

PRWeek

From leading to partnering in the age of influence

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Thought leadership is so 2010. In the healthcare industry, it's become pretty clear that just because a company has a point of view it wants to advance, it doesn't mean others will join in, or even listen. In 2011, the smartest companies will talk less and listen more. They will focus less on thought leadership and more on being thought partners.

Thought partnership is pretty simple -- it's the process of convening others to help answer big questions. Being a thought leader still sounds good, but the days when a single company can frame and shape collective action are long past. Especially in healthcare, a thought partner knows that the big problems can't be solved in isolation, and assembles like-minded parties to tackle problems together. There are three fundamental differences between thought leadership and thought partnership.

Thought leadership begins with a stake in the ground. Thought partnership begins with a question.

The challenges facing the healthcare sector -- from preserving innovation to care delivery to affordable access -- are too thorny for any single solution or any one entity to solve. Corporations that are true thought partners start by examining how their commercial interests align with bigger societal issues, and then find common ground with stakeholders to achieve mutual ends. The questions start and don't stop: what is the biggest challenge to solving this issue? How should we tackle it together? Can we agree on this goal? What are your thoughts on achieving success?

The screenshot shows the PRWeek website interface. At the top is the PRWeek logo and a search bar. Below the logo is a navigation menu with links for Home, News, Features, Reports, Blogs, Whitepapers, Multimedia, Events, Jobs, Directory, Subscribe, and About Us. A secondary menu lists Hot Topics: PRWeek Awards 2011, The Next Conference 2011, Healthcare, Consumer, Technology, Media, Public Affairs, Corporate, RSS, Logout, and My Account. The main content area features the article title "From leading to partnering in the age of influence" by Anne Woodbury, dated December 23, 2010. The article text discusses the shift from thought leadership to thought partnership in the healthcare industry. To the right of the article is a sidebar with a "Premium Edition" badge, a "GET REPORT" button, and a link to "Over 50 pages of charts & analysis". Below the article text are sections for "MORE HEALTHCARE" with a list of related news items, "RELATED TOPICS" (Healthcare, Opinion), and a "PRWeek Webcast" section with a link to "Media relations for healthcare organizations: How heavily should the media factor into your PR mix?".

Thought leadership is a statement. Thought partnership is dialogue.

Thought partners bring people together to tackle hard issues. They convene groups, debate actions, and align stakeholders around solutions that can be advocated collectively. Thought leaders have agendas; thought partners build agendas collaboratively with other stakeholders.

Thought partners don't confuse "sponsorship" with "partnership." Financial commitment is important, but thought partners also roll up their sleeves. Thought partnership is as much about joining conversations, sharing information, and spending time in the trenches with allies as it is about opening the checkbook.

Thought leadership has a single winner. Thought partnership has lots of winners.

Thought leadership is successful if an individual or company's reputation is strengthened around a certain issue. Thought partners measure success not only by how much they win, but by how many of their partners win, too. A thought partner's success is achieved when a greater good is served. By putting the message above the messenger, thought partners build loyalty, trust, and preference -- the ultimate goal of reputation.

The best definition of thought leadership I ever heard was from [Peter Verrengia](#), president of CCW: "First, have a thought. Then, be prepared to lead." The problem is, there is no guarantee you'll be followed. In healthcare, thought partnership is a better option for achieving positive external exposure, enhanced corporate reputation, and helpful alliances that support mutual success.

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