

The little book of...



Thought
leadership
content

The purpose of thought leadership content

Content marketing is all about delivering the right message, to the right person, through the right channel, at the right time.

Its main purpose is to create brand awareness, educate your audience, and build trust...

You'll notice that none of these has anything to do with directly selling your product/service to your audience. Therefore, when you're writing content, particularly thought leadership content, it should never be a promotional pitch for your offering...

Instead, your objective should be to create something that's interesting/useful to your audience, which transfers your skills, knowledge and experience to them. It's a much softer sell, because if you share something that's genuinely valuable, the reader will inherently know that you'll be able to help and be in touch.

99% of senior execs claim thought leadership is either critical or important to their decision-making when appointing an adviser.

Source: Hubspot

This guide covers:

- What is thought leadership content?
- Who reads thought leadership content?
- Why do organisations need thought leadership content?
- Where should thought leadership content be used?
- How should you structure your thought leadership content?
- When is the best time to invest in thought leadership content?

So what is thought leadership
content?

There is no one specific deliverable when it comes to thought leadership content. And arguably, every piece of content you produce should demonstrate some thought leadership, otherwise you're just regurgitating the same old stuff as your competition – and who wants to read that?!

I think of thought leadership content as the big, fat, juicy marketing assets – the pieces that allow you the space to perform a deep-dive on a particular subject matter:

White papers

The jewel of thought leadership, white papers are viewed as the ultimate authority content. Out to explore a specific problem in depth, it shares recommendations on how to tackle the issue alongside research and real-world examples to build a well-rounded argument.

82% of B2B buyers use white papers to help them make decisions.

Source: Marketing Insider Group

Guides

Guides provide your audience with practical guidance on things they can do in their business today. Often structured in a 'how to', 'step-by-step' or 'Q&A' format, they succinctly provide context, clearly identify what organisations need to do to move past a challenge or take advantage of a new opportunity.

69% of execs turn to corporate content, rather than traditional media sources, for practical solutions to their business challenges.

Source: Longitude

Reports

Focused on primary research that you've performed yourself (perhaps through a survey or roundtable), reports are an important way of distilling the data down into lessons learned and then actionable insights your audience can apply to their business today.

Research reports are the third most preferred format for thought leadership content by senior execs, behind blogs and print magazines.

Source: Hubspot

Case studies

The most powerful type of content you can share are client stories - real-life examples of the work you've performed but told through your client's words. A third-party endorsement will always come across as far more credible than you simply telling the world why you're amazing.

63% of B2B buyers read at least one case study during their research.

Source: Marketing Insider Group

Who reads thought leadership
content?

If you're looking to reach senior business stakeholders – in particular, members of the C-suite – then thought leadership content is your entry point...

73% of C-suite execs consider thought leadership content as 'critical', spending an average of 4 hours per week reading this type of content. That's major airtime with a senior decision maker, which has the potential to deliver an exciting ending if you can demonstrate the value you have to offer.

They're prepared to dedicate such an incredible amount of their valuable time to thought leadership content because of the potential opportunity it affords their organisation - a survey from Hubspot shows that 70% of business leaders read thought leadership to get an edge over competitors.

Pitch it right, and you'll win their hearts and minds - the majority (81%) of C-suite execs say their trust increases after engaging with thought leadership content.

In fact, a recent study from Edelman and LinkedIn discovered that 46% of decision makers say they have asked a previously unconsidered supplier to bid on a project after encountering their content, and 49% have awarded business to a supplier as a direct result of their thought leadership.

Why do organisations need
thought leadership content?

Business leaders choose to read thought leadership content to:

- Stay on top of new trends (76%)
- Get information about products and vendors (69%)
- Compare products (50%)
- Help justify buying decisions (42%)
- Develop a short list of qualified vendors (33%).

Proves your worth

We've already established that the purpose of your thought leadership content is to create brand awareness, educate your audience, and build trust. It does this by successfully demonstrating the value you add to the subject matter through your skills, knowledge and experience. Furthermore, by showcasing these talents, it's going to differentiate you within the market.

Creates a 'USP'

Within marketing you're told that every company needs a USP (unique selling point) if they're to gain a competitive advantage that helps position them in the elusive top spot as market leader. And yet in reality, most things can be copied. Plus, if you do find something that's 'unique', does your audience even care?

It's cliché, but people really do buy from people – good people. So rather than banging the same drum as everyone else about being a 'trusted partner' with 'best of breed' solutions powered by 'cutting edge technology', why not show your audience these things? Your customers are sceptical about these empty phrases, but demonstrate that they can trust you and you'll always do what's in their best interests and they'll listen.

Values in action

As longer form copy, thought leadership content provides an amazing opportunity to showcase your brand personality and company values in action. By weaving your key messages throughout the narrative of the piece, your audience will get to know you on a more personal level, which is when the bonds of trust start to be established.

Pushes your people

You've hired some really clever people – don't hide them away behind the scenes. Pushing your subject matter experts into the limelight to showcase their specialisms and expertise adds to your brand story, it engages the reader more and really adds to the overall customer experience when they get to meet the people behind your content...

And of course, for those employees within your business who aspire to see their name in lights and become the next industry celebrity, putting their name to a piece of high-value content gives them reason to feel proud, which boosts their morale.

Senior execs devote an average of 4 hours per week consuming good quality thought leadership content.

Source: Longitude

Where should thought leadership
content be used?

Think of it as a gift...

If you give your prospect something they want, they'll naturally feel more inclined to give you something in return.

But...

That's not to say you secure an immediate sale. Depending on where you are in the sales cycle, this 'something' could be:

- More of their time/attention to get to know you.
- Shortlisting you for a tender piece.
- Recommending/sharing your content with someone in their network.

75% of B2B buyers say they would share information about themselves and their company in exchange for a white paper, making them one of the most powerful tools for lead generation.

Source: Equinet Media

Alternative call-to-action

One of the most valuable places to use your thought leadership content is as a softer call-to-action on your website.

So many companies provide a single option – ‘Book a Demo’ – but that’s a huge, potentially scary, commitment that the prospect might not be ready to make, particularly if they aren’t at that stage in the buying cycle yet.

Offering a piece of thought leadership content is a much smaller step and far less scary commitment for your prospect to make. And if they’re not ready to purchase yet, it means that you’re not going to lose them from your sales funnel. Plus, because you’re adding value to their experience by sharing such great content, you’re more likely to stay front of mind.

The campaign cornerstone

Thought leadership content gives you a highly valued asset that is most effective when used as part of a broader campaign.

Once you’ve planned and drafted your content, think about the wider promotional efforts that sits around the piece to extend its reach. Think about repurposing your content into other promotional assets, such as blogs, emails, social, webinars, PR...

I'd always advocate publishing your thought leadership content online and then using these broader tactics to drive traffic to it. This gives you the opportunity to build momentum within your campaign and track the return more easily.

Tactical sales tool

When following up on a prospect you should always be adding value. Too many sales executives jump in with:

"I just wanted to follow up on our conversation..."

Or something equally as scary that makes your prospect start to dodge your calls. But follow up with something of value and your prospect is more likely to take that call and welcome you further into their world:

"Thought you might be interested in this case study we published last week about a client who was facing a similar challenge..."

How should you structure your thought leadership content?

Every piece of content is structured differently, and thought leadership content is no different - a white paper is structured differently to a guide, which is structured differently to a report, which is structured differently to a case study...

However, there are some common tactics you'll see at play within thought leadership content:

Professional yet personal

If we're to make a connection with the reader, we need to break down the corporate barrier and speak person-to-person. Writing in the third person forces you to write with a more formal tone, which can instantly put people on the defensive because they feel like you're about to sell to them. Whereas speaking more as a friend in the first/second person, you start to earn their trust.

Which statement makes you feel more at ease:

"At Alice Hollis Ltd the team has spent 14 years' dedicated to B2B marketing, now specialising in thought leadership content to better engage audiences. Contact me to discuss how I can help with your next white paper."

"Writing content, particularly thought leadership content should never be a promotional pitch for your offering. Instead, your objective should be to create something that's interesting/useful to your audience, which transfers your skills, knowledge and experience to them. Let me show you how..."

Just because you choose to adopt a more personal tone, doesn't mean your content is any less professional – you're hardly going to pack it full of jokes, slang and drop the f-bomb in every other paragraph.

Personal simply means writing as if you're speaking directly to a single member of your audience, showing empathy and demonstrating that you genuinely care enough to want to help.

Problem not promotion

When asked what turns them off about thought leadership, 53% of senior execs cited content that '*promoted the adviser rather than addressing my problems*'.

Back at the start of this guide we learned that the purpose of thought leadership content isn't to overtly pitch your product/service – it's a softer sell by demonstrating your skills, knowledge and experience in action.

To establish trust with your audience, it's not enough to simply talk about your ideas/product/service/methodology, it needs to be shared within the context of a real-life example. This is where mini-case studies / client testimonials add great value to your content. Now, your content can:

- Set the context.
- Explain the problem.
- Offer a solution to that problem.
- Evidence that solution working in practice.

Substantiated, evidenced opinions

And carrying on this idea...

In a world full of noise from the media, vendors and competitors, what makes your voice stand out?

It's great that you have an opinion to share – and I truly mean that. You'd be surprised how many 'thought leaders' I've encountered throughout my career who actually have nothing to say...

But your opinion means nothing unless you back it up - 58% of senior execs are turned off when thought leadership content contains '*unsubstantiated opinions*'.

So yes, share your ideas and state your opinions but back it up with:

- Research from credible sources, such as established analysts like Gartner, Forrester or IDC.
- Industry studies that were performed on a statistically valid sample.
- Data that you've commissioned yourself – an amazing tactic if you want to position yourself as a leader in the market.

Written with purpose

There's no point in creating content for content's sake, so take the time to properly plan the content you need in order to convert people within the sales funnel.

Some good places to start are:

- Asking your sales team about the common objections they face and produce content that helps them to overcome these.
- Ask your clients if they'd be happy for you to write a case study about their project – case studies have so many applications within your marketing efforts.
- Decide what you want to be 'famous' for – when people utter the name of your brand, what do you want them to instantly link it to?
- Think about whether you want/need to push a particular product/service and develop thought leadership content that helps to 'sell' that proposition.

When is the best time to invest in thought leadership content?

Granted, I'm biased when it comes to thought leadership content, but:

If you're serious about creating a strong brand – you need to invest in thought leadership content...

If you're looking to engage your audience by educating them on your specialist subject - you need to invest in thought leadership content...

If you want to build trust with your target audience - you need to invest in thought leadership content...

Now, more than ever, organisations across the UK are operating in an uncertain world, unsure of what their future holds. I for one am taking back control of the things that are within my control. These are our businesses and we need to do whatever is necessary to ensure they emerge from this period of unrest in a strong position.

Many organisations are taking the coming weeks/months to re-evaluate their offering and positioning. With that in mind, what better way to communicate what the 'new normal' looks like so that when we're released back into the world, we're ready to help?

A little gift from me to you...

Whether you're looking for a one-off asset, or something to support your wider marketing efforts, I will deliver an engaging piece to help convert your audience. When it comes to communicating your value, you don't want any old copywriter - you want someone that actually has 'skin in the game' and knows how to deliver more than words.

I love thought leadership content because if you have something interesting to say I believe you should stand up and make sure your audience reads all about it. And for the next 3 months, I'm offering all thought leadership content with a 33% discount:

Choose from a white paper, report, guide or case study for just £475 (*normal price £720*).

Say hello!

To talk to me about your thought leadership content:

Email: hello@alicehollis.co.uk

Phone: 07853 351 280

Terms and conditions:

Qualifying period

This offer is valid from 06 April 2020 until 06 July 2020.

Feedback

Once I have submitted work for review, feedback for any revisions is expected within two weeks. If no communication is made during this time, the project is assumed to be complete, and will be invoiced.

Copyright

Once your content has been invoiced and paid, the copyright will transfer to your ownership. I will then destroy any briefing information you have provided, and only retain a final copy for my records.

“Alice writes engaging thought-leadership content, based on our brief but also substantial research, that successfully attracts people to our brand. After helping us develop the tone-of-voice guidelines for our brand, Alice has authored a range of popular guides and reports for us, as well as ghost-written pieces published in national press. We’ve seen a flurry of downloads and received great feedback on our written content and would recommend Alice’s approach (and the cakes she brings to our office).”

James McCarthy, Exonar

More than words

Hello!

I'm Alice, a B2B copywriter, specialising in 'top of the funnel' content, such as blogging, thought leadership white papers, reports and guides, and case studies. I'm based in a little village just outside of Reading with clients across the Thames Valley.

I work with small IT and tech businesses who have achieved a certain level of success organically and are now looking to scale to get 'to the next level', but who don't necessarily have a dedicated marketing person or go-to-market strategy in place yet.

Establishing a schedule of regular, interesting and engaging content to clearly position and differentiate you in the market, I can start to create the tribe that ensures a constant drip feed of leads into the top of your funnel, ready for your sales team to qualify.

**IT companies that want to be more than their tech
need copy that's more than words**

Find me online:

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