



FOCUS
PLAN
SERIES

The Power of Thought Leadership

Building Trust in a Digital World

**MIND
SAILING.**

Thought leadership builds trust, influence and authority

This report will give you:

5 reasons it's relevant right now

3 business benefits to guide your strategy

7 best practices to protect your quality

3 steps to get you started

O2/ Thought leadership can expand brand influence and authority

Decision makers welcome a fresh perspective and can appreciate points of view. It's here that thought leadership can be an invaluable business growth tool. It builds brand credibility, demonstrates leadership and can drive industry conversations. And when it's digital, it can reach millions.

Before any issue-related or sales conversations take place, thought leadership provides decision makers with an opportunity to gain knowledge on a challenging topic. It explores a business problem and allows prospects to see themselves acting in the solution. It's made stronger by bringing forward resources from multiple experts or voices who might challenge an audience. From thought essays, the expert can leverage thought assets that support brand conversations – with needs, or with stakeholders and industry stakeholders. Thought leadership is the spark at the top of the relationship funnel.

Brands that set a goal to create content not only attract prospects but also these conversations, earn loyalty and have the level of brand authority that comes from partnerships and collaborations.



Map out a reasonable plan

Start with what you can reasonably manage

Connect to the quality of the content

Have a long-term plan that grows with your performance.

Build internal capacity and external relationships.

Gain momentum with incremental wins.

Remember that it takes time!

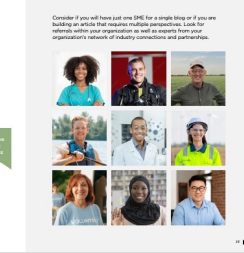
4 Thought leadership brings experts into a community.

Consider if you will have just one SME for a single blog or if you are building an article that requires multiple perspectives. Look for experts within your organization as well as experts from your organization's network of industry connections and partnerships.

Options for subject matter experts (SMEs) can be adjusted based on your format, but here's a score checklist for potential candidates:

Subject matter experts:

- Demonstrates ethical leadership practices and ethical practices in their field
- Has collaborative relationships with the public
- Are all the individuals of their field with a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter or the business
- Have a track record in their field
- Can complete themselves in their domain



Support with teams, tools and a strong process

A thought leadership program can include a range of participants including the growth office, marketing operations, brand, subject matter experts, writers, designers, digital media teams and analytics experts. A well-defined process is needed to coordinate across all these stakeholders, maintain a content engine and sustain a reliable publishing cadence.

The roadmap to thought leadership:

- Define program goals and metrics
- Identify your mission
- Establish an organizational foundation
- Build your network of subject matter experts
- Empower best practices for thought leadership content
- Measure your performance

Thought leadership is driving impact in a digital world.

O3/ Decision-makers are savvy

Your clients and prospects have the world at their fingertips. They are adept at searching for information that can help them make smart decisions. And by doing so, thought leadership is stronger. It directly impacts the performance of your business. Thought leadership is a tool for visibility and can exceed the impact of any other. Decision-makers have respect for organizations that can package their knowledge in a manner that is timely and useful.



6 Thought leadership programs leverage a mix of distribution channels.

It's best practice to deliver your content in the channels your audience prefers – which you will have discovered during persona development. But it's wise to begin in channels you own so you get your process established and your metrics in place.

Coach resources to show prospects through their social channels or share directly via email.

Establish the process on your owned channels and it will be easier to expand to the added requirements of paid media

Start with your website, paid search, email and social media.

Expand to paid social, display and sponsored content.

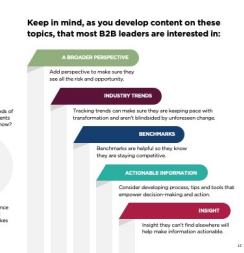
Tip: Provide your SMEs with customized checklists that highlight their contribution to the work.

3 Thought leadership topics advance perspective and action.

Look for the related links between your organizational initiatives – where your organization invests time and resources – and the market pressures or business needs of your audience. Where is the biggest shift? What are the critical problems your clients and prospects are trying to solve? What can you tell them that they don't already know?

Tip: Find what's missing in the conversation and bring a point of view that speaks to that.

Your private discovery will let you identify which topics are important to the audience and then you can build from that along with your organization. That responsibility is shared and ensure what goes next into industry conversations. Closing those gaps makes your content unique.



O1/ Great thought leadership programs can build brand trust

Responding to today's continually changing business landscape means facing a daily barrage of new business opportunities, marketing challenges, regulatory changes, technology advancements, economic pressures, consumer behavior and more. It's critical to ensure your audience is always on the lookout for some insight, idea or industry information that will strengthen their perspective and help inform their decision-making.


According to a recent study, 84% of respondents find authoritative thought leadership to be a more trustworthy source for assessing market conditions and movements than any other marketing message and content type.

64%

Advance to a subscription model and connected experience

START SMALL	SWING BIG	SCALE UP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find your champion Learn about audience Build your starter team Test, collect, learn Add new personas Deliver through content channels Learn more about audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add a few formats Increase audience Add topics Test, collect, learn Add new personas Deliver through content channels Build a content engine Learn more about audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add new formats Increase audience Deliver through content channels Add new personas Deliver through content channels Build a content engine Advance to a subscription model Learn more about audience

ANNUALLY	Quarterly	Research Report	Research Report
Article	White Paper	Living Firm Video	Webinar
		White Paper	Webinar
		White Paper	Webinar



**In an era of
disruption, leaders
need guidance.**

**Today's innovators are rewriting
the rules – together.**

Thought leadership is distinct from other branded communications in that its goal is not to sell, but to co-create insight for a better shared tomorrow.

5 REASONS THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IS RELEVANT RIGHT NOW

01 / Navigating change is difficult

Leaders face professional and financial risk when guiding change. Some have the strength to be leading innovators. But many more are early adopters or fast followers. They want to evolve but they seek guidance from those who have already walked the road-less-traveled. They appreciate counsel grounded in real-world experience on what works and what doesn't. Thought leadership acts as a map for these audiences to understand how the change will unfold, check in on how they compare with others, and collect ideas for how they can continue to advance.

02 / Expertise is under-tapped

Many professionals recognize themselves as experts, but not as authors. And yet, their knowledge and insight can be of significant value to your audience. By capturing their experience, thought leadership can share cutting-edge developments from pioneers in the field. It can connect your brand with ground-breaking work — revealing new tools, collaborations, frameworks and action that is delivering impact in a new way. Your internal experts and network of collaborators may be the industry's best-kept secret and your most powerful untapped resource.

Thought leadership is driving impact in a digital world.

03 / Decision-makers are savvy

Your clients and prospects have the world at their fingertips. They are adept at searching for information that can help them make smart decisions. And by its nature, thought leadership is unique. It attracts, inspires and influences by offering a fresh perspective, innovative content or a new point of view. Thought leaders guide the conversation in a field or industry and can expand the impact of new ideas. Decision-makers have respect for organizations that can package their knowledge in a manner that is timely and useful.





04 / Communications are multichannel

The buyer's journey is a winding road and flows in many directions — whether they are buying an idea, concept, solution or service. Your audience will gain awareness, build interest and consider their actions through web searches, at events, sharing with colleagues, engaging social media and reading trade pubs or traditional media. Thought leadership can travel in any format, through any environment, and can strengthen the brand relationship at every touchpoint. It's not there to sell, it's there to make the journey more intriguing. And it can be there every step of the way.

05 / Insight is evolving not fixed

Change and transformation happen over time. It has its own lifecycle. In the beginning, the ideas may seem strange or even revolutionary. As more players engage, the concepts grow and develop. As they mature, they can be measured and assessed. At this point, there is typically broad adoption, and the innovation cycle starts again. Audiences need information and guidance at every phase. New insight will continue to emerge with an eager audience waiting for an update. When speaking to change and innovation, thought leadership is in continual demand.

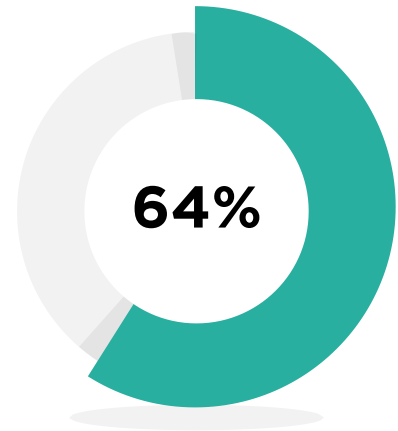


The power of thought leadership

3 business benefits to guide your strategy



01/ Great thought leadership programs can **build brand trust**



Succeeding in today's continually changing business landscape means facing a daily barrage of new business opportunities, workforce challenges, regulatory changes, technology advancements, economic pressures, consumer demands and stiff competition. An executive audience is always on the lookout for some insight, idea or trustworthy information that will strengthen their perspective and help inform their decision-making.

According to a LinkedIn study, 64% of management-level professionals find thought leadership to be a more trustworthy basis for assessing a vendor's capabilities and competency than are their marketing materials and product sheets.¹

Resources 1 <https://www.linkedin.com/business/marketing/blog/trends-tips/heres-what-todays-decision-makers-want-to-see-in-thought-leadership>



02/ Thought leadership can **expand brand influence and authority**

Decision-makers welcome a fresh perspective and even opposing points of view. It is here that thought leadership can be an invaluable business growth tool. It builds brand credibility, demonstrates leadership and can shape industry conversations. And when it's digital, it can travel anywhere.

Before any issue-related or sales conversations take place, thought leadership introduces decision-makers to an organization's depth of knowledge on a challenging topic. It explores a business problem and allows prospects to see themselves active in the solution. It is made stronger by bringing forward viewpoints from multiple experts or voices who might otherwise go unheard. Fresh insight intrigues the reader and provides talking points that support future conversations — with sales, or with colleagues and industry stakeholders. Thought leadership is the spark at the top of the relationship funnel.

Brands that are a go-to source for content not only attract prospects but also shape conversations, earn loyalty and have the level of brand authority that earns key partnerships and collaborations.






03/ Thought leadership programs can **harness the expertise of your teams and stakeholders**

Thought leadership allows you to showcase the knowledge, experience and insight that your organization already has but is not yet visible to the market.

With the rapid rate of transformation, your buyers want to know that you can navigate with them. And the number of buyers in a B2B purchase continues to rise, involving 10 to 20 stakeholders. That means you need to offer information they can use to meet enterprise-wide goals, not just departmental ones.

By leveraging your internal expertise, your industry relationships and even your client base, you can evoke the level and breadth of insight these decision-makers are looking for.



The power of thought leadership

7 best practices to protect your quality

1

Great thought leadership programs are **organized across the organization.**

Creating one piece of thought leadership is straightforward; however, creating a consistent cadence of relevant thought leadership that is embraced by internal stakeholders and your desired audience is much harder to do.

It requires a strong leader who can:



Bring together the right network of collaborators.

This often includes executive sponsors, marketing managers, subject matter experts, writers, designers, marketing operations, analytics and corporate communications.



Protect the quality of the content.

The champion needs to ensure that content remains in the thought leadership category and doesn't slide into promotional messaging or fail to include a point of view.



Promote the value of the program across their organization.

They continue to make a compelling case for why it deserves attention and support.



Support with teams, tools and a strong process

A thought leadership program can include a range of participants including the growth office, marketing operations, brand, subject matter experts, writers, designers, digital media teams and analytic experts. A well-defined process is needed to coordinate across all these stakeholders, maintain a content engine and sustain a reliable publishing cadence.

The roadmap to thought leadership:





Relevant thought leadership **serves an audience need.**

This cannot be overstated. Without a solid understanding of the preferences, needs and pressures your audience is facing, it is impossible to create content to match.

It's efficient to start with an organization's internal understanding of the audience, gleaned from sales and service insights and from the personal experience of key stakeholders. It is also imperative to continually layer on data from primary and secondary research.

As you learn about their tensions and topics of interest, you may uncover emerging pressures they face and new preferences they have about how, where and when they engage in content. Remember, these are people trying to solve difficult problems in turbulent environments.

Tip

The more human-centered the approach, the greater your success.

Opportunities to build audience insight:

- Internal interviews with the growth office
- Customer service requests or feedback
- Social profile audits, industry events, social media conversations
- Industry communications audit
- Secondary research, job postings
- Surveys
- Interviews
- Roundtables
- Webinar questions and discussions



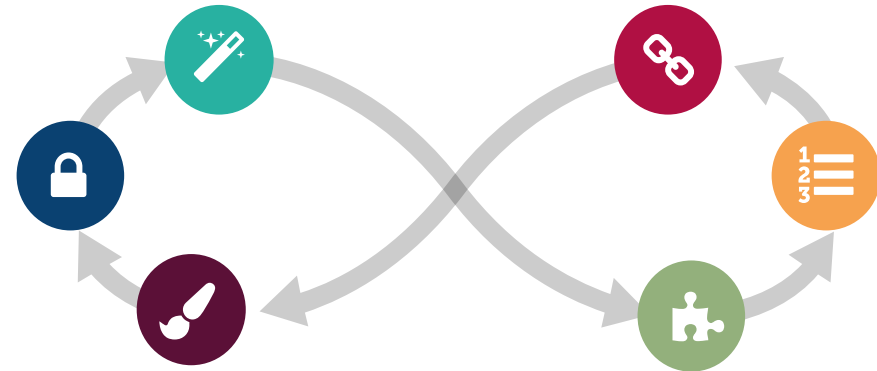
The goal is to recognize how external market disruption and internal business dynamics are creating pressure on their role and their performance. This is how you'll know what topics are most relevant. It should also tell you the other roles that live in their sphere of influence.



What important conversations are buyers having and how can your thought leadership assist those discussions?

Apply audience-centric copy and design

Creating audience persona can be a useful tool to anchor your creative choices. It can inform creative guidelines for the program so that you present information and insights in the visual and literal language your audience prefers. This guides keywords, program themes, photo selection and data visualization for each persona. For example, the way a CFO wants to receive information is quite specific and differs from the way a CHRO views the world. Persona-driven thought leadership makes subtle adjustments to sync up with the audience.



Employing keywords is good best practice but be sure to incorporate into your creative guidelines any language sensitivities, emerging terms and terms specific to their role.

Be certain that whoever is tasked with copywriting and designing your thought leadership understands your audience, how they take in information and their level of expertise with this topic. This is a consultative conversation, and the work needs to reflect the brand's point of view along with deep respect and solid understanding of the viewer. Without that, the insight is simply not relevant or credible.

3 Thought leadership topics advance perspective and action.

Look for the natural links between your organizational initiatives — where your organization invests time and resources — and the market pressures or business needs of your audience. Where is the industry stuck? What are the difficult problems your clients and prospects are trying to solve? What can you tell them that they don't already know?

Tip

Find what's missing in the conversation and bring a point of view that speaks to that.

Your persona discovery will let you identify which topics are important to this audience and then you can select those that align with your organization. Most importantly, it should also reveal what gaps exist in industry conversations. Closing those gaps makes your content unique.

Keep in mind, as you develop content on these topics, that most B2B leaders are interested in:

A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

Add perspective to make sure they see all the risk and opportunity.

INDUSTRY TRENDS

Tracking trends can make sure they are keeping pace with transformation and aren't blindsided by unforeseen change.

BENCHMARKS

Benchmarks are helpful so they know they are staying competitive.

ACTIONABLE INFORMATION

Consider developing process, tips and tools that empower decision-making and action.

INSIGHT

Insight they can't find elsewhere will help make information actionable.

4 Thought leadership brings experts into a community.

Criteria for subject matter experts (SMEs) can be adjusted based on your formats, but here's a core checklist for potential candidates:

Subject matter experts:

Offer a unique point of view

Demonstrate ethical behavior and promote ethical practices in their field

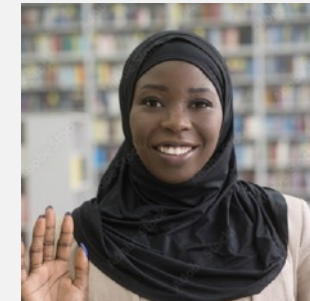
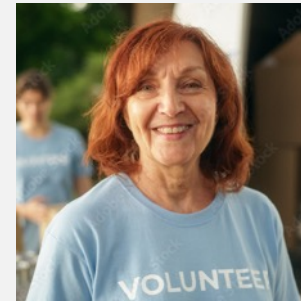
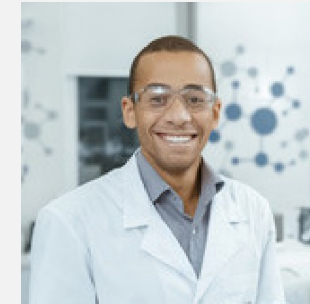
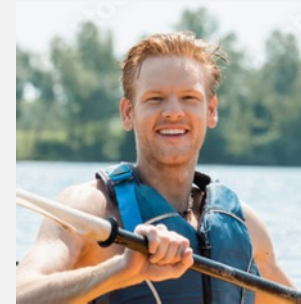
Are collaborative and able to flex with the process

Are at the forefront of their field with an in-depth understanding of the subject matter and/or the audience

Feel a genuine passion for the subject matter

Convey complex concepts in a clear manner

Consider if you will have just one SME for a single blog or if you are building an article that requires multiple perspectives. Look for referrals within your organization as well as experts from your organization's network of industry connections and partnerships.



Nurture your relationships with the experts

One of the most straightforward yet often overlooked aspects of developing thought leadership is nurturing your roster of subject matter experts. They are key to great content and can also become great advocates for your program!

1. Make sure they understand the difference between thought leadership and a public relations release or a product pitch. Spend a little time introducing them to your program and share examples of like articles and show them how they will be featured.
2. Allow enough space in your project plan to accommodate the demands of their "real" job. Provide them with a topic-specific discussion guide before any interview so they can think about what key points they feel are important to bring forward — the idea is to probe and direct the interview, not to script it.
3. Allow interviews to evolve into meaningful discussions. Ideally, the questions from your discussion guide will open up new territory that is richer than planned. Allow for that.
4. You will discover that some SMEs have superpowers and can not only provide a point of view but also support speaking, podcast and webinar opportunities. Be ready to foster those opportunities.
5. Remember, their social feeds are another distribution channel for your thought leadership. So, prepare to support them with email and social promotional content.



Tip

Bring your audience in as an expert. Tee them up as content contributors. These could be partners, collaborators, clients or prospects. People trust their peers, and this makes your content more credible.

5

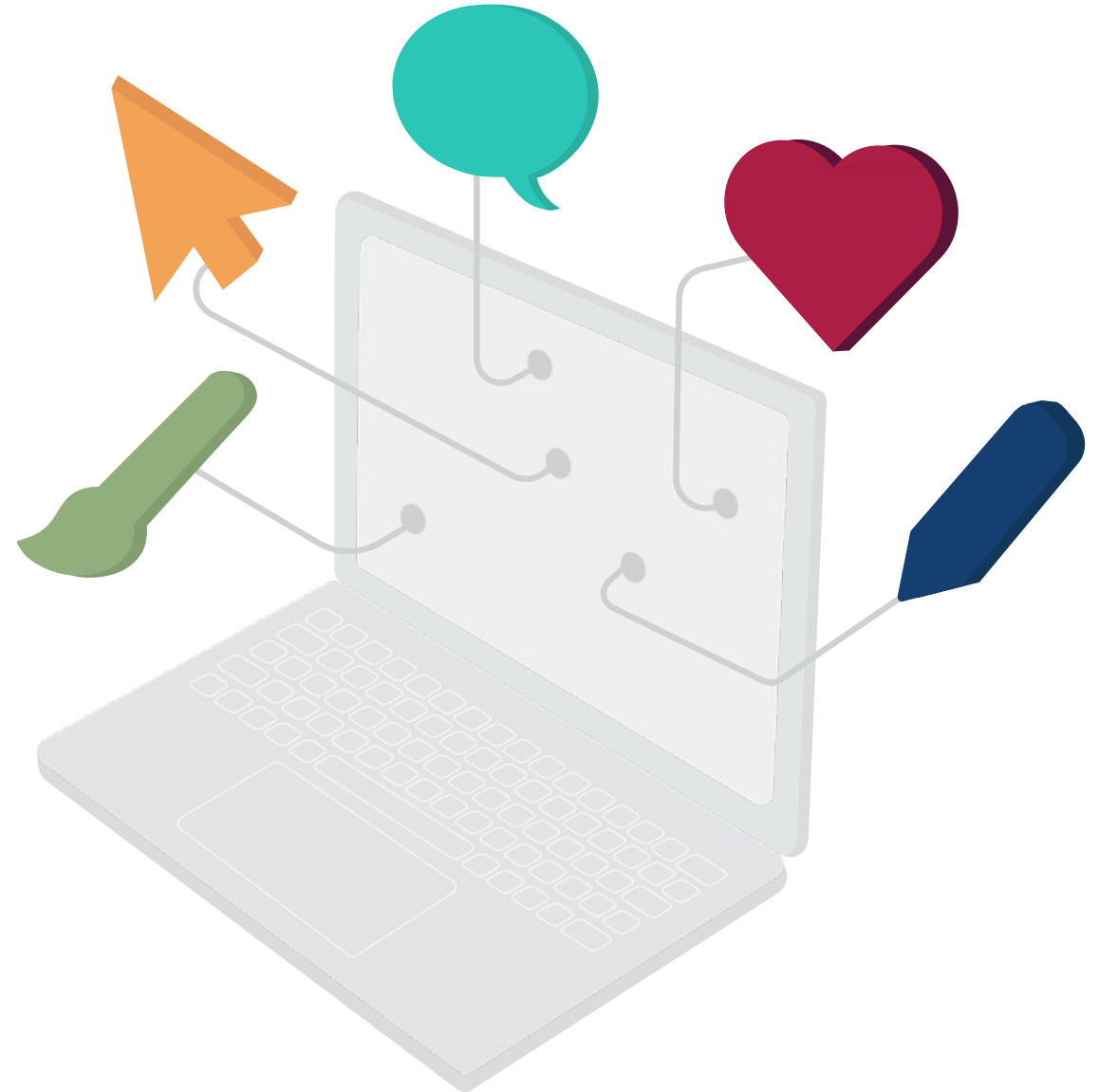
Thought leadership programs **can build over time.**

If writers and designers don't know how your audiences want to consume a story or point of view, then it won't ever get more than a glance. Be sure the creative team knows if your readers are conceptual thinkers that will respond to abstract imagery and overarching principles or are concrete thinkers who rely on facts, tangible details and observable data. Do they require person-first storytelling or look for a sequence of events and actions in the narrative? Are they visual or literal readers?

All the best practices of good creative still hold, but adding human-centered design considerations make it more compelling to your audience.

Tip

Be sure you're sharing a fresh insight or a new perspective. Go ahead and challenge the status quo but give your audience tips or tools they can use right away.



Continually test how audiences respond to your content

Along with knowing your audience, and employing brilliant creative teams, put your creative to the test. Test subject lines, headlines, calls-to-action, formats, story structures, copy and layout. Continually iterate, learn and refine. Testing will change based on objectives, formats and channels but persistent analysis provides the data that can guide creative decisions and improve performance. Great creative has a job to do, and great thought leadership needs to connect to a specific audience that is solving a specific problem.



Actions for creative excellence



Create for your specific audience.
Know them well.



Craft a new point-of-view and
give them news they can use.



Make the design as fresh as
the insight.



Test and refine and test and
refine and test and refine.

6

Thought leadership programs leverage **a mix of distribution channels.**

It's a best practice to deliver your content in the channels your audience prefers — which you will have discovered during persona development. But it's wise to begin in channels you own as you get your process established and your metrics in place.

Establish the process on your owned channels and it will be easier to expand to the added requirements of paid media



Start with your website, paid search, email and brand social channels.



Expand to paid social, display and sponsored content.

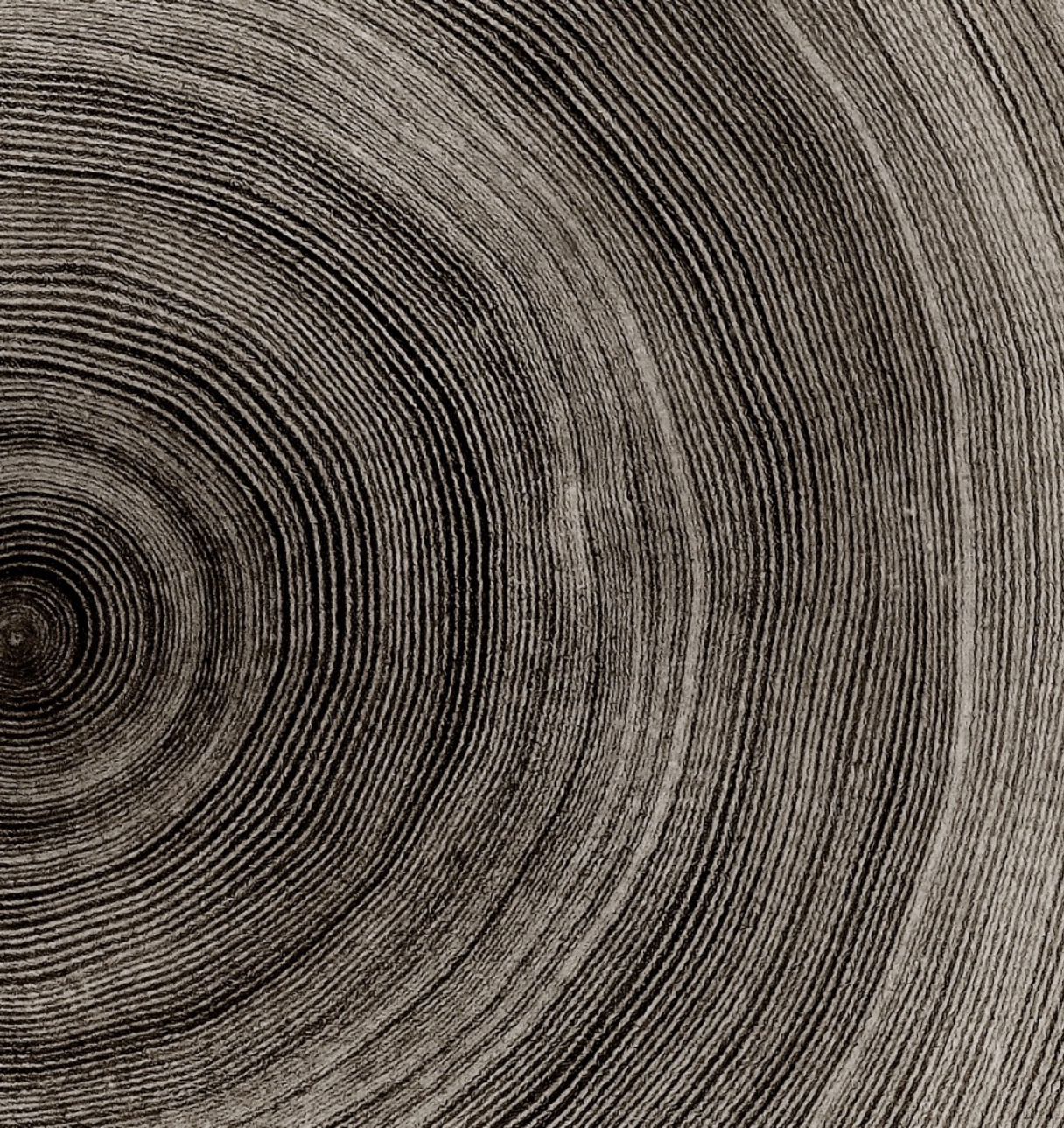
Incorporate webinars, speaking engagements and events into your program.



Coach executives on how to promote through their social channels or share directly via email.



Provide your SMEs with customized social posts that feature their contribution to the work.



Amplify and nurture your program

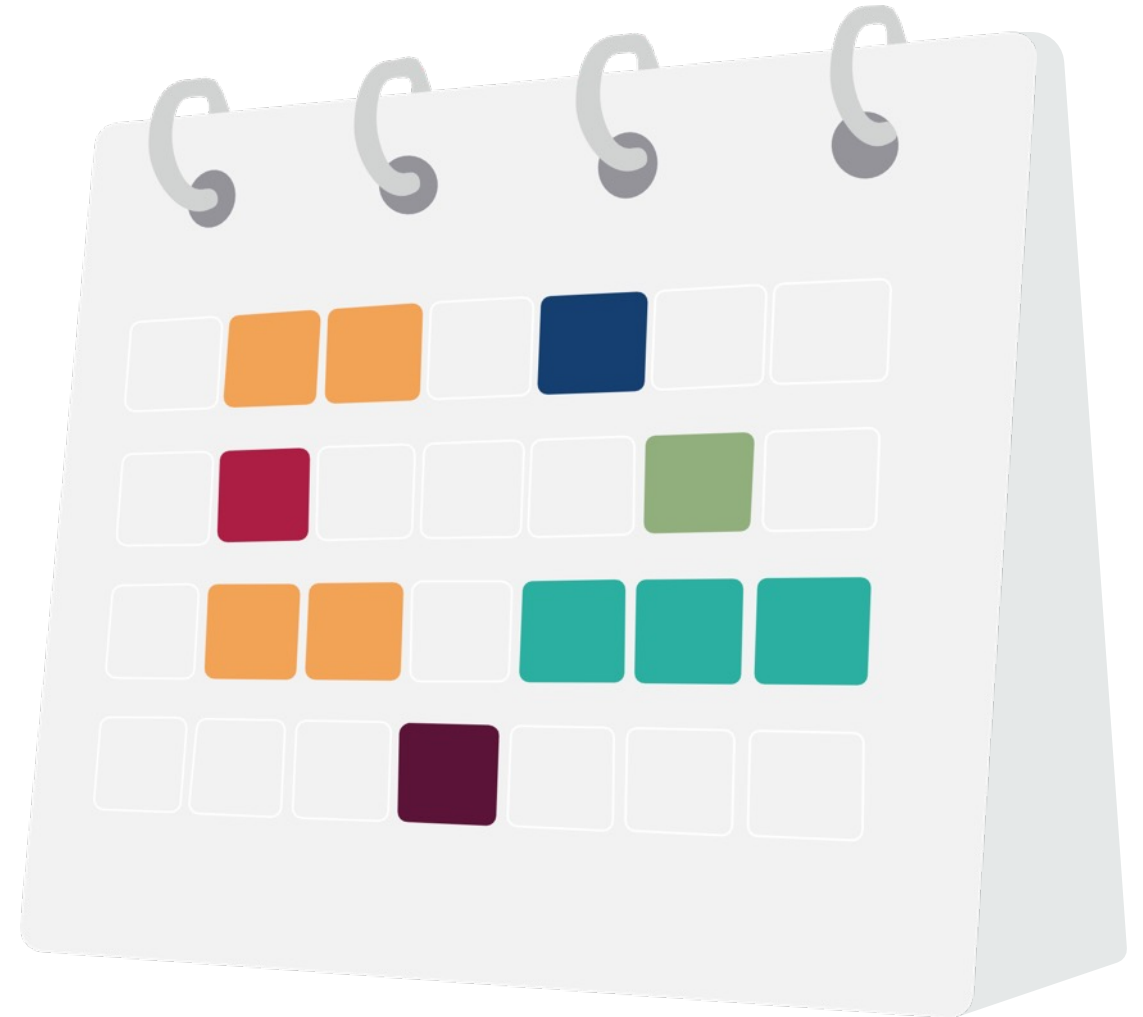
- Once you've identified the topics, formats and channels that audiences prefer and you have a well-run content engine, you can consider a subscription model or gated content. These are superb ways to measure engagement if your brand's other content is well-established. If your organization has plenty of "free" content, your premium thought leadership should consider a gate or a subscription mechanism.
- As you evolve your distribution channels, your metrics will evolve as well — ideally being able to connect your thought leadership efforts to influence on brand sentiment, advancement in the sales funnel and revenue. Aligning with the analytics team is another task for the champion. Results are what they need to advocate for the program.
- Feedback from relationship managers, growth officers and sales leaders should tell you that your thought leadership is doing its job of building trust at the top of the funnel.

7 An appropriate cadence is consistent.

You will need to decide how often you can and should publish. Part of this will be determined by what your organization can commit to and what is already being pushed out to this audience. It's critical to understand the frequency with which your audience wants to consume information and how else your organization is reaching out. This way you can find the right balance to achieve an "always on" cadence.

Tip

Match your cadence to audience appetites and your ability to deliver quality content.



Map out a reasonable plan

Growth occurs by adding more topics or more formats and by increasing frequency or adding new personae to the mix. It is during this growth that the champion will need to determine which dials to turn while continuing to protect the integrity of the content.

Take care not to grow too fast. There is no doubt that as national events unfold, industries transform and organizations grow, so will your thought leadership program. But having these components in place will help ensure the program can evolve with you.

The one element that is most crucial is the champion — the leader who will identify and address obstacles to success, find solutions, rally support and navigate any challenges that arise.

They remain committed to the life of the program, monitoring progress and inspiring their team and their stakeholders.



Start with what you can responsibly manage.



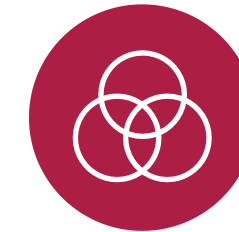
Have a long-term plan that grows with your performance.



Gain momentum with incremental wins.



Commit to the quality of the content.



Build internal capacity and external relationships.



Remember that it takes time.

Advance to a subscription model and connected experience

Start Small while you establish your internal content development and publishing process. With this “starter set” you can work through the kinks of your processes and test the performance of the distribution channels, subject lines, search terms and topics. With performance metrics in hand, you can confidently Swing Big — adding rich formats, new topics, and distribution channels. Once the foundation is set, you can confidently Scale Up.

START SMALL

- Find your champion
- Learn about persona
- Build your starter team
- Test subject lines, search terms
- Distribute through owned channels

SWING BIG

- Add a few formats
- Increase cadence
- Add topics
- Test distribution channels
- Add new persona
- Test creative
- Refine creative and marketing ops processes
- Grow team
- Learn more about persona

SCALE UP

- Add new formats
- Add distribution channels
- Refine based on metrics
- Add new persona
- Increase SME involvement
- Advance to a subscription model

ANNUALLY		Research Report	Research Report
QUARTERLY	Article	White Paper	Long Form Video Webinar White Paper Data Stories
MONTHLY	Blog	Article	Short form video / animation Article
WEEKLY		Blog	Podcast Blog Curated Content



The power of thought leadership

3 steps to get you started



01 Ready your organization

Getting thought leadership into market requires goals, content assets, cross-functional teams, distribution channels and metrics. Begin with what you have, get the engine up and running, and aim for a few quick and measurable wins.

Identify an internal champion

The program will need someone who can guide it across the organization.

Build relationships

Consider connecting across brand, marketing, communications, and marketing operations.

Assess competencies

Review existing content, distribution channels and analytic capabilities.

02 Set your goals

Set goals for program performance as well as internal milestones for building the engine that will create content and get it effectively out into the market. Here are some questions to get you started and to keep you on track.

What are the measurable goals that will drive business value?

Which personae will you prioritize at launch?

Which internal stakeholders do you need to get on board?

Why is this a business imperative?

How do internal capabilities need to grow or expand to support your program?

What external support do you need?



03 Advance with confidence

With your goals in place, you are ready to build out the four cornerstones of your program. Each of these is vital and plays a unique role. There will be lots of learning at the start — understanding your audience, gaining agreement on your content plan, discovering what topics and formats your audience prefers, and finding the channels where they prefer to connect. But your teams can trust in the goals, the champion and the process to sail forward.

Persona Development

Guide your content with a unique understanding of what your audience needs.

Content Strategy

Map your content to align with market events, brand objectives and sales conversations.

Content Creation

Build in capacity to keep an "always on" cadence that keeps your audience engaged.

Distribution Channels

Extend your reach by leverage owned, paid and executive media channels.

Generate the Power of Thought Leadership

We can help

Mindsailing has helped national and global brands grow award-winning and revenue-driving thought leadership programs. We would love to partner with you as you put the power of thought leadership to work for your business.



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