try this one simple trick. When developing your narrative, ask yourself what is the one thing

you want to be known for? What would you write on the t-shirt? In other words, what is the short, snappy slogan or the one word that describes who you are or your point of view?

What does a good narrative look like? Check out our episode with Fabian Foelsch, CEO and founder of BRAINEFFECT. He was an athlete himself, trying to self-optimize. Based on his own experience, he founded BRAINEFFECT, a leading company in the brain food and supplement segment. His personal narrative and business story are ultimately linked and he uses this in his captivating narrative. He solves the problem of mental performance and advocates that we can all get more out of life with a balanced and focused mind.

Step 3: Perform a digital makeover

Who do you appear to be online? What do people see when they Google your name? You have more control over this than you may think.

With clients, we perform what we call digital makeovers, where we work to shape your online visibility and profile. We begin with an audit and then devise the different steps needed to ensure your online profile matches who you are and what you want the world to know about you.

In this audit, we look at Google, LinkedIn, YouTube, Amazon, Spotify, Apple, amongst others. You may ask: why should I check the Spotify results? Simply, because others may do that. Your audience may want to check if you have been on any podcasts, or if you have a podcast of your own. They may think you have written a book, because that is what thought-leaders do. At the very least, they will undertake a one-minute background check, where they will scan Google, LinkedIn, and maybe a few other social media platforms, depending on the industry you're in.

Once you have performed the audit and you know what is out there, you can remove everything you no longer think is relevant or may mislead people.

Don't be shy about deleting content that is no longer relevant. Update your profiles: is your LinkedIn profile fully up-to-date? Does it have a bio and a cover picture? For your bio, why not use the narrative you developed in Step 2?

You can also upload the right pictures, with your name embedded. This helps Google associate you with the picture. All of these are SEO tricks, which are so important in the digital age. A quick win here is to buy the Google AdWords associated with your name. As a result, when people Google you, they will immediately find your website or LinkedIn profile, should you wish so. If you are eligible for a Wikipedia page, don't be shy about it. It takes about half a dozen credible articles about a person for Wikipedia to accept a personal page. And finally, take control of your Google Knowledge Graph and make sure to upload the latest videos you feature in on your YouTube channel.

All of these steps will ensure that your audience find the right information about you when they look for it.

Step 4: Choose your platform

Thought-leaders are often very visible on one platform of choice. With platform, I usually mean a social media channel or another kind of publishing platform, such as a blog. It's important to know that diluted focus gets diluted results. This is why I recommend focusing on one platform, and on the platform that is most prominent with your audience.

If your audience is on LinkedIn, you want to be big on LinkedIn. Unless of course, you hate LinkedIn, in which case I always advise people not to do it. It's common sense that if you dislike a platform or social media channel, you probably won't be good at it and you won't project the energy needed to build an audience on that channel.

Let's delve deeper into LinkedIn, as it is the most important platform for anyone in B2B. Over the years, we have developed the ACES model for LinkedIn. ACES is an acronym that stands for Audience, Content, Engagement and Sales. There is the caveat that not all thought-leaders will want to engage in sales on LinkedIn. But in any case, the ACE still applies:

- Audience: start by growing your audience. You want to reach out to and invite relevant people into your network every day. By adding people to your network every day, you can grow your audience relatively quickly, even within the confines of the LinkedIn algorithm.
- Content: as a thought-leader, you want several high-quality pieces of content every week. For this, you will need a plan and an efficient workflow. The plan should indicate what to publish over the next month. The workflow ensures that the work gets done and the content is published. Everyone has their own system, but I can only recommend blocking out time every month or week to create new content and come up with innovative ideas. This is how I do it. My team and I have a solid workflow in place, and they know exactly where and when to publish, how to produce the podcast, how to convert my social media posts into email newsletters – even for producing books for clients and myself. For my channels, we have worked out a system where the content and ideas originate with me, and our workflow ensures that the content actually sees the light of day.
- Engagement: engaging with the content of others in your network is very important, because only then can you expect that they will engage with your content in return.

This is why choosing a platform is really important. With the right content and workflow, you can start to add value to those who matter to you and your business. Consider Sophie Chung (Instagram) or Anja Hendel and Holger Weiss (LinkedIn). In their distinctive way, they are all thought-leaders on their respective platforms.

Step 5: Craft your signature talk

In Step 2: Develop your narrative, you already decided what the one thing is that you want to be known for. You have an original point of view on a topic that you want to own. You then carried out a digital makeover and started to build your platform. Now you are ready to step up to the mic!

Your aim is to be craft a signature talk on your topic that presents your point of view in an engaging, authentic way – a talk that feels right and is in line with who you are and your values. Think about this is a TEDx talk or a keynote speech at a prestigious conference in your industry. You want to make sure that you craft a talk worthy of your time and your audience's time.

Make the most of this unique opportunity. How can you present your new and innovative idea? How can you provide a new insight or fresh take on an issue? How can you enter an existing conversation in your industry and add to it with some fresh thinking in your role as a thought-leader? Start with one paragraph, then develop a plan on a page that you develop into your signature talk.

One of the biggest stages in the world is SXSW. Our guest [Roland Gerhards](#) shares how he managed to secure one of the coveted speaker slots, and how he prepared for the big day.

Once you have created your signature talk, practice it. Practice it in private, practice it in front of a camera. Enlist a coach or sparring partner, as a great speech is hard to pull off on your own, and you don't want to practice on a live audience. This is the one piece of content you want to really nail down. Then take it on the road. Go on a podcast, speak at an event, give an interview.

Step 6: Gain visibility

Social media is like gravity. It is non-negotiable. However, your social media presence alone is unlikely to turn you into a thought-leader. In addition to your main social media platform, you want to ensure that the media feature you, that you are a guest on podcasts and that you speak at events. I am a strong believer in the virtual circle of attention, where one interview will lead to more coverage, which results in more podcast invitations, more social media mentions, more invitations, and so on. Gaining visibility in the media, on podcasts, and at events, in addition to social media allows you to enter a virtuous circle. This is how you create momentum.

One person who I admire for creating and gaining visibility in her field is Mali Baum, the CEO of WLOUNGE. WLOUNGE is a forum that strives for more diversity in the tech industry. Mali is an excellent facilitator and host and is constantly on the lookout for opportunities to create visibility for her business. You have the feeling she is omnipresent and is clearly seen as a thought-leader in the female tech space.

Step 7: Inspire internally

A leader's role is to develop a strategy and guide the business in that direction. To execute any strategy, you need to convince your team to follow you. As I outline in my book *Mastering Communications*, I believe that communication is a hard skill and without excelling at it, leaders will not be able to reach their potential or that of their organisations.

As a leader, you can devise an excellent strategy, but if no one is there to follow you, it will just not happen. You must figure out how you want to inspire internally. More than emails, the intranet and written content – which are all important in themselves – you want people to experience you, especially as your team grows. For that, you can use audio messages, internal podcasts, or Ask Me Anything sessions in-person or virtually. Open and transparent communications really go a long way, and this is what differentiates successful businesses from the unsuccessful ones.

It's so important to have a genuine purpose and a mission to keep a team engaged. Quarterly figures are usually not enough to motivate an organisation. I was particularly inspired by Nina Pütz, CEO at Ratepay, who joined the fintech giant in the middle of the pandemic. She knew that building human connections was going to be a challenge, especially over Zoom.

She explains: “The key is to speak the language of your respective counterpart. Different people communicate differently. With the right amount of empathy and feeling, you can make this work very well – over video for example.” Nina has successfully managed to inspire her teams and ensure that they can execute their mission day in day out.

Step 8: Protect yourself

The more visible you are, the more you may become a target, both as an organization and as an individual. Online, it is important to stand your ground, but pick your battles. At company level, ensure that you are fully prepared in case of a crisis. It is your job as a leader to ensure that your company and yourself are prepared, whatever happens.

As a CEO or leader in an organisation, you will be the one to face the music if anything goes wrong in your company, internally and externally. You will want to be prepared and you want to pre-plan the processes. I always recommend you undergo crisis media training and ensure your team have gone through the drills as well. In the digital age, a crisis can strike at any time to companies small and large. When this happens, you will have minutes to react before the crisis may blow up, so if you think preparing for a crisis is annoying, try having one you are not prepared for. And with increasing numbers of employees now working from home, there are even more points of attack for cyber-attacks.

There is an old saying that communications is about promoting and protecting. As you step up to become a thought-leader, you want to make sure you're not just promoting, but also protecting your downside. Have a listen to our interview with [Benjamin](#)

Roth, the CEO of Urban Sports Club. It was really insightful to hear how they coped with COVID.

Neeraj Barry told us about the success and then downfall of Sprig, one of the first food delivery start-ups in Silicon Valley. Despite the company's early success, raising \$60 million dollars and having over 1,200 employees, Neeraj told us about why he made the difficult decision to let go of the business. In those difficult times, he wanted to do the right thing, own the story and the narrative, and take action rather than let things run their course.

Step 9: Become unignorable

You want to be so good and so visible that no one in your target group can ignore you. This means you really need to differentiate yourself. That's why many thought-leaders, the big hitters, have written a book. A number of our podcast guests share why and how they decided to publish a book. Eric Partaker is the author of *Three Alarms*; Waldemar Zeiler has written *Unfuck the economy* and Insa Klasing wrote *The 2-hour boss*. Writing a book is hard, but it does make a difference. I've written three and currently work on N°4, I know all too well how hard it can be.

To pass on what I learnt, I run a mastermind group for CEOs and founders who are keen to write their own story. Such groups help because there is accountability, we give feedback to one another, and we cheer each other on. There is a certain process to writing a book. You don't move to a cabin in the forest for three months and write a book. Leaders don't have time for that, whilst running a business. But if you have a system in place, and the motivation, you can definitely become an author within months.

Another way to differentiate yourself is to launch your own podcast. Gerrit McGowan, a distinguished entrepreneur and head of the WHU Entrepreneurship Centre, launched his very own podcast to position himself on entrepreneurship. This was the birth of *The Most Awesome Founder Podcast*.

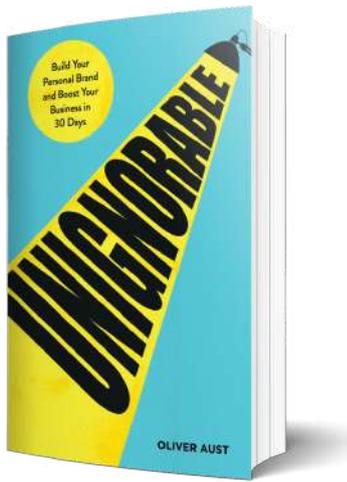
Podcasting is a great medium and can increase your visibility like nothing else. Speak like a CEO has been a game-changer for my company and myself. Not only do we enjoy our weekly interviews with CEOs and founders, but it has also become a tool to brand ourselves.

Alongside books and podcasts, you can create your very own network. Linda Broschkowski at Female Music Force, for instance, founded the first agency and network for female DJs in Germany.

Whether you found a network, host your own show, launch a podcast or write a book, think about how this differentiator will help you achieve your goals.

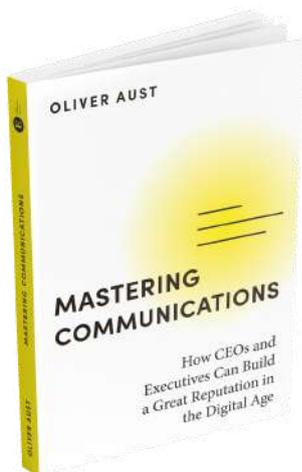
So here we are. We have outlined the 9 steps to become a thought-leader. You can also listen to this e-book on our Speak Like a CEO channel (Episode #109). And of course, spread the word. I think more people should know about this because many of us have unique voices. I want you to become unignorable and share your voice with the world.

If you are interested in becoming a thought-leader or want to position your executives, let's talk. You can schedule a call with me here.



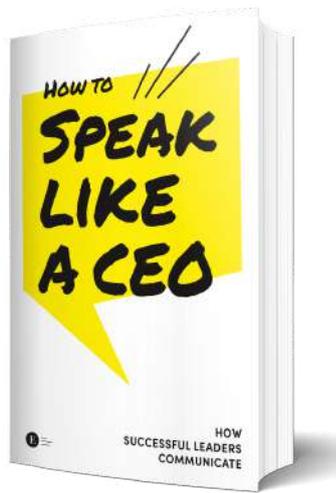
Unignorable, Oliver Aust **Unignorable (German), Oliver Aust**

Oliver's latest book *Unignorable* became an Amazon bestseller in six countries within a week. This book is a practical guide for those seeking to build an authentic personal brand. Oliver takes you through a 30-day framework to build your personal brand online and offline.



Mastering Communications, Oliver Aust

Mastering Communications combines theoretical knowledge and practical expertise to guide you step by step, through every skill that every CEO must master to become a top communicator. From designing an effective strategy to managing a reputational crisis, Mastering Communications provides CEOs and senior executives with the necessary tools to communicate with grace and skill in any situation.



Speak Like A CEO

How to Speak Like a CEO is the key to unlocking the secrets and pitfalls of CEO communications. Based on the podcast of the same name, this practical guide reveals why mastering communications is crucial to being a successful leader. Today, the risks and opportunities for CEO communications are bigger than ever before.



Podcast: Speak Like A CEO

Speak Like a CEO is the leading podcast on CEO communications. It is hosted by Oliver Aust and Lena Carlson. Every week, they speak to an inspiring leader, founder or entrepreneur about leadership & communications. The podcast was launched in 2018 and since then, Oliver and Lena have spoken to over 100 inspiring guests.

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