

***AP PARIGI'S VIEWS ON THOUGHT LEADERSHIP – MORE THAN A CATCHY
PHRASE FOR PR PROFESSIONALS***

**Leadership is the ability to create a story that affects the
thoughts, feelings and actions of others: Gardner, 1996**

*The challenge of
leadership is the
ability to
influence...*

Thought leadership is a very challenging subject, difficult to define. The challenge of leadership is getting tougher with each passing year. The younger generation of managers have more dreams than memories – how does one manage them? Through influence... hence, influence is at the heart of leadership. If a person cannot influence, he cannot lead.

The company of the future requires thought leaders, not just effective managers. The companies of the future will have to be lead-managed by people – therefore companies need a clear agenda of hiring and nurturing thought leaders in the organisation. What stops people from being thought leaders? According to the well-known tennis player Venus Williams, *"Most times when we lose, we defeat ourselves."*

India was considered as a manufacturing hub for the world way back in 1981. Today, the bulk of India's GDP comes from the services sector. We've moved into a service economy and there has been a paradigm shift from a licence raj to a market economy.

*Paradigm shift of
the Indian economy
from "whom do
you know?" to
"What do you
know?"*

Post 1991, India moved towards a market economy. This was a paradigm shift. Prior to that, most Indians experienced shortages in almost everything...telephones, gas cylinders, cement. Vespa scooters came at a premium! However, from the thought leadership, media, PR and marketing point of view, one thing went unnoticed – the licence raj meant "whom do you know?" The paradigm shift took place when the market economy fundamentally started influencing behaviour, the markets and the returns. Cost structures were under review, protective markets were being broken up, consumers were getting restless, credit was being opened up in the economy, inflation was under control; FDI and NRI became a big subject. There was a shift to *'What do you know as a CEO?'*

What did one know about technology, markets, thought leadership, the fundamentals of growing a company from size, scale and scope? What did one know about managing a brand called *mobile telephony* or a category called *FM Radio* when none existed! The media and marketing pundits called it category development. This is where thought leadership gets showcased and articulated.

Take a look at the technological changes that have taken place. Certain thought leaders are quicker and have a distinct capability of realising that *"broadband has arrived"*, or *"India goes computer literate"*. For e.g., a Dell computer manager may estimate that if there are x numbers of

middle class, the company would sell 48 million computers. In actual fact only 4.2 million would be sold. Therefore, in the short run, one overestimates. As far as telephony was concerned, it was estimated that BPL Mobile could sell 50,000 sets. With so many people in India buying Rolex watches, air conditioners, with so much undeclared income, etc. there was no reason to believe otherwise. Sales in fact were just 800 SIM cards... the number of phones sold - just 400!!

Successful internal communication helps in thought leadership...

When one needs to lead manage a category like mobile telephony where none existed, or manage a category like FM Radio, the way to succeed and get acknowledged, requires people to walk the talk and let this belief translate itself to the management team. Thought leaders who have been reasonably successful are the ones who are adept at internal communication. When people get their internal communication strategy right, several layers of thought leaders emerge in the organisation.

When technological change happens, thought leaders intuitively know what is right. For e.g., the power of the SMS. In the long run, one should not under estimate what technology can do.

We have now moved from an MTV generation to an SMS generation. At Radio Mirchi one calls this generation the EMI generation – Equated Monthly Instalment generation! The fabric and fundamentals of thought leadership can be built and enriched or wrecked if one does not understand demographic changes taking place. 54% of the population is under 30 years of age. There is a distinctive segmentation between urban & rural aspirations, the propensity to spend, consumption of media and products.

One has to rise above the brand. One cannot walk the talk on a brand when a category does not exist. Hence the Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI) was a strategic imperative – an absolute necessity for the cellular industry.

Articulating thought leadership through innovations and first mover advantage...

If a product and industry does not have thought leaders or regulators, the economy will not be successful. The consumer and the economy can be hurt in a big way if a regulatory system is not put in place. Every company wants to be a market leader and to dominate the market. However, it needs to be achieved through innovations. Voice mail, affordability of mobile telephones through a credit system across, showcasing utility, functionality etc. are some of the innovations through which BPL Mobile achieved a leadership position in the mobile telephony industry.

How does one make PR part of the marketing mix? How does one get HLL, P&G, BPL Mobile to add ‘radio’ to their marketing mix/ media plan? That’s where Thought Leadership comes in.

Apart from the usual marketing campaign that was undertaken to popularise FM radio as a media option, Radio Mirchi had to innovate

as well. Research showed that the entire group of advertising media planners (22-29 years of age) were not used to a medium that was almost forgotten – FM radio. The 'Mirchi Kaan Awards' was used to get the message across – it was a platform to recognise and acknowledge the creativity of media planning in making jingles. This was supplemented by "Workshops on Radio Works' where practitioners from the UK, Australia were invited to share their experiences with the advertising community - product owners as well as media planners. These are examples of Thought Leadership and the first mover advantage is what Thought Leaders either subtly or brutally adopt in their strategy.

Today, one deals with a generation of managers who are greater on dreams than memories. Thought Leadership comes out:

- In times of increasing uncertainty
- By offering clear and responsible direction
- Through inspiring leadership; and
- Competent management

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Comment on thought leadership in an evolved society...e.g USA in telephony & automobile sectors

Mr. Parigi replied that thought leadership existed in different manifestations in technology with the various companies trying to get ahead of what the customers wanted and rationalising how the markets would further evolve.

What is thought leadership? It is when an Ela Bhatt of SEWA goes to the deserts of Rajasthan to provide unlimited water to 21 villages.

On Capt. Gopinath (Deccan Airways) as a thought leader...

Mr Parigi said that thought leadership is a macro initiative, which with the passage of time become micro. The attribute Capt Gopinath offered is 25 seats at Re 1/- per seat in a year. In the process, he offered Indians a 'Low cost' airline and the others followed suit, growing the market and benefiting the consumer. That is thought leadership and makes Capt Gopinath a great thought leader.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by AP Parigi, MD & CEO, ENIL / TIML, at PR Pundit's workshop, held in Mumbai on November 30, 2005)