

## RhetorIQ's Template for Article Outlines

### I. The Problem

- According to a study of 50 consulting firms conducted by the Association of Management Consulting Firms (AMCF), 53 percent of online thought leadership content published in 2012 by leading firms (defined as those whose articles received on average more than 40 inquiries by potential clients) was ghostwritten.
- Only 22 percent of online content produced by laggards (firms whose articles received less than 20 inquiries) was ghostwritten.
- However, over half (57 percent) of consultants at all firms surveyed were "less than enthusiastic" about working with ghostwriters.
- This makes it challenging for marketers and editorial directors at professional services firms to get their subject matter experts to work with ghostwriters even though the evidence seems to suggest that this is a good way to produce good thought leadership content; that is, content that attracts attention, differentiates the firm, is useful to readers, and generates business.

### II. Why Current Solutions Fall Short

- Marketers often hire former journalists to produce thought leadership content, believing they know how to conduct interviews, construct articles, and write.
- They do, but without experience producing thought leadership content, problems arise that lead to poor drafts, whack-a-mole revisions, and consequent consultant disenchantment – with the writer and the marketing or editorial department.
- Some of the reasons consultants give for their reluctance to engage with ghostwriters are:

1. It eats up too much of the consultant's time to explain their area of expertise to an ill-informed ghostwriter. (Journalists are often generalists, without deep subject matter expertise.)
  2. The consultant does not have a relationship with the ghostwriter, making it difficult to trust him or her to convey the consultant's ideas.
  3. The consultant is afraid a ghostwritten article won't "sound like me."
- The marketers and editorial directors who engage former journalists as ghostwriters often find themselves with substandard drafts that:
    1. Do not reflect the consultants' thinking.
    2. Fail to adequately delineate the argument or point of view.
      - Due to gaps in the expert's thinking (that haven't been questioned or addressed by the ghostwriter), or
      - Due to gaps in the ghostwriter's knowledge of the subject.
    3. Lack supporting examples and quantifiable or qualitative data.
      - Because the expert has not provided them.
      - Because the ghostwriter has not pressed for them.
      - Because the ghostwriter has not done secondary (or sometimes primary) research.
    4. Emphasize the wrong elements for the target audience.
  - These defects inevitably lead to multiple, time-consuming, and expensive iterations of drafts. These painful, tedious, and often unsuccessful re-writes can invite:
    1. Debates over vocabulary.
    2. Arguments about punctuation and grammar.
    3. Discussions that focus on issues irrelevant or relatively unimportant to the article's argument are attempting to make or the point of view it's trying to convey, making it difficult to address the article's real deficits.
  - These defects inevitably lead to multiple, time-consuming, and expensive iterations of drafts. These painful, tedious, and often unsuccessful re-writes also confirm the consultants' view that working with ghostwriters is a pain, making it more difficult for the marketer or editorial director to use them even if they would like to.

### III. The Solution

- Produce an outline before writing a draft.
  1. Having the ghostwriter construct a detailed outline of the article before attempting a draft is beneficial in the following ways:
    - An outline provides a sturdier platform for discussion and alignment than a draft as its argument is not distorted or disguised by distracting prose.
    - An outline provides a template for the best way to construct an argument, demanding that, together, the ghostwriter and expert hew to the best practices of creating thought leadership content, ordering and defining:
      1. The problem
      2. Why current solutions fall short
      3. The solution in detail (with examples and data)
      4. The barriers to adoption and how to overcome them
      5. The call to action
    - An outline quickly reveals gaps in an argument or point of view, thereby keeping the discussion between consultant and ghostwriter focused on the core argument and the examples that do or do not support it, not on how the argument has been expressed.
    - Reading an outline consumes less of the expert's time than a draft.
    - The expert can more easily correct and refine an outline than a draft.
    - It takes less time for the ghostwriter to correct or incorporate additional thoughts and examples to an outline than a draft.
    - Once an outline is approved by the expert, the ghostwriter, by closely following the outline, can produce a draft that the expert most likely will approve, as its structure and content are already known to and been deemed acceptable by him or her.

- Once the outline is approved, the ghostwriter can quickly produce a draft, reducing costs to the marketing and editorial department.
  - The chance of producing a successful, acceptable, and excellent first draft is thereby increased significantly. Writing from an outline, a first draft can take days rather than weeks.
- 2. Only after the outline is approved should the ghostwriter begin drafting the article, following the outline closely.
- Have a template for the outline.
  1. The article or white paper outline template that RhetorIQ uses and has used successfully hundreds of times is the one I am using here.
  2. Standardizing a process is always more efficient than continually reinventing one.
  3. Having a template sets expectations for the ghostwriter and the expert, not only providing a platform for their engagement but establishing trust as both know what is expected of the other.
- Enforce the process
  1. Always insist that the ghostwriter produce an outline before drafting the article, white paper, or blog post. Make no exceptions. Never. No matter how persuasive the writer or even how short the article. An outline for a blog post is just as important as a white paper outline.
  2. Never allow a draft to be written before the expert has signed off on the outline.

## IV. Barriers to Adoption and How to Overcome Them

- Writer resistance
  1. Writers, especially experienced writers with backgrounds in journalism, will often resist creating an outline before a draft.
    - They believe they know how to write an article and that creating an outline just means extra work.
    - Newspaper editors never require outlines because:

- The reporter doesn't know what the story will be before he reports it. (Unlike thought leadership articles, where the content is pre-determined and provided.)
  - There's already a template for a newspaper story: Who, what, when, where, and why.
  - There's just no time for outlines, and it's not part of newspaper culture.
  - Magazine and website editors rarely require outlines. This is unfortunate but true.
  - The belief that outlines are not necessary for long-form writing is generally wrong, but especially when it comes to creating thought leadership content.
  - Therefore, explain to the writer that writing an outline before a draft ultimately creates less work as once the expert buys into the outline, the hard work already has been done. The number and breadth of revisions to the draft will be reduced greatly.
  - In truth, once the detailed outline is written and approved, producing the article is but the work of a moment. (I could write this article in less than three hours now that this outline is almost done.)
2. However, writers are like most people; they're resistant to change. They haven't been asked to produce outlines before; why should they do so now?
  3. How do you overcome this resistance? By making it an essential part of the assignment and the contract. After all, you're the boss; you're writing the check.
- Editor resistance
    1. Whether you're in marketing or part of an internal editorial department, vetting an outline requires a rigorous assessment of your expert's point of view. That can be unpleasant if the expert does not have a strong one or doesn't have examples to back it up. That will put you at odds with your own expert. (Awkward!)
    2. You want the writer to do the heavy lifting of thinking, and you don't want to engage in the details forced upon you by vetting an outline. (You have other work to do, or you're just lazy.)

3. Sorry. This is the work you've chosen. If you shirk it, it will turn out badly for you.

## V. Call to Action

- As thought leadership is increasingly a critical differentiator among professional services firms, its quality and volume have become a metric for assessing the performance of heads of marketing and editorial departments.
- As a marketing head or editorial leader for a professional services firm, your goal must be to produce more and better thought leadership content while reducing the time and expense it takes to do so.
- The most effective quiver in your bow is to demand that your ghostwriters – internal staff or contracted writers – produce detailed outlines before assaying a draft.
- Doing so will improve quality, save money, and begin creating a culture in which your experts will not only be happy to work with your writers, they will seek them out, using them to vet their ideas.
- As your writers discover the benefits of outlining for themselves, they will cease whining about it.
- This will increase the volume of the thought leadership content you can produce, reduce the time it takes to produce it, and rebound to your credit while improving your firm's competitive standing.
- Outlines. Gotta love' em. Really. You have to.