

How To Become A Thought Leader:

Brian Carroll, Influential “Start-with-a-Lead” Blogger & Lead Generation Guru

A RainToday.com Interview

A Thought Leader has Passion PLUS Market Relevance and Reach.

You can't go after a market without something authentic and valuable to offer, without something spun from the passion you hold for your area of expertise... and you can't continue to teach others and sustain your business as a whole without developing an ongoing relationship with your market. One without the other just doesn't work.

- *How To Become A Thought Leader,*
The RainToday.com Research Team

How To Become A Thought Leader

RainToday.com interviewed **Brian Carroll**, thought leader in marketing and lead generation, while creating our research report on ***How To Become A Thought Leader***. He is one of 9 thought leaders in professional services who participated in the research, along with:

- **John Doerr**, Global Marketing Expert, Coach, & Wellesley Hills Group Founder
- **Dr. Marshall Goldsmith**, World-Renowned Executive Coach, Consultant, & Author
- **Bert Gregory**, REI Store Designer and Sustainable Design Expert
- **Tom Hood**, Dedicated Leader, Educator, & Volunteer For The Accounting Field
- **Bruce W. Marcus**, Professional Services Marketing Philosopher, Writer, & Pioneer
- **Michael W. McLaughlin**, Guerrilla ConsultingSM Guru & 22-Year Deloitte Veteran
- **Dr. Martha Rogers**, Best-Selling Author & Celebrated 1to1 Marketing Evangelist
- **Peter Zeughauser**, Client-Focused Consultant To The World's Top Law Firms

In addition to 95 pages of powerful and candid advice offered by these thought leaders, ***How To Become A Thought Leader*** offers 100 pages of expert analysis on building thought leadership in your field; 20 learning checklists and questions for self-evaluation; and down-to-earth views of how passion, relevance, and reach work together for you on your path toward establishing thought leadership to grow your business.

Visit <http://www.RainToday.com/thoughtleader.cfm> today to learn how to get started, and become a thought leader in your field.

Brian Carroll: Influential “Start-With-A-Lead” Blogger And Lead Generation Guru

Brian gets lead generation, lead nurturing, and marketing and sales processes, and how they all three work together.

- Marketing-Profession Members of RainToday.com

Current Position:	Brian Carroll is CEO of InTouch Inc. in Arden Hills, Minnesota, and owner and writer of the B2B Lead Generation Blog.
In The Public Eye:	His B2B Lead Generation Blog received honorable mention for MarketingSherpa’s Best Blog 2005 Award.
Also Known As:	Brian is the author of the book, <i>Lead Generation for the Complex Sale: Boost the Quality and Quantity of Leads to Increase Your ROI</i> (June 2006 release with McGraw-Hill).
Websites:	www.startwithalead.com blog.startwithalead.com

The Interview

As part of RainToday research on thought leadership, RainToday.com interviewed Brian Carroll, successful blogger, new book author, and motivated head of a growing marketing and lead generation services firm near Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Since founding InTouch Inc in 1995 to bring fresh ideas to lead generation and telemarketing, Brian has built a strong and enthusiastic following as a leader in the field. With great personal stories and lessons learned, Brian Carroll shares his advice and experience around aspiring to thought leadership, selling the concept to business partners, involving the whole firm in the process, and how to choose the path that works for you.

RainToday: What do you think about our working definition of “Thought Leaders”?

Thought Leaders are said to be people (or firms) who are recognized among their peers for innovative ideas; who confidently promote those ideas; and who earn recognition from the outside world for their deep understanding of their business, the needs of their clients, and the broader marketplace in which they operate.

Paraphrased from the Wikipedia definition of "Thought Leader"¹ and Elise Bauer, commentator²

Brian Carroll: I agree with the definition. Thought Leadership is either creating, advancing, or sharing ideas. For me personally, the objective behind it is, first and foremost, to help other people. It's for the same purpose people have a mentor. You can say, "I've been there and done that, so I can speak from experience." For a lot of thought leaders, it's not about trying to pontificate on how great you are, or just trying to edify yourself. In a lot of ways, it's truly a way of being. It's something you can't say about yourself... it's really what others say about you. So, when I hear that people have called me that, I think, "Cool!" Because I can't call myself that. It's nice when other people do. It's an outside assessment.

RainToday: Does it surprise you that you're considered a “thought leader” by practitioners in your field? In other words, do you consider yourself an “Intentional Achiever” of thought leadership, or an “Accidental Tourist”?

Brian Carroll: I'm an Intentional Achiever. There was a purpose behind it. I've always had an interest in writing or speaking, but I made a conscientious decision to do it. Most of my thoughts and ideas were just visible to my clients, and that worked for me. What I started to do was to give away information that I was giving freely to my clients. At that point, I didn't

¹ Wikipedia entry: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thought_leader

² Bauer, Elise. *Be a Thought Leader!*, Nov. 10, 2003, at <http://www.elise.com/web/>

use the term "thought leader". I really just wanted to share my expertise. So, that's when the decision point happens.

And answering your question, I deliberately started seeking out public speaking. I did it early in my business, and then got to a point where I had enough business that most of it was growing through what we do: lead generation using the phone, e-mail, and also word of mouth. What I realized was that, from a competitive standpoint, I sell services (which a lot of RainToday readers do). We had been positioning our company as being the best at what we do. But the fact was, customers were looking to buy two things: they were looking to buy a solution that's good enough, and they were looking to buy a solution that's safe.

I read your report *How Clients Buy*³, and it's interesting, because your research backed up my own experience and some of the things I was learning, anecdotally. I thought if I could write and share ideas, eventually other people would find them (i.e. the blog, and through speaking, bringing an audience). Over time, we would build our reputation. We'd created a brand, but for a little company that doesn't have a huge budget, building brand isn't nearly as important as building your reputation. Your reputation is what allows people to make conclusions about your brand.

RainToday: What do you consider to be the difference between Brand and Reputation?

Brian Carroll: The difference is this: brand is a feeling you're looking to identify in someone's mind. It's typically more important with a transactional sale, something needing lower scrutiny. I found that when you're selling something that's more complex and intangible, reputation is more important than your brand, because your reputation drives people to make conclusions about your brand. Questions in people's minds are, "Have you done this before?", "Have you helped companies like me?", and "Can you do it?"

When people engage a big purchase, especially with oversight and legislation (under Sarbanes Oxley, for example), they are putting so much at stake. For example, take a large firm like McKinsey. When people are seeking to do mergers and acquisitions, and they're looking for a consulting firm to help them gain synergies, McKinsey has an outstanding reputation that gives people peace of mind. Brand is the moniker you put on top of your reputation, but reputation is more important.

I think word of mouth is all about reputation, as well. Most B2B marketers and the media are overly concerned about brand building, and they really need to think more about reputation

³ Learn more about *How Clients Buy: The Benchmark Report On Marketing And Selling Professional Services From The Client Perspective* at <http://www.raintoday.com/howclientsbuy.cfm>.

building. Sirius Decisions did a study on branding versus reputation, and I'm paraphrasing their research now. They say that while branding isn't dead, they think it's now a byproduct of reputation, and that companies need to think systematically about their reputation first. That's what will directly help you drive your revenue, because reputation is about building trust and credibility.

So that needs to be thought of throughout the entire sales cycle. Branding – isn't it necessarily about trust and credibility? It can connote a feeling, but you're trying to make an imprint on someone's mind. A reputation is something like this... a friend says, "Brian Carroll knows his stuff, you should hire him. I've heard of him, I've read about him, and he's been everywhere, and these people have quoted him." There's the feeling.

Thought leadership is a public way of demonstrating something that really is just in the minds of the people who have done business with you in the past, or are doing business with you now. You're demonstrating that expertise.

RainToday: Let's verify a few of the activities you might take part in these days:

- **Books Written:** My first book comes out this year, *Lead Generation for the Complex Sale*. It's been a year and a month since I got the book contract and started writing it. Ironically, through my blog and other things, I had the publisher find me! I didn't have to find them. It's interesting. Thought leadership, or sharing your expertise, has a really long tail on it. Once you get momentum building, it makes the more imminent tactical things a lot easier.

For example, we're finding RFPs come into play. Instead of being called in to see the Excel spreadsheet, we're helping develop questions for the RFP along with the clients as our partner. So they're saying, "We really want to work with you. Help us design the questions to help us through this process." That's a lot stronger position to be in, when you're designing it, rather than being someone who's just responding to it.

- **Articles Published:** I haven't focused on a lot of article placement in publications, and at most of the publications that I'm interested in, I'd be interviewed more as a subject matter expert. Some of the ones I'm interested in work with staff reporters, like at MarketingSherpa. They use their own reporters and writers, and they don't take any contributed articles.

What I've been doing (and it's an area we've been working on) is article placement, but I haven't done a whole lot. Mostly, this happens when others see what's on my blog, and ask to publish it. A few publications accept them, like MarketingProfs, where I got to know Mike Schultz and John Doerr. I read one of their articles, and I had published one as well, so we knew one another existed.

The main tool I use is writing blog posts. However, as the book's coming out, I'm putting together 22 to 23 articles to coincide with the book release. That's a new tactic that I'm adding to the mix.

(I have a graphic on my site, illustrating a typical Thought Leader Toolkit mix: http://blog.startwithalead.com/photos/uncategorized/thoughtleader_3.gif)

- **Speaking Engagements:** The other thing I tend to do is a lot of public speaking. I've done both online and offline events. I tend to do one event every other month, but this year it's been about 1-2 events a month, a little heavier. I just finished up 8 events in one month, in October 2005, doing 8 cities in 3 weeks. That was a road show.
- **Press Mentions, Awards, and the Blog:** I've had quite a few press mentions where I've been quoted in articles. With MarketingSherpa, I have the distinction of being the only blog that's been honorably mentioned (which means I was the 2nd favorite!) for Best B2B Blog (2003-2004). Mike McLaughlin won the best B2B blog in 2005, and I won runner-up again. So, in the event something should happen to Mike McLaughlin... *[laughing]*.⁴ That was pretty fun for my first year writing the blog.

I never thought of myself as much of a writer, but I just wrote a lot, and it appears that people have found that helpful. I wrote about things that interested me, and that I felt were valuable, and pointed people in that direction.

I get 2,000 to 2,500 unique visitors a week to my weblog. In terms of web hits, the average visitor's reading about 4-5 separate posts from what I can track. I use Sitemeter's upgraded analytics to track the traffic. I've seen my readership going up between about 1-2% a week. That's about 5-10% increases in traffic a month. It's been growing steadily.

⁴ Since this interview was completed, Brian Carroll's blog has won 1st place for MarketingSherpa's 2006 Best B-to-B Marketing Blog.

The key has been just posting regularly, so I'm looking forward to getting more on a consistent schedule. I try to post 2-3 times a week. The things that I'm using mostly are the book, articles, and events, and with the blog via RSS and e-mail subscription, I'm treating that as an e-newsletter.

RainToday: People define the “beginning” of their path to thought leadership in different terms... How old were you? Where were you working, what were you doing?

Brian Carroll: I started my business, InTouch, 11 years ago, so this is the longest I've been somewhere since college. I worked somewhere else for three months while I was in school, but this is really the only job I've had!

I've always had an interest and ability to teach other people. That's just been a life skill. I enjoy teaching people. I enjoy seeing people get an idea, and then doing something with it. It's been a natural part of me since I can remember.

I made a conscious choice to do it in the Summer of 2000. Our business did lead generation for a huge concentration of clients who were tech-driven companies. At the time, most of those companies were bombing. In two months that summer, our company revenue got cut by 60% by losing just three clients. Our three largest clients all had their budgets cut, and the people we sold to were no longer with the companies. We were part of the fallout of that situation, the little guys that get hurt.

We had built up our business. We were fairly boutique in that we had a few clients, but they were big clients. We decided we wanted to work with smaller, emerging companies. With the larger companies we had been selling to, simply put, the ad agencies were getting cut. It wasn't a fun time for many people in marketing services.

At that time, I made a decision. I didn't have any more money to spend on marketing, but I could teach people what we've learned and, in effect, start distinguishing ourselves from other companies we competed with. I looked at, "What's one thing our company can do better than any of our competitors? Can we improve our process any more, our people, our technology?" We couldn't improve our people, and couldn't improve the process. We could have invested in a lot of technology to upgrade our process, but that can be copied. You can't defend buying better technology.

But in Summer 2000, it was put on us as a company and we could do one thing: cull through a huge number of ideas of Lead Generation tactics, learn them, then teach others what we've

learned. So, that's what we decided to do that summer. Initially, that started out with speaking.

I'd written some articles early on, but it wasn't until 2003 that I saw this thing called "blogging" and said, "Wow, there aren't a lot of B-to-B people doing this now. Here's some white space. I can take this idea of articles and actually get a voice and leapfrog other companies who aren't doing this right now." Ironically, it was Thanksgiving Day 2003, when I was tired and full of pumpkin pie, that I wrote my first blog post. The name of my blog hasn't changed, and my first post is still up there. So that's when I started.

It took a while just to build up confidence that I knew something that other people found valuable. I also realized that I started getting more enthused, because people were sharing ideas. I was getting feedback from people who said, "You made a difference". That's the fun part. I collect these compliments. "You helped me with this, and as a result this is what I did." It's something you need to do fairly altruistically, because it doesn't bear fruit right away. A lot of people will tell you it will, but my experience has been there's a longer tail building up to that.

RainToday: Can you identify certain decisions, opportunities, or experiences that turned out to be important milestones in your progress toward being known as a thought leader?

Brian Carroll: I think a lot of your service firm readers will look at this in terms of being in a partnership-based firm situation.

There were several turning points in my business partnership. When we were in this crisis time in Summer of 2000, I had an instinct. I didn't have any facts to base it on, but I knew building public reputation and persona beyond Minnesota and our clients on the East Coast and West Coast would be important. Where are the forums where these people get to talk to other people? Unless they network a lot, there's not much of a forum. That's when I decided to be more deliberate.

From my business partner's standpoint, they were questioning, "Is what you're doing really going to make a difference to our company?" I could have been doing more short term sales things. "It's nice you're doing this article writing, Brian, and this blog writing, but shouldn't you spend more time doing sales? That's a lot of time."

Every time I heard that, fortunately within a fairly short period of time, I'd be able to point to something that says, "Look, here's this thing that takes time during the day and evenings. And it's making a difference! We got to be #1 on Google out of 70,000,000 websites, how's that?"

It's the same thing with podcasting. It was not on the map. In February 2005, I was having writer's block and heard about this podcast thing. I searched everywhere to learn how you do it. Can you even find one to listen to? And look at it now, on Apple's i-Tunes and everything. For some of your readers, they may not be very strong writers, but maybe they are good talkers. So you should look at where your strengths are. The main pieces of the toolkit for me are one-on-one conversation, writing for an audience and for readership, and speaking for events, for an audience as well.

I had to do internal selling of the idea as well. And now, not only the executive team, but others too have bought into it. I said, "I can't be the only so called 'person focusing on thought leadership'. We need a group of people. We're all smart, we all have ideas." So it's percolated. This subject matter expertise is translated where we've had an internal blog for over a year, where people are doing internally some of the ideas I share externally. As a result of making it a priority, internally there's more of an intellectual curiosity around Lead Generation.

From a leadership standpoint, you can create this as part of your culture and how you do things. It has to start with one person. I know other companies where it's happening organically. In smaller companies, or in larger companies, they're a voice that "gets it". They're the SME - without writing a book - but they're the people others call because they know how to do things.

RainToday: If we call these turning points the "causes", what did you notice as the "effects" in each case?

Brian Carroll: There were public things. I went from being a free speaker to being paid. My goal wasn't to be a paid public speaker, but in the idea that what we had to say was important enough, companies would pay for me to be a keynote.

In terms of business development: clients still want to check references, but we're finding that companies come to us. It's less about having to sell, and more about understanding their needs. By the way, not everyone we sell to is exposed to the blog and the book, so we just notice that the ones that *are* result in shorter sales cycles, and higher quality conversations. We were finding it challenging as a smaller firm to break into very big companies, with large names, and now they're coming to us, and seeking us out directly. All these things just kind of add up.

The book has come as a result, because the publishers knew we had an audience already. We knew what we were talking about.

The challenge for me has been to enhance the reputation. It's something that takes years to build and moments to lose. I can't know what the ultimate impact has been on our reputation, beyond noticing it's easier to win sales than it was three years ago today. There have been external factors: the economy's improved, our value proposition is stronger and better. But we think the reputation has been a major contributing factor.

The fun part is when it comes to measuring. You know it makes a difference. I can point to specific sales for customers that came as a result of the blog, but they're also touched by my sales people, and contacted numerous times as well. I just look at the net impact, and that itself is pretty striking. I read Dan Poynter, who's been doing research. Out of 10,000 book proposals, three are actually published by a major publisher. When you consider that a publisher approached me, it's made a major impact.

RainToday: What was the trigger to go from speaking for free to being paid?

It's something I've wondered about. Partially, it's just some confidence, and saying, "Okay, I'm going to spend some time away from my office." What I realized was, from the customer standpoint, once I wrote the book, I felt like I should charge more. I'm speaking to build my business, not to make a living. As most of your readers are in my situation, my mission in life is not to be a paid public speaker. If someone approaches me, I look at "Who's your audience?" At first, I was willing to speak with anyone who would let me - smaller associations, networking groups. I'm a decent speaker. I earned a scholarship for speech, debated, and traveled nationally. I was in school two out of five days, because I was traveling the rest of the time! So I had a lot of opportunity to hone my skills and get coached, before.

That's something: look at your natural talents and abilities. If someone's own personal talents don't lie with speaking in front of a group, an option you might have is partnering with someone. Bring in a professional, or a paid speaker related to your ideas or value proposition. There's a halo effect (or "guilt by association") working for you! For me, I'm an okay writer from a blogging standpoint. If you're going to be a SME, you need to be passionate about sharing with other people what you do, and what you know. Otherwise, it's a burden, and it's too hard to do. Be passionate about what you want to talk about.

You need to do it consistently - not one article, four times a year. That's getting you there, but in essence, you're just a business sharing what it's doing. Think multimodal. More than one tactic getting your message out. Think about your audience. Be opinionated, and that's okay! Be respected, but not always liked.

RainToday: How would you answer these for yourself? My career / practice would definitely have been LESS successful through the years if I had never...

Brian Carroll: ...decided to reach out beyond myself and make a decision to help other people, regardless of their timing to buy, and regardless of the amount of money they were willing to pay me right then and there. Make an investment in making a difference.

There's a deeper question: If I'd never decided my purpose in life was to help companies acquire and grow customer relationships.

RainToday: My career/practice would possibly be MORE successful, OR more QUICKLY successful if I had...

Brian Carroll: ...decided to develop my management team sooner, as opposed to trying to be a sole practitioner that had all the answers. Our company really began to grow the minute I had business partners, and we had an executive team here.

RainToday: What do you consider the single most important elements of becoming the esteemed professional and thought leader you are today?

Brian Carroll: I think of it this way: when I first started in my first job, I had the fortune of having one of the world's worst chief executives to work for, one of the worst bosses. His name was Terry. I'd always think, "What would Terry do?" and I'd choose the opposite.

Julie, the manager, was outstanding and wonderful. I was looking at what other people were doing, and I was trying to copy other people. I'd try to talk like them. I was inexperienced. Julie said to me, "Brian, just be people with people." What she meant is, be yourself, be real, be authentic, and put your whole self into what you do. Be who you are, whether you're at work or at home. Be your true self. Not everyone can do this. It's something you can't fake.

Over time, if you're not it, you can certainly hire or find someone to help you with this. But from a reader standpoint, if someone's not sincerely interested in sharing thoughts or ideas, and that's not your way of doing business, that's not necessarily the best for you.

In every group or profession, there's a fairly small group of people who are looked to as thought leaders. It can't be everyone. If their heart isn't in it, they'll eventually lose to the ones who are passionate about it because their heart is in it. For example, most blogs don't last 90 days because their heart isn't in it. ■

About RainToday.com

RainToday.com – The Website

RainToday.com is the premier online source for insight, advice, and tools for growing your professional services business. Based in Framingham, Massachusetts, RainToday.com's core offerings include:

- Free articles by well-respected marketing, sales, and service business experts such as David Maister, John Doerr, Patrick McKenna, Suzanne Lowe, Mike Schultz, and Charles Green on core topics in selling and marketing professional services
- Case studies on what's working in marketing and selling professional services
- Interviews with world-renowned services marketers, rainmakers, and firm leaders
- Best practice and benchmark research such as *How Clients Buy: The Benchmark Report on Professional Services Marketing and Selling from the Client Perspective* and *The Business Impact Of Writing A Book: Data, Advice, And Lessons From Professional Service Providers Who Have Done It* by the analysts and experts at RainToday.com Research
- Premium content, products and tools designed specifically for helping service providers to grow their firms
- Webinars, seminars and conferences for rainmakers and service marketers

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RainToday Research

The RainToday Research team produces best practices and benchmarking research to help marketers, sellers, and leaders of professional services firms to grow their business. The RainToday Research team delivers custom market and client research studies for individual organizations. For a complete list of available research titles, visit <http://www.raintoday.com>.

About The RainToday Research Team

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As Publisher of RainToday.com, Mike is responsible for leading the world's foremost content publication on growth strategy, marketing, and selling for professional services firms. Mike is also a Principal with the Wellesley Hills Group and consults to professional services firms worldwide. He has written articles, case studies, and research reports on marketing and selling for professional services. Prior to joining the Wellesley Hills Group and RainToday.com, Mike was Director of Training and Education Partnerships for Linkage, Inc. At Linkage, his primary responsibilities were leading the company's public and in-house seminar divisions, growing revenue and profit by over 800% in his tenure with the firm. Mike has also served as a marketing and sales process and strategy consultant with the boutique firm Product Knowledge Systems. Mike holds an MBA in Marketing and Entrepreneurship from Babson College.

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As Chief Content Officer of RainToday.com, Andrea oversees the content, day-to-day operations, and *Rainmaker Report*, the RainToday.com flagship weekly newsletter. She is responsible for the online publishing site's growth, product quality, marketing initiatives, content, and continuing usefulness to service firm marketers and business developers worldwide. Andrea has worked as a consultant, writer, marketer, and researcher within professional service firms and non-profit organizations. She has written numerous articles, white papers, e-books, and major market research reports on a number of business and management subjects. Andrea holds an MBA from the John M. Olin School of Business at Washington University in St. Louis, with emphasis in organizational leadership, marketing strategy, and entrepreneurship.

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As Editor at RainToday.com, Rebecca is responsible for editing the content for RainToday.com and creating *Rainmaker Report*, the RainToday.com weekly e-newsletter. She is also a co-author RainToday's research, *The Business Impact Of Writing A Book: Data, Analysis, And Lessons From Professional Service Providers Who Have Done It*. Rebecca has worked as a research consultant and business analyst for several Fortune 500 clients. Her experience includes determining the market scope for new products and services, conducting focus groups, designing websites, and writing industry reports. She has also conducted extensive research on the thought processes involved in decision-making. Rebecca holds a BA from Wesleyan University with honors in psychology.