

HOW THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IMPACTS B2B DEMAND GENERATION

An Edelman-LinkedIn Research Study



Powered by **LinkedIn**



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Executive Summary

Strong Thought Leadership Makes Headlines. But Does It Also Create Demand?

For B2B companies, demonstrating insights on timely issues and trends affecting their industries is an effective way to capture customers' attention and create competitive differentiation. To this end, publishing thought leadership has become an important method for engaging potential customers.

But beyond its ability to drive awareness, the impact of thought leadership on generating business opportunities has for many companies been difficult to evaluate. Our study of 1,300 business decision makers and C-suite executives finds that thought leadership goes beyond gaining attention and impacts every stage of the B2B buying process. Poorly executed, however, thought leadership becomes a double-edged sword that not only damages credibility but may

remove your firm from consideration by potential customers. In fact, most respondents are disappointed by the lack of valuable insights gained from thought leadership content. Despite the strong business development advantages that thought leadership appears to deliver, there's clearly room for improvement.

To better understand how thought leadership impacts demand in B2B purchase decisions—including the risks associated with poor thought leadership efforts and how companies can avoid such pitfalls—Edelman and LinkedIn asked business decision makers across several industries how thought leadership affects their own purchase behaviors. The results may surprise you.



Thought leadership has sales impact beyond driving awareness

It attracts invitations to bid (RFPs), earns buyer preference by building trust, directly contributes to wins, and can even impact pricing



Disappointment with overall quality of thought leadership

86% of thought leadership consumed is considered merely good, mediocre or poor in quality, according to surveyed business decision-makers



About The Study

What is Thought Leadership?

Thought leadership is a highly subjective term that varies widely according to factors such as industry, topic and target audience. Rather than universally define thought leadership for a wide range of respondents, this study instead aims to understand how thought leadership influences B2B purchase behaviors.

For the purpose of this study, thought leadership refers to:

“Free deliverables that organizations or individuals produce on a topic that they know a lot about, and they feel others can benefit from having their perspective on. Thought leadership, in this context, does not include content primarily focused on describing an organization’s products or services.”

Thought leadership, in this context, does not include:

- Content primarily focused on describing an organization’s products or services
- Paid-for client deliverables
- Subscription services
- Reports that must be purchased

Formats of thought leadership include, but are not limited to:

- Research reports
- Thought pieces
- Essays
- Videos
- Webinars
- Presentations (live or published online)
- Similar such items that organizations make freely available (or in return for submitting contact information)



About The Study

Survey Respondents and Methodology

To help B2B companies understand the impact of thought leadership, Edelman and LinkedIn surveyed 1,329 U.S. business decision makers across a wide range of industries and company sizes.

Seniority Level

Manager	43%
Director	33%
Vice President	10%
CXO, Partner, Owner	14%

Company Size (Employees)

1-100	27%
101-1000	30%
1001-10,000	23%
10,001+	21%

Data collection

Online, using the LinkedIn platform to survey LinkedIn members

Fielding dates

October-November, 2016

Survey length

10-15 Minutes

Margin of Error

Total Sample +/- 2.8%
C-Suite Executives +/- 7.2%
Creators of Thought Leadership: +/- 3.7%

Vetting Role

Give input	50%
Manage the process	27%
Final decision maker	23%

Additional Segments

Works for organization that produces thought leadership	51%
Works in high tech industry	20%



A hand in a dark suit sleeve is watering a small, leafy plant shaped like a dollar sign. The plant is in a white pot. The background is a textured wall. The entire image has a blue tint.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

How Thought Leadership Influences
B2B Purchase Behaviors

Overview of Key Findings

Thought leadership influences customer purchase behaviors across the entire purchase funnel

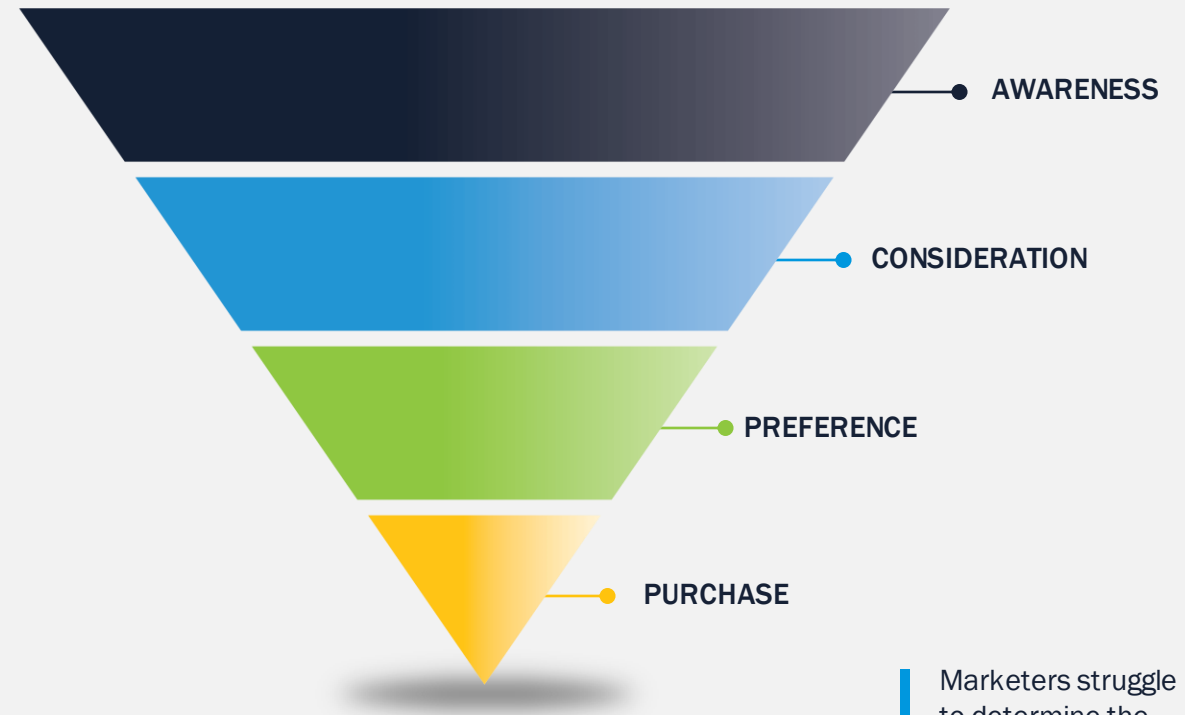
It leads decision-makers to invite companies to bid on projects (RFPs), creates preference with buyers and deal influencers, directly contributes to winning business opportunities and can influence a buyer's willingness to pay a premium for products or services.

Compared to decision-makers, creators of thought leadership tend to underestimate its impact on influencing sales

Beyond its ability to drive awareness, very few creators of thought leadership—typically marketers and communicators within an organization—asccribe downstream marketing and sales impact to their own thought leadership efforts.

B2B decision-makers are generally disappointed with the quality of thought leadership they consume

They view most thought leadership efforts as merely good, mediocre or poor in quality due to a lack of valuable insights gained from reading such content. Given its potential to influence buying decisions, improving thought leadership quality is a missed opportunity for most companies.



Marketers struggle to determine the actual impact and effectiveness of thought leadership in the buying process

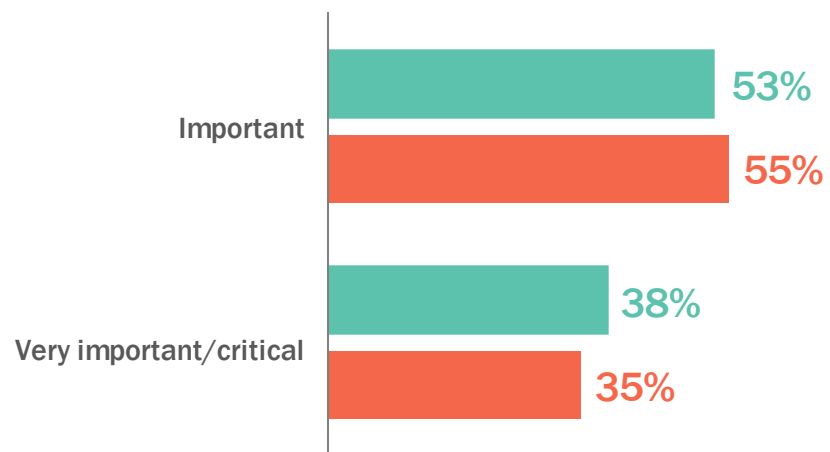




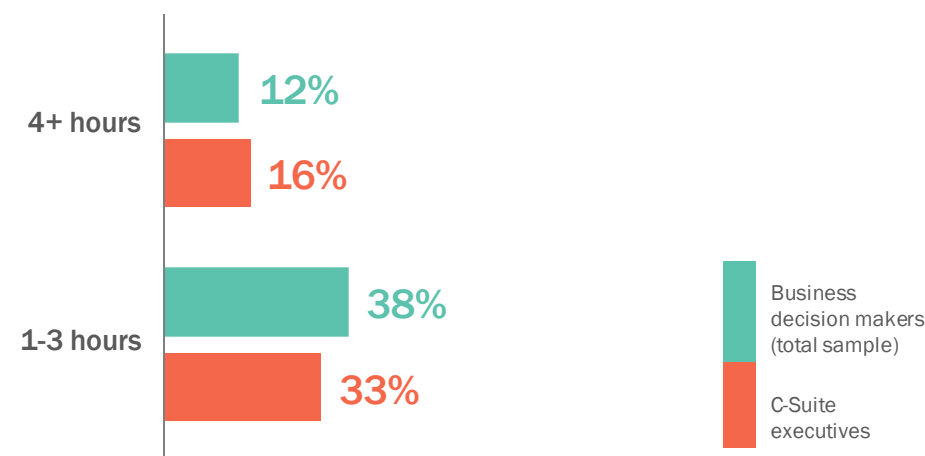
Decision makers value thought leadership and consistently spend time with it.

Business decision makers find thought leadership important, even critical. More surprising: 16% of CXOs spend four hours or more per week engaging with it.

9 in 10 find it important



Half spend an hour or more/week

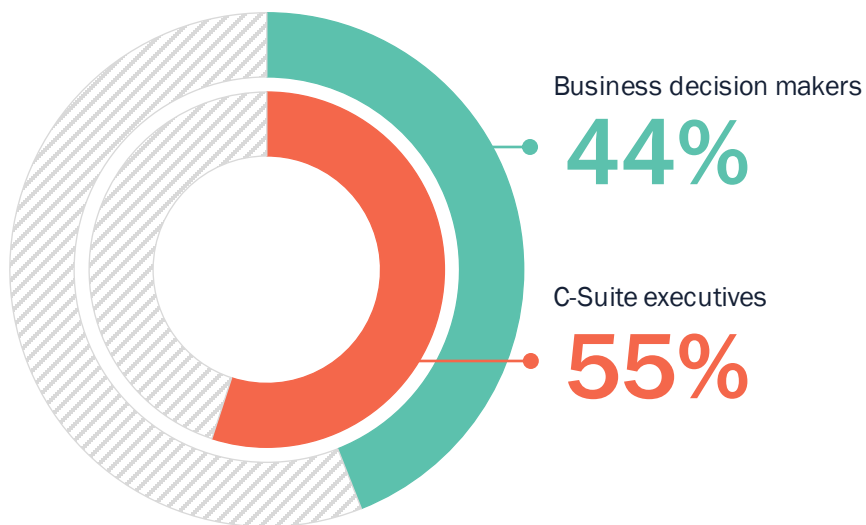


Source: 2017 Edelman/LinkedIn Study "How Thought Leadership Impacts B2B Demand Generation." [POV] How important do you think it is that organizations produce thought leadership which lays out a vision or point-of-view on important topics? [TIME] On average, how much time per week do you spend reading and viewing thought leadership?

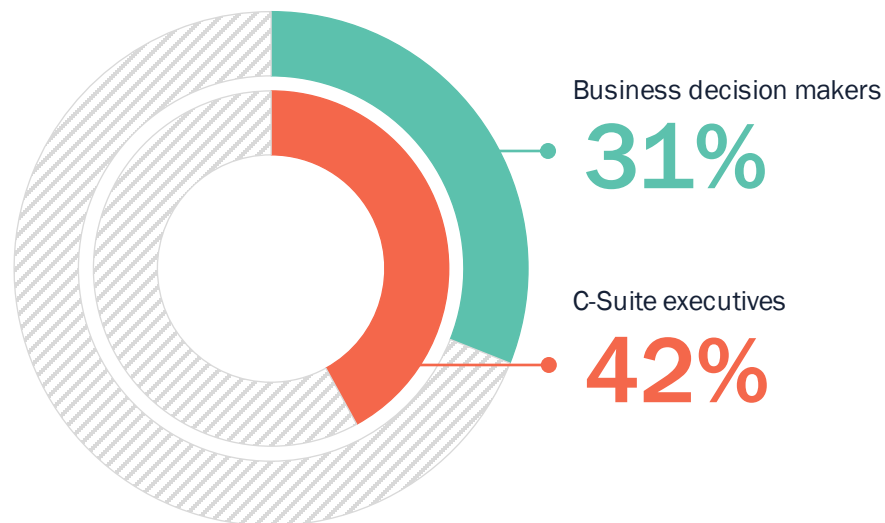


Thought leadership is key to gaining the attention of decision makers in the awareness stage of the purchase funnel.

“Gave the organization my contact information”



“Reached out to the organization to follow up”



THE ATTRIBUTION GAP

How creators of thought leadership view its impact compared to decision-makers

42%

“It helps with lead generation.”

33%

“It generates incoming calls from potential clients.”

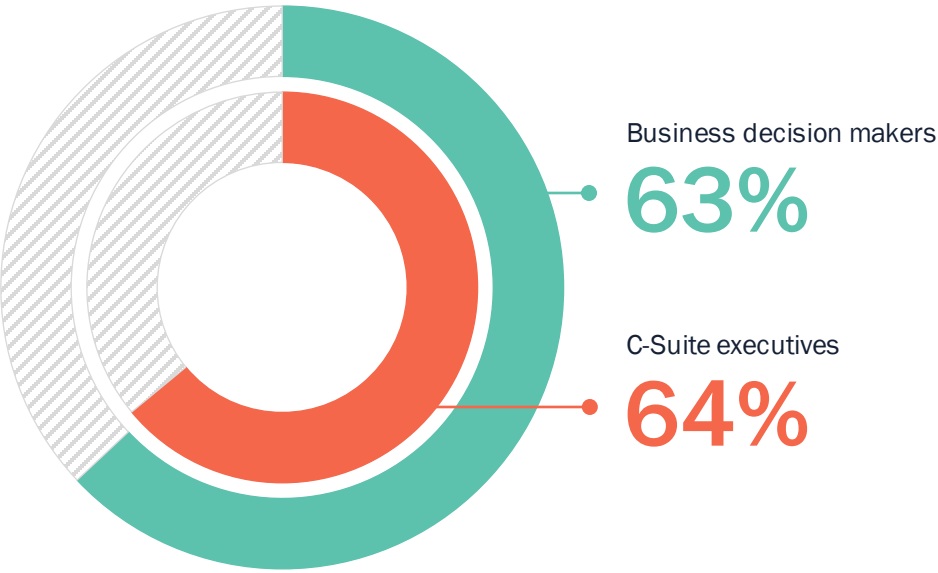
Source: 2017 Edelman/LinkedIn Study "How Thought Leadership Impacts B2B Demand Generation." Producer – [NEW] Within your organization, is thought leadership effective in generating new business? Yes, it helps us with lead generation and getting new contacts that we can call on/Yes, it makes it more likely that potential clients will return or answer our calls/Yes, it generates incoming calls from potential clients. **INSTRUCTIONAL TEXT:** select all that apply; Consumer - [ENGAGED] How frequently has the following occurred after you have engaged with a piece of thought leadership? You started following the writer/organization to automatically receive their update /You gave the organization your contact information for follow up /You reached out to the organization/writer that produced the content to follow up on some of the points raised. (Net of sometimes, often, and almost every time.



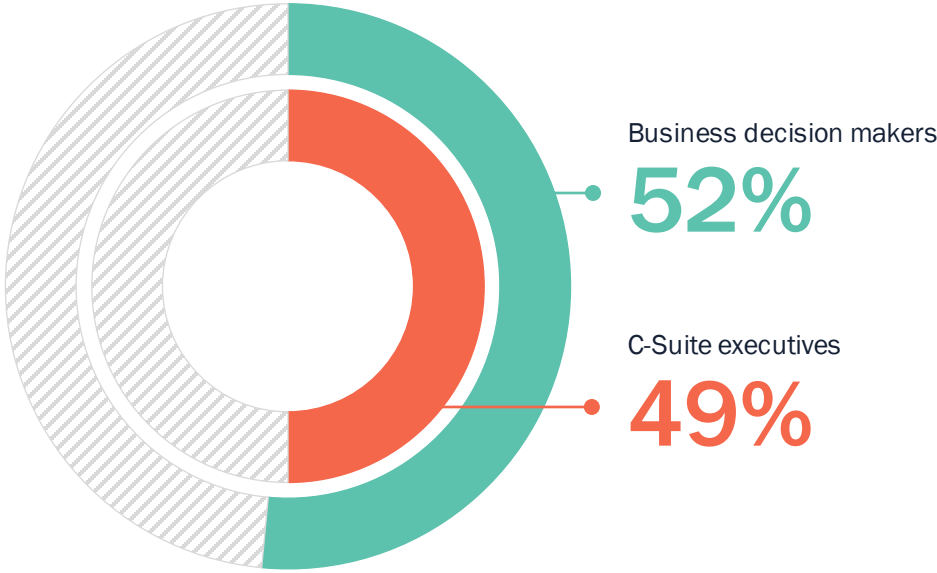


A majority of business decision makers use thought leadership to vet an organization and understand its caliber of thinking.

“Reading thought leadership is one of the best ways to get a sense of the type and caliber of thinking an organization is likely to deliver.”



“Looking through its thought leadership is one important way I vet an organization.”



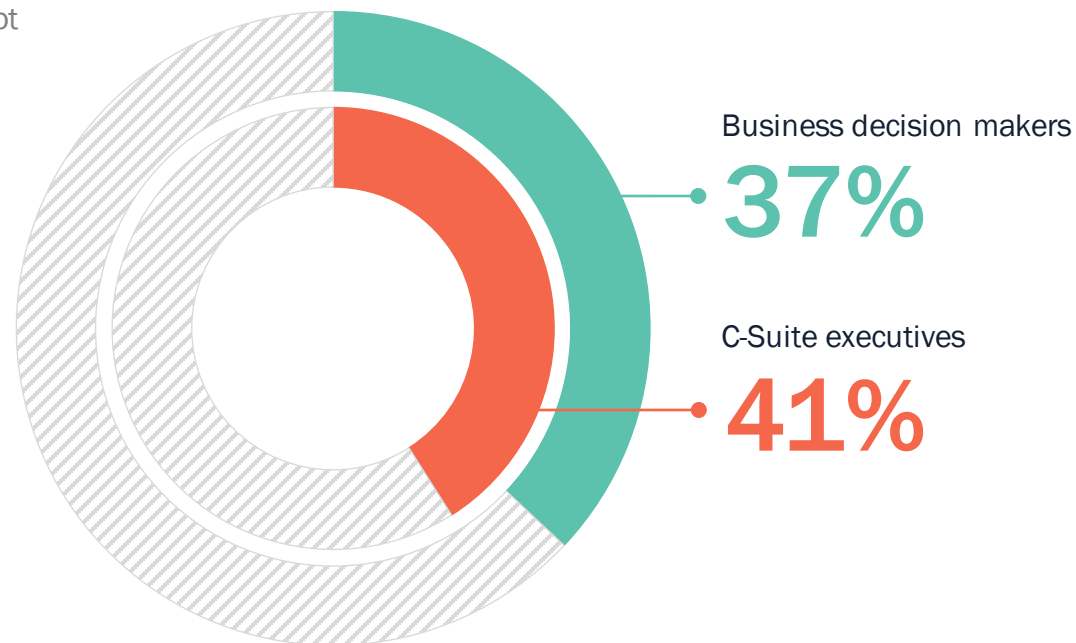
Source: 2017 Edelman/LinkedIn Study "How Thought Leadership Impacts B2B Demand Generation." Producer - [NEW] Within your organization, is thought leadership effective in generating new business? Yes, it gets us more RFPs. INSTRUCTIONAL TEXT: select all that apply; Consumer - [PREMIUM] How much do you agree or disagree with these statements? Reading its thought leadership publications is one of the best ways to get a sense of the type and caliber of thinking an organization is likely to deliver to its clients. Looking through its thought leadership publications is one important way I vet an organization that I am thinking about working with (Top 2-Box Agree). [ENGAGED] How frequently has the following occurred after you have engaged with a piece of thought leadership? You invited the organization or person that produced the piece to bid or propose on a project when you had not been considering them previously (Net of sometimes, often, and almost every time).



Thought leadership led to 41% of C-Suite executives including a company in an RFP opportunity.

“After seeing its thought leadership, (I/we) invited an organization to propose on a project.”

Note: Refers to RFPs where the vendor was not previously in the buyers' consideration set.



THE ATTRIBUTION GAP

How creators of thought leadership view its impact compared to decision-makers

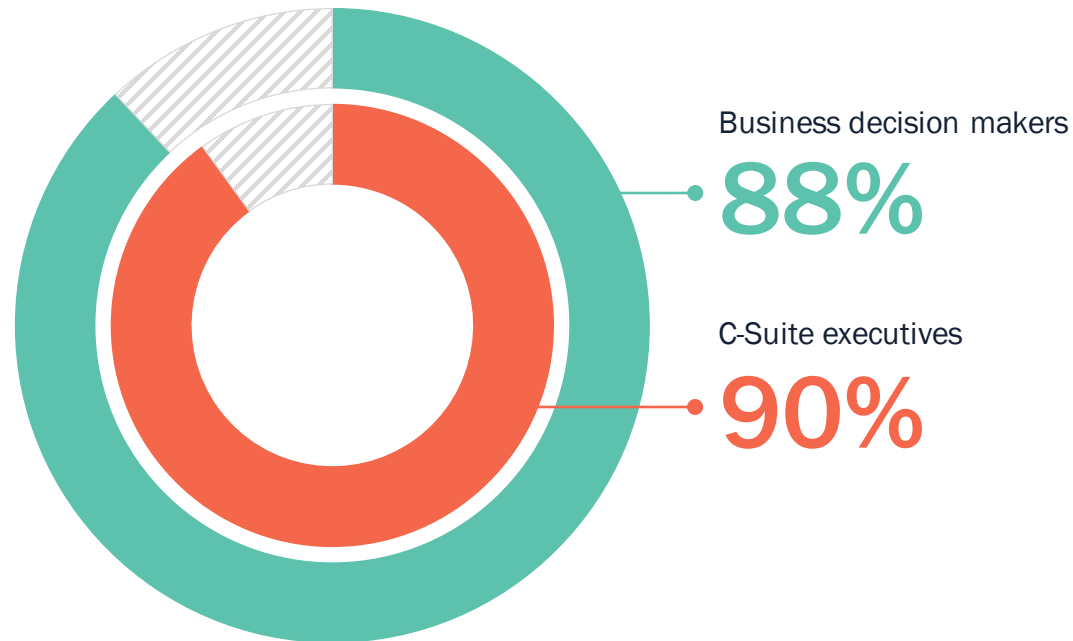
17%

of creators who publish thought leadership believe that it attracts RFP opportunities to their business.



Strong thought leadership increases the respect and admiration of decision-makers.

“My respect and admiration for the organization increased (after engaging with thought leadership).”



THE ATTRIBUTION GAP

How creators of thought leadership view its impact compared to decision-makers

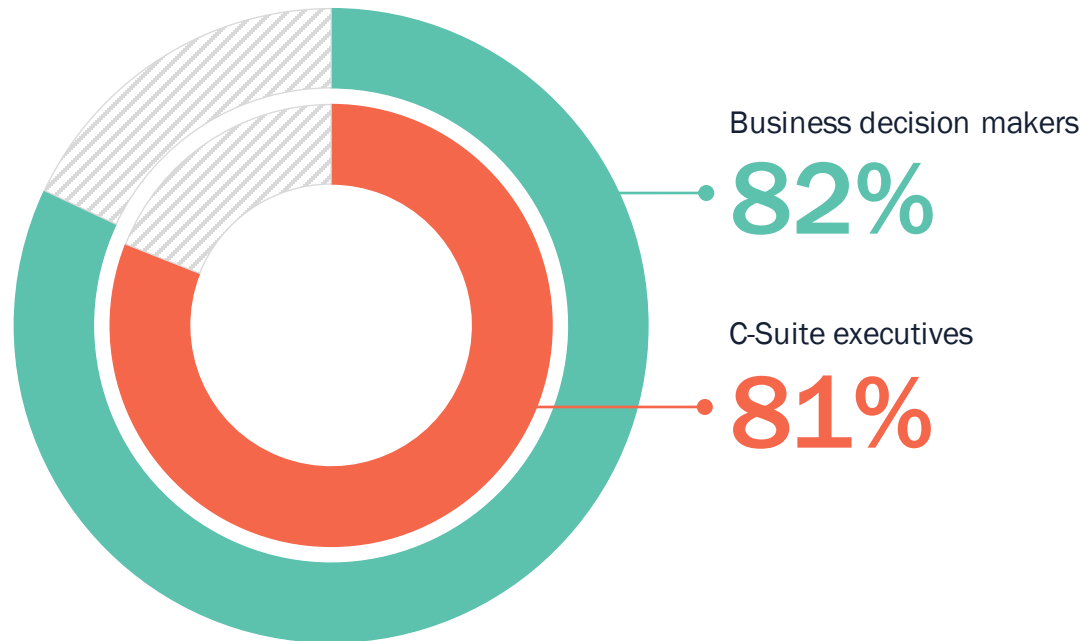
60%

of creators who publish thought leadership believe that it enhances their organization's brand reputation.



Over 80% of business decision makers said thought leadership has increased their trust in a vendor organization.

“It (thought leadership) increased my trust in the organization.”



THE ATTRIBUTION GAP

How creators of thought leadership view its impact compared to decision-makers

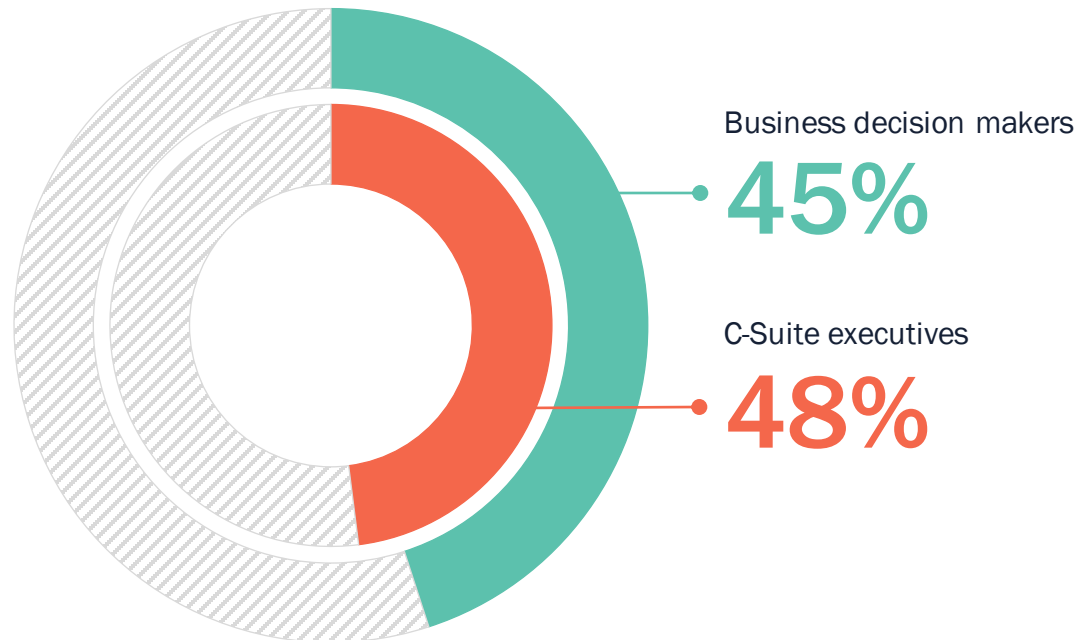
49%

of creators who publish thought leadership believe that it builds trust with potential customers.



Nearly half of business decision makers said thought leadership has directly led them to award business to a company.

“It (thought leadership) has directly led me to decide to business to a company.”



THE ATTRIBUTION GAP

How creators of thought leadership view its impact compared to decision-makers

20%

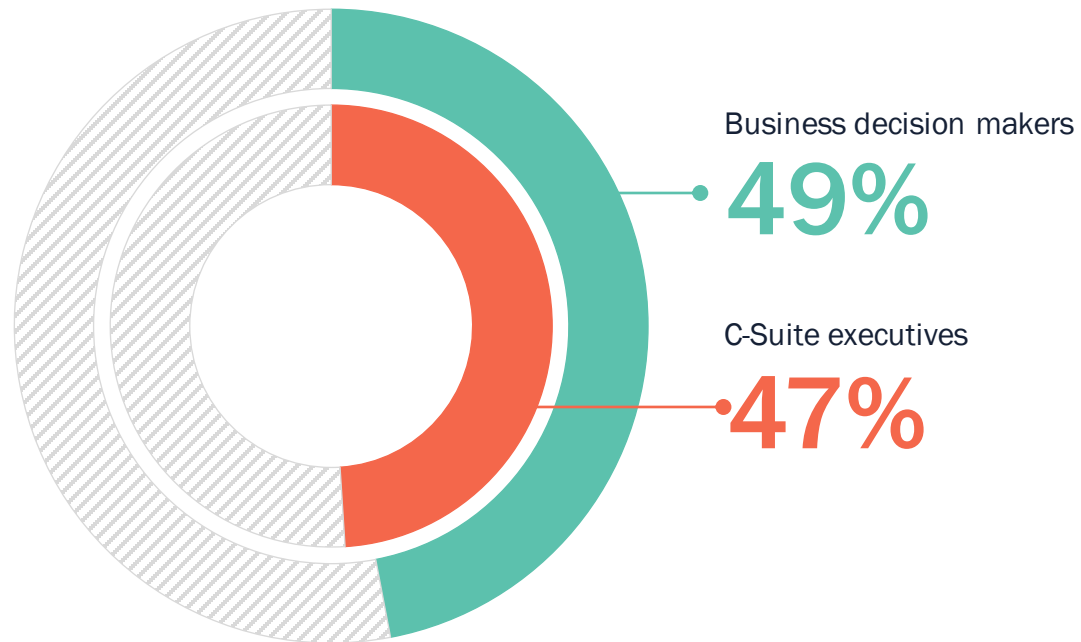
of the creators of thought leadership said “it helps us close and win.”

Compared to decision-makers, thought leadership is more than 2X as effective at helping to win business than its creators believe.



Close to half of decision-makers feel thought leadership helps companies command a premium for their products and services.

"I am more willing to pay a premium to work with an organization that has publicly articulated a clear vision for the future."



THE ATTRIBUTION GAP

How creators of thought leadership view its impact compared to decision-makers

10%

of creators said thought leadership "allows us to charge more than our competitors who produce lower quality thought leadership."

Compared to decision-makers, thought leadership is nearly 5X as effective at commanding a premium for products and services than its creators believe.



A man in a dark suit is seen from behind, with his right hand on his head in a gesture of stress or confusion. He is surrounded by numerous blue arrows of various sizes, all pointing to the left. A single, large yellow arrow points to the right, standing out prominently from the rest of the scene. The background is a dark, textured blue.

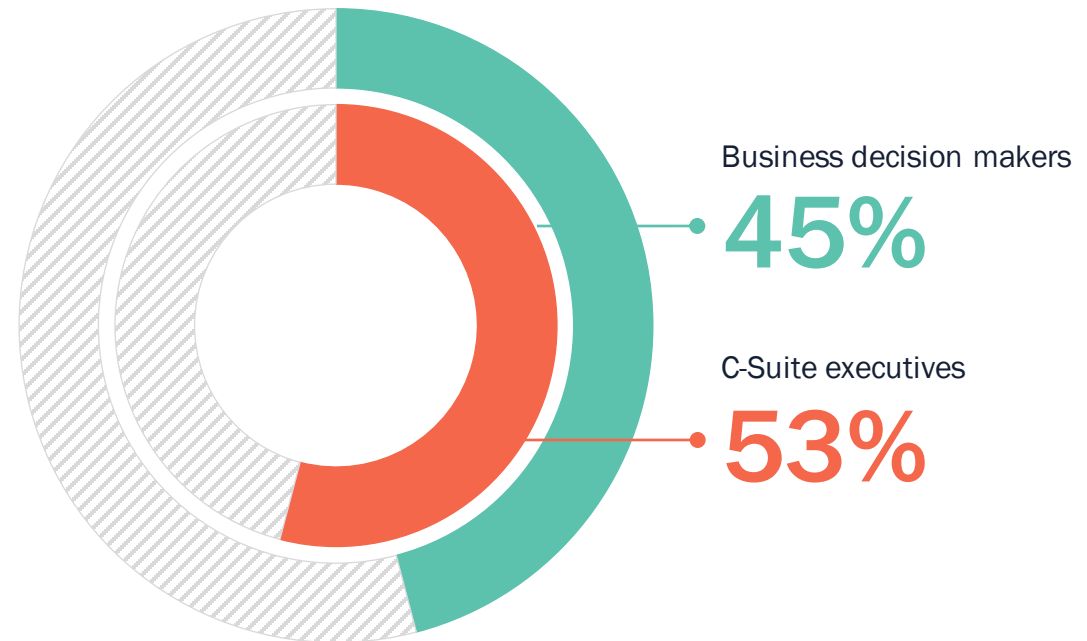
**THOUGHT LEADERSHIP CAN
BE A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD**

More than half of C-Suite decision makers have lost respect and admiration for an organization because of its poor thought leadership content.

Up to this point, we've seen that thought leadership offers many underestimated and potentially unrealized advantages to its producers.

But, as we'll see later, not all thought leadership rates as "good" or even rises to "mediocre." When it is executed poorly or fails to connect with an audience, it can serve as a net detriment to business development. At the Preference stage, for example, business decision-makers indicated that a company's thought leadership resulted in a decrease in trust and admiration.

"My respect and admiration for the organization DECREASED."



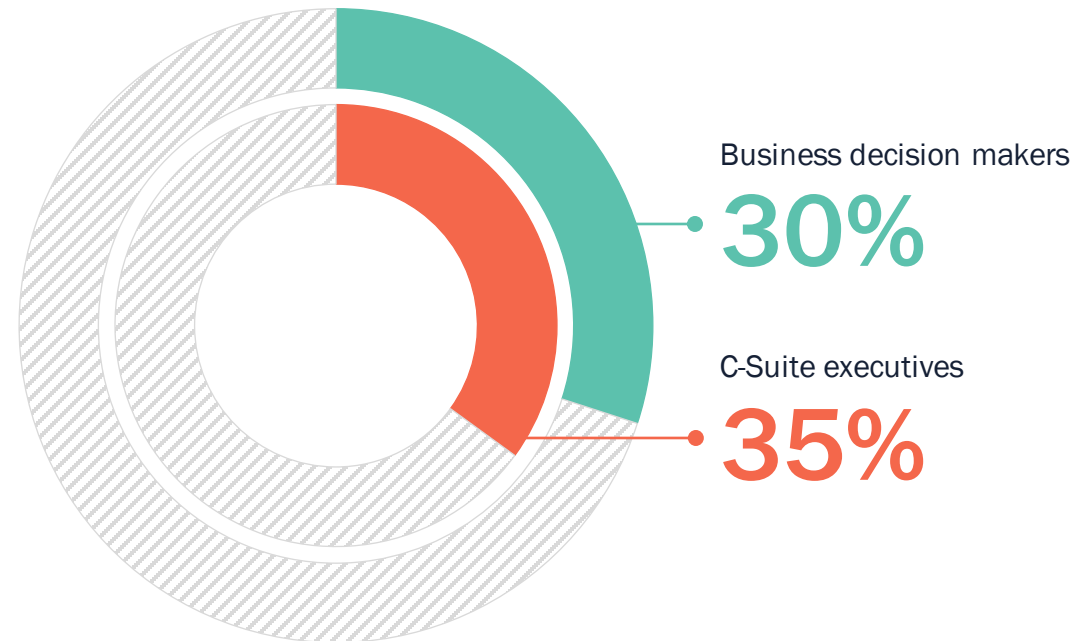
Over 30% of business decision makers have removed companies from consideration after engaging with what they viewed as poor thought leadership content.

Once again, we find that thought leadership must be handled carefully. Potential customers factor quality of thought leadership into their evaluation and buying processes.

When it needed to count the most—closing the sale—companies' thought leadership resulted in roughly a third of the surveyed business decision makers indicating that it decided not to reward its authors with their business.

The lesson: thought leadership requires care in its crafting but also its delivery. Our survey offers guidance here as well.

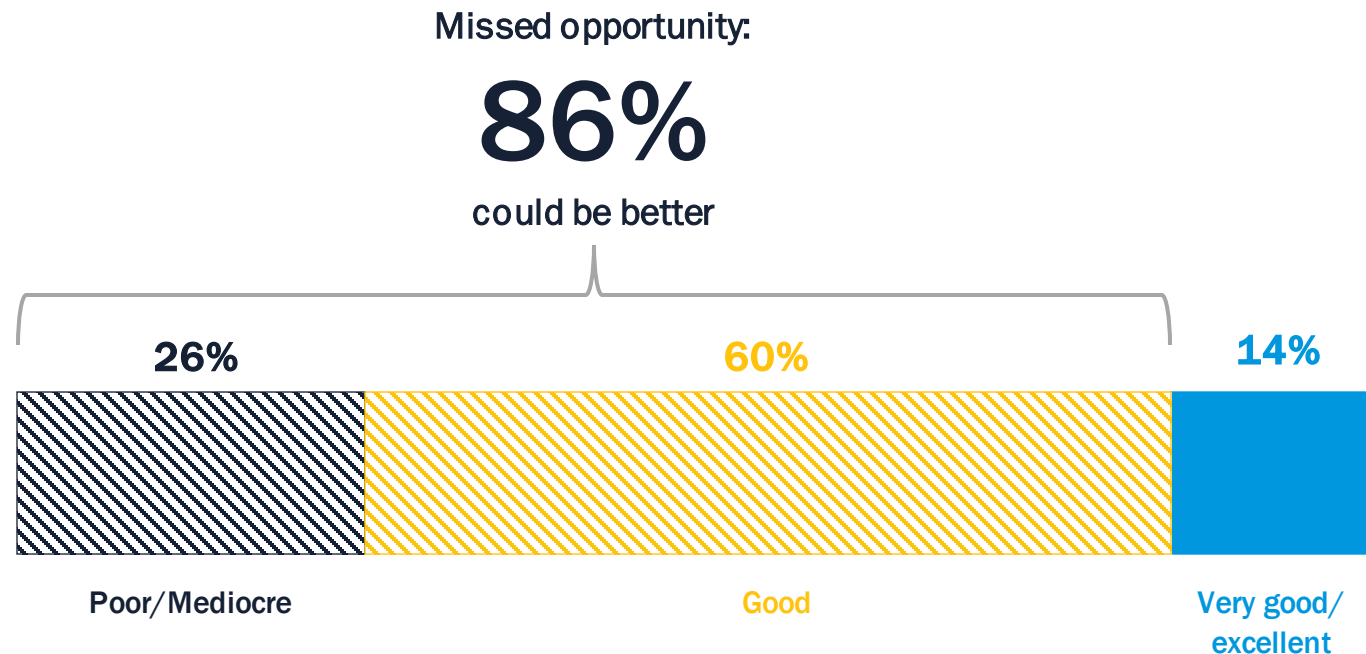
“Directly led me to decide to NOT award a piece of business to a company.”





**WHAT DRIVES
ENGAGEMENT WITH
THOUGHT LEADERSHIP**

Nearly 1 in 2 business decision makers are disappointed in the overall quality of thought leadership and nearly all feel it is a missed opportunity.



Percentage of the time respondents gain valuable insight from thought leadership:

44%

Percentage of survey respondents who are disappointed by this:

51%

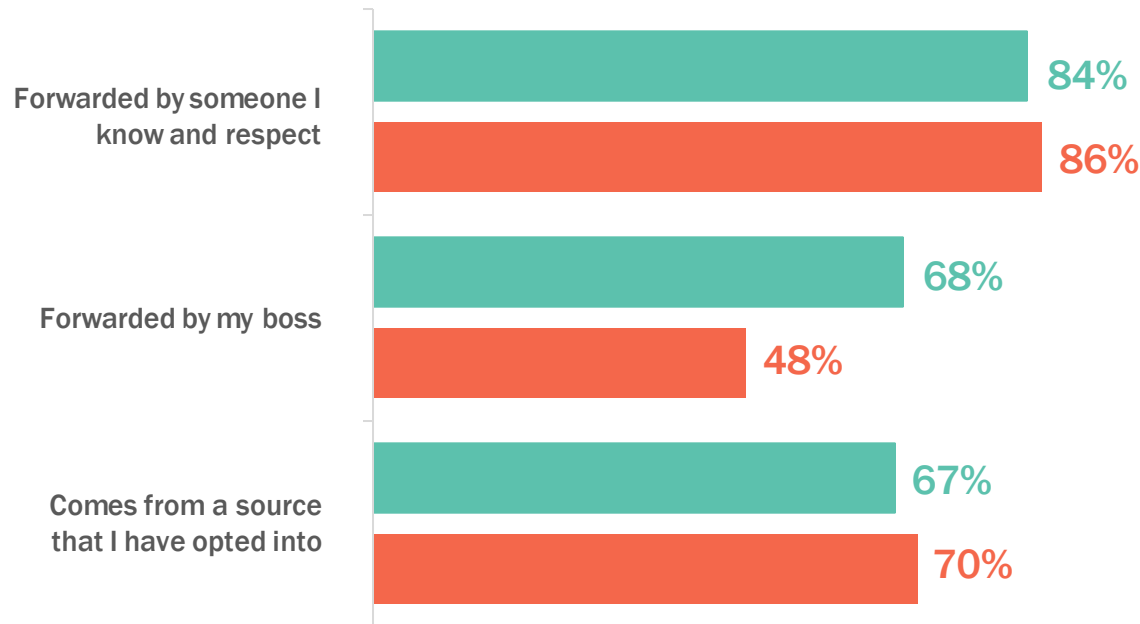


Relevance, timeliness and referral from trusted sources matter most to decision makers.

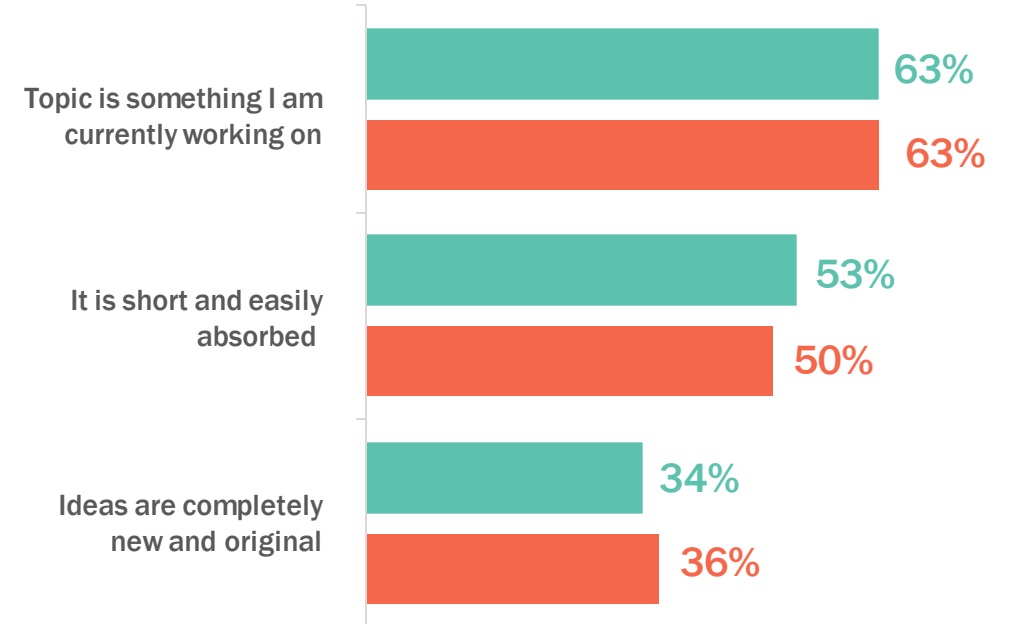
Importance of each trigger in getting respondents to engage with thought leadership (3 most important triggers shown)



Sources

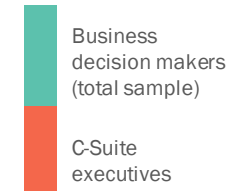


Content

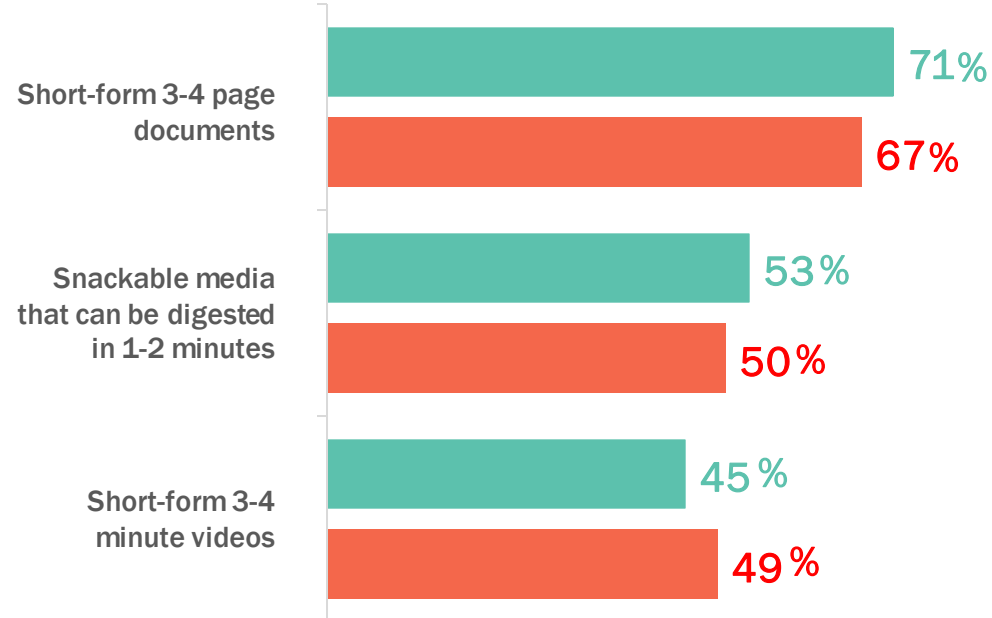


Thought leaders must deliver facts, insights and substance... quickly.

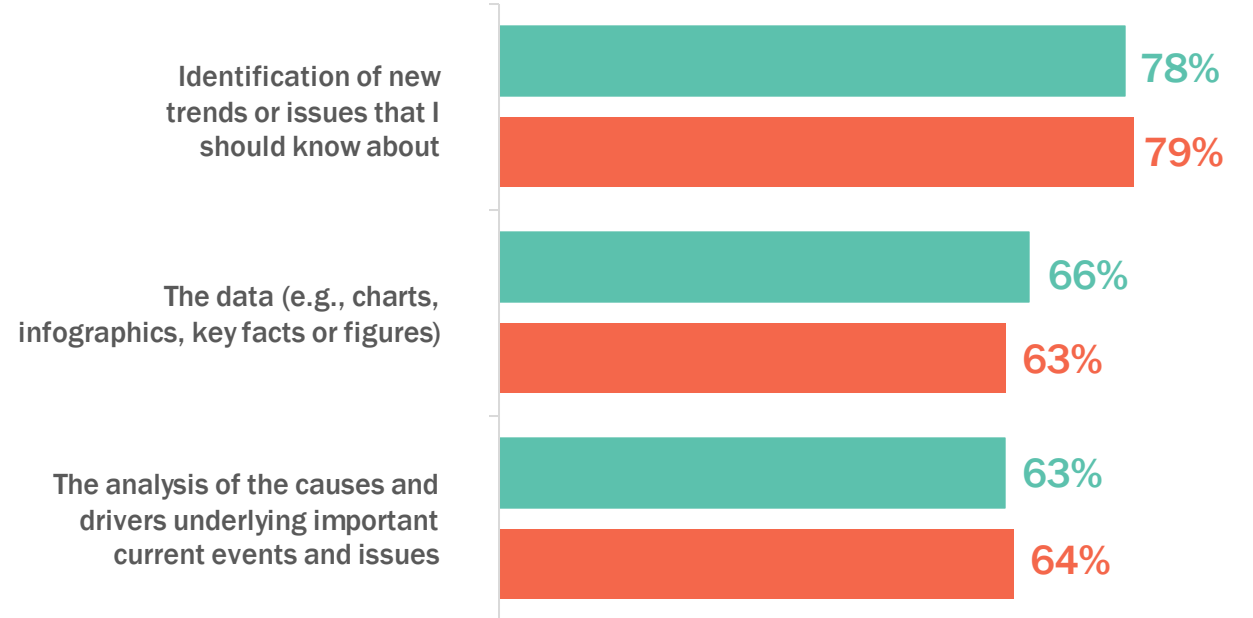
Percent who rate each factor as important in getting them to engage with thought leadership (top 3 shown)



Length



Facts and Insight





THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IN ACTION



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Businessolver: Workplace Empathy Monitor

What It Is

Businessolver, a Des Moines-based provider of employee benefits technology, was trying to find its place in a crowded marketplace. Central to this mission of evolving Businessolver's brand messaging was creating the Workplace Empathy Monitor, a study that exposed a wide gap between CEOs and employees in how empathy is employed in U.S. workplaces to inspire workforces and keep them engaged and productive.

Insight

Feedback from the front lines of Businessolver's customer service and sales teams revealed that their customers wanted not just benefits administration tools but a better understanding of what benefits employees actually need the most. This desire to better understand the employee led the company to conduct research on the topic of empathy in the workplace and its impact on business productivity.

Why It Works

The survey findings and implications were packaged into a wide range of materials that targeted key sales prospects. Additionally the study became the central focus of in-person event engagement and incorporated into sales conversations with prospects and customers. In eight months, Businessolver's sales teams saw 40% increase in inbound RFP requests (year-over-year), and most importantly, 8% increase in sales – all connected to marketing efforts around the new positioning and thought leadership platform.

[Learn more at businessolver.com/empathy](https://businessolver.com/empathy)



Rae Shanahan
Chief Strategy Officer,
Businessolver

“Businessolver’s thought leadership study, the Workplace Empathy Monitor, helped us focus our brand awareness and marketing efforts on a central theme for the year, but perhaps most importantly, provided us with a coordinated way to drive engagement with our key prospects. We’ve been able to leverage the power of cross-functional marketing and sales channels to truly connect with our current and potential customers, and start an important conversation with our prospects and peers about a topic that matters to the industry, our target customers and employees.”



PwC: Annual CEO Survey

What It Is

For the last twenty years, PwC has interviewed CEOs in dozens of countries to gain insights into the “tone at the top” for global business. The survey covers critical topics ranging from digital disruption to globalization. The study is further supported by exclusive CEO interviews and other media assets, and is launched annually at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

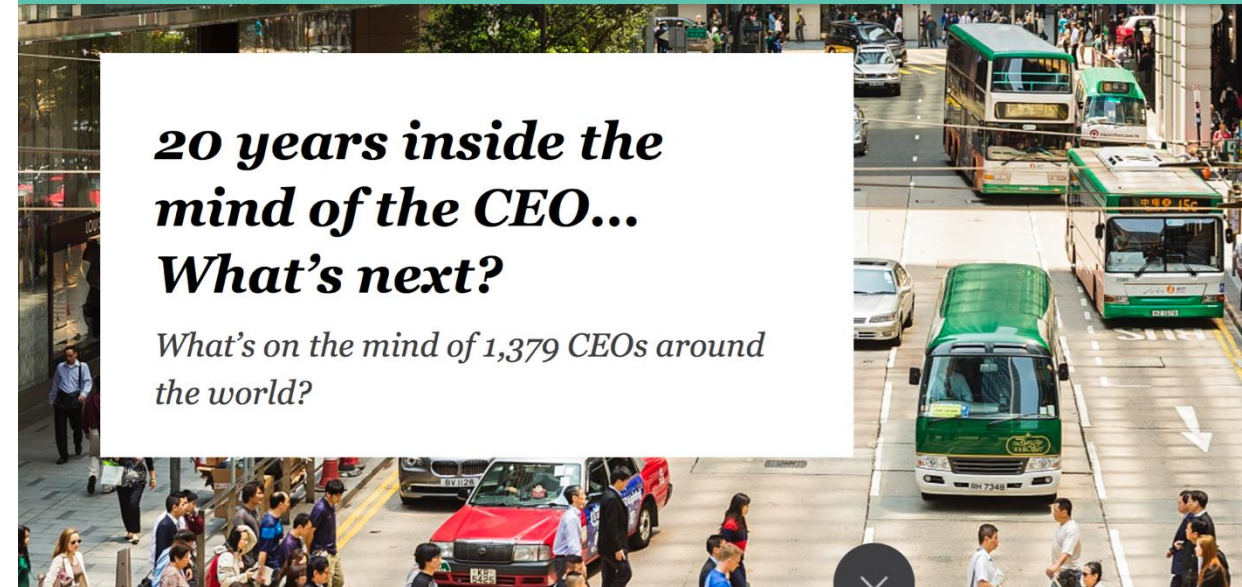
Insight

While there is predictably high interest in business leaders worldwide, much of it is anecdotal rather than wide-ranging and comprehensive. Further, PwC observed a shift where the power-distance between CEOs and their company’s customers was shrinking, providing an opportunity to help put their audience's ears closer to the doors of corporate leadership.

Why It Works

The PwC CEO Survey has become a thought leadership franchise that gives it a reason to have a top-level discussion with its customers, prospects, executives, and media year after year. This creates annual anticipation for the study and its two-decade history enables it to point to trends over time. In addition to the core study, PwC publishes a series of rich content to showcase findings in an easy-to-digest manner including videos featuring the global chairman, category-specific insights and interviews with key CEOs. LinkedIn posts, interactive graphs, infographics and timelines are optimized for social media and content sharing.

[Learn more at ceosurvey.pwc](https://ceosurvey.pwc)



20 years inside the mind of the CEO... What's next?

*What's on the mind of 1,379 CEOs around
the world?*



Bob Moritz
Global Chairman,
PwC

“For any organization, thought leadership is an important vehicle for sharing points of view related to what's happening in the world. It helps executives and leaders distill complex ideas to their fundamental purpose. As a global network of firms, we know that developing and publishing thought leadership can catalyze change, inspire transformation, mitigate risk, and impact critical decisions across business leadership and even among audiences we might not have anticipated.”



Trending Topics by Industry

Top performing B2B content categories on LinkedIn as measured by overall engagement (total views, likes, comments and shares)

Timeframe: March-May 2017

Technology – Hardware

1. Lean manufacturing
2. Silicon carbide
3. Design principles
4. C-level leadership
5. Algorithm design
6. Data center construction
7. Data center consolidation

Oil & Energy

1. Energy audits /assessments
2. Solar energy
3. Climate change impacts
4. Sustainability consulting
5. Wind energy
6. Gas chromatography
7. Seismology

Technology – Software

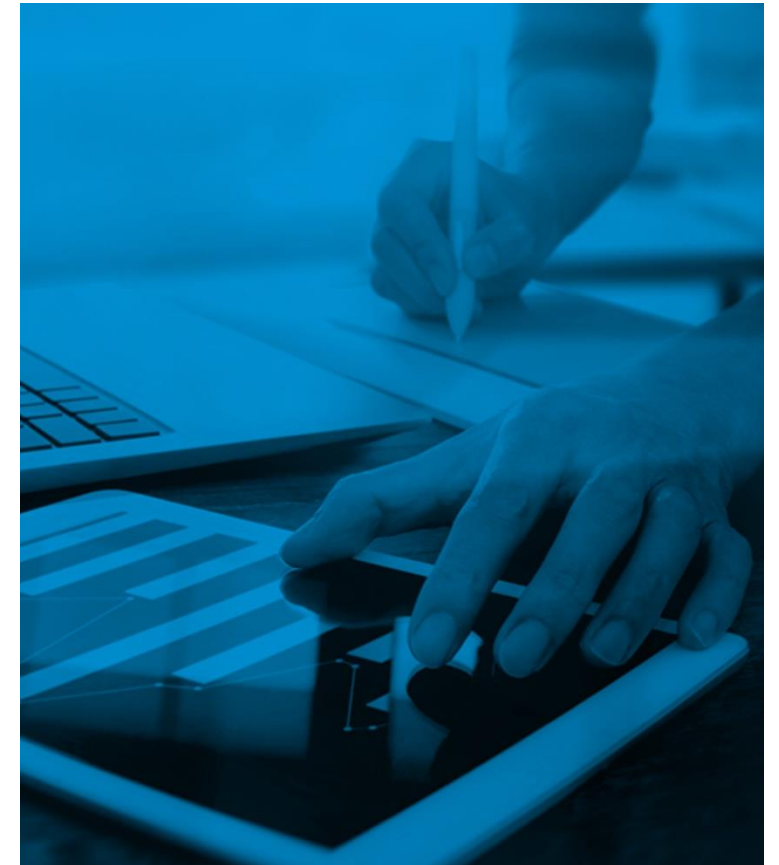
1. Leadership development
2. Sales and distribution
3. Artificial intelligence
4. Strategy alignment
5. Leadership accountability
6. Security analysis
7. Sales effectiveness

Professional Services

1. Management accounting
2. Sales and distribution
3. Strategy alignment
4. Human resources information systems
5. Marketing activations
6. Pay equity
7. Policy analysis

Manufacturing


1. Order fulfillment
2. Claims investigations
3. Graphics processing units
4. Facilities management
5. Waste disposal
6. Shipping and receiving
7. Plastics engineering



Examples of Highly Engaged Thought Leadership Content on LinkedIn

B&B Comcast Business
2mo + Follow

Analysts predict that in-house IT will become the core driver of "how business does business." <https://lnkd.in/d3y3Gkk>



The IT Guy Becomes a Player
cbcommunity.comcast.com

952 Likes · 40 Comments

Like Comment

Morgan Stanley
7mo + Follow

By 2040, the auto insurance business could drop by 80%, unless it finds a way to adapt to the existential challenges of disruptive technologies, such as autonomous driving and shared mobility. <http://mgstn.ly/2giIBDk>



1,035 Likes · 84 Comments

EY
4w + Follow

For miners, how do you overcome the digital disconnect and take the right approach to transformation? Learn how to create a successful digital mine: <https://lnkd.in/gQ95V5P>



Preparing for tomorrow's digital mine today

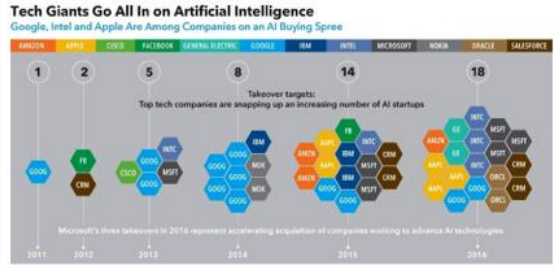
Digital as an enabler **84%** of participants are considering having, have started or already have digital as part of their day-to-day business

Find out how digital is an enabler of productivity. ey.com/digitalmine

502 Likes · 4 Comments

Capital Group | American Funds
4w + Follow

Google, Intel and Apple are racing to acquire private artificial intelligence companies. What does it mean for investors? Click below to learn more.



Tech Giants Go All In on Artificial Intelligence
Google, Intel and Apple Are Among Companies on an AI Buying Spree

Takeover Targets: Top tech companies are snapping up an increasing number of AI startups

1 2 5 8 14 18

2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016

Microsoft's three takeovers in 2016 represent accelerating acquisition of companies working to advance AI technologies.

Sources: Capital Group, based on information from CB Insights, Cisco Systems, TechCrunch and The Next Wave websites, and S&P Capital IQ

Tech Giants Are on an A.I. Buying Spree
thecapitalideas.com

129 Likes · 3 Comments

Tableau Software
6mo + Follow

From making the most of machine learning to strategies for a post-Hadoop world, find out what's coming in big data for 2017. <https://lnkd.in/ewAVwXT>




TOP TEN BIG DATA TRENDS FOR 2017

611 Likes · 9 Comments

Unit4
3mo + Follow

How are CFOs getting a seat at the strategy table?



The 3 ways the CFO's role is transforming
info.unit4.com

741 Likes · 32 Comments



Recommendations for B2B Marketers



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How to Make B2B Thought Leadership Work Harder

Thought leadership, done well, can drive tangible business demand

Align thought leadership strategy with demand generation efforts

- Align with sales and company leadership to elevate thought leadership as a cross-functional business development discipline
- Explore thought leadership topics at the intersection between timely industry trends and your company's growth priorities
- Use sales-enablement tactics such as customer engagement playbooks and content sharing tools to directly engage high-value customers and prospects

In B2B, personalization of content is vital to breaking through the noise

Know your customer

- Engage frontline sales and customer relationship managers to learn what topics most concern current customers and prospects on a day-to-day basis
- Evaluate the B2B buyer committee to determine how customer pain points may vary by function, seniority and role within the decision-making process
- Instead of a one-to-many editorial approach, consider granular personalization, targeting and delivery of content to niche audiences that is enabled by marketing technology (e.g. website personalization, marketing automation, account-based marketing platforms)

Customers want high quality insights, not just product messages

Focus on delivering value, not selling

- Aspire to journalistic-quality content that goes beyond products and services to educate customers
- Help customers understand the drivers of current issues and how to be better professionals day-to-day
- Explore how your thought leadership can be an episodic franchise, rather than a single event, to generate opt-in subscribers (and captive audience) over time



How to Make B2B Thought Leadership Work Harder

Customers need information they can quickly absorb

Be timely, and brief

- Know the channels where your prospects spend time and optimize media formats accordingly
- Create short, snackable media that quickly capture attention and entice readers to consume longer-form content assets
- Evaluate tools and data platforms that signal timely content consumption behaviors such as search engines, predictive intent data, account-based marketing (ABM) and marketing automation

Referral from trusted sources drives engagement with thought leadership

Harness the power of employees

- Know whom your buyer is likely to know and respect—they are your most effective amplifiers
- Consider developing a social-digital footprint for senior executives and subject matter experts who can attract relevant followers, creating a direct distribution channel for thought leadership content
- Encourage employees to share thought leadership content across their professional social networks – especially those who are well connected to the target audience (e.g. customers, prospects, industry influencers, etc.)

Plan for ROI before executing thought leadership

Close the attribution gap

- Plan for an analytics and measurement approach that will help you understand content performance from awareness through purchase
- Align sales and marketing on KPIs such as MQL, SQL and other measures of how content drives customer behavior (e.g. marketing-originated or influenced leads)



HOW THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IMPACTS B2B DEMAND GENERATION

An Edelman-LinkedIn Research Study

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