



ZENGER | FOLKMAN

Being a Trusted Thought Leader

Wisdom From a Young CEO

Kelsey Meyer

Cofounder of Influence and Co.



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Kelsey Meyer, cofounder of Influence and Co., joins Jack Zenger in this installment of the Zenger Folkman Leadership Podcast series to discuss thought leadership, her views about the millennial generation (as employees and as leaders), and her work at the multimillion-dollar company she started the day after graduating college.

Influence and Co. is a firm making waves in helping businesses become their own voices through thought leadership. Kelsey was named to the “Forbes 30 Under 30” list in 2016 in the marketing and advertising field.

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What do you mean by “thought leadership”?

When we speak about thought leadership at Influence and Co., we’re talking about an individual within a company or a solo entrepreneur sharing knowledge with an audience with the intention of educating and engaging. It can take a lot of different forms, the written word, podcasts, video, and more, but thought leadership involves sharing knowledge with a specific audience for the intention of education.

What intrigued you enough about this topic that led you to create a firm around thought leadership?

When we started we weren’t using the term “thought leadership” and we weren’t positive that’s what we were doing. What we knew was that we wanted a way for companies to connect with their audiences in a very human way on a one-to-one basis. We believed that people trust people; people don’t trust brands.

We thought that an authentic way for a company to connect with its audience is through an individual within that company sharing knowledge. After we started doing this, we realized that what we were doing was thought leadership and we started building the company around that.

What have you learned from starting a company focused on thought leadership?

The biggest thing we’ve learned is that people have such amazing information to share, but they don’t always have the outlet or the ability



to do so. We work with executives in different organizations that have amazing experiences and information that is so relevant and important to their audiences, but if they haven't put a focus on thought leadership, this information is just all in their heads or within internal documents. We love to see people light up about the things they are passionate about and to be able to share that with a broader audience.

We have also learned that you can be a thought leader in the most unsexy industries. Our clients work in everything from home generators to horse ultrasounds. People tend to think of high-tech startups and Silicon Valley firms as having the forward-thinkers and thought leaders. Regardless of the industry you are in, you probably have something to share with your audience that is important and relevant that you can make interesting.

What is the link between what you are doing and the consequences or outcomes for businesses?

Most companies that focus on thought leadership have goals that include talent acquisition, lead generation, and general brand awareness.

Writing articles that showcase the expertise and knowledge of a company and its executives helps with talent acquisition. People want to work for the best and companies want to attract the top talent, whether that is engineers or creatives.

Other companies have lead generation for sales as a goal. We use our own service and publish articles on our website around content marketing and thought leadership that generate about 500 leads per month. We help other clients do this as well.

Overall, a lot of companies focus on thought leadership for general brand awareness. Brand awareness might help with talent acquisition and with lead generation, but being able to stay ahead of the curve and the competition and to be known as the company in the industry that knows what's coming next is important for brand awareness and for having people trust your company.



You began your company the day after you graduated from college. What have you learned about leadership through hiring and managing individuals who are more than 20 years older than you?

That was one of the most difficult things starting out. I was 22 and looked about 16. Those first sales meetings were intimidating.

What I realized is that you earn respect by how you treat people and by the results you create. I knew that I was never going to earn respect from the first people that we hired or from the first clients because they thought that I'd been working in content marketing and thought leadership for years. The concept of content marketing is a somewhat new industry, and digital content marketing is even newer. Instead of having the experience to back up what we were doing, we had to show results quickly. We did a lot of work for people we knew for free and used them as case studies to show others what we could do.

What I learned about hiring people is very cliché: hire people much smarter than you. I have been able to do that really well—hiring incredibly smart people and letting them do their jobs and understanding where I can add value.

You, of all people, are probably aware of the talk about this millennial generation and how it differs from its older counterparts. You are looking at it from the opposite direction, but what do you see as the differences between these generations?

I don't see a huge difference. I read articles about how millennials job-hop and how they need constant affirmation. That has not been our experience. We've been in business four years and we have many



millennials that have been working with us since that first year and I've seen people from older generations working similarly to the millennials on our team. I try to stay away from those stereotypes because we see people on our team working really well together, regardless of age.

I think we also vet for this during the interview phase. I recently interviewed someone who was about twice my age and he told me that we needed some adult supervision on the team. I knew that this person wasn't necessarily the best fit. We hire people that we think, regardless of age, will work well in the environment we've created. Even though they might be all different ages, they have a lot of things in common, such as treating people with respect because of what they've done rather than because of their age or their titles in the organization.

What is distinctive about the culture you've created in your company and how has it been a driving force in your success?

A lot of times when people talk about culture, they confuse company culture with company perks. Some people might say our culture is that we have a hammock, a putting green, and a ping-pong table in our office. What we see as our company culture is a combination of what we reward and what we punish.

We reward results over face-time. We have unlimited time off, we don't have set hours, and people don't have to work in the office every day. We reward people who get work done in a quick amount of time. We don't pay hourly wages or bill clients hourly. Some of these things create a culture for us based on autonomy, people being intrinsically motivated, and trust. This allows us to move quickly, grow quickly, and have a lot of fun.



I assume that a lot of these ideas didn't come from your formal schooling. Where did you get these attitudes and ideas about how to build a company culture?

Part of it came from watching my father. My dad is an entrepreneur who ran a real-estate company. They definitely didn't play dodge ball in his office, but when I went to work in his filing room when I was ten years old, I saw how much trust and respect he gave his co-workers and how they respected him, not because he was the boss, but because of how he treated them. This taught me the right way to build a team and that building a company around treating employees right is what is going to make you successful.

The first few hires we made were key to creating and continuing a positive culture. We are incredibly lucky that our first five hires four years ago still work for us and they've set and instilled that positive culture in the next people we hired.

How have you been able to help corporations and individuals become more clear about their thought leadership? Do you have an example you can share with us?

We worked with an organization that conducted culture consulting. This company worked with large organizations, Fortune 500 companies that had something happen that created a bad company culture—maybe a culture based too much on competition or a culture that was not supportive. This company tried to help reset these company cultures.

When we started working with this company, we tried to determine who was going to be the thought leader in these organizations. We realized that it often couldn't be just one person. The CEO didn't have all of the knowledge. While we worked with the CEO, we also worked with a person on the team who had a PhD in psychology who talked about the



psychology behind company culture and organizational structure.

We've seen this working with different companies. When you're building out your thought-leadership strategy, you need to think through who are the different stakeholders, what messages you are trying to convey, and who are the people on the team with that knowledge. It doesn't always need to be the CEO or another executive writing and sharing this content. It could be an engineer, a graphic designer, or someone in customer service who works with clients all day. These are the people who might have the most insightful ideas and knowledge to share with your target audience.

How do you know when you've succeeded helping a client?

One client had just launched a tech company and had raised a Series A round of funding, but in order to get to the next level, she needed to get more funding. She had been trying to get in front of a few key investors who had invested in companies like hers. We helped her write an article about the future of contextual search on the web. She sent this article to those investors who had not given her the time of day before. They were so impressed with her knowledge and expertise in the area that they invested 2,000,000\$ in her company.

With other clients it is less "X equals Y." It involves different opportunities and serendipitous moments that came because they started establishing themselves in the industry.

We have clients who, after we've started working with them, get asked if they are interested in doing a speaking gig, writing a book, or being quoted in a book. We know that these things are helping to raise their profiles and to grow their networks. We know that these things are going to have positive impacts on the bottom line in some way. We just don't know at that moment what impact these things are going to have. This is that brand-awareness side where we're not exactly sure right now what impact the activity had, but we know that it's good.



In closing, what advice would you give to those leaders who are part of the millennial generation?

I'm very aware that it is crazy that I'm 27 years old and I'm leading this company with more than 70 employees. One thing that I've learned is to never act like I know something that I don't know. Instead, I gain confidence in the areas of the company that I do know and then hire those around me who know a lot more than me in other areas of the company.

One of the best things we've done was hiring a full-time accountant so that I'm not doing all of the financials and hiring a full-time HR director so that we have someone keeping us legal and helping us hire the best people. Sometimes younger leaders think they can do everything.

Being incredibly curious and wanting to learn is also important. I have learned more in the last four and a half years running this company than I did in high school and college. I read every free moment, listen to podcasts, and watch webinars to soak in all the knowledge that I possibly can. I would encourage everyone in a leadership position, regardless of age, to constantly push to learn more.



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