



Storytelling in thought leadership: How to get it right

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Introduction

Be honest. How many of the daily LinkedIn posts, newsletter nudges and invitations to download a must-read white paper that cross your screen do you actually look at?

We are adrift in a sea of content, and it's only getting bigger. By 2025, we'll be producing 175 trillion gigabytes of data¹. Frankly, who has the time?

The reality is that much of the material competing for your attention is disposable. That's because many content producers spend their time trying to keep up with the digital Joneses on popular topics, instead of considering what's special about their own company's story. What's needed to drive differentiation in thought leadership in particular is clear alignment to strategic priorities that showcase unique organizational capabilities.

Our own investigations on thought leadership show that most content producers find it extremely difficult to create quality output², in part because they're not drawing on the data they need to ensure credibility.

Thought leadership producers find that creating extraordinary content is exceptionally difficult.

Data-based stories have been around for a long time, but it's only recently that data sets have become more widely accessible, in an evolution that aligns with the rise in data journalism we've seen since the early 2000s. British news outlet The Guardian was an early adopter. In 2013, its Special Projects Editor, Paul Lewis, observed: "It's not just the existence of the data – it's not just obtaining and putting it out there. It's the processing that goes into it to work out what it tells you."³

1. ["The world's data explained: how much we're producing and where it's all stored"](#), World Economic Forum, May 7, 2021

2. ["Rethinking thought leadership: what customers want, and how B2B firms can deliver it,"](#) Buday Thought Leadership Partners, Rattleback, Phronesis Partners, February 2023.

3. "What is data journalism at The Guardian?", YouTube, 2013





In other words, it's not enough to just share your research findings with audiences without any context – you have to weave in a connective thread so that it makes sense as a whole and so that it's easy for people to see why what you've discovered really matters.

Finding the why

Using that approach will help B2B organizations build genuinely useful content for global audiences. When you think about the content that stops you in your tracks, chances are it's because you landed on a piece with a surprising fact or demonstrable relatability. You want to know how things are impacting other humans, and you want to know why. And as we continue to consume content in a more visual way, it allows companies to convey meaning in just a few words, or some well-chosen images.

In this eBook, we'll look at the best ways to unearth a story that makes sense for your corporate messaging and gets the most value out of your data – as well as structuring a narrative that grabs an audience's attention, keeps them engaged, and leaves them informed.

We're drawing on our own learnings, and on the insights shared by the experts who featured in our [webinar](#), "The power of storytelling: transforming data into compelling thought leadership." To our panelists, Liz Bolshaw, Global Content Strategist at EY, Mike Zimmerman, Head of Content Marketing and Editorial Development at Hitachi Digital, and Laura Sheridan Powers, Director, Integrated Communications at Datasite, thank you for your wisdom.

Where do ideas come from?

The rise of the machines

Given the level of industry chatter about generative AI, it's hard to believe that ChatGPT was only released at the tail end of 2022 (swiftly followed by Google's entry, Bard, and Microsoft's Copilot). LinkedIn is awash with marketers talking about how they are using the technology, and the consensus seems to be that, while genAI itself won't threaten your job, not knowing how to use it just might.

According to a Gartner survey from February 2024, "The accelerated adoption of genAI will encourage greater performance and engagement, enhance creativity, as well as free up time and allow marketers to engage in more thought-intensive work."⁴

EY produces dozens of new surveys each year, and its Global Content Strategist Liz Bolshaw and her team use AI to trawl the large data sets that emerge, helping to identify white space. "So long as you get your prompts right, AI is really good at interrogating large data sets and coming up with something that's usable," said Bolshaw.

Of the 51% of marketers already using generative AI⁵, 71% use it to inspire creative thinking and 76% to write copy. The downside of that is the amount of content being produced entirely by AI. It's easy to spot, because it flags up genAI's key weaknesses: while it's incredibly good at synthesizing information, it hasn't quite grasped how to structure a story or demonstrate human impact. While EY has experimented with using it to generate thought leadership, "It's not quite what we need yet," said Bolshaw. "But I'm not saying never. I think every iteration is clearly a step forward."

4. "Gartner survey reveals 87% of marketers are concerned about technology replacing jobs in their industry," February 27, 2024

5. "60% of marketers say generative AI will transform their role, but worry about accuracy", Salesforce, June 5, 2023





Think like a journalist

Where AI currently falls short is where human intuition and judgement come into play: what trends are you seeing in your industry, and what are you developing in your organization that connects to those trends?

Journalists read a lot, to make sure they're getting a comprehensive picture of a topic. That applies whether it's a breaking political development or tracking a new technology. If you're looking for white space, pay attention to what the news media is covering, but also to what your competitors are saying. Consider how you might be able to put a fresh spin on a hot topic. One way to do this is by commissioning original research that produces intriguing takeaways. And when the results are in, really interrogate the data to extract meaningful messages.

"Think about what you want people to come away with after they've seen something that you've produced," said Datasite's Laura Sheridan Powers. "What is it that you want them to know, and what is the action that you want them to take? Be specific about what you want them to do."

"If it's interesting to you, it's probably going to be interesting to somebody else." - Mike Zimmerman, Head of Content Marketing and Editorial Development Hitachi Digital

Another thing that journalists do is ask a lot of questions. Talk to your subject matter experts regularly. They're often a gold mine for content hunters in any mid-size or large organization; sitting on a gem of a story without even realizing its value.

Make use of an effective interview technique by treating every encounter like the most interesting conversation you may ever have. Ask SMEs about what they're working on and follow up on anything that catches your attention. A great approach is to have them explain something technical by talking about its human impact.

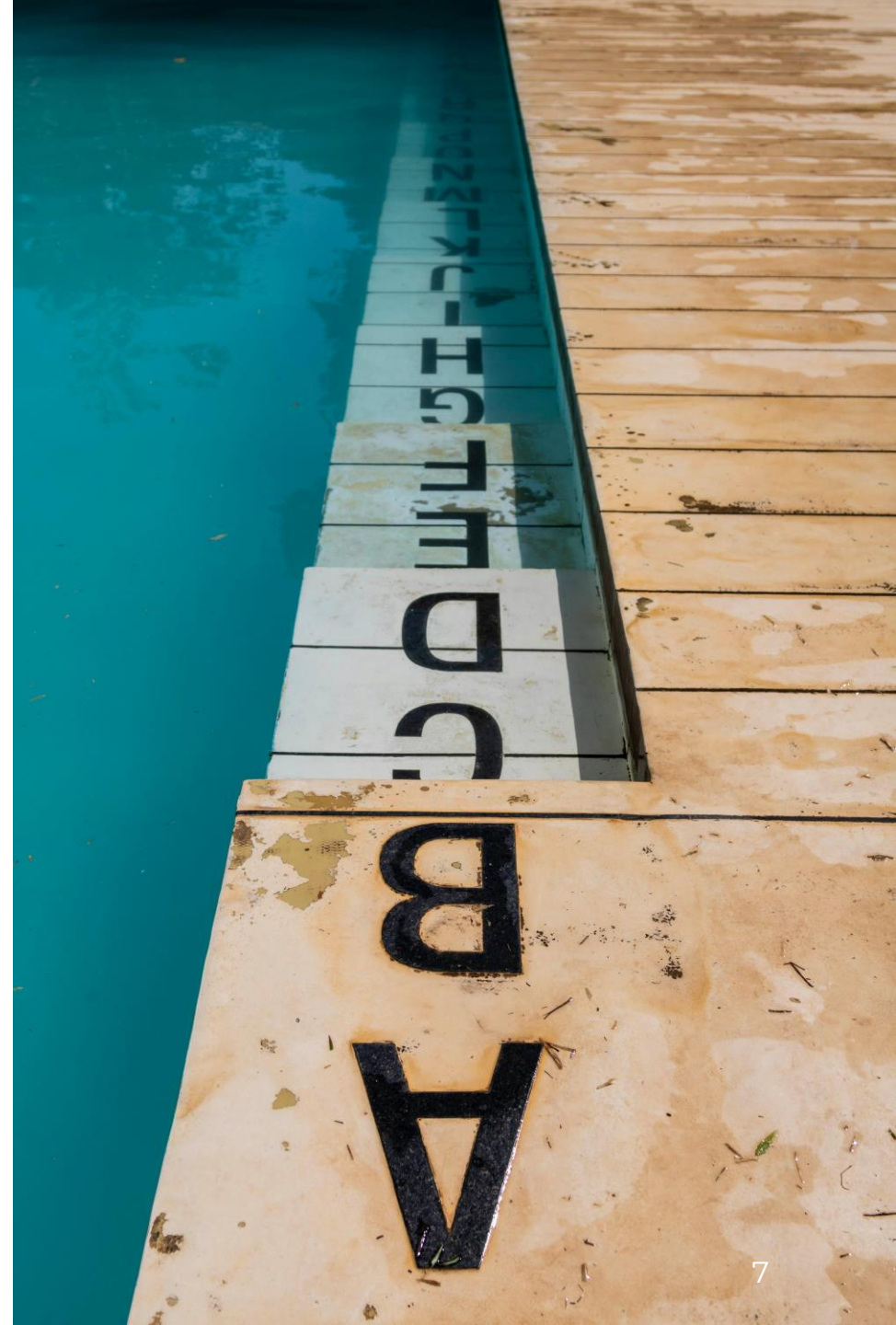
"Look for that idea that you may not be thinking about, but it comes up in the conversation," said Mike Zimmerman of Hitachi Digital. "The most interesting stories come in from the side. An idea pops up, and you must be willing and ready to pounce on a new idea. If it's interesting to you, it's probably going to be interesting to somebody else."

Matching your content to company priorities

Too often, thought leadership content is disconnected from the context of the company producing it. There's no point talking about the application of AI if your organization isn't an early adopter with use cases to showcase, and no value in commenting on investment trends if you have no new insights to share. When it comes to content, more is not always more, especially if you are just parroting what your competitors have already put out there.

In our own research, Phronesis Partners has found that most business leaders use thought leadership content throughout the buying process. They value insights that reveal unique solutions and measurable business outcomes.⁶ Having demonstrable use cases shows that your points carry evidence-based credibility.

6. ["Rethinking thought leadership: what customers want, and how B2B firms can deliver it,"](#) Buday Thought Leadership Partners, Rattleback, Phronesis Partners, February 2023.





Be selective

“One thing we hear a lot from people is, ‘we haven’t got anything particularly new to say, we just want to be in the conversation,’” Bolshaw commented. “I think just being in the conversation isn’t good enough. If you have limited resources, and your audience has very limited time, you need to be quite selective about how much you’re going to push at them and how often. It’s better to go bigger and bolder, rather than doing lots and lots of things that don’t necessarily add up to very much.”

For mid-size firms – which may not have the range of specialisms that large corporates can afford to fund – it’s important to carve out a niche by focusing on your strongest areas. This helps to ensure that what you’re producing will be useful to both your company and your customers.

“We relentlessly track how many people have downloaded a report or an asset from our website, but we also look at what that means to the customer experience and purchase decisions,” said Sheridan Powers. “It’s been hugely informative in determining what our customers actually want.”

The importance of an editorial calendar

Big firms set strategic priorities and pillars for every financial year. To be effective from a business standpoint, all your content should map to these themes. Ideally, plan for one anchor piece of content per quarter that can also be spun out into a range of formats, including blogs and social media assets. Having an editorial calendar means you can connect to wider company campaigns, as well as notable company and external events likely to drive an appetite for thought leadership content.

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- Laura Sheridan Powers, Director, Integrated Communications, Datasite

At EY, “We’re pretty intentional,” said Bolshaw. “We establish editorial priorities at the beginning of each year, and we have a big campaign that sits under that. Then, we’ll develop an editorial thought leadership calendar. That doesn’t mean that there are no pieces outside of that master plan, because inevitably that happens. But we’ve gone from publishing nearly 700 pieces of global leadership a year to under 200 in two years. And with that reduction, we’ve seen a massive increase in engagement and views.”

How do you interpret data to make a story?

If you’re conducting market research, consider how your findings might align to global happenings or business-shifting patterns. Market behavior is fascinating when you get under the hood, which is why many companies use research not just for fresh data points, but also to determine brand perception.

Data visualization – enabling you to view research outcomes as pie charts or graphs – makes it easy to follow patterns and identify standout statistics. Use these as your launchpad. Numbers give you a story direction that you can then build on with desk research and by talking to informed colleagues.





“Don’t feel like you have to do it all by yourself,” said Sheridan Powers. “When you’ve got a set of data or research that you’ve done, it doesn’t hurt to run it past your subject matter experts. What do they think is the most interesting bit of what you’ve secured? Usually, there is some kernel of information that’s going to be a bit of a pop.”

What are some of the things you might look for? Anything that ties into a topic with a lingering buzz – views on climate change, for instance, or the adoption of new technology. Just as intriguing is evidence of shifting social or business behavior: are investors putting weight on the value of real estate? Are companies engaging in new DEI initiatives to accommodate less visible minorities?

Think about what you’re seeing not just in the round, but also sliced by demographics or geography. Are there significant differences in the results that you could play to with your regional audiences, thereby maximizing the value of a single study?

Building a story

Creating a skeleton

The biggest obstacle to publication is usually not the ideation or the production – it’s the approvals process. The best way to avoid delays is to ensure buy-in upfront, by creating a clear outline explaining your theme, supporting evidence, and narrative to stakeholders so they can picture the final output. This makes it less likely that you will have substantial and repeated amends once the piece is complete.

What you're aiming for is enough detail to give a full flavor, without having to generate an entire story. Create an outline template that everyone in the team can use for clarity and consistency.

Also, while it's important to socialize an idea widely at the beginning of a project, it's best to avoid a cast of thousands who feel they need to comment on your draft solely on the basis that it has been sent to them. Although it's true that, as Zimmerman noted, "Relationship management is a big part of storytelling," your job will ultimately be much easier if you can find one or two project champions to be with you throughout the project and sign off when it's complete.

Start with the rabbit

Once you get to producing your story, you need to put your audience on the edge of their seats at the earliest opportunity.

"We live in a different world today than we did 10 years ago," Zimmerman observed. "From a writing standpoint, we've got 15 seconds to grab someone's attention on a website. On LinkedIn, three seconds. So you have to be different. You have to be compelling. You have to abandon any idea of using trite, rote leads to your stories. You have to get into the meat of it right away."

Bolshaw agreed. "One thing that people tend to do is to feel the need to paint a big picture of the current climate," she said. "Every thought leadership piece starts with, 'we are living in unprecedented times of turbulence and accelerated technological change.' Ditch that – everybody knows that.





I think the danger is, you want to wait for the rabbit to come out of the hat at the end. I would say, start with the rabbit. What is the most surprising thing from your work on this topic? It might be a quote from one of your clients. It might be a data point that's come out of the research you've done. Focus on the really surprising thing first – and then build a story around it.”

A strong narrative flow will help bring your audience along with you. If you're linking data points, consider how each point helps to give a comprehensive picture of behavior, and look at what might be driving that behavior. Say you've discovered that 90% of the people you surveyed want to see more warehouse automation. It's worth correlating that with how they feel about increasing costs, or productivity, to understand and explain the impact of a particular solution.

“Focus on the really surprising thing first – and then build a story around it.”

-Liz Bolshaw, Global Content Strategist, EY

As Bolshaw pointed out, you need to be disciplined in what you end up using: “Sometimes there will be data points that don't build into the story,” she said. “You should be happy to leave them on the cutting room floor. A lot of it is about starting with a bang, and then building quite a sharp story that keeps your audience with you all the way.”

More than words

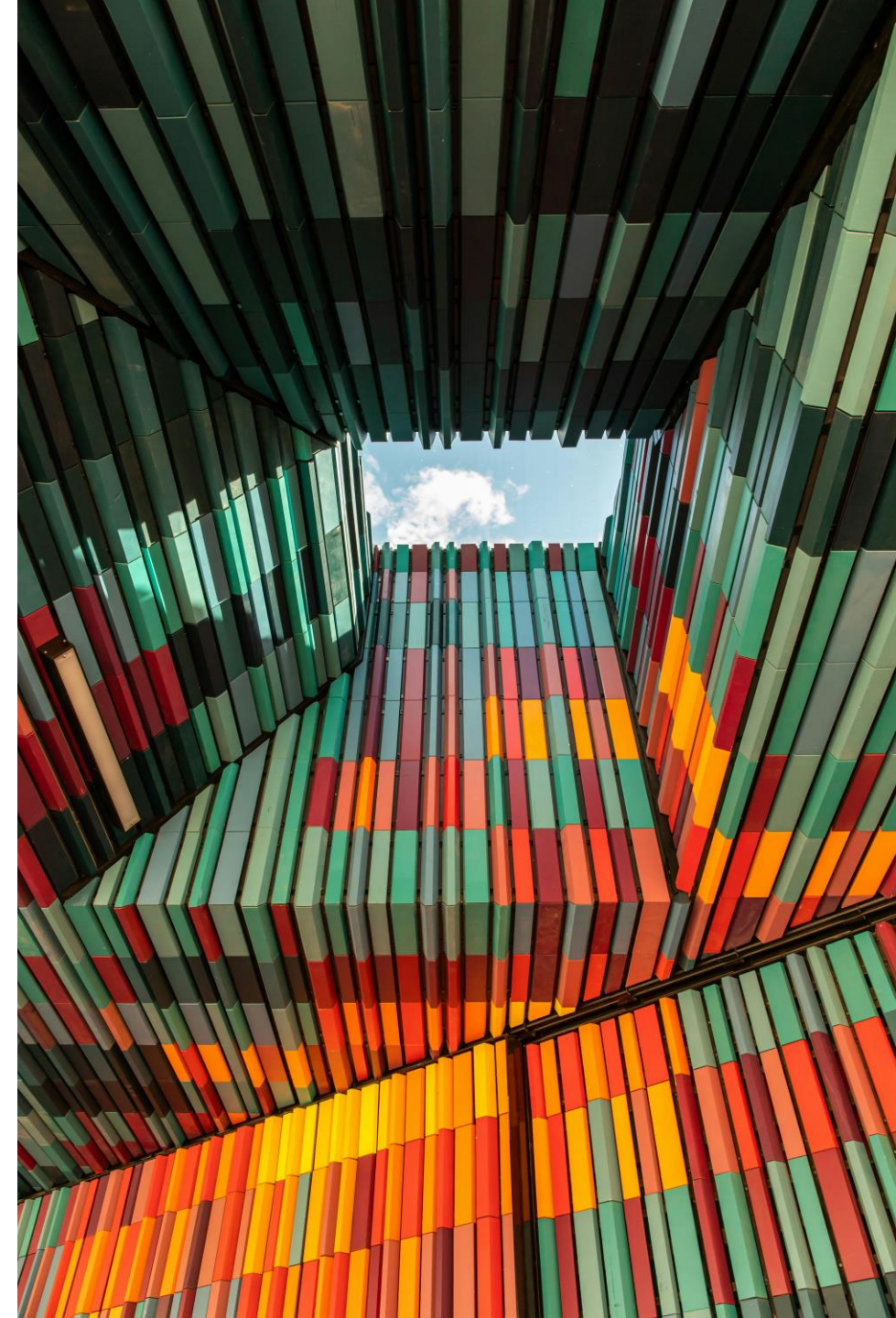
To maximize reach, you need to establish how your target audiences are most likely to consume information and adapt your material accordingly. It could be that, alongside a report, you want to create multiple digital assets.

This isn't as straightforward as transplanting everything you have written into a social-length video – the key is to tailor your presentation to your format. What works in a 2,000-word piece won't necessarily translate to a one-minute script or an infographic. Think about the most important information you need to extract and imagine what will best align with images to help you tell your story in a different way. It needs to be much more condensed, and the language much tighter.

That said, “The same principles applied to storytelling with data and infographics as they do to verbal storytelling,” Bolshaw pointed out. “You still have to think, what is the main insight I’m trying to get across, what’s the big hook, and can I land it in a logical way?”

Visual storytelling is playing an increasingly prominent role even in long-form writing. The *New York Times* is a great proponent of using scrolling graphics to lift a story. Articles like a 2022 piece, “The Coming California Megastorm”⁷ layers text in a way that lets readers take in pictures and copy simultaneously, with the interactivity physically driving audiences forward. Working with a graphic designer in this way can double your storytelling power and make data easier to understand.

7. [“The Coming California Megastorm,”](#) New York Times, August 12, 2022





“These days, if you want your story read, it starts with the image,” Zimmerman observed, “because you have to grab that person's attention who's scrolling down at 100 miles an hour – you've got 15 seconds to grab their attention. So the first thing on your great story has to be the image. The second thing has got to be the headline. It's got to be pithy. It's got to be short, because if you don't have those two things, the best story in the world is not going to get read or read by a lot of people.”

“These days, if you want your story read, it starts with the image.”

*-Mike Zimmerman, Head of Content Marketing and Editorial Development
Hitachi Digital*

Part of the reason for that is platform. With audiences moving to a mobile-first consumption pattern⁸, if you're not optimizing for mobile, you're going to lose out. Sheridan Powers said that much of Datasite's audience of M&A professionals “are completely time crunched, so to get their attention, you definitely need to have things available to them on mobile.”

Our panelists are also finding new ways to keep younger audiences engaged, including by creating more interactive content. One example? The EY.ai Maturity Index helps organizations visualize genAI maturity across seven key dimensions. There's an online version that takes 15 minutes to complete and recommends actions to take based on scores. This interactive model drives engagement while adding depth to existing data sets..

Staying as agile as your audience and meeting them where they want to be will ensure that storytelling continues to connect and persuade.

With thoughtful planning, a deep level of curiosity, and an understanding of what matters to your audience, producing great thought leadership content is well within reach. Here are some tips to take away.

8. [“When the content consumer is king: Adapting to the media and marketing power shift.”](#) McKinsey & Company



Five ways to ensure storytelling success

1

Map to your strategic pillars

2

Think like a reporter and look out for unusual angles

3

Get sign off early on a comprehensive outline

4

Lead with the most surprising element of your story

5

Maximize the ways you can use your source material

[Contact us](#) to discuss how Phronesis Partners can help you with your next story.

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Phronesis Partners, including our group companies, Simplify Growth and Fuld & Company, is a global research and analytics firm. We deliver high-quality, best-in-class corporate, industry and market research and thought leadership to many of the world's largest research and consulting firms, private equity firms, financial institutions, B2B and B2C companies, and publishers.

Our work is both diverse and impactful, helping clients address many of their most complex problems. Be it understanding performance improvement areas for a Bauxite mine in Africa, building a complex financial model for a Silicon Valley unicorn, or developing a comprehensive Brand index for the world's top brands, our clients rely on us for some of the most complicated research questions and deepest insights across industries.

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