

# The Thought Leadership Handbook

A Comprehensive Guide to Growing  
Your Firm with Thought Leadership

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# The Not-So Hidden Force that Shapes Markets

**Whether you know it or not, thought leadership and thought leaders have shaped your career, your firm, and the very market in which you work.**

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Maybe you've built your firm around a big, hairy, audacious goal. Maybe your organization relies heavily on a net promoter score to make strategic decisions. Maybe you carry revenue responsibility and part of your sales process is to reframe clients' perceived notions of needs. Maybe you're concerned about carrying your organization over the chasm of adoption.

While all these concepts seem disparate; they all share a common thread. Each one rooted at some point from a piece of thought leadership — a point of view put forth by a subject matter expert on how to solve a big, thorny problem. Often that point of view has become so pervasive in the business world that some of us have forgotten from whence it came. Or the fact that the original author leveraged the insight to create millions or billions of dollars in value for their organizations.

This handbook is intended for CEOs, managing partners, and marketing leaders in professional services firms and B2B SaaS organizations. It's intended as a user's manual to drive business growth through thought leadership. It covers just what you need to know, and purposely excludes what you don't, to help you develop and implement a thought leadership strategy that drives both top-line and bottom-line growth while enhancing enterprise value.

# What is Thought Leadership?

**Before we start, let's develop a working definition of what thought leadership is and what it's not.**

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It has been over 50 years since McKinsey & Company first published the *McKinsey Quarterly*. Over that time the marketing landscape has changed considerably — hello Internet — and the market for B2B services has changed just as much — hello digital transformation — but the influence of the *Quarterly* remains supreme. In the 50+ years since its launch a whole content marketing universe has exploded around what was a very simple idea — let's share our best thinking with our clients on a regular basis.

In the last 10 years we've seen companies of all shapes and sizes launch content marketing programs. From your local pool installer to your SEO expert and your professional services marketing advisor. Content is all the rage.

While there are a lot of factors that have driven this content explosion — cheap and easy self-publishing tools and Google are near the top — one of the main factors is inside our own minds. It is our intense desire to be informed buyers. A desire to mitigate downside risk in search of the perfect outcome. Regardless of what we're doing or what we're buying we've become addicted to knowledge. We research and plan every detail of our next vacation. We read restaurant ratings to reduce the chance of having a bad experience. Many people even study restaurant menus and entree reviews before they arrive to reduce the risk of a bad order. Much of this, of course, is the domain of content marketing.

That said, this desire to seek understanding and reduce downside risk extends itself to the big questions and decisions in our business lives as well. How will digital

technology impact the future of my supply chain? How will changing demographics influence demand for my product? What new opportunities will AI present for my company? Should we be investing in the metaverse? Much of this, by contrast, is the domain of thought leadership marketing.

## THOUGHT LEADERSHIP VS. CONTENT MARKETING — WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

In the B2B marketing world these terms seem to get thrown around interchangeably. While it seems a bit semantic to take the time to distinguish one from the other, the reality is there are important distinctions between the two. And, often, there's a need for both sets of activities in a firm so it's important we start with clarity.

### WHAT IS CONTENT MARKETING?

First and foremost, content marketing programs are generally built to provide relatively simple answers to straightforward business questions. How do I optimize my article for search? What is the process for developing an effective job description? What are the primary features of a small business accounting system?

Content marketing articles often take the form of: "How to..." or "7 Steps to...". The primary goal of most content marketing programs is to generate leads for the firm now.

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### WHAT IS THOUGHT LEADERSHIP MARKETING?

Thought leadership marketing is generally seen as a subset of the broader universe of content marketing. It deals with complex issues that often have accompanying complex solutions. It seeks to carve out a point of view on those complex issues shaping the future of society or the markets and clients a firm serves. Ideally it brings forth a more elegant and simple solution than the ones that already exist.

Thought leadership articles often take the form of: "The future of..." or "The state of...". The primary goal of thought leadership marketing programs is to shape future demand for the firm and its services. While lead generation is a welcomed side-effect, the central mission is to position the firm and its subject matter experts as a leading industry voice on big marketplace issues that matter.

# Establishing Business Objectives and Metrics for Success

**How you define success and what you measure will be a function of the objectives you define.**

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Most firm leaders have a fuzzy vision of a publishing a breakthrough idea that reshapes the world around them. It creates massive demand for the firm's services and enables them to charge more, make more, and have more control of the future of the firm. The reality is demand generation is just one of several different objectives a thought leadership program can have. Let's look more closely at all six.

## 1 DISCOVER NEW PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

My good friend, Bob Buday, author of *Competing on Thought Leadership*, likes to say that thought leadership for a professional services firm is like R&D for an automotive company. It's the lifeblood of the firm. The very future of the business depends on its ability to identify where markets are going and shape a defining point of view on the prevailing issues of our time. Generally, this requires learning beyond the walls of the practice and partners' existing client relationships. It requires making investments in original primary research — exploring new ways of solving existing problems and identifying adjacent market opportunities.

If your objective is to discover new products and services, the metrics you use to determine your success are straightforward:

- ▶ New investment opportunities identified
- ▶ New products and services launched
- ▶ Revenue generated from new offerings

## 2 CREATE VISIBILITY AND CREDIBILITY FOR A PRACTICE

My other good friend, Jeff McKay, likes to talk about **brand relevance**<sup>1</sup> in firm marketing. What is your firm known for and where does it have permission to compete? This issue often comes up when a firm is looking to launch a new service or enter a new market. While clients may already know your firm, they may not think of you as being relevant in the new arenas you're looking to operate. In situations like these, thought leadership can be an effective way to change client perceptions.

If your objective is to create visibility and credibility for a practice, the metrics you use to determine success are:

- ▶ Search engine position
- ▶ Website traffic generated
- ▶ Leads generated

## 3 ATTRACT PROSPECTIVE CLIENTS WE DON'T KNOW

This is the objective we lean on most frequently in our client work. It's been the promise of the inbound marketing community for years — buyers are increasingly doing their learning online and your thought leadership exists to intercept them at the earliest stages of their buying journey. Thought leadership built around this objective generally leans heavily on publishing frequency and quality to influence search engine visibility. In essence, it's all about getting found.

If your objective is to attract potential clients you don't know, the metrics you use to determine success are:

- ▶ Leads generated
- ▶ Pipeline generated

<sup>1</sup> <https://rattleandpedal.com/brand-awareness-versus-brand-relevance/>

## 4 OPEN DOORS WITH PROSPECTIVE CLIENTS WE DO KNOW

The promise of inbound marketing was big and lofty — just publish and let clients come to you. But the reality is more nuanced. The truth is that few firms generate the bulk of their new business opportunities inbound. In fact, most firms already know which clients they'd really like to be doing business with. Often, they even know those clients hire firms like theirs on a regular basis. The challenge has been that the doors into those client relationships have been closed. In this case, thought leadership is used as a lever to pry them open. In situations like these the best strategy is often to apply an account-based marketing approach to the thought leadership program. Identify pressing issues within key target accounts and invest thought leadership resources against those issues.

If your objective is to open doors with prospective clients you already know, the metrics you use to determine success are:

- ▶ Meetings generated
- ▶ Pipeline generated

## 5 TURN EXISTING PROSPECTS INTO CLIENTS

While thought leadership is generally targeted at the learning stage of the **client's buying journey**,<sup>2</sup> it can also be a useful resource to help clients reduce the perceived risk associated with hiring a firm. Hence, it can provide value at the discussion stage as well. Thought leadership enables a client to understand how a firm thinks about problems and how it approaches solving them. It helps them understand what to expect as a client, and in so doing determine if they're philosophically aligned with your firm. Importantly, it can help clients understand the methodologies that apply to the work and reduce the fear associated with large scale change.

If your objective is to improve your ability to turn existing prospects into active clients, the metrics you use to determine success are:

- ▶ Opportunity win rate
- ▶ Speed to close

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rattleback.com/insights/articles/buying-process-professional-services-clients/>



## 6 DEEPEN EXISTING CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

While we generally think about thought leadership as our primary tool for attracting new clients, in many instances it can be even more effective at helping partners and account managers deepen existing client relationships. One of the most common issues we hear from firms is the challenge associated with getting clients to understand the breadth of their firm's expertise and service offerings. The firms feel as though they could be providing much more value to their clients than they already are. One of the best ways to demonstrate these untapped pockets of value is for existing client account managers to share the firm's thought leadership through personal notes and 1:1 client interactions.

If your objective is to deepen existing client relationships, the metrics you use to determine success are:

- ▶ Qualitative feedback from clients on the thinking expressed in the thought leadership itself
- ▶ Pipeline generated

## TRACK YOUR PROGRESS

It's tempting to look at this list and say, "Yes, we want all these things. So, let's just pile them all together." This is particularly tempting given that there's overlap in what a firm might use to measure the success of many of these objectives.

Unfortunately, our experience has been that the strategies and tactics used to unlock these objectives don't always overlap and are quite nuanced. We've seen this first-hand in our client work. Even objectives that look very similar on the surface — attracting clients you don't know and opening doors into those you do — require different mindsets, strategies, and tactics to achieve success. Generally, our advice is to narrow in on just one or two central objectives. Then, focus on the approach you plan to take and establish SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based) goals you can use to determine what success means to your firm.



Chapter 3:

# Developing Your Thought Leadership Strategy

How to get clarity on the path forward.

What issues does your firm need to own? Why do you need to own them? And how will you do so? Ultimately, a thought leadership strategy answers all those questions (and more). Running a thought leadership program without an underlying strategy would be like NASA launching a space mission without an agreed upon destination or scientific objectives. Yet, firms do it all the time. So, let's fix that.

Over the years, we've led the development of thought leadership strategies for more than a few firms. Along that journey, we've settled in on a six-step process that works:



Let's look at each step in the process at a high-level.

## 1 CLARIFY FIRM STRATEGY

Ultimately, whatever content you produce must align with your firm's growth targets. How much does your firm hope to grow in the next three to five years? Where do firm leaders expect that growth to come from? Are there particular markets or practices that are growing faster than others? Are there practices that are stagnant or declining? If so, why?

For more on this, check out *Cash Cows or Rising Stars: Where to Allocate Your Marketing Budget?*<sup>1</sup>



To start, your goal is to get alignment on resource allocation. How much of your thought leadership investment will be made at the firm-level? The industry-level? The practice-level? Which industries or practices are the highest priorities? Why? Firm leaders need to agree on these things before content development programs get too far down the track.

## 2 AGREE ON IDEAL CLIENT

The next step is to make sure everyone agrees on who you hope to attract to your firm. When asked who they want to do business with, it's shocking how frequently firm leaders will say, "the C-suite." Well, the "C-suite" is not homogenous. The challenges, wants and needs of the COO look nothing like those of the CHRO, the CMO, or the CSO. For content to resonate, it needs to speak very clearly to the challenges of a specific person in a specific role often at a specific moment in time.

We cover this in detail in this companion article<sup>2</sup>, but to start I always suggest thinking about this in three layers:

### Firmographics

What types of companies do we want to do business with?

### Demographics

What people within those companies?

### Psychographics

What are they thinking or feeling right now about the challenges we solve?

1 <https://www.rattleback.com/insights/articles/thought-leadership-marketing-mix-allocation/>

2 <https://www.rattleback.com/insights/articles/defining-your-ideal-client/>

### 3 CONDUCT QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Next, we recommend conducting qualitative one-on-one interviews with senior partners, practice leaders and clients. The goal of these interviews is to hear first-hand what clients are struggling with most and what issues our people are seeing within their client work.

In these interviews, I suggest querying topics such as why clients hire firms like yours at all, the most critical challenges clients have struggled with in the past, how difficult those challenges are for clients, and how difficult they see those challenges being in the future. When talking to clients, don't be afraid to ask them bluntly what topics would interest them.

### 4 FIELD QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

One of the big problems I see with qualitative research (especially when it's only internal) is that the sample size is limiting. A partner's perspective is highly shaped by the client relationships they have. But how many do they really have in a year? Four to five? The same problem holds true when talking to clients. Many of your clients hire you because they share a similar world view as your partners. What if that world view is too narrow? The sample set is just too limiting.

Our preference is to take the findings of qualitative interviews and field a broader quantitative study with prospects, past clients, and people beyond your network. The goal is to test and validate your assumptions. Are those big challenges your clients and partners see truly big challenges? Get some data and find out.

## 5 AGREE ON CORE STRATEGY ELEMENTS

This is really where the rubber hits the road. Essentially, you're bringing together all your exploration and fact-finding to-date. An effective thought leadership strategy needs to provide four key things:

### Central theme

Think of this like a high-level concept that overlays everything you do. For instance, your firm might say it wants everything to ladder up to sustainability or data-driven decision-making.

### Production formats

What types of content are you going to produce? Will you conduct original primary research? Will you publish a deep white paper every quarter? An article a month? A podcast? A YouTube interview channel? Drill down to the types of content you'll produce and who's responsible for leading each one.

### Topics to own

This is a bit lower-level and should provide for 15-20 topics that the firm would like to own going forward. These aren't individual articles. Rather, they're topics you can dig deep into and build a body of work around. If your central theme was data-driven decision-making, your topic list might include things like building data repositories, ensuring data quality, overcoming data skepticism, or data visualization.

### Quality criteria

Finally, we suggest agreeing on what constitutes quality. While important, I don't mean spelling and grammar. Rather, you want to describe what is necessary to provide proof of a sound argument (clear problem statements, novel solutions, client examples).

## 6 BUILD AN EDITORIAL CALENDAR

No strategy is complete unless you build a plan to execute it. Last, but not least, you need to build a calendar that describes who's going to do what by when. Generally, we recommend building a regular cadence into a content program. It's not dissimilar from building a workout routine or a practice schedule for a sports team. As a firm, if you commit to producing an article every month or every two weeks, that commitment will increase the likelihood of success for everything that follows.



#### Chapter 4:

# Understanding the Elements of a Compelling Point of View

**Your firm's POV is the heart and soul of your firm's thought leadership strategy.**

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While your thought leadership strategy provides clarity on the issues you hope to own, your POV puts forth a better, more elegant way of solving them. At its core, a POV describes how you see the world.

If you have a small firm, your POV will be the centerpiece of your firm's entire messaging strategy. A large, diversified firm will likely have separate POVs for individual markets, practices, and thought leadership programs. Sometimes a POV emerges from the collective experience and wisdom of a few senior leaders. But, more often, it derives from a systematic process of research, analysis and insight gathering. Ultimately, sometimes it's actually the culmination of years of work seeking better ways to solve for big complex problems.

Regardless, in our experience, an effective POV has seven characteristics.

## 1 ATTACKS CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Most consulting firms operate in highly mature industries. Over time, there is a way “things get done.” Whole industries and functions converge on a similar way of operating; “best practices” solutions emerge to all those conventional problems. But some of those “best practices” solutions create new problems or are problems in themselves. An effective POV identifies those nuggets of conventional wisdom that stand in the way of progress, innovation and growth. A perfect example of this is the emergence of the **Net Promoter Score**<sup>1</sup>. Measuring customer satisfaction prior to NPS was a clunky, ineffective process requiring 100s of questions and 80-page slide decks to explain the results. NPS emerged as a more effective way to do it, and in so doing attacked conventional wisdom on how customer satisfaction measurement should be done in the first place.

## 2 ATTACKS CONCEPTS. NOT PEOPLE.

This goes without saying, but it's generally NOT smart marketing to launch direct attacks at competitors. After all, you're marketing a professional services firm, not a cola. But someone else's thinking? Attack away. Again, we'll come back to Fred Reichheld, Bain consultant, and the lead “architect” on the Net Promoter Score that was first published in a *Harvard Business Review* article<sup>2</sup> in 2003. In that seminal article he introduced his POV to the world by articulating a better way to measure customer satisfaction rendering many of the methods used before obsolete. But, of course, the article was not a systematic tear-down on all the consultants that came before him. It was a tear-down on the prevailing concept that defined customer satisfaction.

## 3 ATTRACTS AND REJECTS

Not everyone is going to agree with your POV. And that's okay. Even though it's exploded into a multi-billion dollar market used by 2/3 of the Fortune 1000, there were thousands of detractors at first that neither believed in the wisdom nor the efficacy of the Net Promoter Score model. But that doesn't mean the model should have been discarded or never published in the first place. Developing a compelling POV takes courage. Marketing your firm is not a popularity contest. Your goal isn't to appeal to every executive on the planet. It's to appeal to a reasonable portion of the clients you really want to do business with. If you get it right, you'll

1 <https://fortune.com/longform/net-promoter-score-fortune-500-customer-satisfaction-metric/>

2 <https://hbr.org/2003/12/the-one-number-you-need-to-grow>



attract a loyal following of employees and marketplace fans to your cause. And, of course, if you really hit it out of the park you'll be rewarded with substantial revenue growth.

## 4 TAPS AN EMOTIONAL CHORD

One of my favorite lines in Simon Sinek's now "beyond viral" Ted Talk<sup>3</sup> is where he talks about the power of language in MLK's legendary speech. He reminds us that it's the "I have a Dream" speech; not the "I have a plan" speech. Ultimately, a great POV inspires your clients to change. The best thought leadership isn't just prescriptive, it's provocative and inspiring. *Good to Great* inspired leaders everywhere to strive for the golden ring not just to slowly reach for and cling to the next rung on the ladder.

## 5 SOLVES FOR REAL BURNING PROBLEMS

This also goes without saying, but if you want your POV to make a difference in your firm, your clients, and the world, you must identify novel ways to solve big, complex problems. Problems that cost large organizations \$10s or \$100s of millions of dollars. Avoid 2% solutions.

## 6 LEADS TO A TANGIBLE SOLUTION

All too often, firm POVs live up too much to their name. A point of view is all they are. They're a different way of thinking or looking at the world. But for a POV to take hold and create value for the firm and its clients, it must lead to a clear, understandable solution that can be bought and implemented. *The Challenger Sale* put forth a different way to think about how to hire, promote, and reward sales teams. The solution on how to implement that thinking is clearly articulated and easily understandable through a **collection of three straightforward services**<sup>4</sup> designed to improve the performance of enterprise sellers.

## 7 PROVIDES EVIDENCE THE SOLUTION WORKS

Ultimately, a POV is only as good as the "digital paper" it's written on these days unless you can back it up with specific examples, data, or both that the prescribed solution actually works. On the whole, we at Rattleback know research-based content is more effective at driving leads and revenue from thought leadership programs than opinion-based content. I'm 100% confident in saying that because I have **statistically significant research**<sup>5</sup> to back it up.

3 [https://www.ted.com/talks/simon\\_sinek\\_how\\_great\\_leaders\\_inspire\\_action](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action)

4 <https://emtemp.gcom.cloud/ngw/globalassets/en/sales-service/documents/insights/sales-brochure.pdf>

5 <https://www.thoughtleadershipseminar.com/following-the-leaders-key-findings/>





## Chapter 5:

# Using Research to Develop a Compelling POV

**One way to develop a compelling POV is through comprehensive quantitative and qualitative research.**

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Often your POV derives from the hard-earned wisdom of your subject matter experts. It emerges over decades of working with clients and seeing the patterns that emerge repeatedly. But that is also frequently not the case. Often marketing leaders find that their most important practices don't have anything compelling or different to say.

As it turns out, some of the most compelling POVs are discovered through research. *The Challenger Sale*, *Built to Last*, *Good to Great*, *Net Promoter Score*, *Reengineering the Corporation*. Many of the most influential management insights — the POVs that shaped or redefined markets — started as tightly bound research inquiries.

If you're struggling to derive a POV for one of your practices one of the best places to start is with research.

## 1 START WITH A FOUNDATIONAL QUANTITATIVE STUDY

To do this type of research we recommend starting with a tightly bound leaders/laggards research inquiry. Focus on one mission critical problem that your ideal clients face and develop a study that explores how they're currently solving it.

For instance, maybe you want to understand how manufacturers are navigating today's supply chain disruptions and working to avoid them in the future. Maybe you want to study how Fortune 500 companies launch, nurture, and grow new ventures. Or maybe you want to understand how mid-market B2C advertisers are leveraging data to drive revenue growth.

Regardless of what your topic is, the quantitative study is designed to help you identify and characterize companies that are already solving the problem with remarkable success. What processes are they using? What structures do they have in place? How are they staffing and organizing teams? What behaviors do they bring to the task?

An effective study is usually 30-35 questions, and it includes a leaders/laggards identifier. This is a question you can use to identify top performers. You can identify them objectively — companies with the fastest revenue growth or the lowest employee turnover, for instance. Or you can identify them subjectively — let executives self-identify by indicating how they feel their company is performing on a given dimension relative to their peers (usually they're right).

Regardless of how you do it, make sure you can make a comparison in your research of top performers and the general population. This enables you to find those characteristics, processes, and behaviors that the leaders apply to solve the problem that others simply do not. In a sense, it becomes the base ingredients of your POV — the sugar in that icing!

## 2 LEVERAGE QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY RESEARCH

The next step is to spend 1:1 time with the executives from the identified leader organizations. Schedule structured qualitative sessions to perform deep case study research. Get underneath the data set. What are they really doing to solve this problem? What mindsets are they bringing to the task? What motivations? What is unique about their company culture relative to other companies you've worked with?

Your qualitative case study research is where you will identify novel ways to solve the problem you've not thought of before. It's where Hedgehogs, BHAGs, and Challenger Selling methodologies are really discovered. It's the secret ingredient in that icing that makes it the best thing your clients ever tasted.

### 3 SYNTHESIZE WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED

Your research findings will never be obvious. We all hope that the answer will just jump out of the data and the interviews — oh, solving this supply chain quagmire is a cinch! The reality is it takes some work.

The last step in the process is to make sense of what you've discovered. The key here is engage as many perspectives as you can. Work with your subject matter experts to see how the findings jive with their experience. Share your conclusions with some of your most trusted clients. Do they agree with what you've uncovered?

Your goal is to deliver a solution to the problem that is not only a better one, but also a more elegant one. A POV that can be easily understood if not readily applied.



## Chapter 6:

# Working with Subject Matter Experts to Shape an Argument

**One of the most critical skills of the most successful thought leadership teams is argument shaping — the ability to develop a compelling argument in partnership with a subject matter expert.**

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At our 2018 Profiting from Thought Leadership conference Bob Buday first introduced the concept of argument shaping to the world of thought leadership marketing. In his foundational talk he outlined the clear but critical distinction between argument shaping and ghostwriting. And he shared his contention that the most successful thought leadership emerges from a creative partnership between a subject matter expert and content developer. A partnership in which both parties recognize that the role of the content developer is not simply to capture the unseen wisdom of an expert and put it to words. But, rather, both parties recognize that for thought leadership to work the content developer needs to become an expert themselves — an expert in developing a profound argument.

It's that argument shaping skill that's critical to helping a subject matter expert shape, hone, and develop a point of view that has merit, conviction, and the ability to unleash groundbreaking insights and uncommon commercial success. As it turns out, we later proved through our 2019 thought leadership research<sup>1</sup>, that bringing the expertise of "argument shaping" to bear into the content development process is one of the seven critical factors to being highly successful in thought leadership marketing. In fact, we found that 92% of top performing companies placed high value on this skill. Yet only 26% of the broader population of firms thought they were good at it.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thoughtleadershipseminar.com/following-the-leaders-key-findings/>

Ultimately, if you're going to make thought leadership a critical lever to your firm's growth, you'll need to hire or cultivate this unique, but rare, skill within your content development teams. To get underneath this a little further, let's look at the elements of a compelling argument and offer some tips to help you get better in this area yourself.

## ELEMENTS OF A COMPELLING ARGUMENT

Alright, I'm not going to take you back to your high school debate class to understand what a great argument looks like. Nor am I going to make you suffer through a Trump-Biden debate to know what a compelling argument clearly DOES NOT look like. But before we can become better argument shapers we have to agree to some common language about what a compelling argument looks like. In my experience, a compelling argument has at least five components:

- 1 A clear problem statement** — To start, most effective thought leadership needs to be directed squarely at a big, intractable client problem. Ideally, it's a problem that many organizations share and have found difficult to overcome. Yes, thought leadership can also point at an unseen or unfulfilled opportunity. But our brains tend to be hardwired to overweight risks relative to opportunities. So, most of your thought leadership will likely be pointing at big client problems.
- 2 Evidence of impact** — Often the impact of a problem is clear and evident. Other times the problem is just the tip of a much larger, unseen iceberg. In these cases, providing evidence on the impact of the problem is a critical step in getting executives to act when a solution is later presented.
- 3 Explanation of current, prevailing solutions** — Chances are good that organizations have found some solution to the problem already. An effective argument explains those existing solutions and points out their various shortcomings. Hence, it makes the case that a better way to solve the problem is needed.
- 4 Explanation of your superior solution** — Presumably, your firm is going to put forth a different, better solution, or you wouldn't be developing this piece of IP at all. Explain the solution in detail in language a client can understand.
- 5 Evidence** — Finally, for any argument to hold water, we must present evidence that our proposed solution works. We must bring forth real-world examples that the proposed solution has been applied in other organizations with great success.

## TIPS FOR SHAPING A COMPELLING ARGUMENT

If you find yourself working with subject matter experts to shape their thinking, here are a few tips I've found to be more effective in that endeavor:

**1 Use a structured outline** — Most of the time subject matter experts come to the table with a fuzzy idea of what they want to say. While the argument may seem very clear in their head, frequently there are holes and transgressions. Just about any argument can follow a simple, logical structure. We use a process coined Situation > Complication > Resolution that is used by many Tier 1 consulting firms. Over time, we've found that 95% of thought leadership projects can be framed using one simple outline structure. The outline helps us bring the subject matter experts' thinking to light and identify any holes in the argument. It also helps us keep the expert focused on the argument itself and not the language used to articulate it. In his recently released book, *Competing on Thought Leadership*<sup>1</sup>, Bob Buday shares the outline structure he's used for over 30 years to help clients publish numerous books and over 50 HBR articles. Without a doubt, this is the best place to start.

**2 Read a lot** — Earning the respect of subject matter experts tends to start by being well read in and around the domain in which they operate. Your goal isn't to rival their expertise, it's simply to be fluent enough in their world to hold an effective conversation about the problems they solve and the ways they solve them.

**3 Ask why, why, why** — From there it's always critical to consistently ask questions. Why do companies typically fail in this arena? Why can't they solve for that? What blocks them? Why else do they fail? You can almost always ask, "Why?" one more time to uncover another level of insight.

**4 Force evidence** — Consultants and firms are frequently reticent to share the details of their client work. Often that work is confidential. But that doesn't mean there's no evidence that the suggested solution actually works. Push your experts to provide examples of their thinking in action. Often, they'll identify public examples from their own knowledge or from secondary research. More often than you'd guess, it's quite possible to approach clients to share their experiences by framing them as best practices examples of how to solve a problem.

**5 Get validation** — Share your outline with your subject matter expert before you go into content development. Invite others within the organization who haven't worked on this initiative to review it as well. If you can, share the outline with a few trusted clients. Often, other experts and clients will see problems with the argument you simply do not.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Competing-Thought-Leadership-Robert-Buday/dp/1646871006>



# Determining Where to Publish

**Once you've determined the issues your firm must own and developed a clear, compelling POV around those issues, you have to determine where you'll publish.**

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Your website lead will probably want to publish everything on your firm's website. Your social media lead will want to publish everything on LinkedIn (or maybe produce a podcast or YouTube channel). And your PR firm will tell you only to publish in 3rd party business and trade journals. So, who should you trust?

The truth is, they're all right. In a perfect world, you'd publish anywhere and everywhere your clients passively learn or actively seek new insights on the central business issues they face. And, of course, they do that in all three of those ways and more. They actively leverage Google to search for answers to problems they face. They read business and trade journals to understand what's going on in their industry. And they passively consume LinkedIn (and other social feeds) to keep abreast of what's happening within their personal networks.

The real question you should probably be asking yourself is, how much energy and resources should I devote to each of these publishing venues? To answer that question, let's start by sharing the three most overt benefits of publishing in each of these individual channels.



## THE 3 BENEFITS OF SELF-PUBLISHING

**Gain Search Visibility** — The most important reason to publish your content on your own site is to build visibility for your firm in the areas for which you hope to be known. Google functions like an “automated editor-in-chief” by elevating the most useful content on an issue. In so doing, it behaves like an arbiter of trust. Clients assume you to be an expert in a given domain when your content appears near the top of a search query.

To learn more about the benefits of self-publishing, [read this article](#)<sup>1</sup>.



**Build Audience** — Publishing content on your own site enables you to build a direct relationship with potential clients who are interested in what you have to say. Essentially, it gives you the best chance to earn their permission to market to them on an ongoing basis.

**Enable Sales** — Most consulting firms sell custom solutions to complex problems. There is no other place in your marketing mix where you can make a more direct connection between the issues you solve and the ways you solve them. You can literally lead clients from learning about how to solve a problem to seeing how you solve it and who you’ve solved it for.

## THE 3 BENEFITS OF PUBLISHING IN SOCIAL

**Expand Reach** — The first, and most obvious, reason to publish on LinkedIn or platforms like it is to easily share your thinking with the expanded personal networks of your subject matter experts. Hopefully people within those networks will engage with, like, and share that thinking further opening you up to a broader group of potential readers and contributors within their networks.

To learn more about the benefits of publishing in social, [read this article](#)<sup>2</sup>.



**Grow Followers** — If someone does discover your article via a share in their feed from a connection or by following a topical hashtag, it’s easy for them to quickly follow your firm and its subject matter experts. And it’s a bit less intrusive for them to follow you on LinkedIn than it is for them to sign up for your email marketing newsletter. This makes it easier to scale an audience more quickly.

**Exponentially Grow Followers?** — Of course, the biggest potential benefit is also a bit of a mirage. It’s the possibility of what could happen if LinkedIn editors choose to feature your content through their feed, the Daily Rundown or some other means. Essentially, it’s the hope that one of your subject matter experts can build a very large and loyal following of readers and become a social influencer.

1 <https://www.rattleback.com/insights/articles/reasons-professional-services-self-publishing/>

2 <https://www.rattleback.com/insights/articles/pros-cons-linkedin-marketing-strategies/>



## THE 3 BENEFITS OF PUBLISHING EXTERNALLY

**Amplify Reach** — Well respected business publications, like *HBR*, and trade publications frequently have large subscriber bases and followers. An article published in one of their publications can often extend the reach of your thinking to hundreds of thousands of readers and millions of social followers that can find value in your thinking.

To learn more about the benefits of publishing externally, [read this article](#)<sup>3</sup>.



**Impose Rigor** — Often, when firms publish on their own site or on social platforms they don't hold themselves accountable to very rigorous editorial standards. This, of course, is not the case for high quality publications with professional editorial staff. Working with their editorial teams will raise the quality of your thinking while forcing you to sharpen your unique point of view and prove its merit.

**Gain Credibility** — This is probably the biggest, and most important, benefit of publishing your thinking externally. In a world drowning with fake news, smart senior client executives do still consider arbiters of quality in determining which advice they choose to provide credence. An article placement in *HBR*, *Fortune*, *Fast Company*, or any other well-respected business or trade publication sends an important signal to the clients you hope to do business with that your expertise and thinking has merit and should be trusted.

### Owned Channels

- ▶ Gain Search Authority
- ▶ Build Audience
- ▶ Enable Sales

### Social Channels

- ▶ Expand Reach
- ▶ Grow Followers
- ▶ Exponentially Grow Followers?

### Earned Channels

- ▶ Amplify Reach
- ▶ Impose Rigor
- ▶ Gain Credibility

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rattleback.com/insights/articles/thought-leadership-publishing-channels/>

## BALANCING YOUR RESOURCES APPROPRIATELY

While every firm and every situation is different, I generally recommend that firms publish the bulk of their content into the content channel they most control — their own website. Your self-published channels are effectively the R&D zone of your thought leadership. It's where nascent ideas become emerging ones. And, where those emerging ideas are honed with added rigor. Importantly, it's the one space where you have complete control over what you publish, when you publish, and how you publish it. Essentially, it's the place where you can most shape the conversation.

External publishing channels tend to be the area where you have the least amount of control. While it's largely up to the editorial room to determine what topics to cover, it's up to you to find gaps within the news cycle. Hence, while it's your largest area of impact it tends to be the place where you will likely publish the least amount of content.

Generally, we recommend placing the least amount of emphasis on social publishing. When publishing on LinkedIn or other social platforms you give up the benefit of search authority while also sacrificing the authority you gain from other external channels — after all, anyone can publish anything they want anytime. Usually, we suggest publishing derivative content that extends thinking that's published elsewhere or content that brings the personalities of your subject matter experts to life.

I know what you're thinking...what about paid? In short, while **we regularly use paid media as part of our clients' lead generation programs**<sup>4</sup>, we don't advise them to invest in paid article placements (i.e., paid editorials). In our experience they're very expensive, and your time and resources are far better spent in one of the three other channels described here.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.rattleback.com/expertise/professional-services-digital-marketing/>

# Exploring All Your Digital Publishing Options

**Thought leadership isn't limited to the written word.**

Five or six years ago I began writing about how the traditional thought leadership publishing model was not working the way it once was. More than a few consulting firms were coming to us with the same problem. The success of the model they'd always used to build demand for their firm—author a book, publish a handful of *HBR* articles, and hit the speaking circuit — was in gradual or rapid decline.

The remedy we applied at the time was straightforward. Keep doing the things you're doing. Just make it more digital. Abandon PDF reports. Make everything search-engine visible. Publish more frequently in live HTML. And gate some of your high value content.

In hindsight our thinking, while helpful, was still too analog. In essence we were saying, "Keep writing. Just do it digitally." Now, I've come to realize that we were bringing a linear, editorial mindset to the first entirely interactive medium. In short, we were advising clients to keep right on producing radio shows while distributing them through television sets.

As we enter a new decade, it's time to shed our preconceptions. Thought leadership is still an incredibly powerful tool to create demand for a firm's products and services. In fact, it may be more powerful than ever. But the way we develop and publish thought leadership needs to change. Quickly.

As I see it, there are four emerging thought leadership digital experiences:

1

**Digital  
Hubs**

2

**Articles  
3.0**

3

**Series**

4

**Real-Time  
Videos**

## 1 DIGITAL HUBS

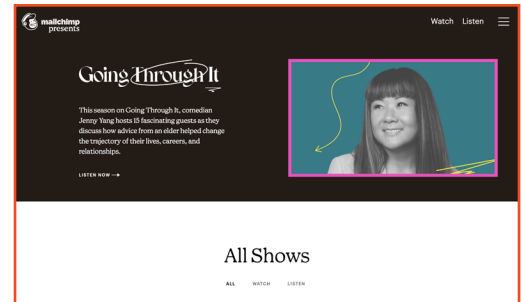
Digital hubs use short-form interactive content to pull “readers” into deeper long-form experiences. Essentially, they aggregate a variety of content formats to serve a specific need for the company and the people they’d like to do business with. We’re seeing organizations develop hubs to serve:

- ▶ An audience they’d like to have a relationship with — entrepreneurs, CFOs, CIOs, etc.
- ▶ A central topic they’d like to own — digital transformation, agility, digital manufacturing, etc.
- ▶ Recurring publications — think economic confidence indicators and “editorial products” like the *McKinsey Quarterly Five Fifty* and McKinsey’s *The Next Normal*.

Let’s look at a few examples.

### MailChimp Presents

*MailChimp Presents*<sup>1</sup> is a digital hub that features a wide range of original stories (short series, podcasts and documentary films) about entrepreneurs and their journey. It exists as an educational and entertainment resource for a very clearly defined audience — entrepreneurial leaders.



### McKinsey Quarterly Five Fifty

I first wrote about the *McKinsey Quarterly Five Fifty*<sup>2</sup> shortly after it launched. It is an “editorial product” that uses a recurring format to deliver new thought leadership roughly once each month. Content covers a wide range of topics and comes from all corners of the firm, but they all follow the same structure — a short piece of scannable interactive content that can be easily consumed in less than five minutes that leads you into a collection of long-form content assets that will take you 50 minutes or more to read.



<sup>1</sup> <https://mailchimp.com/presents/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rattleback.com/insights/articles/examples-thought-leadership-online-formats/>

## The Middle Market Indicator

The *Middle Market Indicator* is a bi-annual economic indicator that surveys the pulse of the U.S. middle market (companies with revenue ranging between \$10M – \$1B). Each quarter, we partner with the National Center for the Middle Market<sup>3</sup> to publish fresh survey data from 1k middle market leaders to this digital hub. It combines video, a variety of interactive graphics, and a collection of industry-specific and geographic-based downloadable content.



## 2 ARTICLES 3.0

I first profiled the emergence of Article 3.0<sup>4</sup> in a post in late 2019. This digital experience is simply the next evolution of the thought leadership article. It combines a mix of video, interactive graphics, audio, and written content to deliver a firm's thinking on a single, discrete topic. Since early 2019, we've been producing Articles 3.0 right in the flow of content we might otherwise produce for ourselves and our clients.

Let's look at a few examples:

### McKinsey: An Incredible Year for Impossible Foods

In late 2019, McKinsey launched another new “editorial product” called *The Next Normal*. While the product itself could be classified as a digital hub, many of the articles within function as articles 3.0. This interview with the CFO of Impossible Foods<sup>5</sup> combines a mix of useful content including — a collection of short topical interview videos, a “how it's made” video showing how the product is produced, and written content that binds it all together.



3 <https://www.rattleback.com/work/think-tank-research-center-digital-marketing/>

4 <https://www.rattleback.com/insights/articles/evolution-thought-leadership-marketing/>

5 <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/agriculture/our-insights/an-incredible-year-for-impossible-foods>

## The New York Times: Trump Engaged in Suspect Tax Schemes as He Reaped Riches From His Father

While not strictly thought leadership, this article [3.0](#) produced by *The New York Times*<sup>6</sup> describes a history of President Trump's real estate holdings and some of the questionable approaches taken to minimize his tax burden. It acts as an aspirational example for thought leadership marketers as it combines a variety of elegant interactive graphics to grab reader attention and animated videos to describe complex concepts that would be very difficult to explain with just words.



### 3 SERIES

The critical role of thought leadership marketers as storytellers<sup>7</sup> is becoming more on display with the emergence of episode-based series. Series-based thought leadership content has all of the compelling elements of any great series — it has a clear and understandable theme, a recognizable start and finish, and in some cases, even protagonists and antagonists. Often, the theme itself is published front-and-center for all to see.

Let's look at some examples:

#### Against the Rules

A two-season podcast series, *Against the Rules*<sup>8</sup>, produced by Michael Lewis documents the “decline of the ref in American society” in season one. Then, looks at the “rise of coaches in all aspects of life” in season two. The series explores these themes at length as it crosses everything from the NYSE to the world of fine art and NBA Basketball.

#### Electronic Propaganda Society

A nine-episode podcast series, the *Electronic Propaganda Society*<sup>9</sup> was produced by Matthew Sweezy, a marketer at Salesforce. The premise of the series was that over 99% of all marketing efforts are failing. It explores the root cause of why this is happening and offers thoughts on how to think about a better path forward for all marketers.

6 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/02/us/politics/donald-trump-tax-schemes-fred-trump.html?mtrref=undefined&gwh=4E453A90BBD39CDA856ADC36DC0DFEB5&gwt=pay&assetType=PAYWALL>

7 <https://www.rattleback.com/insights/articles/thought-leadership-marketing-storytelling/>

8 <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/against-the-rules-with-michael-lewis/id1455379351>

9 <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/electronic-propaganda-society/id1460256430>

## Lifecycle of a Business

A seven-episode podcast series<sup>10</sup>, produced by *MailChimp Presents*, details the stages of an entrepreneurial venture through the eyes of people who've lived it. The series looks at each stage of the journey from a business that is little more than a loose idea, to a growing then mature enterprise, to exits and rebirths.

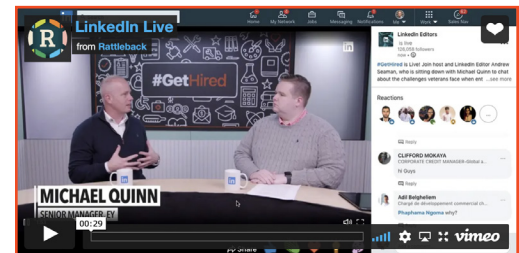
While all these examples feature podcasts, series-based thought leadership can be published in a wide variety of formats including videos, films, and articles.

## 4 REAL-TIME VIDEOS

While consumers have been shooting and streaming real-time videos from their iPhones for years the practice has gained traction in B2B marketing the last few years as more firms are realizing they can bring near broadcast-quality production to a live-stream on LinkedIn Live or Facebook Live.

### LinkedIn Editors Live

This real-time video features a LinkedIn Editor interviewing EY manager Michael Quinn on advice for military veterans looking to enter the civilian workforce.



### Boston Consulting Group Live at Davos

This rooftop interview between Mai-Britt Poulsen and Alan Thomson streamed live on LinkedIn from Davos featured a discussion on how to approach sustainability in the global energy industry.



<sup>10</sup> <https://mailchimp.com/presents/podcast/lifecycle-of-a-business/>





## Chapter 9:

# Learning From A Real-World Example

**An outside-in look at how CEB/Gartner reshaped the market for sales training.**

If you work in the sales and marketing arena, I'm confident you're familiar with *The Challenger Sale*. But have you ever stopped to think about how the book came to be? How it was marketed? Or the impact it had on CEB, the firm that published it?

## CEB/Gartner | The Challenger Sale

The selling philosophy put forth in the firm's 2011 book, *The Challenger Sale*, didn't just create interest in the firm's services, it entirely rewrote the thinking on how salespeople sell. For a lot of companies, this new insight forced them to re-think everything they knew about how they hire, train and reward salespeople. And, as you might imagine, it created a lot of demand and catalyzed growth in the firm's Sales & Services practice leading up to its sale to Gartner.

## How the Insights Came to Be

Published in 2011, *The Challenger Sale* was co-authored by Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson. According to this [2017 podcast interview with Brent<sup>1</sup>](https://bregmanpartners.com/podcast/brent-adamson-the-challenger-sale/), the insights started as simple curiosity from the subject matter experts. During the Great Recession of 2009, the consultants at CEB noticed a trend through their client conversations. Sales leaders from across industries and countries were sharing similar stories. Given the state of the economy, the vast majority of their sales reps were understandably way down in their performance, making only 30-40% of their quota. Yet, those very same organizations tended to have one to two extremely high performing sales reps. These folks weren't

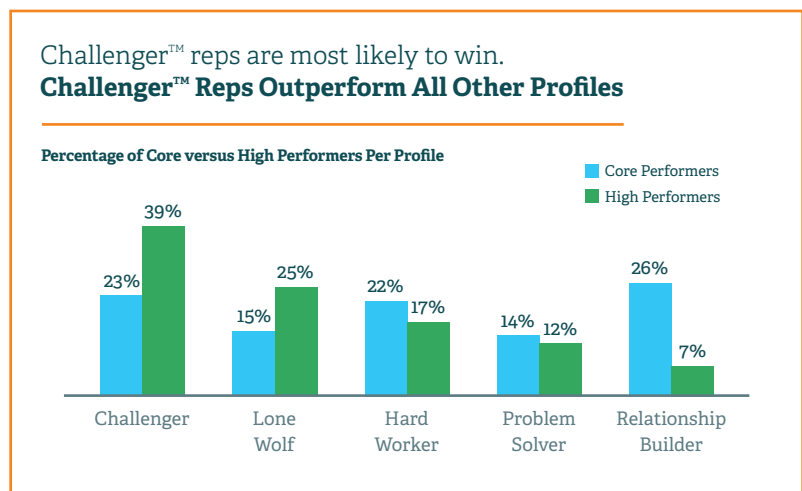
<sup>1</sup> <https://bregmanpartners.com/podcast/brent-adamson-the-challenger-sale/>



just doing well, they were far exceeding expectations, selling 130-140% of their quotas. As these stories emerged again and again, the CEB consultants started to ask “why?” and “how?”.

What followed was a tightly bound research inquiry that asked the question, “what do these star performers do differently?” What behaviors, skills, knowledge, attitudes and activities do they bring to the job that enable them to dramatically outperform their peers in a very difficult selling environment?

To start, the firm surveyed over 6,000 executives on both sides of the buying process. From within the data set, they identified a group of star performers. Star performers were defined as salespeople who consistently met or exceeded their quarterly goals for a number of years. From there, they used multi-factor analysis to group all the people in the data set into one of five profiles. Each profile represented a different approach to selling. Then, they identified the likelihood that a star performer was found in each individual profile. Here’s a sample of what they found from their presentation of research findings:



Source: Gartner, *The Challenger Sale*  
<https://www.gartner.com/en/sales-service/insights/challenger-sale>

### How the Insights Went to Market

According to the firm’s 2011 Annual Report, the firm published the book and “positioned [it] at the center of a major multichannel communications effort that drove unprecedented engagement with our content across major social media platforms.” The book spawned at least seven *HBR* articles. By 2013, Dreamforce had dedicated an entire day to Challenger-related content (i.e., the firm’s subject matter experts were sharing the findings to over 250k sales and marketing executives in-person). By 2015, the thinking spawned a companion book, *The Challenger Customer*, and the firm created its own Sales & Marketing Summit. As of today, the firm has sold over 500k copies of its books.

## What The Insights Returned for the Shareholders

It's hard to put exact ROI numbers on the firm's investment from the outside looking in. Even before bought by Gartner, CEB was a relatively large, diversified membership-based, training and advisory firm. But the firm was publicly traded. And, based on a review of the firm's annual reports, it seems clear that CEB did reshape the entire conversation in the market on how selling gets done. We do know this:

- ▶ CEB sold over 500k copies of its books making *The Challenger Sale* a monumental best seller in the world of business publishing that likely generated upwards of \$10M in revenue.
- ▶ The firm claimed to have trained over 80,000 sales professionals on the Challenger methodology.
- ▶ CEB demonstrated significant impact from its training on the sales performance of major companies like SAP (26% more deals, 27% more revenue for Challenger-trained sales representatives according to the 2015 Annual Report).
- ▶ The firm's stock price gradually grew from \$37.39 per share on 11/10/11 when the book was published to \$75.90 on 1/10/17 when it was officially sold to Gartner in a \$2.6B transaction.
- ▶ Over that same period, CEB consistently grew revenue from ~\$485M to over \$950M. While the Sales & Services practice was just one piece of the firm's diverse organization, one has to assume it had a significant contribution to that growth given the prominent place the initiative had in the firm's corporate annual reports in 2011, 2013 and 2015.

# Don't Just Take What the Market Gives You.

**In the world of B2B services and software the future favors the bold. The firms that put forth the most cogent thinking on how to approach the most pressing issues of our time have an opportunity to create new market space, build new businesses, and create growth in revenue and business value they previously only imagined. Will your firm be one of them?**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jason Mlicki** has been advising professional services firms and B2B SaaS providers on marketing matters for over 20 years. He writes about growth strategies, thought leadership development, and lead generation on his agency website, [Rattleback.com](http://Rattleback.com). Also, he co-produces the annual conference, *Profiting From Thought Leadership* and the professional services marketing podcast, *Rattle & Pedal*.

## ABOUT RATTLEBACK

**Rattleback** provides growth consulting, thought leadership development, and lead generation for professional services and B2B SaaS firms. We help business and marketing leaders envision and realize the desired future state for their firms. We have worked with early revenue start-ups, middle market, and notable tier one firms such as Infosys, L.E.K. Consulting, and Dale Carnegie. Learn more at [rattleback.com](http://rattleback.com).

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