



be the voice

MEDIA SOLUTIONS

"Be the VoiceSM" - Build Your Business by Becoming your Industry's Thought Leader

By David Spark, Founder of Spark Media Solutions, LLC
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Here's a summary of what you'll learn and why you must "Be the Voice."

Critical business need

Thought leaders are driving customers either to your business or away from it.

Cost-efficient publishing and distribution

You have the industry wisdom, you just haven't had the easy-to-use tools (e.g. blogs, podcasts, video) for communications and conversation. Now you do.

Focus on message, not medium

It's easy to be distracted by the technology. Don't be medium-focused. Learn how to zero on the message and efficiently publish a single idea or effort across multiple media.

Determining your message

What content should you create? What is the most appropriate medium for your audience? How, when, and where should you engage in conversation?

Grow your business with ongoing knowledge base

Increase organic discovery of your product and services. Support sales staff so they can close sales. Build your brand identity. Help customers find their way by providing answers so they can make decisions whether or not to purchase your product.

Avoid common pitfalls

Learn how to detect common early warning signs that your company's media network may fail.

Be top of mind

How powerful would your business be if customers and potential customers always thought of you first whenever they had an industry related question?

You are first on their mind because you have an online media presence. For the past year you've been writing a blog, hosting a podcast, and producing video demos for everyone to see. All of that information is housed in one easily searchable area of your business site. Everyone uses their real names when they post and for each posted content unit, people can comment, provide their own insight, or ask a follow up question. You don't balk nor delete messages when they mention your competitors. You follow up on your audience's responses and provide thoughtful answers for everyone to see.

Whenever a big industry issue hits, you have an opinion. You reach out beyond the walls of your business' Web site and engage in conversation on independent blogs and in editorial publications. Plus, you provide links from your site to outside entities.

People know you and your colleagues by your first name, and everyone's business email and phone number can easily be found.

There's absolutely nothing strange about the above description. But for years, organizations have feared this public discourse scenario as inviting only problems. Organizations have eschewed self publishing, operating out of fear of exposure. But as we all know, just because you're not in the conversation, doesn't mean they're not talking about you. People tend not to talk negatively about you when you put a human face on your organization, and you're willing to listen to all their problems with serious concern.

Thanks to new Web 2.0 technologies, the Internet has become the platform for an endless array of media publishing and distribution opportunities. Those taking advantage of these communications and conversation tools have become voices for their industry or sector. People are listening to, learning from, and making decisions based on the ideas and recommendations of these thought leaders.

If you and your business don't become the voice for your industry, someone else either already has or will. Voids don't stay open long. But even if it is filled, not to worry, thought leadership always needs to be challenged.

Stake your editorial claim. Own a category that's aligned with your branding, PR, and marketing strategy. Such an online presence reverses the notion of outreach. No longer do you blast out messages to groups of people hoping to find the ones interested in your business. You are creating a destination that people can find on their own or be pushed to through traditional media. Through hard work establishing credibility as a thought leader, the "right people" will self qualify and come to you.

Becoming a thought leader is not just a nice idea, it's integral to your business strategy. Having ongoing editorial content and discussion will provide support to your sales staff, aid in discovery of your products and services, strengthen your brand, and move potential customers through the pre- and post- stages of your sales cycle.

Help potential customers find their way

Solution finders are self motivated. They want answers, and they appreciate honest and thoughtful explanations. More importantly than the answers, is they recognize and acknowledge the voice delivering those answers. When creating custom editorial content, keep these issues in mind:

You're not writing sales collateral. You're creating content to answer a question. If it's a sufficient "answer" then you've sold them on your credibility and your solution.

Put yourself in the mind of the individual or organization with the problem. Different people are brought in at different points in the sales cycle. Do you have the right information, produced in the right way, when that person needs it?

For the audience that doesn't even know you exist, where do they go to find answers? Where do they spend their time? Find those locations (e.g. blogs, magazines, user groups) and spend time there as well. Participate in discussions even when they're not directly relevant to your business.

Make sure there's a division between your editorial content and marketing collateral. It should be instantaneously clear to the audience what is information and what is a sales pitch. Think about a magazine that has an article on the left page and an advertisement on the right page. Editorial separated by advertising is an understood and accepted relationship. Create the same dual tracks.

Purchase should be possible at any moment. Once you've created a separation between editorial and marketing, making both visible and available, you've given your audience the option to jump to purchase or additional purchase at any point along the sales cycle.

You're using custom editorial and social media to move a would-be buyer through the purchase cycle. With this understanding, you're ready to start creating your editorial calendar.

Five phases of a purchase cycle

Assuming the product you're selling is a considered purchase, like a service or piece of technology, consumers will go through five distinct phases (discovery, research, purchase, use, and additional purchase) to solve a given issue. Except for the two purchase stages, traditional and new media custom publishing combined with open discussion will move potential customers and existing customers through the other three stages. Here's a look at each stage in isolation.

Phase 1: Discovery

There are an endless variety of ways potential customers can discover your company and its solutions. Here are some common examples:

- Your business has an established brand for which you're always a top contender in your category.
- A media entity talking about a specific issue mentions your business as offering a desired solution.
- Potential customers ask a trusted friend/expert what solution they'd recommend.
- Potential customers go to editorial sites they trust and search for possible solutions.
- Potential customers do general searches online to read articles and see what's being discussed in blogs and discussion groups.
- Potential customers happen upon your business serendipitously through traditional marketing or as they're casually reading or looking for other tangential, yet relevant information.

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What content should you broadcast through your media network?

The easiest answer to this question is to ask yourself what inward facing information do you have that you can make outward facing? Chances are that information would be of great interest to your customers and potential customers.

Releasing internal information is a good first step, but you'll need to interview customer-facing people to find out what are your audience's questions and concerns. Interview sales staff, customer service employees, tech support people, partners, and most importantly customers. Here are some questions to ask.

For customers:

- What problem does your business have?
- How did you discover our product or solution?
- Where do you go looking for answers?
- When you find an answer, where do you look for validation?
- What are the kinds of answers you're looking for that will help you make a decision?

For sales staff, partners, and customer service personnel:

- How do they find you?
- Why do they trust you to come and tell you their problem?
- What causes you to lose sales?
- What causes you to win sales?
- When are people happy with their customer service experience?
- What are people unhappy with their customer service experience?
- What tangential business issues are bringing customers to your company?

Answers to these questions will be the information you need to form the initial outline for your editorial calendar. Once you've formed your editorial calendar, it's time to go into production.

Five phases of a purchase cycle (cont'd)

Phase 2: Research

Once you're on someone's radar, and you're a consideration, then individuals/organizations go through a research stage to see if your business offers the ideal solution. Traditionally in this order, but not necessarily, here are some common research methods:

- Ask a trusted friend/expert again what solution they'd recommend and why.
- Look for case studies or stories of people who have had similar situations and what solution they chose. Search on company names, the problem in question, or the solution provided. Read, listen, and view third party articles, blogs, podcasts, videos, discussion groups, and information on each company's web site. Pay special attention to unaddressed negative criticism.
- Determine the economics of such a solution and whether it can provide the results and return on investment you need. Consider pricing for alternative solutions.
- Test the solution in your environment.

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What medium should you use?

New media and social media have given rise to an endless array of production and distribution options. It's not just thinking about blogs, podcasts, and videos, but whether you're going to do something live, what the quality will be, will you allow for interactivity, what tool you plan to use, and whether you're going to produce it in-house or hire a professional crew. Ask yourself the following initial questions to help guide your decision making:

How is your audience currently consuming information pertaining to your business?

- Is it user-to-user support?
- Do they garner all their information from an FAQ (frequently asked questions) list or a help database?
- Is there one third-party media outlet that's considered "the bible" for the industry?

What is the type of content they're consuming, and what's the quality?

- Do they seek out documents, discussion logs, audio, or video?
- Is information parsed through user discussions or are there certified people that offer qualified actionable information?
- If video content is prevalent is the majority of it professionally produced, or would a person sitting and talking to a webcam be considered sufficient?

What's missing? What does your industry need?

- Is your content visual? Would a slideshow or video help?
- Do you have access to interview really talented people either within your organization, vendors, or customers?

Once you know the answers to these questions, you can start to think about what you want to produce.

Five phases of a purchase cycle (cont'd)

Phase 3: Purchase

At any point along the discovery or research stage, you want to make it easy for the individual to jump to purchase, but you don't want to force it if they're not ready. This requires offering options either through your own site, a retailer (online or offline), or third-party to make a purchase. Make pricing easily available for them to find and compare across all these options.

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Create content units around a single effort

Traditionally, when a client comes to Spark Media Solutions they are singularly focused. They come to us saying either they want to create a blog, podcast, whitepaper, or video. While we appreciate the initial intention to create content, a singularly-focused approach to content creation will be expensive and yield very little output.

Instead, we ask clients to step back and try to figure out what it is they're trying to accomplish in terms of building a voice and communicating with the audience. And then we look at what kind of access and talent they have internally and see how we can spin a single effort into multiple pieces of content, thus allowing people to touch the information in a multitude of different ways.

It's common to focus on the medium (e.g. podcast, video, or whitepaper) first. When you're in the initial stages of planning, don't get mired in the medium. Think about the effort. The effort is the subject matter that you want to talk about that would be of interest to your audience. An effort could be a five star interview or maybe a how-to on a subject everyone wants to know. Once you know the effort, then you can determine the media. With proper forethought and production you can actually spin multiple units of content off of a single effort.

Here's an example to illustrate the need to focus on effort rather than means of content delivery.

Say you're a mobile technology company and you landed a 30 minute interview with Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple. He's willing to discuss anything with you and show off a brand new iPhone.

A lazy producer, not thinking ahead, would think, "Great, we can put the 30 minute video interview up on our site and tons of people will come to see it." That's very possible, but that kind of thinking misses multiple opportunities for production and distribution. Not everyone has the time or interest to sit and watch a 30 minute interview on their computer and not everybody knows about your company or your site. What you do know is they're interested in what Steve Jobs has to say, just maybe not in the 30 minute video format on your site.

Instead of just creating a 30 minute video, think about additional content units you can spin off of this singular effort: getting Steve Jobs to sit down in front of a video camera for 30 minutes. For example:

- A 30 minute audio file (streamable, downloadable, and made available via RSS podcast feed)
- A transcript of the 30 minute interview (PDF and HTML)
- A two minute highlight reel (video and audio) of the interview
- An article outlining highlights of the interview
- Photos in the article
- Short 15-30 second video snippets in the article
- An article outlining the new phone
- Short close up video of the phone and its functions

For just a little additional effort, what was originally just going to be a single video can be parsed into more than a dozen content units that can be reached and consumed a multitude of different ways.

Offer exclusive distribution opportunities to high profile editorial sites

While putting content up on your site may be a good idea, does your site currently draw a lot of traffic? Is the content you're creating high profile enough (e.g. a Steve Jobs interview) that it would interest mainstream sites with more traffic than yours? If so, consider giving some major sites exclusive initial distribution to the content.

In the Steve Jobs example, you could give exclusive distribution of the interview to TechCrunch (www.techcrunch.com) and exclusive distribution of the phone demo video to Engadget (www.engadget.com). These two sites get millions of visitors and would drive more traffic, discovery, and brand association to your business.

Five phases of a purchase cycle (cont'd)

Phase 4: Use

This stage becomes the audition for a customer's next purchase and whether or not that person/organization will become an evangelist for your product or service.

- Should not provide unexpected surprises. Use should be as simple or as complicated as expected upon finishing research phase.
- If help is needed, answers are timely and satisfying. Solutions are found by the user or assisted through customer service.
- Product or service provides solution that was desired and customer develops an affiliation with the brand.
- Consumer becomes a "word of mouth" advocate for the brand's product or service.
- With brand affiliation, user goes through a mini-discovery and research phase to see what other products and solutions the company has to offer.

Phase 5: Additional purchase

Depending on the outcome of the use stage, consumer may go onto purchase additional products and services from the brand which will cause a repeat of the use stage.

These are just very general descriptions of a sales cycle. Depending on your business, products, and services you'll be able to better refine and define this flow. Whatever the sales cycle is, it's critically important that you get inside the head of someone who needs your solutions and how they would go about discovering, researching, and using your product. Once you understand all of those stages, then you can create a media network of content and communications to satisfy their needs every step of the way.

Engage in conversation, especially when it's tangential to your business

Once you begin creating your editorial network, you now have something to talk about and something to point people to as part of the discussion. Here are just some basic rules of thumb when engaging in online conversation.

Don't hide – Use your real name, your real email address, and yes, even your real phone number. Let them know that they're talking to a real human being and that there's a person they can contact in the future.

Take ownership – On blog posts, don't advise the public that they can call the generic help line or email address if there's a problem. Tell them they can come to you. Put a face on the problem, yours. It's easier to create an attachment with a company (and harder to hate them) when there's an individual with a name and a face that's willing to respond to your concerns.

Don't get wrapped up on "who" responds - I've seen responses get delayed because a company is trying to decide whether a VP or an engineer should respond to a question. The public doesn't care about "who," they only care about a timely useful answer from a person who cares to respond.

Track conversation about you – Use tools like Google Alerts (www.google.com/alerts) and Technorati (www.technorati.com) to alert you when someone is writing about your company. I'm always very impressed with companies that comment on my blog or email me directly when I write about them both positively and negatively. When negative, they reach out and say they're willing to help. In some cases, the error has been mine, I've corrected it, and made the appropriate change on my blog post.

Track big media for tangential stories – Your audience will discover you when you leave the nest of your environment and engage in discussions happening in big media, or wherever there is a major discussion. If you're in the tech field, you should be following the site Techmeme (www.techmeme.com). This site automatically tracks the hottest discussions in the tech industry and points you to the blogs that are engaged in the discussion. For everyone else, you should simply keep an eye out on the big media, such as CNN, NYTimes, and the WSJ. Every now and then a story will hit Techmeme or the big media that's tangential to your business. This is where and when you need to jump into the discussion.

First, write a post on your blog forming an opinion about the article. Second, see what industry insiders are saying about this article. Responses can be found using a search tool like Technorati or by following the top influencers in your category.

For all those people in the blogosphere that do comment on the big story (i.e. The New York Times article), feel free to post a relevant comment on the blog with a link back to your post. It's a good idea to mention something specific in that post and don't just copy and paste the same comment everywhere. If someone wanted to, search tools would reveal spamming the same comment everywhere.

In addition, you can link to their post within your post using a permalink (also known as a trackback or pingback). That's essentially just a link to the specific blog post. The advantage of linking to a specific post is that the blog owner will be alerted that you've posted about them and as a result they will inevitably come to your site to see how you've mentioned them. This permalink "alert" is a mechanism automatically built into blogs and the blogosphere.

If you want people to discover you, get away from your site and reach out to the community. You can utilize a whole host of new and social media tools to help you get there.

Early warning signs that your company's media network might fail

The most common failure for companies building and communicating a content network is to not put in the effort, or simply ignore one of the three development stages: production, distribution, or conversation. Here are some classic tell-tale warning signs (that I've actually heard from clients) that a development stage may not get the attention it deserves:

"We want to create a podcast"

Good initial effort, but singularly focused. Not thinking about creating a content network, but rather a content unit. Nine times out of ten the phrase, "We want to create a podcast" means we want to create one, maybe two audio interviews. A podcast is defined as a series and its purpose is to build an audience over time. Go beyond single audio program-type thinking by understanding the core of what you're trying to accomplish over the long term.

"We want a whitepaper"

Probably the most uninteresting, uninventive, and most expensive single form of content. Seeing the word "whitepaper" usually results in a giant "ho hum." It is often the first content form that's requested and, while it has value, it is costly relative to the other opportunities for content network creation.

"I don't have time to write a blog"

This is extremely common and if anyone does say this, do not force them to write the blog. Blog writing is based on passion and if it's dictated or micromanaged it will fail. Best to let the people who want to write, write. It's possible the person who initially said they didn't have time to write will see the success of the blog and will find time to write.

"Everyone tells us we need to make a video"

Those people who say you need a video probably haven't seen your product and don't realize it's not visual. In general, though, what they say is true. Most people would rather watch a three minute video than read a three page article. But, not everything is visual, especially in technology. The purpose of video is to tell a story with pictures. For example, one colleague sent three silly videos he made for a wireless technology product. I patiently sat through all three videos and still wasn't sure what the product actually did. Instead, I went to the company's Web site and after reading the first two sentences, which took me ten seconds, I knew what the product did. Think what medium can tell your story the best and in the quickest way. It may or may not be video.

"I want to create something viral"

Thankfully, I'm not hearing this phrase as much today as I use to hear it. But it's about the equivalent of hearing fingernails against a chalkboard. A person who says this is looking for a single shot to get something for nothing with an audience you have no control over. They're not committed on an ongoing basis to creating content or engaging in conversation.

"I want to increase word of mouth about our products and services"

This person is skipping the need to create editorial content and wants to move directly into conversation. Problem is people need something to talk about. You can't force word of mouth. You have to create an environment for it to happen. That means you create a forum for discussion and a catalyst that drives people to interact and respond.

Summary - Turn your business into a media network

To become your industry's thought leader you need to create and distribute stories that interested consumers can learn from, follow, and emulate. Your job is to provide the information and voice that allows potential consumers to move to the next step in the decision making process.

Every organization has internal wisdom that is of great value to consumers looking to discover, decide to use, or enhance their existing use of a product or service. Don't keep it bottled up within the four walls of your organization. Take the inward facing information and make it outward facing.

Custom editorial is the net that catches potential customers as they move through the sales cycle. Messaging alone cannot move people from discovery to purchase nor to additional purchase. There needs to be editorial content and discussion.

Marketing, branding, and public relations alert people to a product or a solution. These traditional message-based communications commonly don't tell a complete story and thereby cause people to ask questions. Those questions are then answered or not answered by people (e.g. employees, customers, analysts) and content (e.g. articles, blog posts, discussion boards, podcasts, videos). The quality of that content, the quality of that conversation, and the quality of the people willing to participate in that conversation is what grows your reputation, your brand, and allows you to "be the voice" in your industry.

Author Bio

"Be the VoiceSM" was developed by David Spark, founder of Spark Media Solutions. Spark is a twelve year veteran technology journalist and industry analyst. He's written for and appeared in more than 25 media outlets including eWEEK, PCWorld, PC Computing, Wired News, TechTV, and KQED in San Francisco. To add some color, Spark spent a dozen years as an award-winning stand-up comic and a comedy writer for Chicago's famous Second City corporate communications troupe.

Read Spark's blog at www.sparkminute.com.

About Spark Media Solutions

Spark Media Solutions is a traditional and new media custom publishing organization that provides editorial guidance and production to turn businesses into the number one voice in their respective industries. Our objective is to manage, develop, create, and distribute editorial-based information for and from our clients. The content and the conversation that surrounds it is designed to position our clients as thought leaders in their respective industry.

While Spark Media Solutions does not offer traditional public relations, branding, marketing, or advertising services, we support and extend any PR, branding, or marketing campaign. We work alongside all your promotional efforts to help them get realized.

Spark Media Solutions can be found at www.sparkmediasolutions.com.