

Building your thought leadership for maximum impact

How to structure your insights for success



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Introduction

Thought leadership is growing up

No longer the arcane purview of nebbishy intellectuals, it has become the go-to for busy executives looking to solve critical business challenges. Its importance has grown against a backdrop of global uncertainty that makes analysis and context essential for business planning.

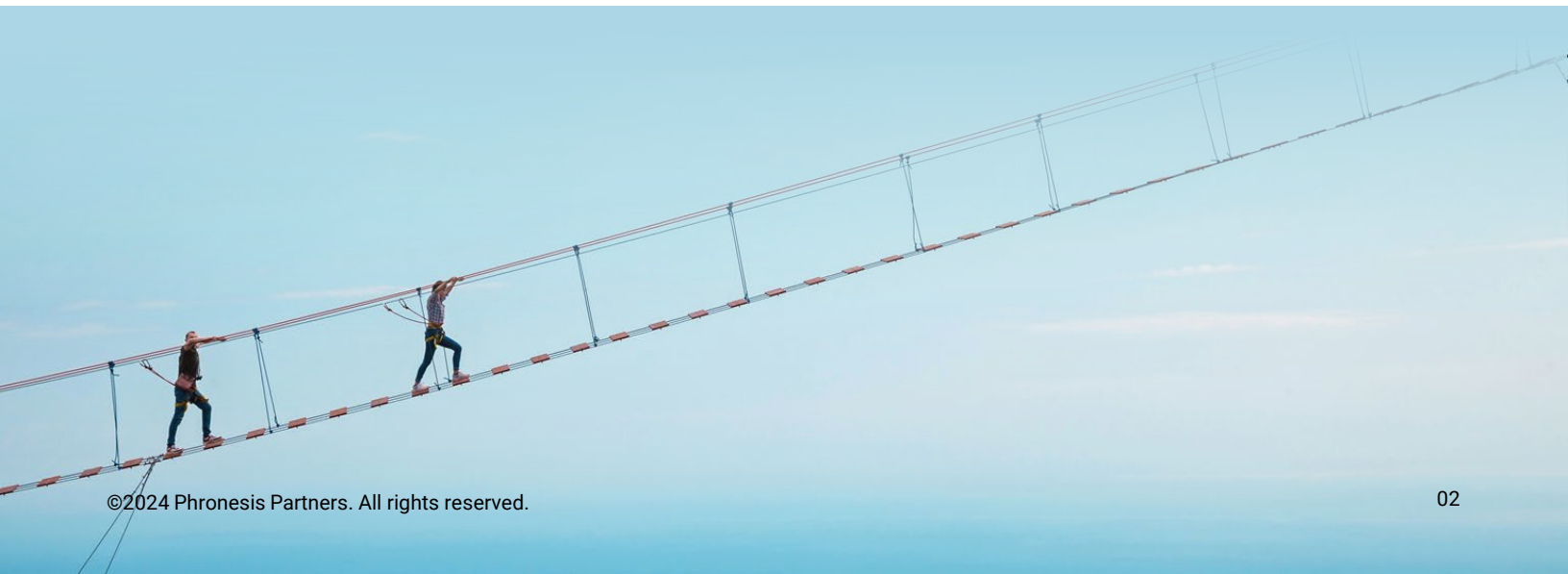
The pace of technological change is also driving demand for insight, as business leaders grapple with the gap between the potential of emerging technology and the speed and effectiveness at which it can be integrated into business processes. Indeed, **research has found that over 70% of senior executives used thought leadership at every stage of the buying process to inform their most strategic decisions¹.**

There are many content leaders and strategists who are already involved in thought leadership in some way but lack a coherent and consistent program. If you're in the process of formalizing a thought leadership infrastructure, how do you refine and scale so that it becomes a core part of your brand identity and value proposition?

To answer this question, we spoke to some leading voices in the field of thought leadership: Francis Hintermann, Global Managing Director, Accenture Research; Anna Bernasek, Global Head of Thought Leadership at financial services firm State Street; Samad Masood, European Head and Content Strategy Lead at the Infosys Knowledge Institute, and Cindy Anderson, CMO and Global Lead for Engagement & Eminence at IBM Institute for Business Value (IBV). It emerged there are four key factors at play to successfully scale your thought leadership:

- 1 Focus on your unique objectives
- 2 Build the right team
- 3 Devise a smart promotional strategy
- 4 Evaluate your work comprehensively

In this report we look at how companies can achieve this.



Designing a targeted thought leadership program

- 1 There is no “one size fits all” approach
- 2 Focus on your pillars
- 3 Harmonize messaging for global growth

The most successful thought leadership producers have their insights program down to a fine art, with a steady research schedule and a web of connected content. Large consultancies, for instance, can publish hundreds of thought leadership papers a year, looking at dozens of sectors.

Other organizations might base their strategy around an anchor piece of content, such as Edelman’s annual Trust Barometer, which can then be spun out into multiple assets and media-friendly threads. At Phronesis, we moderated a webinar discussion on the art of storytelling² which was then turned into an e-book.

Thought leadership is not just about raising brand awareness. Done right, it can also deliver an impressive return on investment. This is achievable even with a limited budget, because there is no “one size fits all” approach. There are many organizations, such as Avaloq or FM Logistic, producing lower volumes of thought leadership content that still deliver impressive engagement and ROI.

“If it’s done well, you can really influence your whole stakeholder system. You’re basically shaping the attitudes of clients, employees, shareholders, and the community in which you exist.”

- Anna Bernasek,
Global Head of Thought Leadership, State Street



You might want to invest in a social media video, or a set of LinkedIn posts, that will involve less time and effort than another long-form article. If you have strong data behind you, with detailed research that audiences can reference at their leisure, you can reach them in a way that won’t cost the earth.

While smaller and mid-size firms may have to carefully consider their budget, reach, and focus, what matters most is that your thought leadership strategy is closely aligned with your corporate focus and organizational objectives. Even global giants will build a program around just a couple of themes – AI, for instance, or sustainability – and then connect all their output back to those principles.

“If it’s done well, you can really influence your whole stakeholder system,” said Bernasek. “You’re basically shaping the attitudes of clients, employees, shareholders, and the community in which you exist.”

That alignment is something to hold onto as you expand your scope and reach. Hintermann has overseen the expansion of Accenture's thought leadership team from a few researchers in Europe to a globalized group of hundreds. What is helpful in scaling your thought leadership, he said, is to level-set on messaging, so that you don't have to reproduce everything from scratch – and then tailor your output for relevant markets and geographies.

"It's incredibly important in the noise that is created by all these publications to have some type of rigor and discipline," he said, "so that your company can be associated with a certain number of ideas that you communicate in a coherent manner from one industry to another, from one country to another, from one function to the other."

Use what you have, build what you need

The way we consume content is changing, and as audiences are drawn towards more visual and interactive material, there are multiple platforms for sharing insights, from social media videos to podcasts and in-person events. Plugging in to the areas where your marketing team is already active ensures that you maximize the number of touch points potential customers will have with your insights, without having to extend your spend.

At State Street, events are a long-standing feature of the company's marketing mix, and Bernasek took advantage of this when she joined, connecting a thought leadership strategy to a ready-made platform that didn't stretch her resources. Leaning into an existing cultural framework, she wove thought leadership into talking points, panels, op-eds and client conversations.

Positioning your thought leadership content prominently on your corporate website will also give it added credence and demonstrate to audiences that your company is an important source of knowledge.

"A lot of websites are static informational websites, rather than content websites," said Masood. "A lot of companies are still stuck in a very 90s view of, 'Our website is a place where people come to get corporate information, and then on the side, we're publishing stuff'."

Instead, he favored a formula that is "about engaging people because they want to learn things. McKinsey is a great example of this. It reads like a media website – it's just stories and articles. I think there is an evolution of people's understanding of how they can use the internet to push their message. Ideally, it's a place where which is your digital strategy is designed to push your thought leadership messages out to an audience, rather than just being a place where your thought leadership rests."

The most important roles for thought leadership

- 1 Subject matter experts make your content relevant and credible
- 2 Journalistic knowledge helps bring research to life
- 3 Creating a partner ecosystem gives you access to a wide range of skills

You're likely to be able to find subject matter experts within your existing team, and you should absolutely leverage their insights, because they will be tracking industry trends and engaging with clients in a way that really helps to understand their challenges and burning questions. They will drive rigor and discipline in the research process, and their understanding of the industry in focus will also make your content relevant and credible – not only to audiences, but also to internal decision-makers.

But to build a narrative, there's one vital skill to have on the team. "I would say you need to hire a good journalist," said Bernasek. "You need somebody who can research and who can write and think about things and produce compelling ideas and understand that you want to come up with that angle that nobody else has."

"The magic comes from having people from different backgrounds."

- Francis Hintermann,
Global Research Executive Director, Accenture



On top of this, there is increasing value in working with data scientists who can work effectively with artificial intelligence tools and dig into the analysis of the data that is generated from research.

"The magic comes from having people from different backgrounds," said Hintermann. "What matters is people who are able to articulate these original ideas, supported by proprietary original data."

Creating a robust data set to tap into will immediately expand your thought leadership horizons. And the ability to gather that data isn't limited to large global firms with sizeable budgets. By carefully considering your target audience and looking only at a refined set of key questions to ask, you can gain an effective data set that will be cost efficient. This same dataset can then be used for a whole program of original content creation, allowing you to build on your thought leadership as required. Don't have a big team? Borrow someone else's. Another cost-effective way for smaller firms to scale is to create a partner ecosystem with another organization, perhaps a larger company or an academic institution.

Doing this may enable you to split the cost of thought leadership research and access a wider range of resources, including the ability to piggyback on a research project, where perhaps your firm might contribute subject matter expertise or editorial capabilities. Co-branding also helps with promotion – both from a cost perspective and in terms of wider reach.

Prioritize promotion

- 1 Get the whole organization involved in understanding and promoting your work
- 2 Use all your existing marketing channels
- 3 Build direct client engagement into your strategy

Our research found that thought leadership producers need a company culture that is hospitable to thought leadership – especially to keep their programs going during a change in management at the top of the organization or in times of across-the-board cutbacks. **71%³ of the thought leadership leaders we surveyed had a culture that supported their work, compared to 43% of thought leadership laggards.**

How do you achieve such a culture? By working collaboratively and communicating right across the organization; working together to understand the problems that clients are facing. That level of connection is vital to ensuring thought leadership is effectively marketed and measured.

“When the consultants and sellers use our content as that red carpet into the C-suite, into the boardroom with our clients, then that’s how it gains traction.”

- Cindy Anderson, CMO and Global Lead for Engagement & Eminence, IBV



Edelman’s 2024 B2B Thought Leadership Impact Report revealed that, despite the clear power of thought leadership to drive business results, most organizations say it is under-resourced, misused and not measured appropriately. **42% of thought leadership producers surveyed said they measure effectiveness based on increased traffic to their digital channels, and only 29% were able to connect sales leads to key pieces of thought leadership⁴.**

Promotion that is limited to posting content on your publishing channels will only ever gain limited engagement. You need your own ambassadors to get thought leadership in front of clients – whether that is speaking directly to them or involving them in activities that showcase your work, as webinar panelists or podcast participants, for instance. Partnering with your sales teams will help them understand the key messaging and unique value of the work that you have undertaken.

“I think we would be best served to create a little less content and spend a little more time on talking to client-facing teams,” said Bernasek, “getting them the materials, helping them understand and setting up things for them to have conversations around the thought leadership.”

At IBV and Accenture, Anderson and Hintermann say their colleagues are already bridging that gap. Everyone who is involved in the creation of thought leadership is responsible for promoting and contextualizing it. Their role in dissemination continues at conferences, in discussions with (and pieces written for) the media and in social media conversations.

"I think that one thing thought leadership organizations, especially if they're new or small, forget is the value of internal promotion within the organization," said Anderson. "The enablement

that we do with our consultants and sellers is probably more important than much of the external visibility, because when the consultants and sellers use our content as that red carpet into the C-suite, into the boardroom with our clients, then that's how it gains traction."

That personal relationship between your thought leadership and your clients and prospects will build trust in your knowledge and capabilities as a firm – making it more likely they will select you as a supplier while keeping your PR costs at a manageable level.



Measuring your wins

- 1 Look beyond social media clicks
- 2 Gauge commercial results
- 3 View performance in the round

Of course, it's all very well talking about the business value of thought leadership, but how do you prove it?

According to Edelman's latest report, nearly one in five thought leadership producers have no process in place for measuring effectiveness⁵. There is often over-reliance on tracking social media engagement and website visits, even if that isn't the right criteria to satisfy stakeholders and budget-holders. It's why Anderson recommends determining how to measure your success before even beginning your campaign journey – and then choosing the right types of content to meet your objectives.

"The worst thing that can happen is you collect a set of metrics, have a great pitch or proposal for additional funding, and the people in the room don't think they are the right ones," she observed.

The evolution of thought leadership

Thought leadership as a practice has grown so rapidly that there are no standardized means of production, promotion, or measurement. It's part of the reason that US-based research organization APQC has established a new Global Thought Leadership Institute⁶, with Anderson and Hintermann among the founding board members. It will look at best practices and training opportunities to help maximize the value of thought leadership.

Although thought leadership is typically seen as top-of-funnel in marketing terms – and therefore a step removed from sales conversations – its influence can still be noted in later-stage decision-making. Consider whether your clients are changing their decisions, whether there are any commercial results from what you've done, and if your research is being cited in the media. Alongside comments on your social media feeds, this demonstrates the mindshare you are achieving through your work.

"Tracking actual client connections makes it more real."

- Samad Masood, European Head and Content Strategy Lead, Infosys Knowledge Institute



At Infosys, Masood's team connects customer journeys to content engagement, tracking how many sign up for newsletters and events, as well as how many clients or prospects have interacted with Knowledge Institute thinking – including where a research paper has been used as a keynote event or a member of the team has participated in a panel, sparking greater awareness of Infosys thought leadership arm.

“That could be a client we interviewed, or who took part in a webinar, or someone we jointly wrote an article with, or that attended an event,” he said. “It shows that every year, more and more clients have touched what we do, in the real sense, rather than just being an audience metric. Tracking actual client connections makes it more real, because from that, you can also take anecdotal examples, where perhaps a client was interviewed for some content, that then enabled the sales team to build a stronger relationship between them, which then led on to a new sales opportunity within their organization.”

It’s an exciting time for those building out their thought leadership architecture – and ripe with opportunity that’s even more likely to be fulfilled with learnings already established.



Five things to remember

- 1 Ensure your thought **leadership strategy is closely aligned with your specific corporate focus and organizational objectives**. Focus on solutions, not volume.
- 2 Use all the **marketing channels available to you** to maximize impact – not just social media, but also events, broadcasts and PR.
- 3 **Storytelling, consultancy and research capabilities** are all helpful to have on your team. Work with partners to fill in any gaps.
- 4 Your **sales and client-facing teams play an important role** in embedding your work with clients. Involve them early and often in conversations about your campaign.
- 5 **Track the impact of your work** from website clicks to commercial results to fully demonstrate value, ensuring clear success metrics before starting.

¹“Rethinking thought leadership: what customers want, and how B2B firms can deliver it”, Buday Thought Leadership Partners, Rattleback, Phronesis Partners, 2023

²“Mastering the art of thought leadership storytelling”, Phronesis Partners, 2024

³“Rethinking thought leadership: what customers want, and how B2B firms can deliver it”, Buday Thought Leadership Partners, Rattleback, Phronesis Partners, 2023

⁴“Reaching Beyond the Ready: Thought Leadership’s Impact on Engaging Out-Of-Market B2B Buyers”, Edelman

⁵“Reaching Beyond the Ready: Thought Leadership’s Impact on Engaging Out-Of-Market B2B Buyers”, Edelman

⁶Global Thought Leadership Institute at APQC

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