

Major Global IT Outsourcer: Identifying Thought Leadership Marketing White Space

Thought leadership is a critical tool for professional services companies to generate awareness and demand. The ability to demonstrate deep and unique insights on the nature of and solution to a pressing business problem—and a proven track record in solving that problem for clients—is one of the most powerful competitive differentiators a professional firm can have. This is particularly true in professional services markets that have moved to competing largely on the basis of price—a sign of a commoditizing market.

As a relative newcomer to the U.S. and European market, a major global IT outsourcing provider faced formidable competition in the marketplace for expertise. The company had grown rapidly and achieved high levels of client satisfaction by providing lower-cost technology implementation services to a wide range of clients around the world. However, beginning in 2006 the company began to notice that its price advantage was no longer sufficient to generate robust growth. In fact, its major, established consulting competitors had gradually narrowed the price gap between themselves and the outsourcer.

At the same time, clients were sending a clear message to their consulting and IT services providers that while cost was important and superior technology skills were critical, deep knowledge of functional and industry business challenges trumped them both. Indeed, this quote by *InformationWeek* editor-in-chief Rob Preston vividly illustrates this mindset: “From my conversations with various IT executives, this is their No. 1 concern . . . [s]uppliers, for all their technical smarts, just don't understand the businesses of their customers.”

This evolution in thinking had major implications for our client. To continue its rapid growth rate, the company would need to enhance its process and industry expertise. In addition, it would have to change the marketplace perceptions of its expertise—from being just a technology implementer to

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a business process improvement firm. That, in turn, would require developing and marketing distinctive intellectual capital—true “thought leadership”—that communicated that expertise to clients and prospects.

To be sure, this was a challenge for the company, but it was also a great opportunity to create a new image among clients and prospects. Recognizing this, the company hired Alterra Group to identify where it should focus its resources to develop intellectual capital that would

strongly resonate with clients and prospects, position it as much more than a low-cost provider with deep technology skills, and generate substantial awareness and business leads.

Having recently performed similar work for one of the world's largest and most successful management consulting firms, Alterra Group was well prepared to help our new client find differentiated and relevant topics to develop. We used a five-step approach, as outlined below:

1. First, we conducted secondary research to quickly and cost-effectively identify the business issues of highest concern among clients and prospects—across key business functions, vertical industries and geographic regions. In doing so, we paid particular attention to issues covered with frequency in the major trade and business publications; to issues that appeared on various “top issues” lists generated through surveys of executives; and to the writ-

ings of relevant industry analyst firms. Synthesizing this information, we created a consolidated list of issues the outsourcer's clients were grappling with most.

2. We then studied the firm's body of work and business strategy to identify the types of projects the outsourcer had completed in the past two years—e.g., call center systems outsourcing for manufacturers or CRM applications maintenance for financial services firms. The projects effectively served as a proxy for the outsourcer's expertise, giving us an indication of where the outsourcer likely would have the deepest experience on which to draw as it developed content for its marketing programs. By ranking the types of projects completed in terms of frequency and scope, and comparing the focus of those projects with the top-issues list developed through our secondary research, we were able to find an overlap of issues that were both highly relevant to the market and were within the firm's "sweet spot." It is on these issues we recommended the outsourcer focus its thought leadership marketing efforts.
3. Next we assessed the quality of the outsourcer's existing intellectual capital, as well as that of their competition, on the issues identified in point 2 above. Our quality ratings were based upon seven criteria of compelling intellectual capital: focus, novelty, relevance, validity, practicality, rigor, and clarity. In conducting this exercise, we were able to show where the outsourcer's competitors had effectively covered the issues under study and where there was ample opportunity for the outsourcer to say something new and different about the issues—i.e., the "white space." By identifying this white space, we helped the outsourcer avoid wasting time and money addressing a topic on which it would likely get little return.
4. After mapping out the intellectual capital landscape, we provided a detailed plan for developing the intellectual capital on the chosen issues, including suggestions for

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specific angles to pursue on each issue and the type of research we believed would be necessary for the outsourcer to fully develop its point of view on each. This plan would help the outsourcer publish materials that were relevant to its clients, differentiated from the competition, and that demonstrated the outsourcer's deep expertise on the chosen issues.

5. Finally, to gain maximum visibility for any content the outsourcer would develop on the chosen issues, we developed a detailed multi-channel marketing program for taking the new intellectual capital to target buyers. Included in this plan were discussions of how to leverage specific marketing tools and channels (such as media relations, the Web, seminars and workshops, and external events), as well as names of and contact information for specific individuals to target at relevant publications and event organizers.

As a result of our work, the outsourcer gained a much clearer picture of the business issues about which its clients and prospects wanted to learn more, which of these issues best aligned with the outsourcer's core strengths and experience, and how the outsourcer could communicate its expertise in ways that cut through the marketplace clutter. This intelligence would prove to be invaluable in helping the outsourcer develop marketing plans that would play to its strengths and have the best chance of generating

a strong return on its marketing investment. In other words, the project helped the outsourcer focus on only those issues and marketing initiatives that would support the firm's strategy and strengthen its image in the marketplace while helping to prevent irrelevant, non-differentiated materials from consuming valuable resources and diluting the firm's key messages. With Alterra Group's help, the outsourcer was ready to continue the evolution of its brand to the next level, moving from value leader to thought leader. ▲



Alterra Group helps professional services organizations raise awareness of and create demand for their services among key target audiences. We do this via three principal services: developing unique points of view, articulating those points of view in a variety of publications, and building powerful marketing campaigns around the content in those publications to get points of view in the hands of current and prospective clients. We have applied our approach to thought leadership marketing in a diverse group of professional services firms, including leading global outsourcing and systems integration companies, influential trade associations, midsize consulting and strategic advisory firms, boutique consultancies, and independent consultants and authors.

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