

VALUE OF B2B THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SURVEY

# AIN'T NOTHING LIKE THE REAL THINK, BABY

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HOW THE C-SUITE VIEW AND USE THOUGHT LEADERSHIP



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### **About the research**

Independent market research agency Coleman Parkes Research undertook the research on behalf of Grist, conducting more than 525 interviews with senior decision-makers at large and enterprise organisations around the world. Interviewees were segmented by heads of legal, finance, tech, marketing and sales and risk. The interviews were carried out in June and July 2018.

# 1.0 Welcome

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**High-quality thought leadership can cement an organisation's reputation as a trusted partner. It can underscore perceptions of expertise. It can even help to close the deal. However, in an increasingly crowded market, thought leadership must hit the mark or risk being overlooked completely.**

When we began our first foray into the value of B2B thought leadership in 2016, we surveyed the C-suite of FTSE 350 firms about what they expected from thought leadership, how and when it was consumed and what would make it better. We subsequently gained some great insights:

- Senior executives sought out thought leadership to help them stay ahead of emerging trends and to help them make better, more informed decisions.
- Thought leadership failed when it was too generic, lacked original insight or ideas or was self-promoting.

- The thoughts of clients and customers mattered more than any other voices or sources.
- Readers preferred 'short and punchy' formats for thought leadership.
- Senior executives relied on multiple sources, online and offline, to get their thought leadership fix.
- Monday lunchtime was the best time to get to the C-suite audience, but just 31% of the thought leadership that came across their desk would be read.
- Four out of five respondents wanted content that they or their peers were involved in developing.

In the intervening years, though, the way the world consumes information has changed. This is the post-Brexit, Trumpian era; the time when 'fake news' and social media scandals have taken their toll. Surely this has had an impact on the way our senior audience views thought leadership?

Yes, but also no. This latest survey, which this time has been expanded to include senior executives at enterprise-level companies in the US, Europe and Asia, finds a world much more comfortable with the idea of thought leadership – but much more demanding in what they want and need from it. Today the C-suite wants statistically robust, data-led thought leadership that they know is authentic – something they can genuinely trust.

In this second of three reports dissecting the next wave of thought leadership research, we explore these trends and provide the latest figures in thought leadership consumption. Find the first report, *The growing importance of data to the value of thought leadership* [here](#).

# 1.1 Methodology

**Who:**

525 senior decision-makers at large/enterprise organisations around the world

**When:**

June to July 2018

**How:**

Online survey with some telephone interviews

**Where:**

UK, US: 100 respondents each

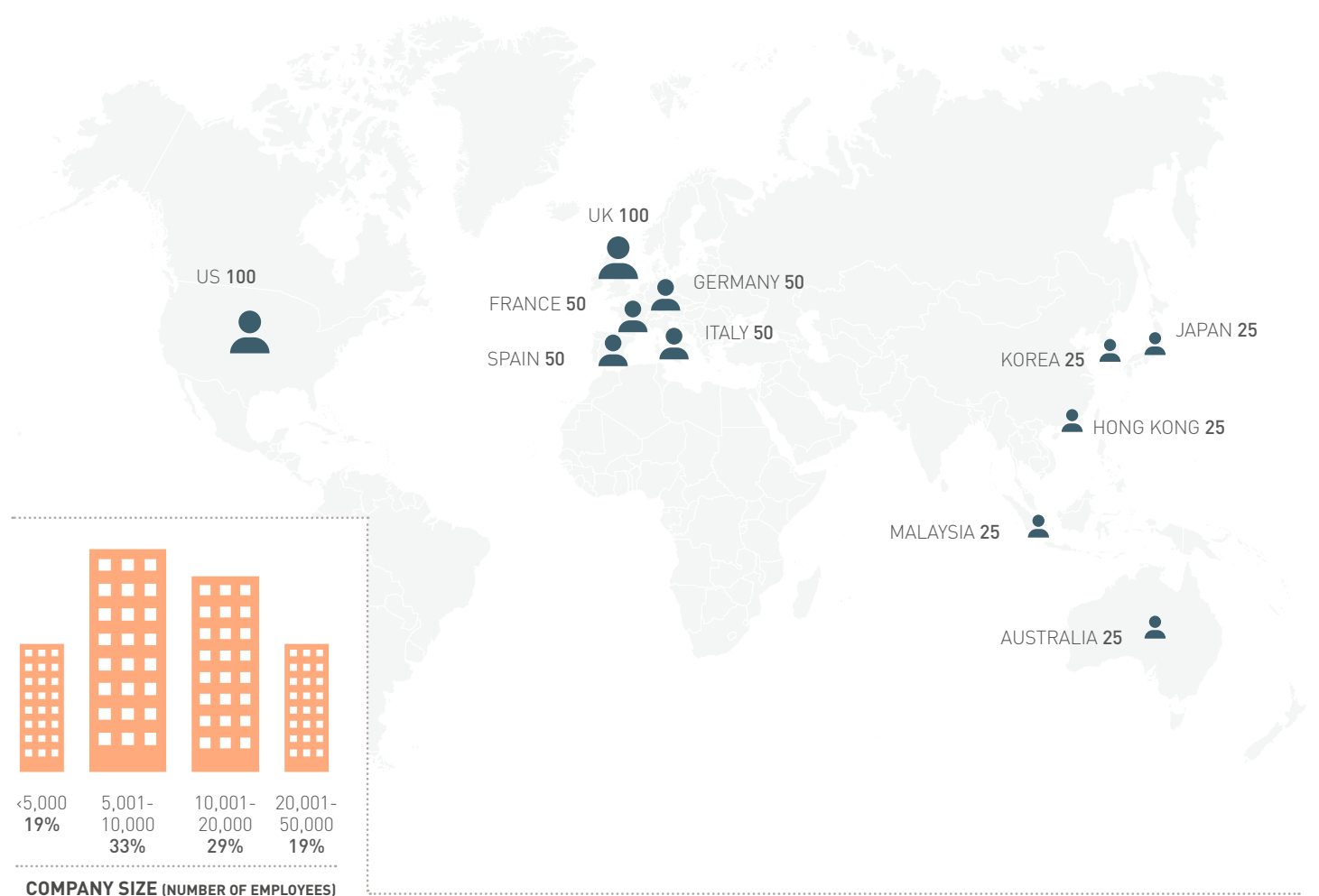
France, Germany, Spain & Italy: 50 respondents each

Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Korea & Australia: 25 respondents each

**Company size:**

Up to 50,000 employees, divided into four ranges: less than 5,000 (19%); 5,001-10,000 (33%); 10,001-20,000 (29%); 20,001-50,000 (19%)

16% of respondent companies had revenues of \$1 billion or more in 2017



RESPONDENT LOCATIONS

## 2.0 What is thought leadership and why is it important?

Thought leadership may be today's buzz phrase, but it was actually first coined in 1994 by Joel Kurtzman, editor of *strategy+business*. To give that some context, that was the same year Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa, *Friends* debuted on television and Yahoo! launched.

In the years since, the term has evolved and, while the majority acknowledge its importance, there is often much debate about what it means. At Grist, we have coined the following definition:

**Original, authoritative and insightful content that differentiates your brand and helps your clients, leading to mutually beneficial commercial opportunities.**

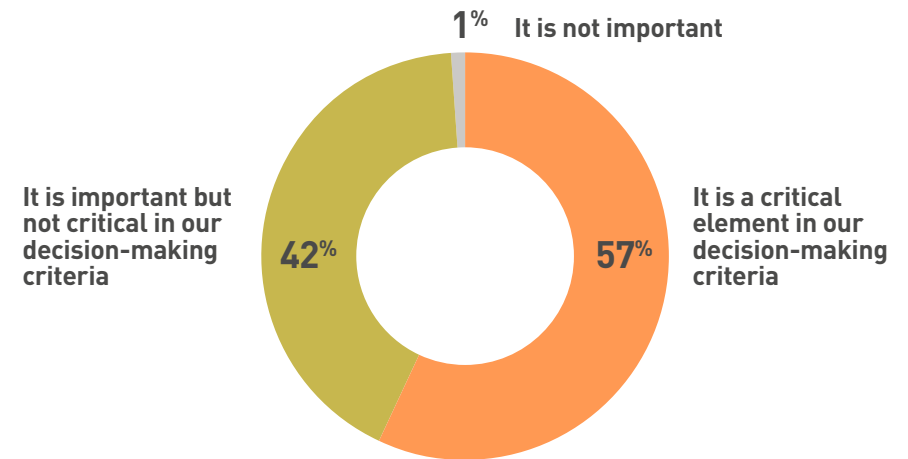
Throughout this report, we're going to look at what the C-suite wants when it comes to thought leadership.

According to our research, 99% of the senior executives we surveyed claim thought leadership is either critical or important to their decision-making when appointing an adviser.

Anecdotal evidence would back this up. Take RFPs, for example. Whereas thought leadership used to be something that could add value to your proposal, it has now become expected.

If we accept that thought leadership is now the norm, however, there is even more importance on getting it right. This includes giving careful consideration to what the right thought leadership is for clients' specific needs.

HOW IMPORTANT IS THOUGHT LEADERSHIP WHEN ASSESSING THE SUITABILITY OF A NEW ADVISER?



# 3.1 How does thought leadership provide value?

To understand what clients want or need, it's important to take a step back and ask, 'why do people read thought leadership?'

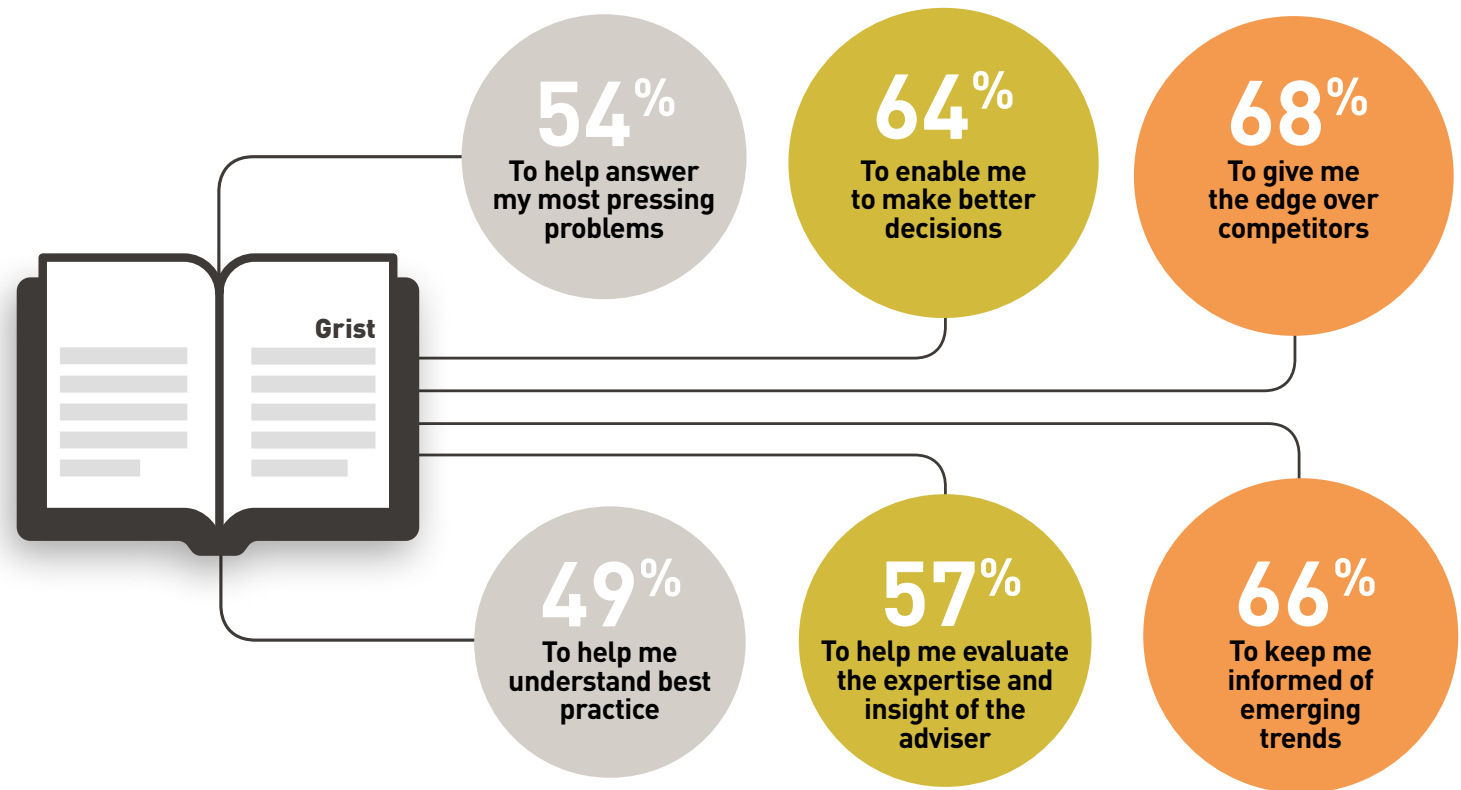
Our research found 68% of senior executives read thought leadership to give them an edge over competitors, while 66% say it keeps them informed of emerging trends. The third most popular answer is enabling them to make better decisions (64%).

All three of these responses encapsulate the fundamental objective of all successful content marketing – to be of use.

Comparing these results with our 2016 research shows how the value of thought leadership is changing. In 2016, only 48% of senior executives surveyed claimed to read thought leadership to give them an edge over competitors – now up 20%. Similarly, helping answer their most pressing problems also rose 15%, with 54% now stating that's why they read thought leadership. Commercial objectives are clearly competing for attention with future trends.

Yet the most notable change since 2016 is that 57% of respondents read thought leadership to help evaluate the expertise and insight of the adviser that created it. Compare this with the 36% from 2016 and the importance of thought leadership is clear. It's no longer a 'nice-to-have', but a 'must-have'.

Q: Why do you read thought leadership?



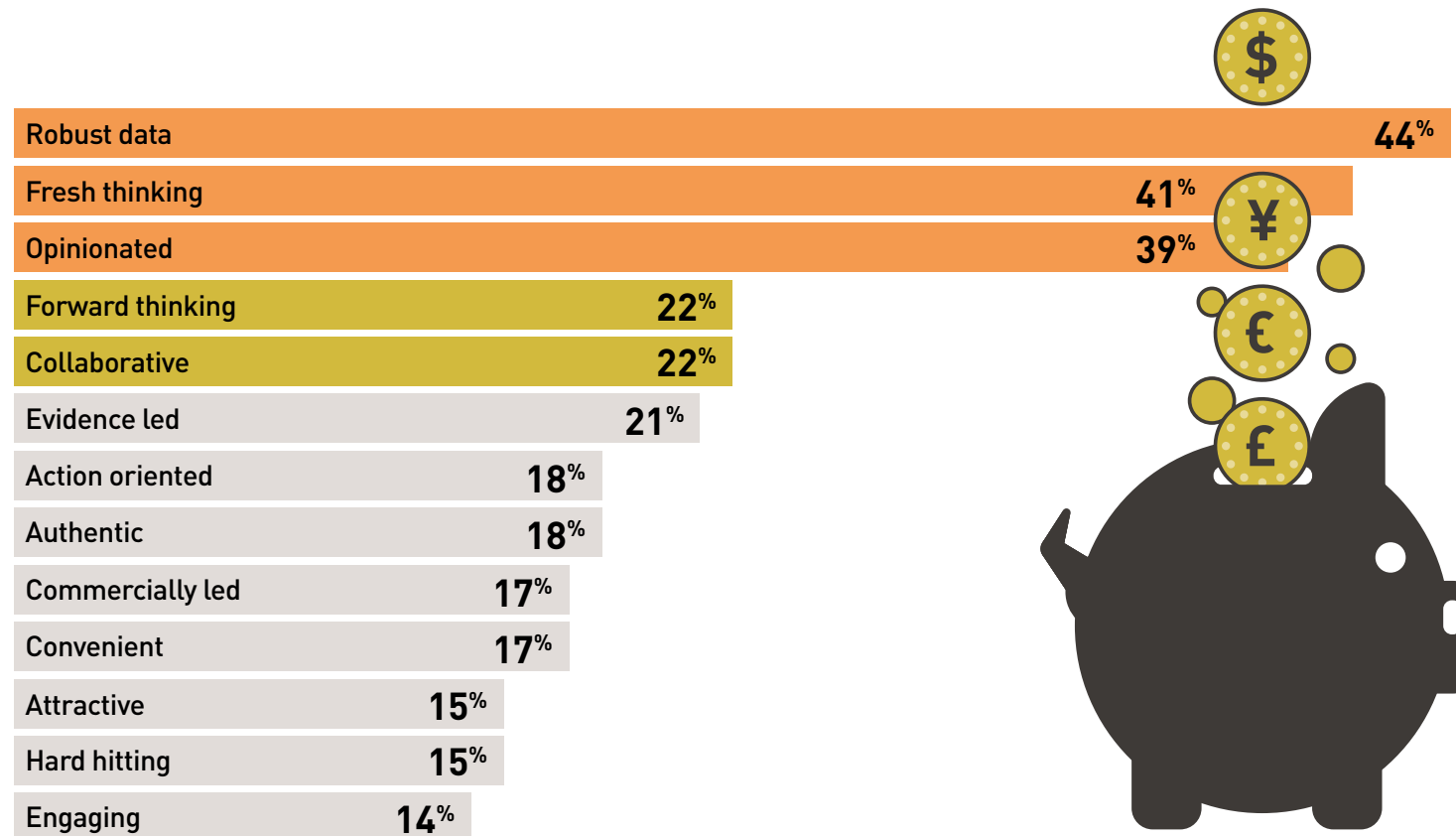
## 3.2 Which qualities do senior executives find most valuable?

Fresh thinking is at the core of thought leadership. However, our research suggests that's no longer enough. Robust data (44%) is now seen as the most important attribute – up from 29% in 2016 – and is vital when backing up fresh and opinionated thinking when it comes to thought leadership.

But why the sudden importance of data? The answer is simple. While the landscape is vast, it's becoming increasingly crowded. The world is now littered with content masquerading as thought leadership, making 'cut-through' difficult.

The C-suite is looking for robust data with sound and informed analysis. Adhere to this principle and you'll stand out from the crowd.

Q: Which qualities do you find most valuable in thought leadership?



# 3.3 Why does thought leadership fail?

It may be a favourite mantra of Donald Trump, but 'fake news' has had a serious impact on thought leadership. That sense of mistrust and anxiety around the information we consume has crept into our business lives.

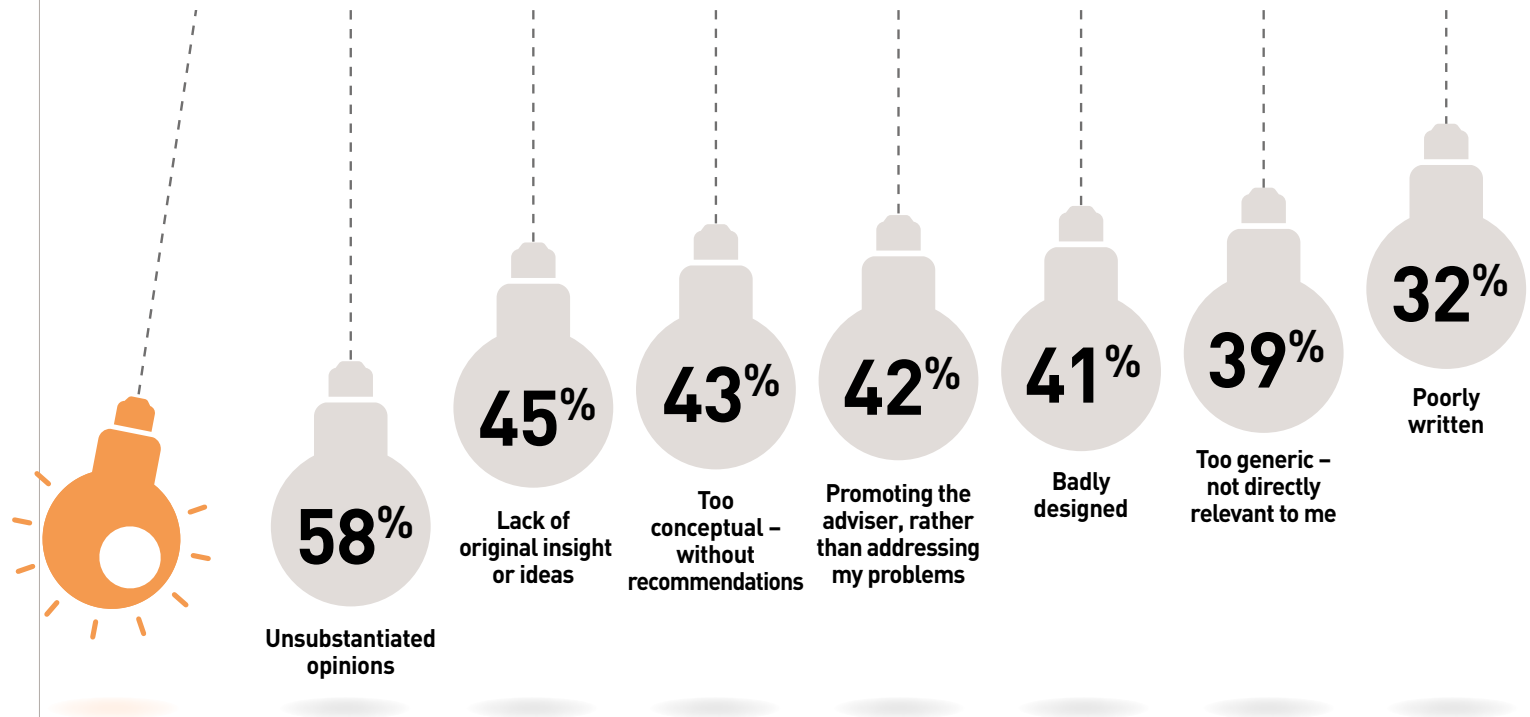
When we asked our respondents what turns them off when it comes to thought leadership, 58% cite 'unsubstantiated opinions'. Home in specifically on the US and that figure rises to 66% – another example of the Trump-effect perhaps.

Brexit, along with Trump, has also played its part in feelings of mistrust. Prior to the EU referendum in 2016, unsubstantiated opinions came fifth in the list of turn-offs. It's now top. It's another reminder that people are demanding that opinions are backed up with data.

However, some things haven't changed: senior executives are still turned off by a lack of original insight, by content that is too conceptual and by content that promotes the adviser, rather than addresses their problems.

This highlights the demands on all content creators to really understand their readers and their needs. Any thought leadership content must help them realise their opportunities and avoid their risks.

Q: What turns you off thought leadership?



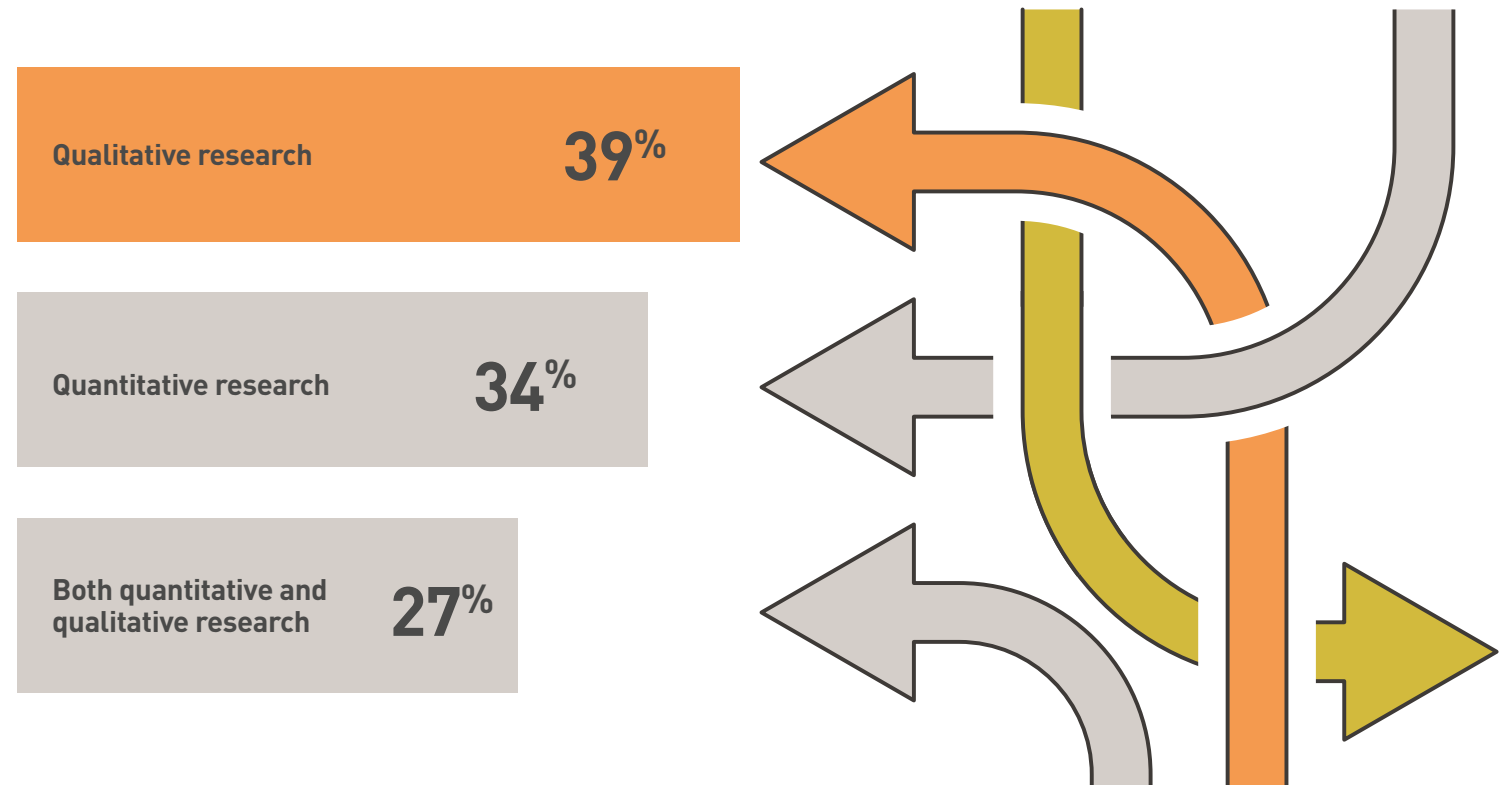


# 3.4 Which research methodology works best?

When it comes to the kind of research senior executives want, qualitative or quantitative, the answer is... both!

According to our survey, respondents slightly lean towards qualitative (39%) over quantitative (34%). And more than a quarter (27%) want both. It's up to us, as marketers, to work out how best to provide this.

Q: Which research methodology would you prefer?



# 3.5 Whose views do the C-suite want to hear?

A common misconception about thought leadership is that the views the C-suite most wants to hear are those of other senior executives. In fact, the views most valued are those of their customers. This was echoed in both this and our previous survey in 2016.

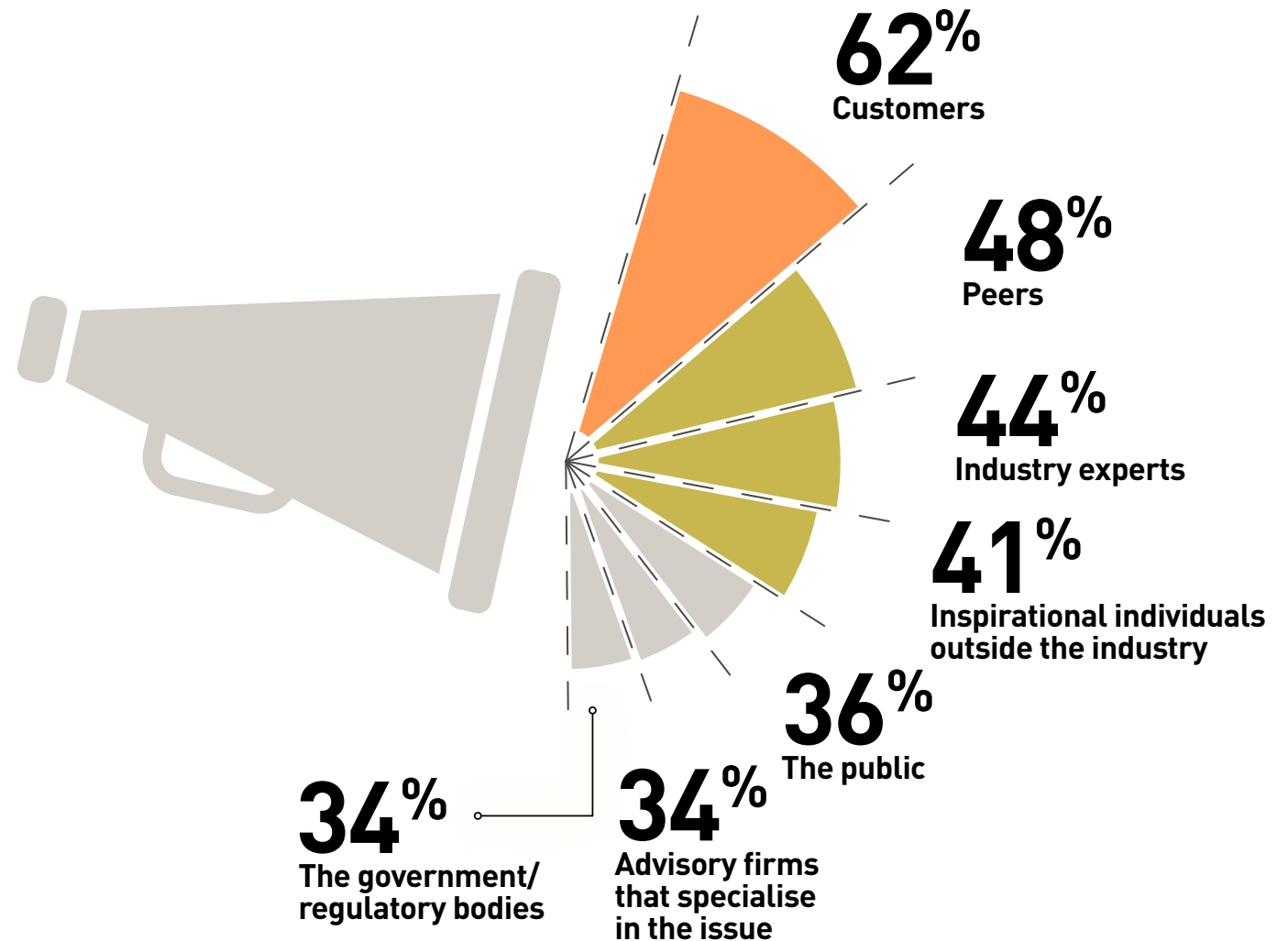
62% of those surveyed for this report cite customers' views as being number one.

Of course, it's not just the customers' views they want to hear. Competitors or peers comes in second with 48%, while industry experts (44%) and inspirational individuals outside the industry (41%) also feature high.

All this suggests the C-suite is interested in hearing from people outside of their immediate circle – those people that their company exists to help and those who can provide outside perspectives.

However, perhaps most interestingly, more than a third (34%) of the C-suite we talked to wants to hear from advisory firms that specialise in the issue. These are the very firms that want to reach the C-suite with their thought leadership. It's a relationship that's built to succeed.

Q: When reading thought leadership whose views do you want to hear?



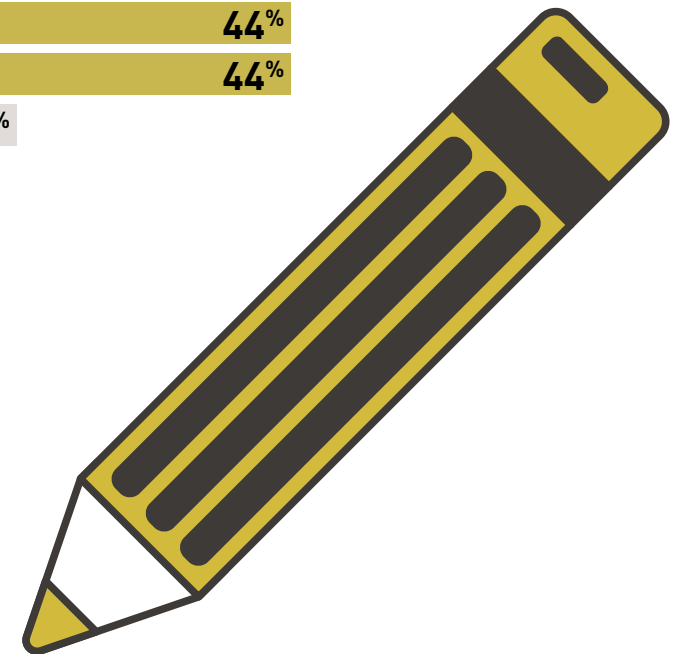
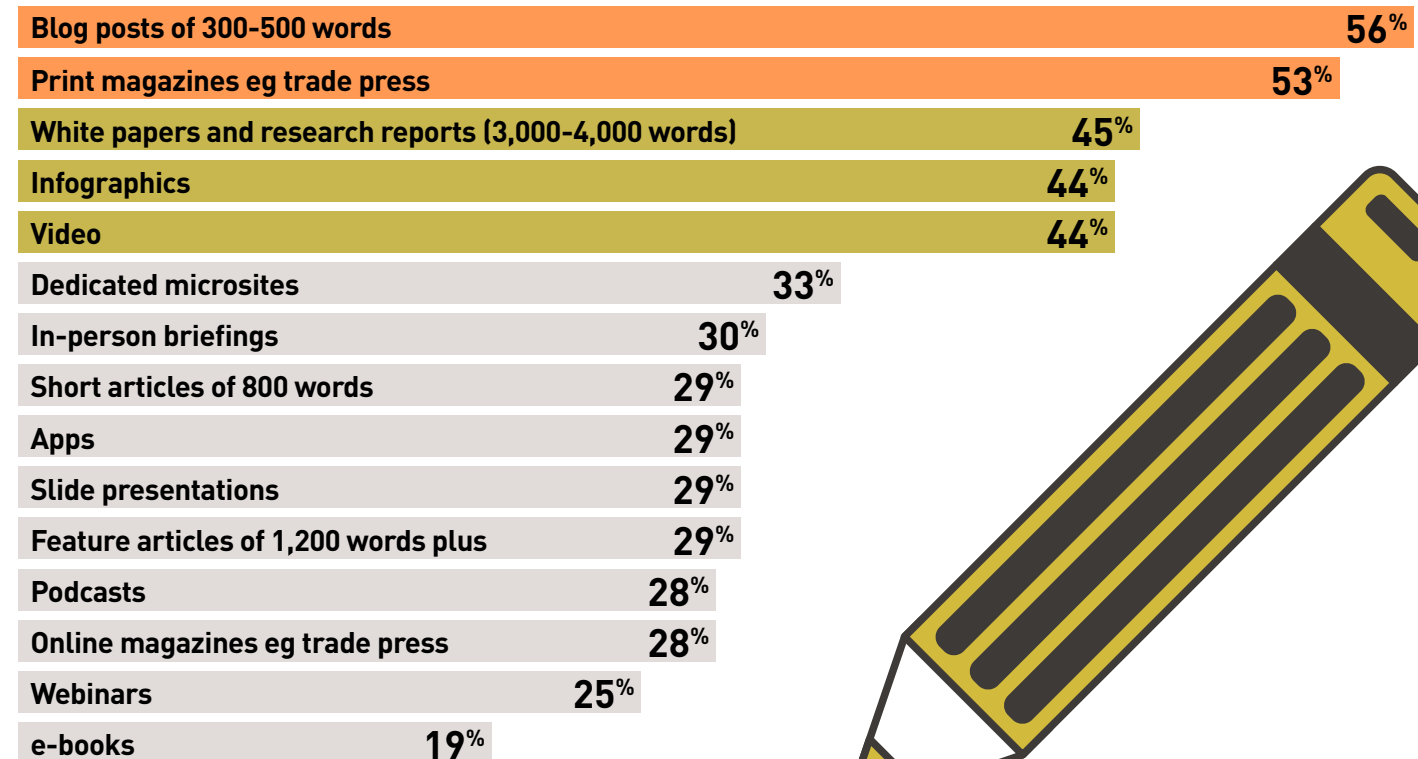
## 3.6 Which formats do the C-suite prefer?

When it comes to the formats senior executives prefer, blog posts come out on top (56%), closely followed by print magazines (53%). White papers and research reports (45%), infographics (44%) and video (44%) make up the top five formats, with the next highest, microsites, only being cited by 33% of respondents.

This confirms two things. Firstly, that there is a need for an integrated communications strategy to reach them. This includes both short- and long-form content with PR and events such as roundtables enabling a greater reach for the thought leadership programmes.

Secondly, new formats may not necessarily be the answer. Less than 30% of respondents say they favoured podcasts, apps, webinars or e-books. Now this may change over time but don't force the issue simply because you feel you should be ahead of the curve.

Q: Which of the following formats do you prefer?



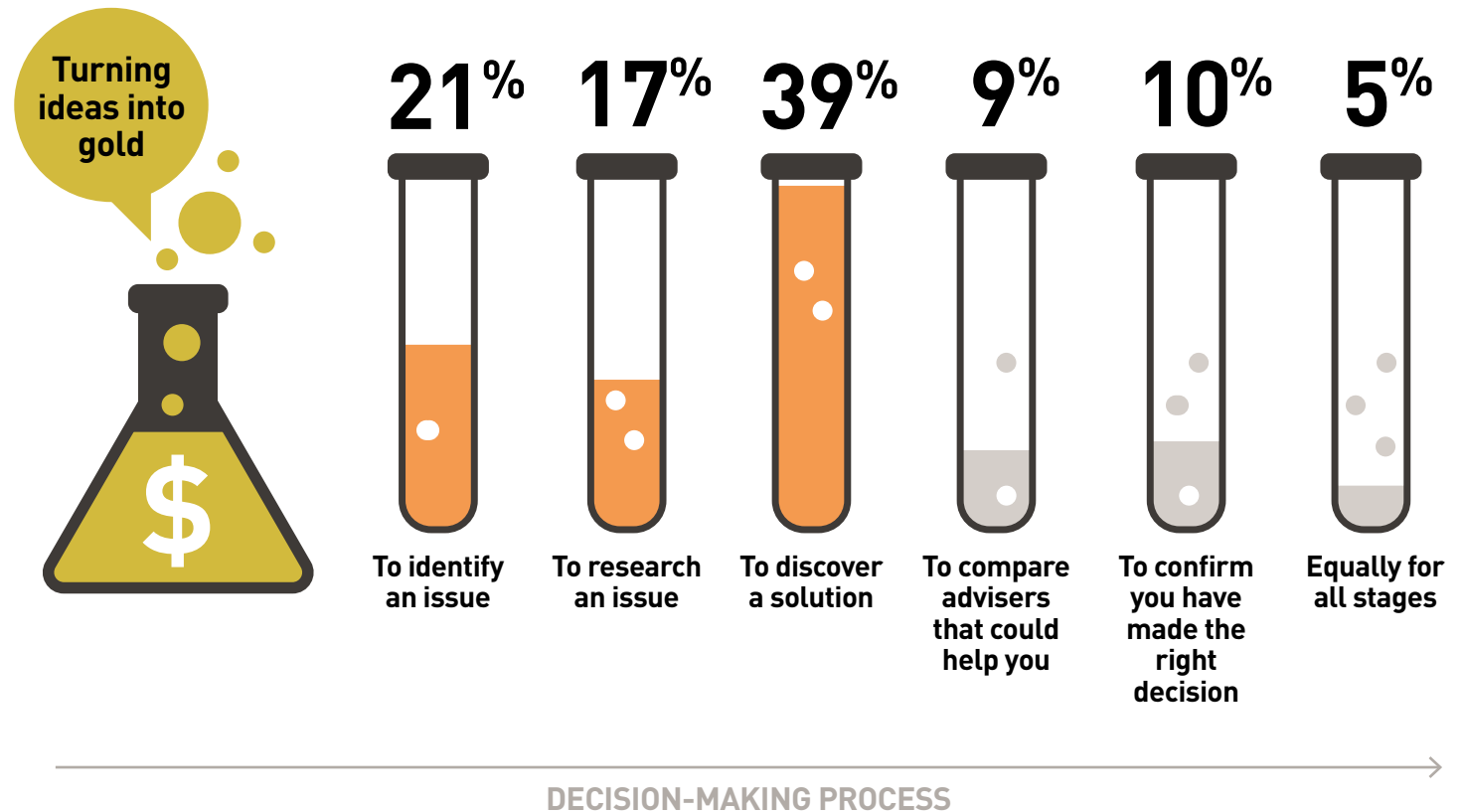
# 3.7 Where does thought leadership provide most value?

When asked at what stage thought leadership provides most value in decision-making, our respondents are clear. Thirty-nine percent say it is when looking for a solution, while 21% say it is when identifying an issue and 17% say it is when researching an issue.

This would reinforce another trend we have seen, which is that thought leadership is moving from the beginning of the BD funnel to the middle. Gone are the days when thought leadership could be used just to raise awareness – it now has to play (and pay) in lead generation too.

Not using thought leadership in the decision-making process is also important. Only 10% of respondents say they have used it to confirm they had made the right decision, while 9% say they used it to compare advisers. Thankfully there is already material that helps with these decisions and comparisons (eg testimonials, directory entries). Thought leadership clearly serves a different purpose.

Q: Where does thought leadership provide most value in the decision-making process?



## 3.8 Where do senior executives seek out thought leadership?

According to our survey, professional networks (eg colleagues or peers) are the go-to source for seeking out thought leadership, with 57% of respondents citing it as number one.

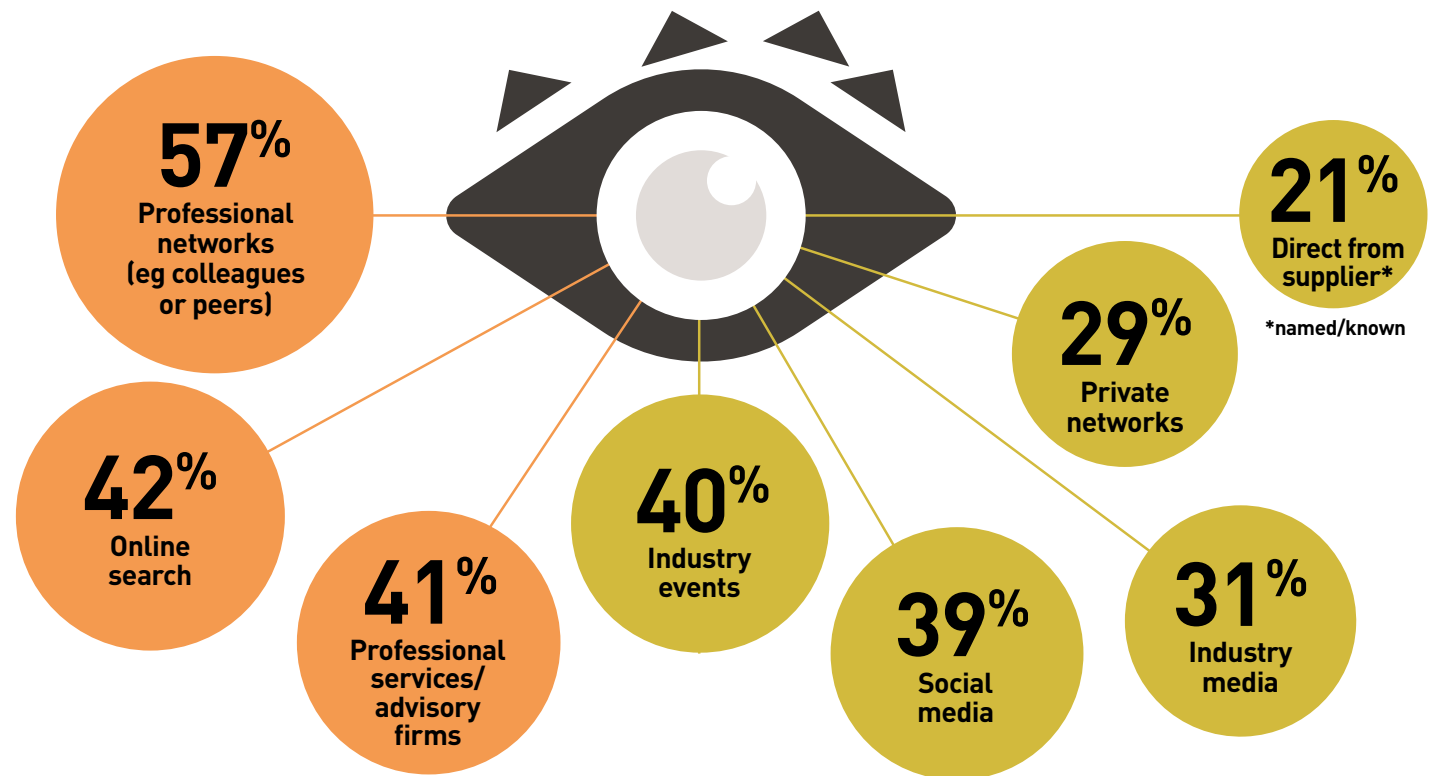
Second on the list is online search (42%). With this in mind, it's worth considering what you're doing in this space with paid social campaigns – a particular favourite of some of our clients.

Noticeably, 41% of the C-suite we surveyed say they seek out thought leadership from professional services/advisory firms. But this opportunity is clearly also a risk – since if you are not creating the thought leadership they seek, and your competitors are, the senior executives may well end up on their sites rather than yours!

More traditional B2B sources such as industry events and industry media appear to be on the decline. This is perhaps not surprising when we consider the transition from print to digital and how much of the 'old ways' generally involved content being 'pushed' to senior executives, rather than sought out.

Yet above all, our survey suggests that, as marketers, when it comes to sources of thought leadership, there is no silver bullet. Your campaign must work hard and cover all of the bases.

Q: From which of these sources are you most likely to seek out thought leadership material?



# 3.9 Which networks are most popular for thought leadership?

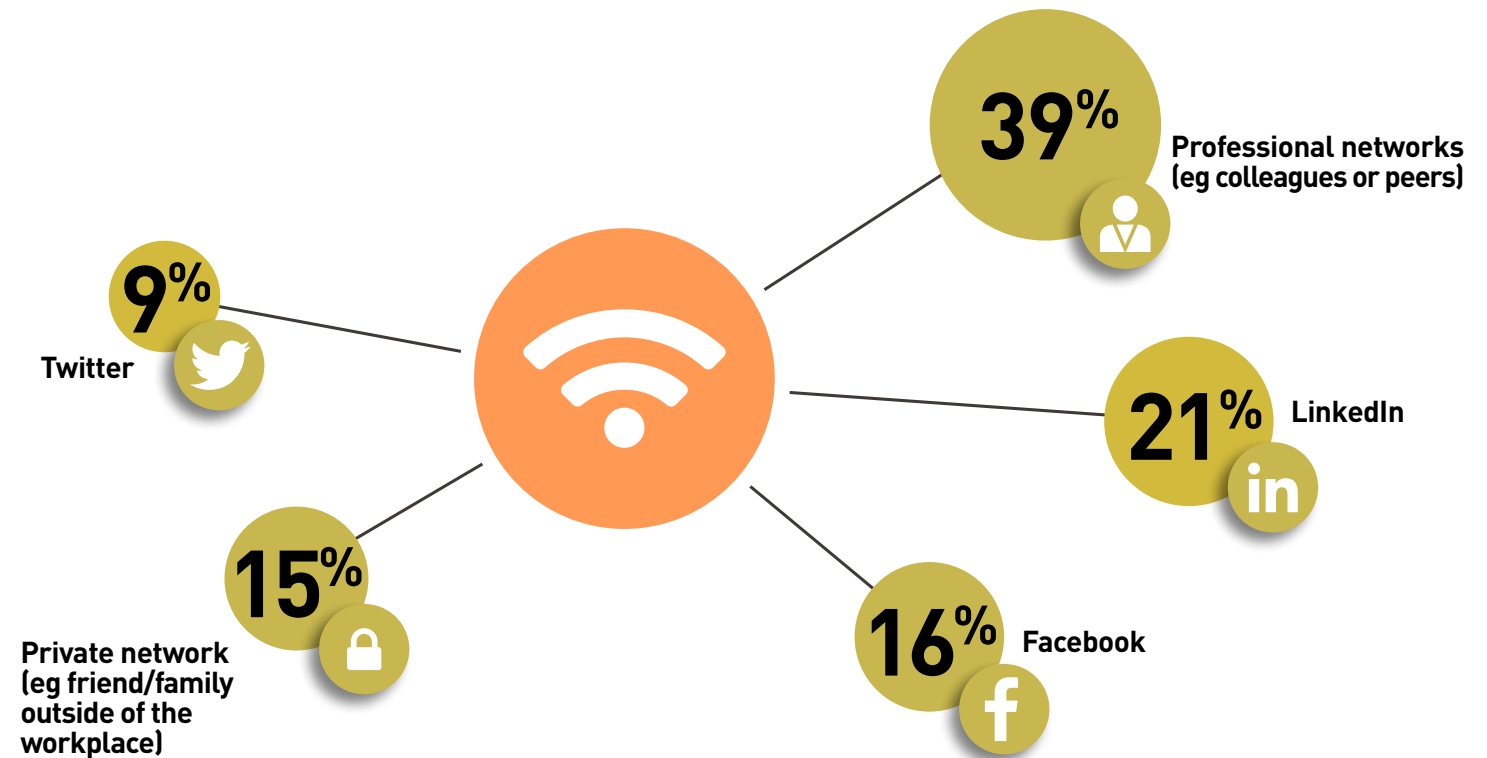
Our survey once again shows the importance of professional networks when it comes to thought leadership. Thirty-nine percent of respondents say colleagues or peers are the first port of call when engaging with thought leadership.

However, beyond that, we found some of the results to be surprising. LinkedIn, the self-described world's largest professional network, is only cited by 21% of respondents. This is all the more surprising when we see Facebook is only marginally behind with 16%.

Yet break down the numbers and it's easier to fathom. LinkedIn, for example, has 610 million users, whereas Facebook has 2.38 billion. If only a small minority of Facebook users use it in a professional context, you can see how it's begun to spill into the world of thought leadership.

Our survey, however, doesn't make for good reading for Twitter, with only 9% of those surveyed saying they use it to engage in thought leadership. Again, another surprising result.

Q: On which network are you likely to engage with thought leadership?



# 3.10 When is thought leadership consumed?

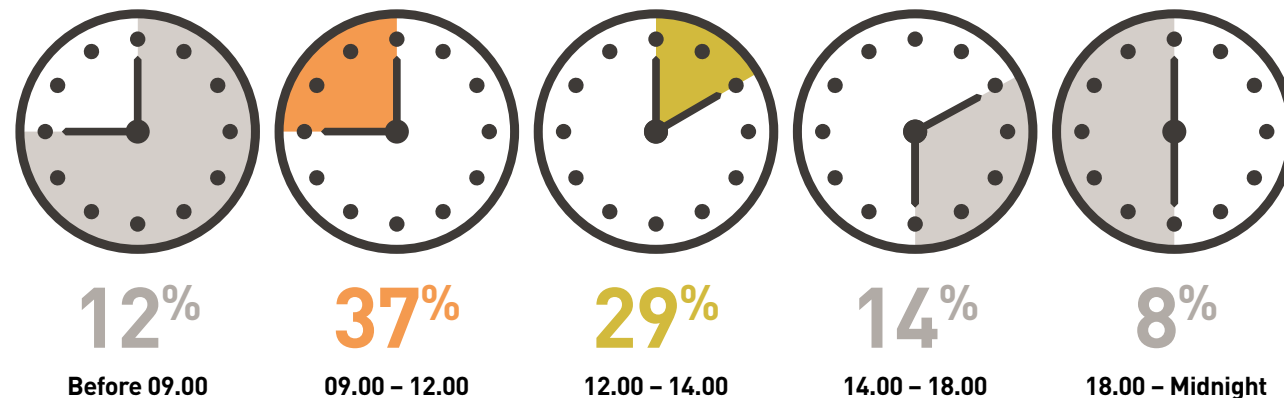
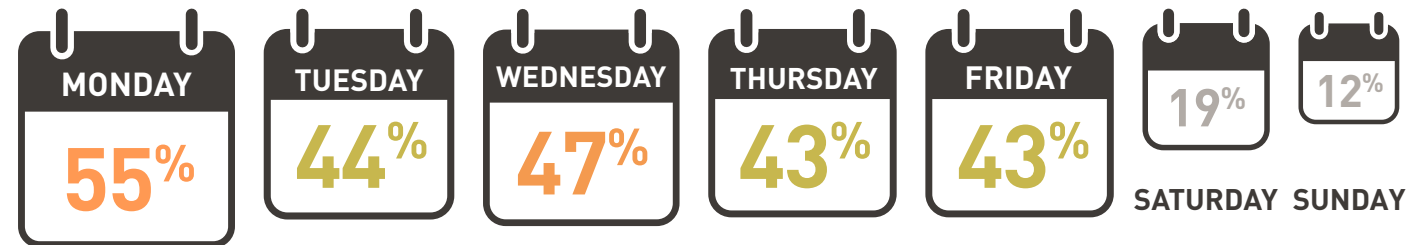
When we asked our senior executives what day of the week and at what time they seek out thought leadership, we found some interesting results.

Monday (55%) proves to be the most popular day for the C-suite to seek out thought leadership, by some distance. Wednesday is the second favoured day with 47% but, other than Monday, the difference in weekdays is negligible.

Less surprising is Saturday (19%) and Sunday (12%) being the days of the week that thought leadership is least likely to be consumed. Yet the fact that nearly one in five respondents is prepared to engage with thought leadership at the weekend points to the ease of access to information via smart devices. Another example of how the landscape is changing.

If Monday is the most popular day to seek out thought leadership, the first half of the day is the most popular time, with 37% saying they are most likely to view thought leadership between 9am and 12pm and 29% between 12pm and 2pm.

**Q:** On which days of the week and at what time of day do you typically seek out thought leadership?



# 3.11 How much gets read and what impact does it have?

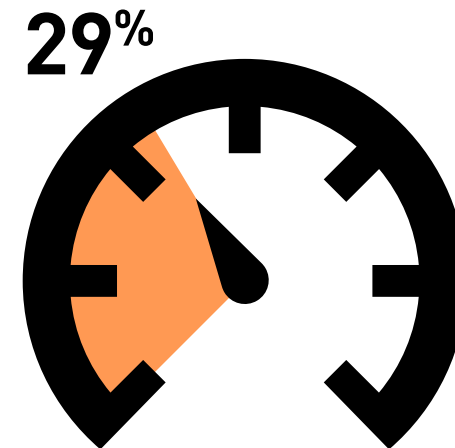
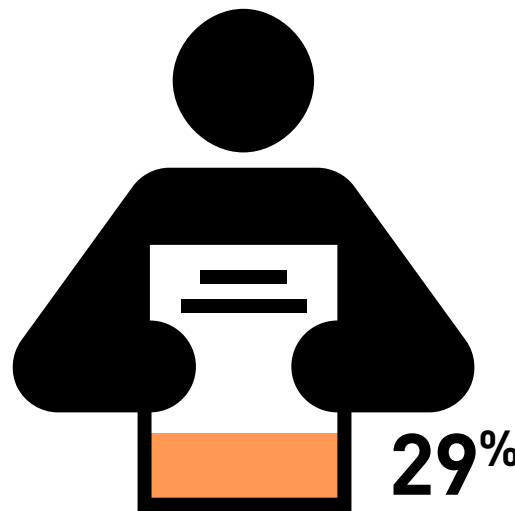
Key to our survey was gaining an understanding of how much thought leadership readers see, what influence it has and what responses it typically elicits.

Yet even if thought leadership lands on the decision-maker's desk – or screen – our survey shows that only 29% of what is produced is read.

Similarly, should thought leadership be read, our survey indicates only 29% of that would impact the C-suite's decision making.

This can make for disheartening reading. However, it's important to remember what was discussed at the start of this report. The landscape is flooded with content masquerading as thought leadership. Seventy-one percent of this content is either not landing on the desk it needs to or is simply not being read. That's why any thought leadership campaign has to hit the mark and to do that you need to match the readers' needs.

**Q:** How much of the thought leadership that you come across do you actually read and how much has an impact on your decision making?





# 3.12 What happens when thought leadership hits the mark?

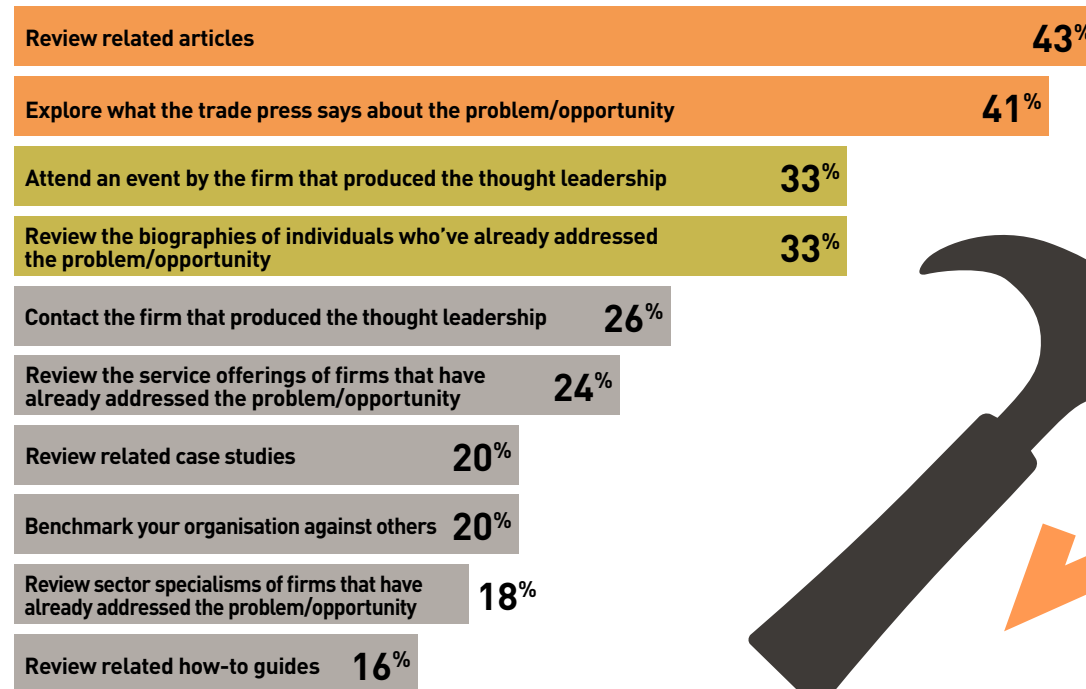
When thought leadership lands on that desk, is read and most importantly hits the mark, what's next?

Our survey shows respondents typically take two courses of action: review related articles (43%) and explore what the trade press says about the problem/opportunity (41%).

With reviewing related articles being cited as the number one action from respondents, this supports the need to have additional material based around your thought leadership. It's not enough to just produce a report and leave it at that. It should evolve, with the dialogue continued via short-form content, PR and social. After all, you will have used a vast amount of resource and spent a lot of time on your thought leadership programme. You should squeeze everything that you can from it.

From those surveyed, 33% say they would attend an event by the firm that had produced the thought leadership. This is a further example of how a rolling integrated programme can be implemented off the back of successful thought leadership research.

Q: What action would you typically take when thought leadership hits the mark?



# 4.0 What does the future hold?

When asked what they would most like to see in the future, 55% of our respondents cite content that is more interactive (eg video or webcasts).

While that may be what the future brings, it's worth referring back to how these same respondents cite more traditional formats such as blog posts and print magazines as preferred formats in the here and now.

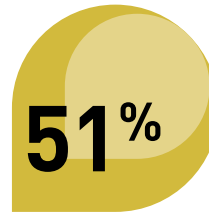
Likewise, content that provides a single source answer to a problem – drawing in the opinion of all stakeholders or content that is personalised for an organisation – will require time and resources that may be beyond most of today's thought leadership campaigns but could be the key to unlocking the future.

It's therefore prudent to consider content that incorporates dialogue with your peers and content that you and your peers are involved in developing. These are cited by 46% and 49% of respondents respectively, and may prove the easier way forward

Q: What would you most like to see in the future?



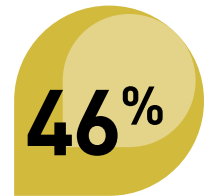
**Content that is personalised for your organisation**



**Content that provides a single source answer to a problem – drawing in the opinions of all stakeholders**



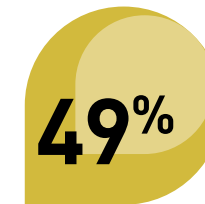
**Content that is more interactive, such as video, webcasts and other digital formats**



**Content that incorporates dialogue with your peers**



**Content that you and your peers are involved in developing**



**Content that is more accessible, such as shorter bite-sized articles and infographics**

# 4.1 Key takeaways

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- Thought leadership has taken on a commercial imperative – both for the creator and for the audience.
- Have an opinion, but make sure you can back it up with robust research and data to show it's not fake news and stand out from the mountains of unoriginal content.
- The C-suite wants to hear from customers and outside experts – but it's their professional networks they turn to for fresh thinking.
- After reading thought leadership the audience is likely to look for related content as a next step, so make sure you have plenty of quality content easily accessible from campaign materials.



## 5.0 About us

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Grist has a strategic partnership with independent market research firm Coleman Parkes Research to deliver survey-driven thought leadership for clients in the B2B sector. We believe data is imperative to thought leadership if you want the reader to take action.

### **Grist**

At Grist, we create content with purpose. We are a strategic B2B thought leadership and content marketing agency with the editorial heritage of *The Economist* and *Financial Times* in our DNA and a clear vision of the digital future.

As B2B specialists, we not only understand your needs but also those of your clients. We understand how to produce and promote engaging content across all channels – content that helps your clients do their jobs; content that underscores your value to them; and content that influences the decision-making process. It's what we call the content marketing sweet spot.

We are also a results-driven business partner. That means we'll work with you to track return on investment, always aiming to exceed your marketing goals through the delivery of quality content.

### **Coleman Parkes Research**

Coleman Parkes Research is a full-service market research company that specialises in researching global markets for IT/technology and professional services players.

Since it was founded in 2000, Coleman Parkes Research has conducted thousands of global research projects for major multinational corporate brands around the world.

Some of the many global successes to date include the annual World Quality Report for Capgemini, The HP New Style of IT Survey and the PwC Risk Maturity Index.

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