



*THE  
THOUGHT LEADER  
MANIFESTO*

*STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING & LEVERAGING YOUR INFLUENCE*

*DENISE BROSSAU*

Whether you're an executive, entrepreneur, or a non-profit leader, your success is often dependent upon your ability to engage and enroll influencers to get on board with your ideas.

When you create connections with recognized and well-respected influencers, you move from a “one-to-many” to a “many-to-many” model, empowering others to carry your ideas forward to their communities.

What follows are 12 strategies to secure the support of influencers and empower them to amplify your message. As you read through these ideas—from such diverse realms as politics, publishing, technology, content marketing, and education—imagine how each of them might apply in your situation, then get creative and add your own innovations.

# The House Party

Most prevalent in politics and non-profit fundraising, house parties come in all shapes and sizes. At the informal end, there are MeetUp style gatherings where a host or hostess gathers their friends and neighbors or opens their house to interested participants. Everyone gathers around the TV to watch a prepared message or joins a conference call or live stream from campaign headquarters to get the latest updates and marching orders.

More formal house parties, usually large dollar fundraisers, are gatherings held in grand private homes with far more pomp and circumstance. The champagne flows freely and the presentations are short, but the coffers are usually full by the end of a few of these evenings.

**Lesson:** Leverage your personal network to gain momentum for your ideas and funding for your cause. *How can you use a house party strategy to educate and engage people with your ideas?*

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# The Listening Tour

Another popular political technique is the listening tour. Think back to Hillary Rodham Clinton's successful 1999 campaign for the New York State Senate. She kicked it off with a listening tour around the state, which gave her a chance to hear the concerns of potential voters and gain familiarity with the state's issues and challenges.

This strategy works outside of politics just as well. When my client, Van Ton-Quinlivan, was appointed to be the Vice Chancellor of Workforce and Economic Development of California's Community Colleges, she launched her own listening tour to introduce a new statewide initiative, [Doing What MATTERS](#) for jobs and the economy, an innovative campaign to close the skills gaps across the state.

Hosted by well-established community leaders in different regions of the state, Ton-Quinlivan shared her vision in Town Hall meeting settings. The combination of her hosts' political capital and the setting on their home turf opened people's minds to her ideas and increased the engagement with potential stakeholders.

**Lesson:** Take yourself to your stakeholders and create a safe environment for them to voice their views and hear your ideas. *Who are the key leaders in your community that could host a listening tour for you? Which stakeholders should be invited?*

# The Media Tour

While the media tour has been a standard way of building traction for books, products, and services for years, the outlets for gaining a listening or reading audience have broadened substantially. No longer limited to the Sunday morning talk shows with their vigilant gatekeepers, media has gone online to thousands of internet radio shows hosted by local business owners, authors, and community spokespeople. On the print side, we are no longer limited to the large publications like *The New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*; there are more blogs and news sites popping up every day, not to mention news apps that curate information for targeted audiences.

The good news (and bad news) is that there are numerous opportunities to reach those you want to influence. Whether you opt for a guest blog strategy where you secure guest blog opportunities on well-trafficked sites, or a guest appearance strategy in which you secure interview opportunities with local and national radio or television programs (or both), the key is to develop a few (3-5) key points and keep reinforcing those points throughout.

**Lesson:** Find the well-trafficked sites or shows where your audience is already listening and stick to 3-5 key points that are easy to remember and repeat. *How can you use the media to amplify your message and build your reach?*

# Participatory Design

Another model of engaging influencers is to enroll them in the process right from the start. When author and social entrepreneur Miki Agrawal began to explore starting a healthy pizza restaurant at the age of twenty-five, she had no industry experience but she did have a wide and varied network. She convened about twenty people she knew, including bankers, interior designers, and an architect, for dinner and brainstorming, and in a few hours they put together her menu and came up with a clever name, Slice Perfect, for her first restaurant. The many other ideas they developed that night ensured that her New York City restaurant (later renamed WILD) rose above the rest. In addition, several of the attendees became investors and others provided design, marketing and financial expertise to get the new venture off the ground. Agrawal has since documented her adventures, including launching her second restaurant with Tony Hsieh of Zappos, in her book [Do Cool Sh\\*t.](#)

**Lesson:** It's not about what you know, it's about co-creating (or crowdsourcing) the best ideas from your network. *How could you bring together people you know from a variety of diverse backgrounds to share their expertise?*

# Crowdsourcing

While participatory design brings together people you know with strategic skill sets that complement your own, crowdsourcing brings together people you may or may not know who share your job title or area of expertise. One of the best-selling business books of the last few years, [Business Model Generation](#), was actually collaboratively co-authored by 470 strategy practitioners from around the world under the guidance of Alexander Osterwalder and Dr. Yves Pigneur. Each co-author shared their best ideas and also co-financed the independently produced and beautifully designed final outcome. As each co-author was an influencer in their respective industries and/or country, the final book gained immediate widespread attention and a large following.

**Lesson:** Who says they won't pay to play? *Who are the top practitioners in your particular niche? How could you gather their best ideas for the benefit of all?*

*“It's not about what you know, it's about co-creating (or crowdsourcing) the best ideas from your network. How could you bring together people you know ... to share their expertise?”*

# Set Up an Innovation Challenge

Another form of crowdsourcing is to send out an open call for solutions to a wide variety of networks. Outline what you're looking for and offer a prize to recognize those whose solutions are adopted. This is most effective when you can bring together multiple networks, each with their own large community, right from the start.

In May 2013, eight different organizations formed the [Global Women's Leadership Alliance](#) and offered a \$1,000 prize for ideas on how to radically accelerate the development of leadership capacity in women and girls around the globe. By tapping all of their networks, these influencers expanded their reach exponentially. On a larger scale, the [Knight Foundation](#) created a \$2.2 million health data challenge calling on companies, nonprofits, and individuals to submit ideas on how to turn large, publicly available datasets into useful information to inform health policy or help consumers make better decisions. Perhaps the largest and best known of these initiatives is the X Prize Foundation's efforts to "spark radical breakthroughs for the benefit of humanity" through their global competitions in the area of space exploration.

**Lesson:** When the right people aren't in your network, a monetary incentive might be necessary to gain their attention. *Who might provide funding for a broad call to action to expand your efforts?*

# Leverage Top Influencers

When the founders of the Content Marketing Institute (CMI) began to build their followership, no one could have predicted that in three years they would have 80,000 e-mail newsletter subscribers and 150,000 unique site visitors per month. Given that all they had at the start was a budget of \$6000 a month, a well-honed list of the 42 top influencers in their niche of content marketing bloggers and a good editorial team, this has been a remarkable few years.

Through a combined strategy of regularly showcasing the work of these 42 key influencers on CMI's social media sites and creating a research methodology to rank the influencers quarterly, CMI began to gain credibility and popularity not just among the influencers themselves but also among their followers.

CMI then invited each influencer to provide content on the CMI daily blog, using their editorial staff to assure that the content was well edited and positioned the influencer appropriately. They also created regular eBooks featuring case studies of these influencers to give them even more opportunities to shine. In turn, each influencer shared their content with their already wide audiences, with links back to the CMI blog and website.

Over time, those followers became CMI followers as they tracked back and found significant additional content worthy of their attention. Learn more about [How to Create Faster Relationships with Influencers](#) from CMI's Joe Pulizzi.

**Lesson:** When your budget is limited, focus on what's most important to making your community look good. *How could you build an influencer list in your industry or niche and begin to build reciprocal relationships using the CMI model?*

## Host a Cheese Party

Lest you think that every influencer strategy has to begin and end with business, let me share the story of the [Beijing Cheese Society](#). In 2004, my friend Sharon Ruwart moved from Palo Alto to Beijing with her family. Given that the Chinese are predominantly lactose-intolerant, Sharon created an instant community when she began hosting cheese parties for expatriates who were overwhelmingly 'dairy-deprived.'

A confirmed turophile (a lover of cheese) with an encyclopedic knowledge of cheese history, production, and varieties, Sharon's parties began with a cheese quiz and ended up building lifelong personal and professional connections.

After Sharon was invited to host a Cheese Society event for the American ambassador, the group grew to include a veritable who's who guest list for its monthly gatherings, including senior diplomats, heads of news bureaus and leaders of international chambers of commerce. Society members who were traveling abroad became "cheese mules," purchasing and carrying home fifty pounds of cheese from places like Australia, South Africa, Russia, and Israel. Local restaurateurs, who quickly caught on to the value of the Cheese Society members' clout, hosted the events.

Sharon's Cheese Society relationships also came in handy when she was hired to serve as the first American-born country manager for Elsevier Science & Technology, a scientific publishing company. Her new community connections opened doors that had long been closed to her new employer, and she never let on that it was her passion for cheese that gave her such wide and unique access.

**Lesson:** Don't underestimate the value of a shared hobby to create a valuable community of influencers. *How can you create your own community around an area of personal interest that might help you win over top influencers?*

*“Lest you think that every influencer strategy has to begin and end with business ...”*

# Build Your Own Generation of Influencers

If you have the patience and time, another effective strategy comes from the technology & utility industries, where they are willing to take a long-term view because of big potential payoffs.

When Autodesk first began selling their AutoCAD software, they were a new market entrant into a new market category. With no ready set of customers, they realized they would need to develop the next generation of CAD-trained designers themselves. To do that, they provided their products free of charge to colleges and universities in hopes that when the newly CAD-trained architects and product designers got their first jobs, they'd take their tools with them.

Another example of this strategy in action can be found in the California utility industry. The industry regulatory body, the CPUC, has for many years required utility companies like Pacific Gas and Electric to develop and disseminate [classroom training materials](#) as part of their push for increased energy efficiency across California. By teaching grade school students to recycle, to turn off the lights, and about the value of alternative energy, the CPUC is influencing the next generation to grow into more conscious adults with better “green” habits than their parents. The strategy seems to be working as California’s energy use has now fallen to 48th in the nation because of these and many other energy efficiency efforts within the state.

**Lesson:** When there is a large pay-off or an intractable challenge, it's important to build a long-term influencer strategy. *How can you take a long-term approach to building the next generation of influencers for your ideas?*

## Create Your Own Faculty

When you are championing change on a national scale, especially if you are moving quickly, one effective strategy is to create a national faculty. When your faculty includes already well known and respected community leaders, you are far more likely to gain people's attention and buy-in.

Mary Hughes is a longtime political consultant and the founder of [the 2012 Project](#), a two-year nationwide initiative to identify, engage, and motivate women to run for office for the first time—not just for city council and school board seats but for state legislatures and Congress. Her strategy was to do “direct outreach to executive-level, accomplished women, particularly women of color, in the private and public sectors who had not previously considered running for office.” She enlisted the help of seventy former elected women, including the former cochair of the Republican National Committee and former Vermont Governor, Democrat Madeleine Kunin, to create a bipartisan “faculty.”

These women traveled the country to make the case at annual conventions, professional association meetings, and monthly luncheons that public service was rewarding and productive and that women could make a difference. If women were interested in running for office, they were connected with the many resources in their communities that could teach them how to campaign and support their candidacies.

Simultaneously, Hughes mobilized statewide coalitions of women's organizations to spread the word and launched a large-scale public education campaign to raise awareness of the issue.

The 2012 Project was successful in engaging over five hundred women from the private sector and providing them with road maps to explore a run for office. They also connected these potential candidates with campaign boot camps, fundraising trainings, leadership institutes, and think tanks. Of these 500 potential candidates, 129 filed to run for office and 30 were successful. Another 56 were prepared to run in the next two elections.

**Lesson:** For a regional or national initiative, create your own committed faculty/team to evangelize and push forward your shared agenda. *How could you set up a "faculty" to endorse and spread your message?*

# Train the Trainers

While a faculty of community leaders can bring immediate attention to your ideas, gaining even wider adoption may require a community of trainers who you will train initially but who in turn can become certified, and ultimately paid, trainers. Dr. Michelle May was a practicing physician who had her own secret struggle with food and body image. She began teaching mindful-eating workshops “on the side” while she had a fulltime medical practice. Fourteen years later, she has “retired” from medicine and her “Am I Hungry” Mindful Eating Workshops are now available through corporate wellness programs, medical offices, hospitals, fitness centers, insurance companies, and community programs. What began as an eight-week, in-person workshop and workbook offered to her patients, May eventually turned into books, keynotes, and a train-the-trainer and licensing program. She initially trained Am I Hungry facilitators through teleseminars and webinars, but the training is now available online through a self-paced course that attracts licensees from around the world. Continuing education (CE) credits for the program broaden its reach for nurses, registered dietitians, and psychologists who are required to complete a certain number of CE credits annually.

**Lesson:** Develop a readily transferrable curriculum and then license or certify your own trainers to spread the curriculum far and wide. *How could you train and certify others to spread your ideas far and wide?*

# Empower Your Team

One of the most powerful models for building influence is to empower your own employees as social influencers or brand advocates. Whether your marketing team takes this on or you use a mobile or SAAS solution, you could both increase your employee engagement and expand your reach overnight.

A survey by Dell Corporation found that their employees' social networks had an overlap of only 8% with the audience reached by Dell's marketing efforts. Realizing that over 90% of the audience their employees reach was new to Dell, the company started to rethink the way they were utilizing their own employee base to spread the word about Dell's products and services.

Rather than discourage their employees from Tweeting, posting, and blogging, they began authorizing and investing in all of their employees' efforts to become company evangelists and spread the word about Dell by providing them with training and approved content and messages to send to their audiences.

As more and more brands begin to see the value of employees as advocates, [Social Chorus](#) has pivoted their product roadmap to add support for employee advocacy as part of their solution. Today, the company provides Employee Advocate Marketing software and services to dozens of leading brands, including large companies like Whole Foods and Verizon.

These solutions quickly turn company employees into trusted social influencers and advocates that are often far more effective in selling their company's products and services than the original sales teams.

Another company that is taking a unique approach to leveraging a company's employee assets is [ExpertFile](#). They have created what is essentially a branded LinkedIn for companies, helping them to showcase their internal experts as thought leaders, building the overall influence and eminence of the organization as well as the visibility and credibility of their key leaders. By positioning the credentials, publications, and biographical details of chosen senior executives, they increase the likelihood that their (and their company's) message is heard on the stage at industry conferences, in the pages of well-read publications, and on the boards of important executive forums.

**Lesson:** Your employees are your best brand evangelists. *How could you empower your employees or association members to become trusted social influencers and thought leaders?*

*“ These solutions quickly turn company employees into trusted social influencers and advocates ...*

# What's Required

No matter which influencer strategy you choose to adopt, here are a few tactics you will want to put in place first in order to be successful.

- **Know your influencers:** Who are the influencers in your market niche? Develop a list and keep it updated.
- **Prepare Talking Points:** What are the 3-5 key points you'd like others to understand and how is what you are saying or doing distinctive from your 'competition'.
- **Match your strategy to your audience and goals:** Rather than adopt a scatter-shot approach, take the time to analyze all 12 of these strategies and match them to where your target audience resides and your individual goals.
- **Make sure it's win-win:** The right strategy to adopt is one that will be a clear win-win for all involved. Think long term – what's in it for them?
- **Hire Help:** Don't go it alone. Even if your resources are limited, delegate to others those details that you don't have time for or aren't the best person to manage.

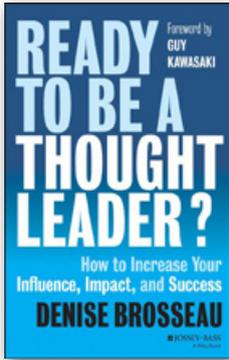
- **Think about the three R's:** Reach (how many people are you reaching?), Relevance (is your message relevant to them?), Resonance (is your message resonating—are they passing it forward to others in their network?)
- **Track your progress and success:** Create a few milestones and track and celebrate your progress.

## Be a Thought Leader

Thought leaders are people who can move and inspire others with their innovative ideas, turn those ideas into reality, and then create a dedicated group of friends, fans, and followers to help them replicate and scale those ideas into sustainable change.

**We hope you've been inspired by the stories of thought leaders and thought leading companies from a wide spectrum of industries, and that you've found a few ideas you can implement right away.** 📌

# Info



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | For more ideas on how to build your influence, read Denise Brosseau's book, *Ready to Be a Thought Leader?*, published by Wiley/Jossey-Bass. Denise is the CEO of [Thought Leadership Lab](#), a boutique professional services firm that specializes in building the visibility, credibility and thought leadership of executives and CEOs. A Stanford MBA, Denise is a serial entrepreneur and the co-founder of [Springboard](#), the women's start-up launchpad that has led to over \$6 billion in funding for women entrepreneurs. In 2012, she was honored by the White House as a Champion of Change.

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