

## Building a Thought Leadership Brand: How to make an impact and get it right

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**Guest speaker:** Mark Raffan, Host & Founder, Negotiations Ninja, and Founder & Advisor, Content Callout

**Dani:**

Hi everybody, welcome to another episode of Supercharge Marketing. Today we have another special guest for you - Mark Raffan. He is the founder of Negotiations Ninja and Content Callout and he is a serial entrepreneur and lover of marketing and thought leadership. He is also an expert in negotiation, influence, and persuasion and he has coached executives and teams in some of the largest companies in the world. Mark loves to talk about all things procurement negotiations, leadership and marketing and we're going to bring it all together within this episode. So I'm super excited to welcome you, Mark, to the show.

**Mark:**

Thank you so much for having me, Dani. It's great to be here.

**Dani:**

Yeah, great to be here and I know last time we chatted we mentioned that we kind of connected before even this call where we used to both be in the world of procurement but now like we're coming back together in the world of marketing and thought leadership, so I'm super excited to give your thoughts on these topics.

**Mark:**

Yeah, me too. I think it's going to be a ton of fun.

**Dani:**

Yeah, for sure. So let's get right into it. So, I know you are a big proponent of thought leadership and you think that this is really something that can take someone's brand, and a company's brand, to the next level. So how do you think organizations can really harness the power of thought leadership beyond just the buzzword, because a lot of people think that thought leadership is a buzzword because they're not doing it correctly?

**Mark:**

Yeah, you've hit on probably one of my favourite topics and also the topic that gives me the most heartburn ever when it comes to this kind of work because so many people think that thought leadership is just producing content. And to be fair, there is some argument to be made of like if you're producing content, that must mean you're a thought leader. But not really. In order to be a thought leader, you must have an opinion, right? You must be able to say something within the marketplace that stands out to a certain degree, and you have to be able to carry that conversation.

**Mark:**

And so, when we think about thought leadership and we think about all of the things that go into it, it's not just a buzzword. It's about developing someone within your organization, that is already amazing at what they do, into a thought leader within their space. OR it is about harnessing thought leaders that already exist within your industry to use them as quote-unquote "influencers" to be able to build your brand. OR the third option is to hire those thought leaders and then use their thought leadership status to amplify your brand. So it's not just a buzzword. It is super powerful. I mean think of it this way, especially when we think of B2B, right? You and I are both in the B2B space and we think about LinkedIn... At a minimum, a personal profile gets 4x the reach of a page of that company - that's by the way for someone who's not a thought leader who's got like a thousand connections and no one knows.

**Mark:**

So let's just say, for example, you have a thought leader that has a lot of connections and interacts with that community. What do you think the reach is going to be there. It's going to be substantially higher and so your ability to be able to reach your market increases tenfold at a minimum with the thought leader that's in space. So your ability to amplify your ideas and your thoughts through that thought leader is increasingly important for businesses like ours - B2B businesses - who are going into that space. And I know that. you know, B2B businesses get hum up on the idea of like 'oh we're not into influencers' but that's not what it's about. We're not talking about Charli D'Amelio doing a dance on Tiktok. What we're doing is talking about actual people who know what they're talking about, telling the community about those things and about their opinion of those things, and that carries weight.

**Dani:**

Absolutely and Mark I think like you mentioned a few ways to really utilize thought leadership which is really refreshing because a lot of times companies only talk about you know their internal thought leaders which I know is one part of what you mentioned, but you also mentioned being able to leverage the thought leaders that are already out there. So just curious, from your perspective - for a company that doesn't have thought leadership as a strategy yet, where should they start?

**Mark:**

That's a really good question. So where should people start when it comes to building a thought leadership brand? So, when we started Negotiations Ninja the whole idea was to position that business and me as a thought leader within that industry, and we did it through the content that we created but we also started thinking about what are some things that go against the grain of the industry that most people secretly agree to but most people won't say out loud. And so for us, when we thought about that and when we thought about the negotiation world, it was the whole concept of win-win negotiation - which we think is the biggest lie that's ever been told in the negotiation world, we think it's nonsense.

**Mark:**

Now, when I say that out loud it sounds like a really controversial thing to say because so many people have said 'win is great and win is really important and let's collaborate and hold hands

and sing kum bah yah' and so we've taken a position of like 'that's nonsense and let me tell you why'. And so we built content around that and that became a big pillar piece for us to be able to build off of, and once we were able to harness that it became a lot easier for us to scale the content accordingly. Now, here's the downside to that kind of conversation. You're going to isolate a lot of people, right? Like there are people who just don't follow our work because of the position that we've taken on something that is like the holy grail of negotiation. And the downside is that you would think that your reach is reduced - and it is somewhat, I mean it's not as broad - but the depth that you get with the people that do listen is significantly greater and so when they consume your content, it's not just a cursory glancing read. They actually consume it. They actually start to absorb it.

**Mark:**

And so for anyone that's thinking of developing a thought leadership brand, what I want you to start thinking of is what is the thing in your industry that you would chop down with a sword? Like if you had a sword in your hand right now and you could personify the thing that you hate most in the industry or the thing that pisses you off the most, what is that thing? Then start to think of why do you feel that way and what's your reasoning, what's the logic behind it, because you actually have to be able to back up your statement. And then what I want you to start thinking about is, what kind of content can I build off of this as the start to this thought leadership brand?

**Mark:**

Then you can start talking about all of the other things that come with thought leadership, like how you would perform a particular thing or how you would do a thing or what people need to be thinking of - the sort of content that you see a lot of B2B companies build. That content is going to resonate more if you hold a position or if you hold an opinion on something that is slightly controversial because once you make that stance then people become advocates for you. They start to actually look for your stuff, they listen to your material, and they consume it more. And so, what we're looking for when we're building content and when we're building leadership content it's not just about building content, but it's about taking a position on something and then building the content that you would usually build because then it becomes more impactful.

**Dani:**

I love that tip, Mark. And I think it's so great to have that visceral example too of chopping something down like, what's that one thing you want to destroy in your industry, and you're taking a posing stance on it. I think that's a really great way to put it. And I guess like also we talked about this in our previous podcast together on Content Callout, but how can people really take that step to find that? Because you know controversy in B2B is something that scares a lot of people. So what would you recommend for people to kind of take that step and where you can look for this particular piece of insight?

**Mark:**

Yeah, for me, it comes down to number one, knowing what to avoid, and number two, knowing what to lean into. So knowing what to avoid first has to line up with your values as a company, right? So what are your values as a company? Like for us, we don't post anything religious and we don't post anything that's related to gender roles and stereotypes. We don't post anything related to any of that stuff because we don't have a position on any of that stuff - like if you want to do something do it, we really don't give a shit. So that's the stuff that we avoid. The stuff that we lean into is going to be stuff that really gets us fired up. So when you think of that I want you to think and break that down into two additional steps.

**Mark:**

The first step is what gets you excited? What gets you fired up and like really like 'wow I really want to speak to someone about this, this is so powerful, I need to tell people'. If you wake up thinking to yourself 'I must tell more people about this' that's a topic that you need to start leaning into, or a particular vertical of content that you need to start leaning into. And then the other part to that is, I want you to think about what pisses you off about the industry now. An example could be someone who's in HR, right? Like, let's just say, for example, your B2B SaaS HR platform is built on the thesis that more people need time off in the workforce and you wish you could tell people about why limited time off is destroying the workplace. That's where you need to start chopping it down because there are people that lean into the idea of like 'you're only allowed this and you're only allowed that and I want to control your life and do this and do that' and all that person that has the thesis that you need more time off wants to do is slap the shit out of those people.

**Mark:**

So when you think of that kind of person - that's why I'm saying personify the thing that you hate - then that will help you start to think about, 'okay, this is this is good, this is going to create a lot of really good content for me, it's something that I really believe in, I can back it up, I have the research to be able to back it up, I'm going to do more research on it because I'm so passionate about it...' So those are the two avenues. What are the things that get you fired up in terms of getting excited, and then what are the avenues that really piss you off like, really grind your gears, like if you could personify that thing you just want to slap that person. That's how I want you to start it.

**Dani:**

I love that. And I feel like it's almost like you're waging war.

**Mark:**

Yeah, take a sword to the bad idea.

**Dani:**

100%. And getting people on your side, like warriors on your side to fight for that cause. like that's how you start a movement.

**Mark:**

Yeah, exactly exactly.

**Dani:**

I love that. Let's get into social media a little bit too because I feel like we talked a little bit about content but now let's talk about the distribution side. So as a podcaster yourself, of course you get the power of social media when it comes to thought leadership, but what are some myths that you wish to bust with social media marketing because it seems like a lot of B2B companies still think social media marketing is like 'oh let's post like a cute little image on our Instagram' or 'hey let's share some photos of our office'.

12:21.45

Mark Raffan

Yeah, oh I love that you used like the cute little image like 'hey look we have this announcement, here's the team, smile!'. Look, social media is powerful, very powerful. In fact, the vast majority of B2B content is consumed on LinkedIn, which is the single largest professional networking site on the planet. And the other thing that most people don't realize, especially B2B companies, is - and there is a study that Adelman did about this with LinkedIn - is that 87% of buyers say that thought leadership content can be intellectually rigorous and fun to consume at the same time. Which means, if you're going to challenge someone in your industry and you want them to actually read your stuff, it has to be out there - not just producing it, but distributing it.

**Mark:**

So it's not just a matter of actually producing the content, but how is anyone actually going to find out about it. So your content and the success of your content is a function of two things: producing good content is function number one, and function number two distributing that good content. If no one reads it, it's not going to work. We know from research from Gartner that 83% of a buying decision happens before anyone actually ever talks to you, which means that most of the sale is already done when you speak to someone. And if you're not controlling the narrative out there in the marketplace and putting your content out there and distributing that content to control the influence and persuasion of your target audience, you're missing out on a ton of real estate. Like there's so much opportunity that you're missing out on. And so you need to distribute it. And so, the question becomes how do we distribute it?

**Mark:**

Well, organic, obviously utilizing your company page and the thought leaders or personal profiles of your employees, influencers which we already spoke about, and then also paid distribution. So are you boosting the posts that you need to boost to the specific audience that you need to speak to? Are you creating a great landing page for those people so that when they land on it they can get the key snippets of the things that you want to talk about? Are you targeting the people that you need to target according to the people that have visited your website and visited your profiles and gone through all of the effort of actually starting to consume your content? So it's not just about producing, but it's also about distributing it and getting it in front of as many eyes as possible of people who would be able to consume it and

get value from it. Now that means that you're obviously being very targeted in your distribution - you don't obviously sell it to everyone - but you HAVE to distribute it.

**Dani:**

Oh my gosh, Mark. Preach. I feel like in the marketing industry, it's like 90% focused on production and then 10% - like distribution is almost an afterthought. So I'm so thankful that you touched on this.

**Mark:**

Yeah, it's so important and so many people miss out on it. Like for example, we produced a guide for B2B SaaS companies to create B2B content strategies for them. Now, we could have just left that on our website but that would be pointless, right? Like we need to get as many people's eyes on this as we can. And so we create social posts about it, we put dollars behind it, and we distribute it. Like, we do everything we can to get people tuned into it and without it like we would lose out on a lot of opportunities.

**Dani:**

Absolutely, I 100% agree. Let's get back to the more traditional industries part. B2B companies are definitely very conservative, but both me and you, we know, we've worked with very traditional industries like for example, I'm going to call some people out here, procurement and accounting, within your Negotiation Ninja's brand. So, these industries are often a little bit more boring when it comes to thought leadership. They're a little bit more conservative. Sorry, not sorry. So what do you think are some ways for these more traditional companies to stand out while also being tasteful in their own way?

**Mark:**

Yeah, this has been happening a lot more lately where people recognize the power of thought leadership, like you look at guys like Michael Cad who is in the procurement industry, who has a strong voice, who's really positioning himself as a thought leader within that space - by the way, he's built a community for procurement people - and then you would naturally think to yourself, 'okay, but there were no other communities for procurement people before' and that's not true. There were lots of other communities for procurement people before but those communities are generally built by like designation granting authorities that say 'you can say this and you can't say that' and so they lose out and all of those people now are going to his community. Why? Because there's the freedom to be able to have the conversation.

**Mark:**

When he speaks people listen because he has an opinion on things - an opinion that a lot of people agree with, yes, there are going to be some people that don't agree with it, but there are going to be others and most of them do. And so I think there's going to be a lot more opportunity for these types of disciplines to be able to build up their thought leadership status. But if you're an existing brand in this space and you're in accounting or you're in human resources or something like that where it's a little bit more conservative and you can't really say the things that you need to say... look it doesn't have to be tear down the world conservative, just pick

something small like maybe there's something in HR that you vehemently disagree with, where you say to yourself 'everyone should have benefits' and you're a benefits provision company. You know, something like that is really controversial but it's not like going to tear down the world, that's going to be okay. And by the way, debate is good. And this is what I think kills a lot of B2B brands when they start this whole thought leadership process is they're like 'what if someone disagrees with us online, what if someone calls us names'. I was like listen, you couldn't wish for a more beneficial opportunity. That is literally what you are trying to do - you're trying to create debate, you are trying to create conversation, you're trying to create engagement. If someone disagrees with you, that is fantastic. That's like best-case scenario. Lean into it, have the debate, have the conversation. As long as it's polite, who cares.

**Dani:**

Oh absolutely. I feel like sometimes when you stir the pot that's actually where everybody comes and congregates around the side, right? Like people love picking sides in a way because people are community-based, and I think once B2B companies understand this when they can really start movements around those communities where 'these people may not agree with me but let's have a healthy discussion about it', and that's really good content.

**Mark:**

Yeah, and you can also do it about something that's fun and light as well. Like it doesn't have to be about that kind of stuff that we're talking about. Like, one of the things that I spoke about recently was I made a post that said people that eat pizza with a knife and fork should face a war crimes tribunal and be held accountable for their actions, right? And then people have fun with that because they're like obviously he's not serious, he's having fun. It's an enjoyable thing, right? We can create a little bit of controversy about a really fun thing that no one really cares about. Or I say something like, 'friends was the worst sitcom ever' and then everyone's going to be like 'what are you talking about, are you insane?!' You know, that's going to create conversation. That all counts.

**Dani:**

Absolutely, and I think sometimes when people have these thoughts in their minds they want to keep it to themselves because they're so scared of someone like disagreeing with them publicly but as you mentioned, you can have that conversation. I've seen like 400 comment threads on LinkedIn where it was just people arguing against each other but you know what, you learn a lot from those arguments. You learn both people's sides and that's really, I think, what you can really gain as a professional is just those insights.

**Mark:**

Yeah, yeah, exactly. The only thing that I would caution people to do is just, look if you're not comfortable defending your side and you're not comfortable taking the heat on something that's like community-based controversial - like the pandemic, for example - I would urge you to steer well clear of that unless of course, you work for a biopharma company or something like that then whatever, who cares, lean into that conversation. Or abortion or religion or things like that where you're like 'ah does this have anything to do with the business' - it's controversial for the



sake of being controversial. You can do that with something light like pizza for example, but when you dive into topics like religion and all the other kinds of things that's where it starts getting dicey and damages your brand. So I would just say be careful of that. That's the only thing that I would caution people on.

**Dani:**

So basically any topics that you would avoid talking about on the first date.

**Mark:**

Yeah, that's a great way to think about it, right? Like you're not going to bring up those topics on a first date with someone unless you're a psychopath and in which case, whatever, do your thing.

**Dani:**

So I want to also put your negotiation hat on a little bit because I feel like that's something really different that you can bring to the podcast because most people I have on are in marketing. So, one thing I've noticed within negotiation is that there's the idea of influence and trust, and similarly in thought leadership influence and trust are also two big ingredients. So how would you say your negotiation world meshes with the world of thought leadership and content marketing, and how can you really leverage influence and trust in both content and also negotiation?

**Mark:**

Yeah, they're super similar which is why we started the marketing business because we realized that we could influence and persuade one person at a time with negotiation, but we can influence and persuade thousands of people at a time with marketing. And the unique ability that marketing has is that a lot of the negotiation fundamentals and a lot of the marketing fundamentals are very similar, especially when you think of like Robert Cialdini forces of persuasion and influence, and you think of the things that drive people to make a decision. All of those things are really really close between marketing and negotiation and so when we're thinking about what we're doing in marketing, we're thinking of it from the same perspective.

**Mark:**

Firstly, what am I trying to get someone to do? Getting you to read the content is an objective for sure. So, how I'm going to how am I going to get you to read it? Well, what are the things that are going to force you or cause you to be more likely to read that piece of content? And then when you read that piece of content, what is the intention of that piece of content? Am I trying to educate you? Am I trying to move you along to make a decision? Am I trying to get you to do a certain thing? Am I getting you to sign up for a webinar? What is it that I'm trying to get you to do? Those same principles are the same in marketing as they are in negotiation. And so all we did was take the principles in negotiation and try and apply them as best we could to the principles in marketing and lo and hold, it's working.

**Dani:**



Wow. And there you go. You know, the things that you're learning in marketing, you can also apply it the other way, in negotiations. And just to put it out there too, if you want some tips on that, Mark has a really good podcast called Negotiations Ninja where you can check that out too.

**Mark:**

Yeah, thanks very much for the shout-out.

**Dani:**

Yeah, of course. So finally, this is one question I love to ask all our guests. You know I feel like we talk a lot about successes in the marketing world but I would love to also hear about some failures and hiccups. So what do you think is one failure in your career that you've had and what did you learn from it?

**Mark:**

Okay, there are a lot so if I'm gonna isolate it down, there's one related to marketing that was a big mistake and it was because we didn't understand our audience. So we came out with, it's gone now because it's all been deleted, but we came out with a bunch of content related to entrepreneurs to help them with their negotiation expertise. What we didn't understand is that we didn't understand our audience. We didn't understand what they were looking for and what they were doing, and all of that content bombed. It didn't resonate. It was spoken from the perspective of someone else. It was a complete catastrophe. But the the thing that we learned from that is that, well that didn't work and now we can adjust. So it wasn't as big of a mistake where you're like 'oh this is career-ending,' but it was enough of a mistake where we're like, we invested thousands of dollars into the content and the videography and the filming and all of it only to realize that that's actually not our audience, that's actually not who we're selling to. So it taught us a really good lesson of like, okay but who is our audience? Are we speaking to them? Do we have discussions with them? What do they care about? And that was a really good lesson to learn.

**Dani:**

I feel like sometimes you've just got to roll with the punches, you know when you've invested so much into something, and learning to let go of that. I feel like that's really a lesson in itself where you might not want to get too married into something if it doesn't work out and just letting it go gracefully.

**Mark:**

Yeah, exactly. Now fortunately enough, that's a mistake that you can come back from. I've made other mistakes in negotiation that cost me hundreds of thousands of dollars and those are more painful to talk about, but the reality of the situation is you make mistakes. You're going to screw up and I think that's something that all of us in all of our careers, whatever career you're working in, have to come to terms with. You're going to screw up and if you're not failing, you're probably not trying anything new, you're probably not trying anything different. So don't take it too hard. Learn your lesson, adapt, and move on.

**Dani:**

I love that so much, Mark. I love how that's like you know your ending note there. So if you fuck up, stand back up. You're always gonna fall forward right?

**Mark:**

Yeah, exactly yeah.

**Dani:**

Well, thank you so much, Mark, for joining me on the podcast. I had a great time chatting with you and I'm sure the audience has learned so much just from this conversation. So, if you want to find Mark and his two podcasts as well, he is the host of Negotiation Ninja and also the Content Callout podcast, and I'll make sure to include those links in the comments here. Thank you so much everybody and we'll see you on the next episode of Supercharge Marketing.