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Creating Meaningful Thought Leadership

HOW TO CUT THROUGH THE NOISE AND
POSITION YOUR BRAND AS AN INDUSTRY LEADER

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Introduction

In the internet era, data and information are ubiquitous. Professionals and consumers alike are inundated with content at every turn. Amidst the information overload, a different kind of expert has emerged to separate the signal from the noise. Enter the thought leader.

Thought leaders are individuals and companies that have created a coherent body of ideas with the goal of advancing thinking in a category, industry, or on a particular topic.¹ Given the attested impacts of thought leadership—a 2020 Thought Leadership Impact Study carried out by Edelman and LinkedIn,² for example, found that 88% of business decision-makers cited good thought leadership as an effective way to improve their opinions of an organization—“thought leaders” have become a dime a dozen.

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But in the marketplace of ideas, what separates claimed knowledge from an idea that is meaningful and consequential?

Only 17% of the decision-makers in the Edelman/LinkedIn study felt that existing thought leadership content was good or excellent, highlighting the dearth of truly impactful work in this arena.

1. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/russprince/2012/03/16/what-is-a-thought-leader/?sh=2657b24c7da0>

2. <https://www.edelman.com/research/2020-b2b-thought-leadership-impact-study>

Much “thought leadership” in the current ethos suffers from three foundational weaknesses:

1. It is often more focused on grabbing attention with catchy headlines than showcasing new and multi-faceted insights.
2. With the goal of looking to the future, it often attempts to fill white space with insufficient evidence, selectively choosing from the data that is available.
3. Because a thought leader’s livelihood may be riding on their ideas, they are often incentivized to confirm their own biases versus uncovering new truths.

How can companies avoid the common pitfalls mentioned above while taking thought leadership to the next level?

The authors of this paper have spent years partnering with top brands on thought leadership initiatives. Over time, we have developed a set of best practices that organizations and individuals can use to add real value to conversations while reinforcing industry credibility. By approaching thought leadership in the same way as other serious fact-finding endeavors (guided by deeply seated objectives and carried out via rigorous, objective, data-driven research), thought leaders can go deeper and produce impactful content that moves industries forward.

Follow the recipe below to create more substantive thought leadership content:

- ①— **Leave preconceptions at the door.**
Allow primary research to shape your position.
 - ②— **Make the story the hero.**
Center the story instead of the storyteller.
 - ③— **Keep your audience at the forefront.**
Consider worldview, context, and pressing questions.
 - ④— **Identify your “Goldilocks” moment.**
Topics shouldn’t be too niche, or too saturated. Just right.
 - ⑤— **Have a strong POV.**
Challenge your team to make a truly unique contribution.
 - ⑥— **Start with what you know.**
Stay in your lane of expertise, or content can backfire.
 - ⑦— **Let the investment match the goal.**
Budget, buy-in, and cross-functional participation are key.
 - ⑧— **Think beyond the “deliverable.”**
Focus on narrative, brevity, polish, and headline-worthy stats.
 - ⑨— **Push to the last mile.**
Focus on what, where, when, and how to maximize socialization.
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①— **Leave preconceptions at the door.**

Structure thought leadership projects around primary data that is exploratory in nature, rather than leveraging data to validate a story that has already been crafted. Allowing the data to lead and shape your position will help your team explore the boundaries of your industry, revealing insightful takeaways that impact both the here-and-now, as well as what's on the horizon. By approaching thought leadership projects with a spirit of intellectual curiosity bolstered by primary research, your organization will avoid already-crowded conversations in favor of a fresh perspective.

②— **Make the story the hero.**

Too often, modern thought leadership content relies on a few influential leaders' ideas and points of view with the goal of "harness[ing] what everybody else sees and may already know and mak[ing] it your own."³ Stand out by centering thought leadership on the *story* instead of the *storyteller*. Brand agnostic thought leadership not only garners more credibility from third parties but is able to go beyond "what everyone already knows" by pushing industry, category, and audience understanding forward without an agenda.

Embark on new thought leadership initiatives in search of—not in service of—the big story. Invest in original data collection and approach your project with an unbiased storytelling position that elevates ideas. For many companies, this approach will require a shift in mindset: true thought leadership must be detached from the thought leader's financial interests; generating external attention, excitement, and conversation—not sales leads—should be the primary objective.

3. <https://www.prweek.com/article/1274838/delivering-thought-leadership>

①— **Keep your audience at the forefront.**

Effective thought leadership begins by identifying the target audience and crafting the research to meet them where they are: what is their world view, what context are they approaching the subject matter from (e.g., global, industry-focused), and what matters most to them? Understanding what your audience is hungry to learn and where the information gaps are allows you to build your approach and respondent sample in turn, making both the final product and the process itself instantly more meaningful.

②— **Identify your “Goldilocks” moment.**

When it comes to thought leadership research, timing is everything; even the most masterfully designed research will fall on deaf ears if the topic has too little momentum or resonance with the target audience.

Finding the right topic for the moment is a game of Goldilocks: there must be hunger in the market—it can’t be done to death—but it also can’t be so nascent that very few know about it. For brands across categories, the perfect porridge is typically the “inevitable but unknown.” By focusing on these “not if, but when” products and trends, your company can establish itself as leaders in the new frontier.

①— Have a strong POV.

Impactful thought leadership research does more than just educate; it makes a unique contribution to discourse and thinking at a category level. As pioneers in category scholarship, effective thought leaders explore big, market-shaping spaces and take positions grounded in their own research.

Crucially, the first step of a thought leadership endeavor should not be to find a point of view; rather, individuals and organizations should only throw their hats in the ring if they can take an original, principled stand corroborated by rigorous, independent, evidence-based research. As AMA CEO Russ Klein explains, “you can’t inspire unless you’re willing to take occasional stands. It creates an inherent presence of tension, which I’ve long asserted is the one common denominator to all great communication.”⁴

②— Start with what you know.

While strong thought leadership can establish your company as an expert in its category, it’s important to remember that credibility starts with equity—and a service or product that stacks up. If your product, service, and/or reputation aren’t solid or well established in the space in question, your knowledge will (rightly) be greeted with skepticism. Unsurprisingly, this can have a negative impact on your thought leadership goals. Indeed, almost 1-in-3 business decision-makers say a company’s thought leadership endeavors have *deterred* them from doing business with the organization,⁵ a statistic that underscores the fact that not all press is good press.

4. <https://www.ama.org/marketing-news/what-is-the-definition-of-thought-leadership>

5. <https://www.marketingcharts.com/digital-78395>

①— **Let the investment match the goal.**

While thought leadership comes in all shapes and sizes, the more you put in, the more you can get out. Though monetary investment matters, buy-in and participation across stakeholders and subject matter experts within your organization is also key.

To make sure you're addressing relevant topics and fully understanding them at an intimate level, you need the support of cross-functional teams: product, R&D, marketing, PR, and beyond. Leveraging a team of experts that can help contextualize learnings and how to talk about them will produce smarter, more impactful results. This type of thought leadership takes a village, so plan accordingly.

②— **Think beyond the “deliverable.”**

Thought leadership research requires a different kind of deliverable—one that challenges the idea of reporting as we know it. Distinct from your average slide deck, your thought leadership deliverable should be grounded in narrative storytelling, brevity, polish, and rich in headline-worthy stats and storylines. This is true whether it takes the form of a white paper, a blog, an infographic, or something else entirely.

①— **Push to the last mile.**

Even the most brilliant research is wasted if not well socialized. Focusing on the *what-where-when-how* of thought leadership socialization helps ensure that it crosses the finish line:

WHAT Compelling, interactive content is everything.

WHERE Not all earned media is created equal. The quality of your placements matter.

WHEN Content releases should be timed thoughtfully such that industry professionals can leverage the conversation.

HOW When it comes to social media, cut through the noise and go straight to your audience by utilizing external platforms as publishing venues rather than owned marketing channels.

When heeded, this thought leadership recipe can have an immense impact on an organization—and the investment is well worth it.

Keep the following benefits of meaningful thought leadership in mind:

IT WORKS FROM THE INSIDE OUT.

When leveraged with intent, thought leadership can benefit an organization internally. Integrating thought leadership content into training materials, for example, allows sales associates to leverage it with prospects. Beyond just the sales team, a well-supported thought leadership program can achieve internal buy-in and help stakeholders coalesce around a consistent narrative and brand identity. Finally, given its future orientation, thought leadership has the potential to impact resource allocation and, subsequently, the innovation pipeline.

IT'S A CONVERSATION STARTER.

Beyond simply elevating brand perceptions, effective thought leadership yields measurable outcomes. Almost 1-in-2 decision-makers cited thought leadership as *the primary impetus* to doing business with a company, and 1-in-3 said it either prompted them to request a proposal or to reach out to the organization for a follow-up conversation.⁶ In this way, thought leadership can position your organization as the company to partner with or look to in a particular space. For this reason, we highly recommend making your thought leadership initiatives available free of cost.

IT GARNERS RECOGNITION.

Edelman and LinkedIn found that good thought leadership is highly effective at improving perceptions of the company at its helm: 82% credit it with building trust.⁷ By providing a new, data-driven perspective founded upon primary research, your organization can establish and reinforce its place as a category leader and trusted industry resource.

6. <https://www.marketingcharts.com/digital-78395>

7. <https://www.edelman.com/research/2020-b2b-thought-leadership-impact-study>

Conclusion

Research-driven thought leadership initiatives bring rigor to every step of the research process; they include survey questions that are nuanced and carefully tailored to the research objectives, involve subject matter experts in their analyses, and complement quantitative data with qualitative interviews to ensure both breadth and depth.

While thought leadership is, in many ways, just another buzzword, it doesn't have to be. By moving away from bias, oversimplification, and bad incentives, thought leadership can be reframed as a manifestation of the scientific method, guided by intellectual curiosity, rigorous data collection, and an exploratory mindset. We have seen firsthand the impact successful thought leadership can have on both an industry and an organization. Now that you have this recipe—what will you cook up next?

Hypothesis is an Insights Association Top 50 Company that fuses insights, strategy, and design to help important brands do amazing things. We specialize in high-stakes questions that require creative, multi-dimensional approaches, thoughtful strategy, and a broad business perspective. Our client partners include many of the Fortune 500's most innovative and admired brands. Learn more at: www.hypothesisgroup.com

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