

The Visible Authority: A Complementary Strategy for Business Development in Modern Management Consulting

Joe O'Mahoney

Abstract

The traditional "trusted advisor" model for management consulting business development is being disrupted by a number of pressures. Accelerated promotions, younger directors, stronger procurement functions, shifting client communication preferences as well as new capabilities in the creation and distribution of digital content have all contributed. This paper proposes the "Visible Authority" approach - leveraging digital media and content marketing for individual seniors - as a powerful, complementary sales approach. Building demonstrable, widely recognised expertise offers a viable path to attract clients and drive revenue, especially for consultants who have not had time or opportunity to build deep, trusted networks. This paper provides a practical framework for consultants to define their niche, understand client challenges, develop compelling content, and strategically distribute it, translating authority into tangible business opportunities.

The Evolving Landscape of Consulting Sales

For decades, the "trusted advisor" has been the gold standard – cultivating deep, long-term client relationships (Maister, Green, and Galford, 2000). This model, built on trust and strategic partnership, remains valuable. However, its traditional pathway is increasingly difficult. The time-intensive nature of building such trust clashes with today's accelerated business environment. Compounding this, client loyalty is waning. A recent survey found the share of C-suite buyers automatically returning to the same provider fell from 76% to 53% in five years, and is predicted to hit just 37% soon (Dixon et al., 2023). This signals a critical need to adapt.

Challenges to Traditional Pathways

Several trends are making the trusted advisor journey tougher, especially for new leaders.

1. Accelerated Careers & the 'Founder's Network' Deficit

Promotions are faster (Bidwell, 2011), meaning younger leaders often lack the decades their predecessors had to build expansive, C-suite networks. This "experience-network gap" means the depth of influence crucial for the trusted advisor model isn't always present (Maister, Green, and Galford, 2000).

2. Market Saturation & Shrinking Client Bandwidth

The consulting market is crowded (Consulting Quest, 2025). Clients are inundated, their time for relationship-building finite. Differentiation is key. If everyone uses traditional tactics, individual signals are lost. Clients may prioritise quickly identifiable expertise. Strategies like Visible Authority, which make expertise discoverable, can cut through the noise and earn, not just demand, client attention.

3. The Procurement Interruption

Sophisticated procurement departments now often mediate initial contact, focusing on cost and compliance (Consulting Quest, 2025; Essig and Batran, 2005). This creates a barrier to direct relationship-building. Procurement's emphasis on quantifiable metrics disadvantages sales models reliant on intangible, relationship-based value. "Trust me" doesn't cut it in an evaluation matrix.

4. Evolving Communication & Digital Natives

Younger "Digital Natives" (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008) communicate primarily digitally (IISTE, 2014). Clients across demographics increasingly use digital channels for initial vetting. A consultant's online visibility is now critical. Indeed, 90% of professional service buyers check a consultant's expertise online before contact (The Visible Authority, 2024). An "invisible" expert is an overlooked expert.

Introducing the Visible Authority: A Complementary Path to Influence

These challenges demand an evolution. The "Visible Authority" model, using digital media and content marketing, offers a potent complementary approach. What follows here is partially a reflection on the authors own journey to become a visible expert, but also his experiences in helping over 40 consultancy seniors become more visible to their clients using better production and distribution of quality digital content. Recent research by Dixon et al. (2023) reinforces this approach, finding only

one partner profile - the "Activator," whose traits align with Visible Authority – consistently boosts revenue.

Defining "Visible Authority"

A Visible Authority is recognised by their target audience as a leading expert in a specific niche, actively sought for their insights (The Visible Authority, 2024). This isn't accidental; it's built via a deliberate strategy of creating and sharing valuable content.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Signalling Expertise

Signalling Theory explains this. In situations of information asymmetry (where the consultant knows more about their quality than the client), the consultant can send "signals" – like high-quality content – to convey credible information about their expertise (Spence, 1973; Capsicum Labs, 2023). Producing valuable content is costly and hard for non-experts to fake, making it a reliable signal of genuine authority (Hinge Marketing, 2025; AAM, 2023).

Tangible Benefits of Visible Authority

Visible Authorities attract more qualified leads, command premium fees, and enjoy shorter sales cycles (The Visible Authority, 2024). High-growth firms prioritise content and differentiation (Hinge Marketing, 2025; AAM, 2023). Indeed, 92% of business leaders say high-quality thought leadership influenced their decision to award a deal (The Visible Authority, 2024). Website conversion rates are nearly six times higher for content marketing adopters (The Visible Authority, 2024). Benefits extend to enhanced brand reputation and talent attraction (The Visible Authority, 2024; APA, 2007).

Trust in the Digital Age: Public Credibility

The 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer shows business as the only institution seen as both competent and ethical, though economic optimism is low (Edelman, 2023). While personal trust is vital, public credibility, built through visible authority, is increasingly important as clients vet online. Consistently providing valuable, verifiable information builds "scaled trust" with a broader audience before direct interaction.

The "Activator" Profile: Evidence in Action

Dixon et al. (2023) found only the "Activator" partner profile positively correlates with revenue (up to +32% lift). Activators:

- Dedicate weekly time to BD, balancing new and existing clients.
- Build wide, multi-level networks, sharing relationships and cross-selling.
- Proactively create value, curating insights and sparking conversations before an RFP. These behaviours are hallmarks of a Visible Authority.

Table 1: Contrasting Trusted Advisor and Visible Authority Models

Dimension	Trusted Advisor	Visible Authority
Primary Sales Driver	Deep personal trust, intimacy, established referrals	Recognised public expertise, inbound interest from content, proactive value creation

Network Source/Focus	Long-term, often closed, high-level personal networks	Broader, often open, multi-level audience/community around expertise
Key Skills Emphasised	Interpersonal acumen, listening, empathy, bespoke solutions	Content creation, public speaking, digital communication, niche specialisation, proactive insight generation
Time to Build Authority	Typically long, multi-year	Can be accelerated with consistent, strategic effort
Primary Communication Mode	One-to-one, private conversations	One-to-many, public dissemination of content, targeted proactive outreach
Scale of Reach	Limited, deep	Potentially broad, scalable
Initial Client Contact Point	Often through existing relationship or direct referral	Often through online discovery, content consumption, event, or proactive engagement

A Strategic Framework for Cultivating Visible Authority

Mastering the "how" requires a structured approach.

Stage 1: Niche Definition & Audience Understanding

Becoming a Visible Authority starts with defining your specialised domain and deeply understanding your target audience.

Claiming a Defensible Niche

Successful Visible Authorities focus. Narrower expertise is often perceived as more valuable (Hinge Marketing, 2025). Differentiation is essential. A well-defined niche attracts the right clients and focuses content efforts. Answer decisively: "What are you an authority in?". Ideally, this should be 'uncomfortably narrow'. This doesn't mean that this niche is all that you sell and deliver, but it is often the 'entry point' for client conversations.

Deeply Understanding Client Challenges

Content must address real client challenges. Visible Authorities research their audience's interests and pain points. B2B buyers consume multiple content pieces before deciding (The Visible Authority, 2024). Understand not just business challenges, but clients' digital search behaviour - the keywords they use. Also, have a strong knowledge of the relevant literature, research, academics, conferences and focus groups in the space.

Stage 2: Developing Compelling Content

With a clear niche and audience understanding, create high-quality content that demonstrates expertise.

Identifying Content Pillars & Formats

High-growth firms prioritise high-value educational content (Hinge Marketing, 2025; Bidwell, 2011). True thought leadership offers new ideas or perspectives. Develop "content pillars" from your niche and audience pain points. Use diverse formats: articles, reports, webinars, podcasts. Emphasise originality and actionable insights. Translate complex ideas simply.

Ensuring Quality, Credibility & Differentiation

Only exceptional, credible, and differentiated content cuts through. It must demonstrate P.R.E.: Provocation, Research, and Emotional Engagement. Provocation concerns the new angle that you have on the topic: if you repeat what everyone else is saying you are unlikely to stand out. Research means your recommendations or analysis should be firmly based in qualitative and quantitative data not just 'I've done this for 20 years and I know what is right'. Emotional Engagement means that it's about more than facts. Feeling the client's pain and providing them with an emotional vision for the future is crucial.

Stage 3: Strategic Distribution

Great content needs strategic distribution to reach its audience.

Optimising for Discoverability (SEO)

SEO is vital for organic search visibility. This means compelling content marketing and sound technical SEO: keyword research, on-page optimisation, and excellent user experience. SEO is an ongoing process.

Utilising Professional Networks (LinkedIn & Beyond)

LinkedIn is indispensable for B2B professionals to build brands and share insights. An optimised, active LinkedIn presence is non-negotiable.

Exploring Other Channels (Email, PR, Events)

Diversify and re-use. Start with 'state of the union' piece of content. Record a video about it. Use the audio (via AI) to create a blog or article. Post on LinkedIn articles and your own blog. Cut this up into smaller LinkedIn posts, video clips, and infographics. The useful thing is that an outsourced marketing agency can do this incredibly cheaply.

Stage 4: Building & Sustaining Visibility

Visible Authority is an ongoing commitment.

The Power of Consistent Output

Sporadic efforts won't build authority. A regular content schedule is crucial for connecting with your audience and earning trust. An editorial calendar helps (try Buffer.com). Consistency signals reliability and dedication.

Engaging with the Audience & Iterating

Visibility isn't one-way. Engage with your audience - respond to comments, solicit feedback. This builds community, refines your messaging based on feedback, and boosts the visibility algorithm. Track content performance. Use simple analytics to understand what resonates and improve for next time.

Table 2: Key Stages and Activities in Developing Visible Authority

Stage	Key Objectives	Core Activities	Critical Success Factors / Supporting Concepts
1. Niche & Audience Definition	Define unique, defensible expertise; deeply understand audience needs & behaviour	Self-assessment, market research, competitor analysis, audience interviews, persona development, keyword research	Differentiation, Specialisation, Empathy
2. Content Development	Create high-quality, valuable, differentiated content addressing audience pain	Develop content pillars, choose formats, write/produce original content, ensure actionable insights, cite sources	P.R.E.: Provocation, Research, and Emotional Engagement.
3. Strategic Distribution	Maximize content reach and discoverability among the target audience	SEO, LinkedIn/social media marketing, email marketing, PR, speaking engagements, content repurposing	Multi-channel approach, SEO best practices, Engagement
4. Sustained Visibility & Engagement	Maintain momentum, build community, and continuously improve impact	Consistent content cadence (editorial calendar), audience interaction, performance tracking (analytics), strategy iteration	Consistency, Responsiveness, Adaptability, Measurement

Discussion: Integrating Visibility with Trust

Visible Authority is most potent when integrated with the Trusted Advisor model's enduring principles.

Visible Authority as a Complement

Visible Authority isn't a replacement for the Trusted Advisor model; it's an enhancement. Visibility earned through shared expertise acts as a "trust accelerant" (The Visible Authority, 2024; Spence, 1973). Publicly demonstrated competence builds initial credibility faster and more broadly than private interactions alone. This initial trust can then deepen through personal engagement (Maister, Green, and Galford, 2000). For newer consultants or those without established networks, it's a democratic path to getting known.

Addressing Challenges & Ethical Considerations

This isn't without challenges. It demands significant, consistent time for quality content and engagement. Authenticity is key; pressure for visibility shouldn't lead to an inauthentic persona or overstated expertise. Superficiality is a risk if tactics overshadow genuine knowledge. Measuring direct ROI can be hard, requiring a long-term view.

Ethical execution is paramount: transparency about affiliations, factual accuracy (Edelman, 2023), avoiding hype, and respecting intellectual property. Shortcuts damage credibility.

Implications: Cultivating "Visible Authorities"

For individuals, Visible Authority empowers personal brand building and opportunity attraction. It demands new skills in content creation and digital communication.

For firms, fostering Visible Authorities offers competitive advantages: attracting top talent, elevating the firm's brand, and creating a scalable lead generation engine (The Visible Authority, 2024). This means investing in training, tools, and time. Dixon et al. (2023) offers a roadmap:

- Training & Coaching: Focus on network management and proactive insight generation (e.g., McDermott Will & Emery's program).
- Hiring & Promotion: Value collaborative behaviours and proactive value creation, not just technical skill.
- Technology: Use CRM prompts, relationship intelligence tools, and Gen-AI for insights.
- Incentives: Reward collaboration and consistent BD (e.g., Baker McKenzie's revenue growth after rewarding collaboration). This may require a cultural shift towards valuing open knowledge sharing for market impact.

Conclusion: The Future of Consulting Business Development

The consulting sales landscape is evolving. The traditional Trusted Advisor model, while valuable, faces new pressures. The Visible Authority strategy is a vital complementary approach, and the advent of AI is only going to make this more important as the internet gets saturated with low quality content from low-trust sources.

Challenges to traditional sales models demand strategic augmentation. Visible Authority - signalling expertise through quality content and digital engagement - builds public credibility, a precursor to deeper trust. "Activators" exemplify this proactive, networked approach. Integrating these models creates a resilient strategy: be "found" for expertise, then "valued deeply" for trust.

Critically assess your BD strategies. Passive reliance on old models may not suffice. Strategic investment in Visible Authority - individual or firm-wide - is essential for thriving. Embrace content, master digital channels, foster "Activator" behaviours, and value knowledge sharing. Are your current efforts truly future-proofing your success?

References

AAM (Association for Accounting Marketing). (2023). *Becoming a Visible Expert: Path Forward for Accounting Marketers*. 1

APA (American Psychological Association). (2007, March). *Reputation matters*. *GradPSYCH Magazine*. 2

Bidwell, M. (2011). *Paying More to Get Less: The Effects of External Hiring Versus Internal Mobility*. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 56(3), 369-407. 3

Capsicum Labs. (2023, April 28). *Signaling Theory in Recruitment: How to Identify the Best Candidates*. 7

Consulting Quest. (2025, February 18). *The Future of Consulting: Navigating the Transformation*. 9 (Note: Year adjusted based on snippet content implying future date)

Dixon, M., Channer, R., McKenna, T. & Freeman, K. (2023, November 1). 'What Today's Rainmakers Do Differently', *Harvard Business Review*, Digital article R2306D.

Edelman. (2023). *2023 Edelman Trust Barometer*. 10

Essig, M., & Batran, A. (2005). *The impact of procurement on the outsourcing of services – A German perspective*. *Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management*, 11(5-6), 261-270.

Gummesson, E. (1979). *The Marketing of Professional Services—An Organisational Dilemma*. *European Journal of Marketing*, 13(5), 308-318. 11

Hinge Marketing. (2025). *High Growth Study 2025: Insights into Today's Best-Performing Firms*. 4 (Note: Year adjusted based on snippet content implying future date)

IANUS Project. (2023, February 20). *2023 Edelman trust barometer: Navigating in a polarized world*. 16

IISTE (International Institute for Science, Technology and Education). (2014). *Trans-local Formational Negotiation of Digital Natives Through Interaction on Facebook (Case Study in Bengkulu Town)*. *New Media and Mass Communication*, 22. 17

Maister, D. H., Green, C. H., & Galford, R. M. (2000). *The Trusted Advisor*. The Free Press. 19

Palfrey, J., & Gasser, U. (2008). *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*. Basic Books. 20

Spence, A. M. (1973). *Job Market Signaling*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 87(3), 355-374. 7

The Visible Authority. (2024, February 15). 10 Reasons Why Consultancies Shouldn't Be Afraid of Sharing Their Expertise. 22