

THE VALUE OF B2B THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SURVEY

STAT'S THE WAY,
UH-HUH, UH-HUH,
I LIKE IT >



THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF DATA TO THE C-SUITE



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About the research

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

1.0 Executive summary

Curious as to what drove consumption of thought leadership, we worked with independent market research agency Coleman Parkes back in 2016 to survey 210 senior executives at a range of organisations in the FTSE 350. We looked at how thought leadership provides value, why it fails and its impact on the intended audience. We also looked at what the C-suite wants from thought leadership – and how and when to reach them.

But a lot has changed in the intervening years. Technology, of course, has jumped forward yet again, as have consumption habits.

It was high time we checked in again, only this time we expanded our research to include 525 enterprise firms in the US, Europe and Asia as we looked into what type of research methodology works best, who you should survey and what the optimum sample size is.

What we found was a world much more comfortable with the idea of thought leadership – and more demanding in what they want and need from it. We've always said that quality of respondents surpasses quantity and while it's surprising to find quantity coming last in the survey, the results show that this audience has also learnt that biggest is not always best. A small, statistically robust survey will do just as well, if not better, than a giant global one when it comes to inspiring trust and engagement.

It's also important to understand who the C-suite wants to hear from. Job responsibility is far more meaningful to this audience than industry, company size or location.

Despite an abundance, we found just 29% of thought leadership is actually read. To cut through the noise to reach the C-suite today, content must contain

something new – new opinion, new data, new ideas. Self-serving white papers won't cut it anymore, nor will blogs espousing your own virtues. Today's thought leadership consumer is savvy and wants real, intelligent content backed up by robust data to help them make commercial decisions.

Data and research are growing in importance in this field. The good news is that there is plenty of opportunity for how this research takes shape and it is, on the whole, very attainable.

Before asking how, ask why

Thought leadership has become absolutely essential to the marketing mix: 99% of survey respondents believe that it is either important or critical in assessing the suitability of a new adviser.

This report is the first in a series dissecting our thought leadership research.

Key findings from our survey

- 77% want insights from people with similar job responsibilities to them; just 40% want the same age or gender: **page 06**
- 60% say it's the quality of analysis that inspires trust in thought leadership: **page 09**
- Only 39% name sample size as a key trust indicator: **page 09**
- Almost 70% of business leaders read thought leadership to get an edge over competitors: **page 11**
- 99% of business leaders now believe that thought leadership is either important or critical in assessing the suitability of a new adviser: **page 11**

2.1 Where thought leadership adds value

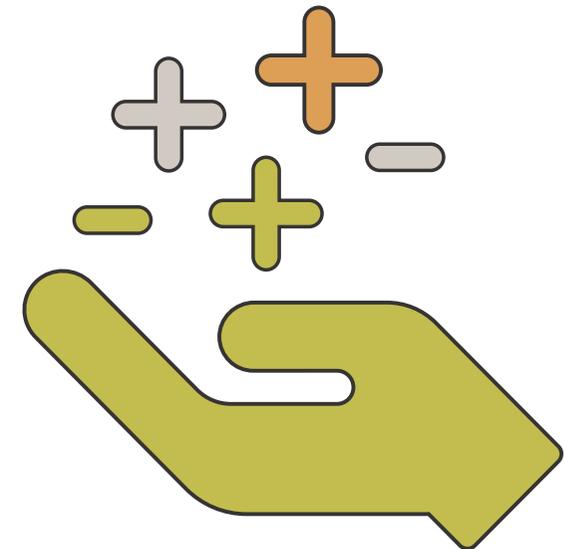
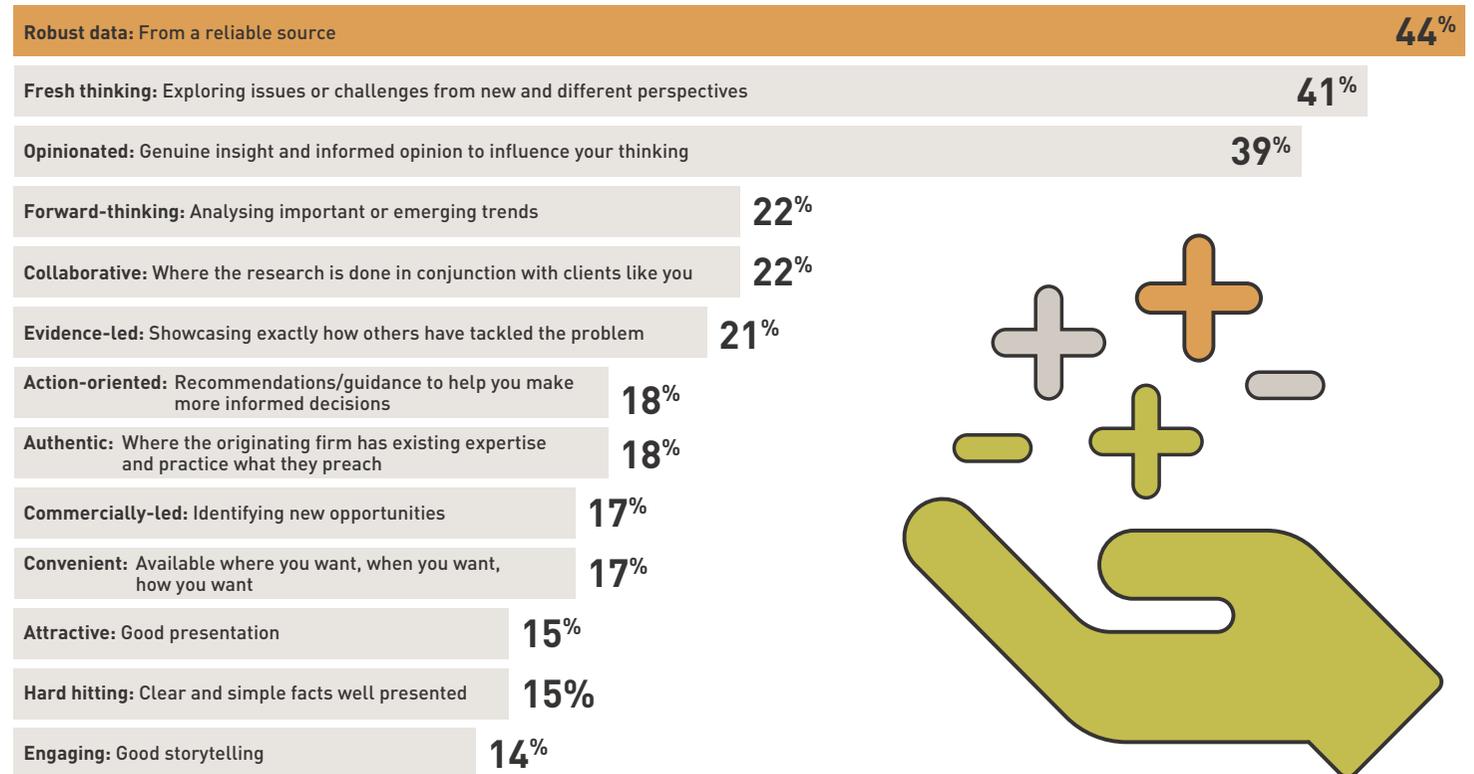
Business leaders in 2018 still value fresh thinking in their thought leadership, but it needs to be backed up by reliable data – robust data is the most sought-after quality in thought leadership (44%), up from 29% in 2016.

Why such a big jump in the importance of data? Well, think of the current content landscape: everyone is producing blogs, e-books, white papers, reports, video series and more. And as companies around the world look to increase their content production, there has been an explosion in content masquerading as thought leadership – content with flimsy insights or featuring commercially-driven copy – which has made today’s audience wary of trusting it.

Highlighting robust data as the key driver behind thought leadership can help you to stand out and get attention. Add in an analysis of industry trends, feature case studies from your target audience and include informed opinion from your company’s experts, and your thought leadership becomes incredibly valuable to those you’re trying to influence.

Trying to drive readers away? Then by all means dive into unsubstantiated opinions (58%), fail to show original insight or ideas (45%), be generic (39%) or get too conceptual (43%).

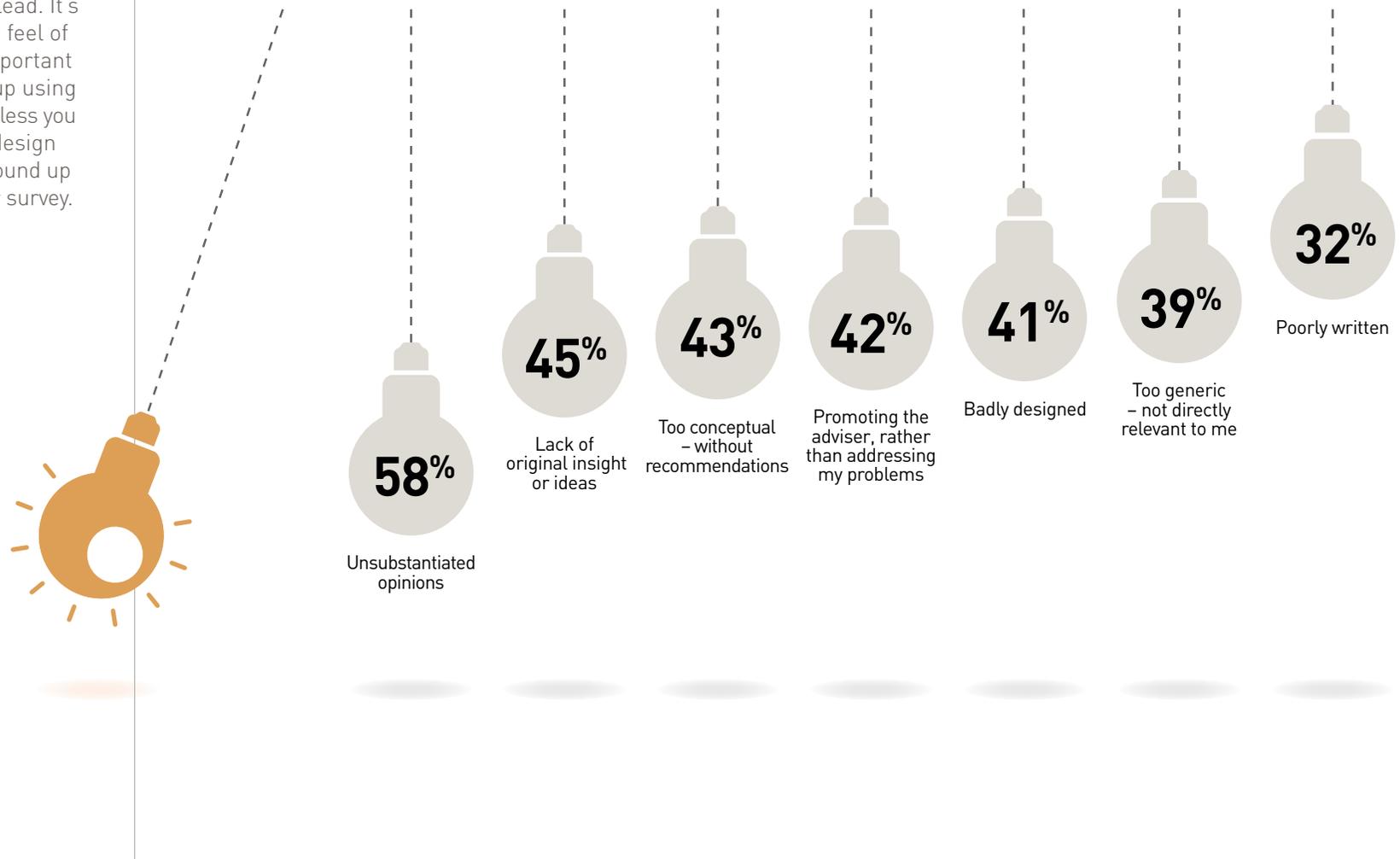
Q: What qualities do you find most valuable in thought leadership?



2.1 Where thought leadership adds value continued

Business leaders want originality with recommendations; if you fail to provide fresh insights and instead promote yourself (42%), you'll lose the lead. It's also worth noting the look and feel of thought leadership is more important than you think – don't whip it up using desktop publishing methods unless you know what you're doing. Bad design (41%) and poor writing (32%) round up the turn-offs highlighted in our survey.

Q: What turns you off thought leadership?



2.2 Demographics take a back seat

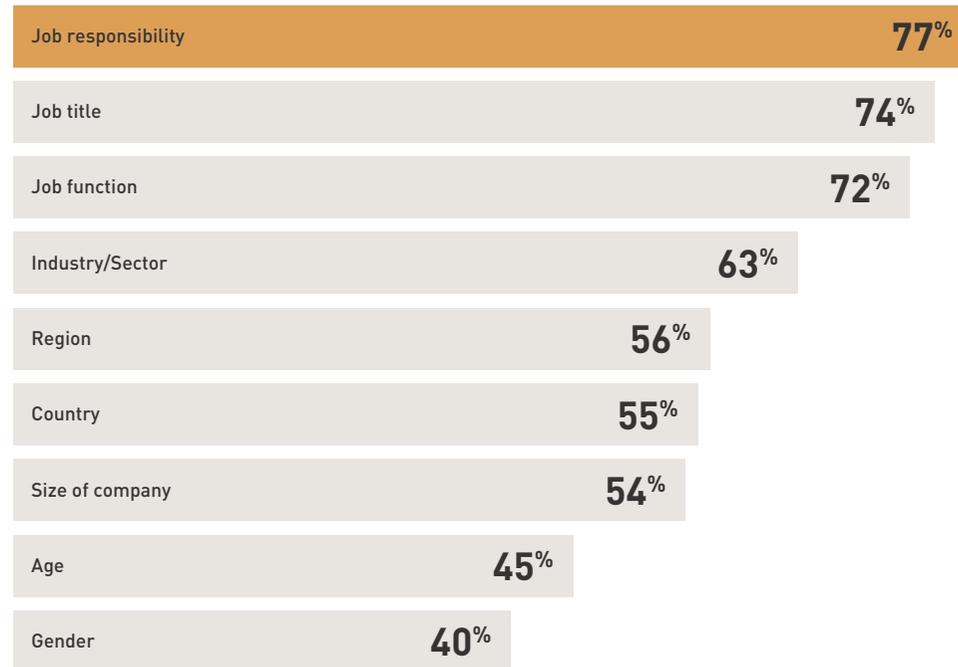
Accepted wisdom in B2C marketing says that ‘people like us’ are the ones we listen to – that demographics surrounding age, gender and location are the best and brightest indicators of whether a campaign will hit its target, or content will be successful in persuading, informing and engaging the audience.

Job roles and responsibilities matter most

Not so in B2B. As our survey shows, analysing responses from people with similar job responsibilities and roles is far more valuable than analysing those from the same age or gender. These people’s experiences and viewpoints will prove most useful when building thought leadership.

We found the most important peer attributes for both quantitative and qualitative research are, in fact, job responsibilities – CEOs want to hear from other CEOs and managers from other managers. The experience of people with similar job responsibilities will be more useful in making the business decisions these leaders seek help with when they turn to thought leadership.

Q: Regarding quantitative research, how important is it that the target respondent is like you in terms of the following attributes?

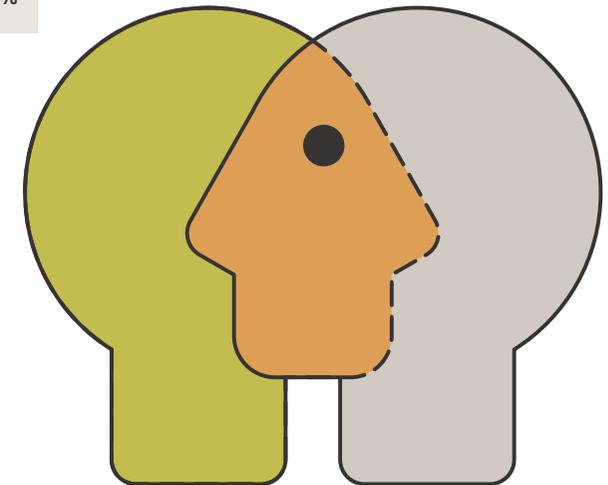
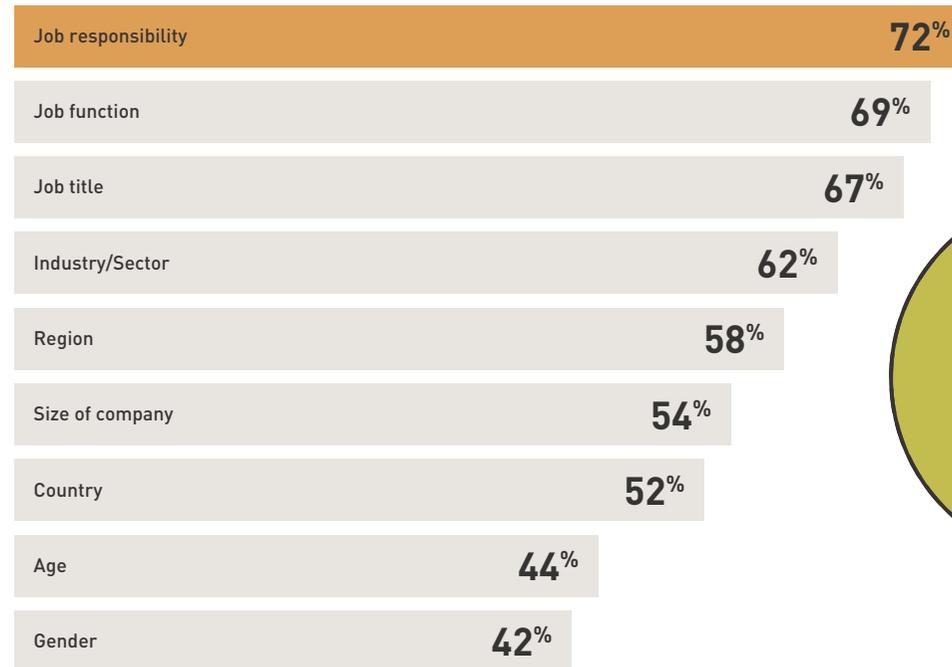


2.2 Demographics take a back seat continued

Job responsibility slightly edged out job title and job function in our survey. On the surface these three terms could be seen as interchangeable, but with no standardised job title across industries, let alone regions, responsibility could be seen as a catch-all for 'people like me'. We believe what respondents find most interesting are the opinions of those in charge of similar projects, objectives and teams. A CFO in one company may be a Financial Director in another, and those job titles may not be seen as correlating in a survey tick-list.

The order of importance of various attributes remains fairly consistent between research methods with two slight discrepancies: in quantitative research, job title (74%) is ranked higher than job function (72%), and country (55%) higher than the size of company (54%); whereas in qualitative research, job function (69%) beats job title (67%), and size of company (54%) edges country (52%).

Q: Regarding qualitative research, how important is it that the target respondent is like you in terms of the following attributes?



2.2 Demographics take a back seat continued

Our respondents are from enterprise-level companies so we're not talking about small local businesses. Our sample spans high-revenue entities with large numbers of employees. Therefore when we discuss job responsibilities, it is somewhat simplistic to extrapolate that to different countries and regions – with one notable exception.

The Asian experience is key for Asian readers

The difference between the two research methods should be kept in mind when looking at regional variations here; in Asia, a very complicated and multifaceted region, location does, in fact, matter when it comes to research.

Asia Pacific as a region covers everything from the West (Australia, New Zealand) to the East (China) and everything in between (Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, and so on). Just as the cultures are very different so too are the experiences of businesses in these countries – not just from a compliance and operations standpoint but from a business mindset and approach, too.

So perhaps it comes as no surprise that, when isolating responses by region and country, they are more important in Asia Pacific than anywhere else. This was one of the biggest areas of discrepancy in our survey – though it's surprising that country is more important for quantitative and region is more important for qualitative, as seen below. We'll look in more detail at regional comparisons in a future report.

		Global	Asia Pacific
Quantitative	Region	56%	59%
	Country	55%	66%
Qualitative	Region	58%	66%
	Country	52%	55%

Asia Pacific is also the only region that nominated age of respondent as an important attribute (60% quantitative; 52% qualitative), which makes sense for cultures where experience and age are so highly respected.

The Asian experience illustrates the need to remember cultural differences, whether when designing the survey or analysing responses. While location of respondents may not be important to the end user, it might skew results, so careful analysis is needed.

What do we mean by research format?

We surveyed people about their preferences for thought leadership from a quantitative (numeric) and qualitative (opinion-based) viewpoint. Here's what we mean:

Quantitative research

Research designed to help organisational decision-making, focusing on the incidence and statistical relationship of variables. It tends to have the following characteristics: use of structured questionnaires with standard questions; limited face-to-face contact between respondents and primary researchers; use of large samples; results subjected to statistical analysis.

Qualitative research

Research designed to help organisational decision-making, focusing on understanding the nature of phenomena and their meaning, rather than their incidence. It tends to have the following characteristics: direct, face-to-face contact between the primary researchers and the respondents; in-depth examination of small-scale samples or small numbers of observations; unstructured interviewing guides, which are responsive to context and may be amended throughout the project; the researcher and his/her interpretative input is key to the process.

[Definitions from the Association for Qualitative Research](#)



JOB RESPONSIBILITY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN SECTOR OR REGION.

2.3 What makes a business leader pay attention?

With the opportunity to canvass business leaders around the world, we naturally asked what inspires trust in thought leadership – what it is about a piece of content that really engages them. Unsurprisingly, it's the quality of analysis that is most sought-after (60%). Surprisingly, though, the number of responses was the least sought-after attribute (39%). This helps to dispel the myth that size matters when it comes to survey samples.

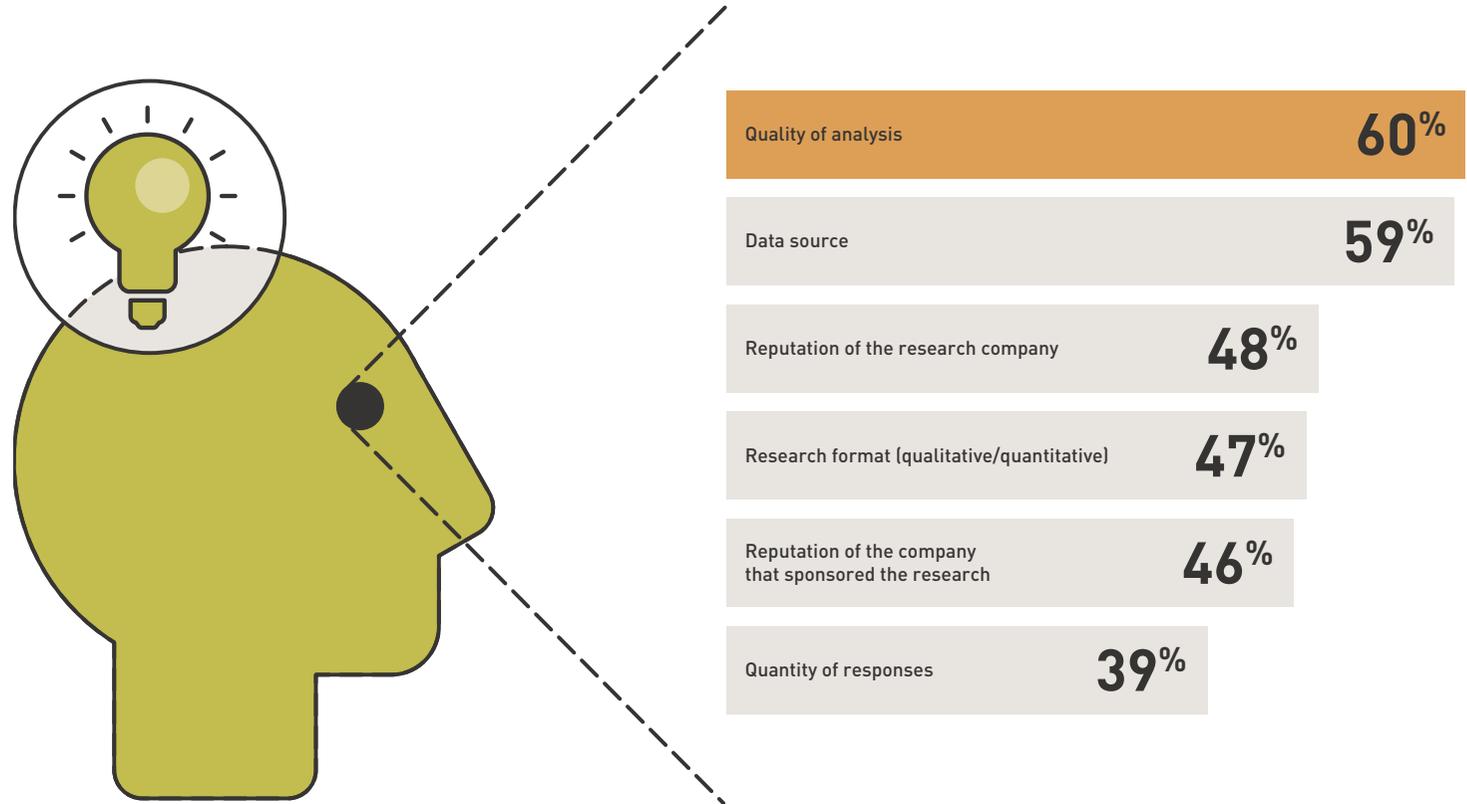
The sample size question

The appreciation of quality over quantity is perhaps because, although data is important, it must have context to hit the mark. There is a danger of data overload in modern marketing – and not enough in-depth analysis.

However, the question of sample size can be a big concern for some people – they think they need to survey thousands of people and that will exceed their budget. This need not be the case in B2B surveys.

In B2C surveys you do need a big sample as you're often looking at an entire country's population. However, in B2B, you've already narrowed down your niche, which means your sample size can be smaller while retaining statistical validity.

Q: Which quality is most likely to inspire trust in thought leadership?



2.3 What makes a business leader pay attention? continued

You just need to keep in mind how you want to segment. If you want to cover several markets, verticals and countries, then you will naturally need to survey more people to ensure the individual segments retain statistical robustness.

The minimum number of respondents for B2B surveys is 100 respondents per segment or audience group, which will give you a figure of +/- 4% at 95% confidence. This may sound complex, but it should provide confidence that the survey has covered all bases. The greater the number of respondents, the higher the confidence level. However, confidence levels never reach 100% in sample-based surveys because of statistical error.

Boosting confidence levels by increasing the sample size can require thousands of pounds of investment. But for a gain of just 2-4% points in confidence, for a B2B survey, it is rarely worth it. The reason B2C surveys go wider is so they can narrow that gap to a 99% confidence ratio and make sound product-based and market-entry decisions.

Also, consideration needs to be made for media publications. Some are so set in their ways that they will only pick up and distribute reports with at least 500 respondents because they deem them more credible. Maximising ROI in your research is a delicate balance of minimising investment wastage in unnecessarily large sample size, while ensuring maximum media coverage.

Analyse this

While sample size loses importance, statistical analysis does not. When asked their preferred mix of thought leadership – qualitative only, quantitative only or a mix – there was a fairly even split globally: 39% said qualitative, 34% said quantitative and 27% said both.

There is a leaning towards data (ie quantitative) in both the US (37%) and Asia Pacific (37%), while Europe favours interview-based (ie qualitative) research (43%).

Whatever research format you opt for, one thing is clear: you must ensure your analysis is sound and informative, especially if you're talking to a US-based audience (65%). The data source is also important (59% globally) and the reputation of the research company less so (48%).

Whether you're thinking globally or regionally, this means you don't have to shell out big bucks for a world leader. As long as the survey design, methodology and analysis are sound, you can get statistically significant and robust research-driven thought leadership from a smaller research firm that may be able to spend longer with both you and respondents.

Quality over quantity

It's worth noting qualitative research did come out on top in this survey, although not by much. This is perhaps because, although infographics are great, they must have context to hit the mark. As mentioned, data is all good and well, but too much, and without in-depth analysis, it can miss the mark.

Qualitative research helps increase the quality of analysis; it shows clearly what your peers think, not just which button they pushed, and can bring out insights that may not be obvious with pure data. By putting quantitative and qualitative research together you're getting the best of both worlds.

Surveys tend to cost more as the number of people you speak to increases, so the fact 'quantity of responses' sits at the bottom of the trust barometer is good news. You don't have to be a big gun with a big budget to deliver a survey-based thought leadership programme; we all have the chance to own an area.



THE QUALITY OF ANALYSIS IS MORE IMPORTANT TO READERS THAN THE SAMPLE SIZE...

2.4 The commercial importance of thought leadership

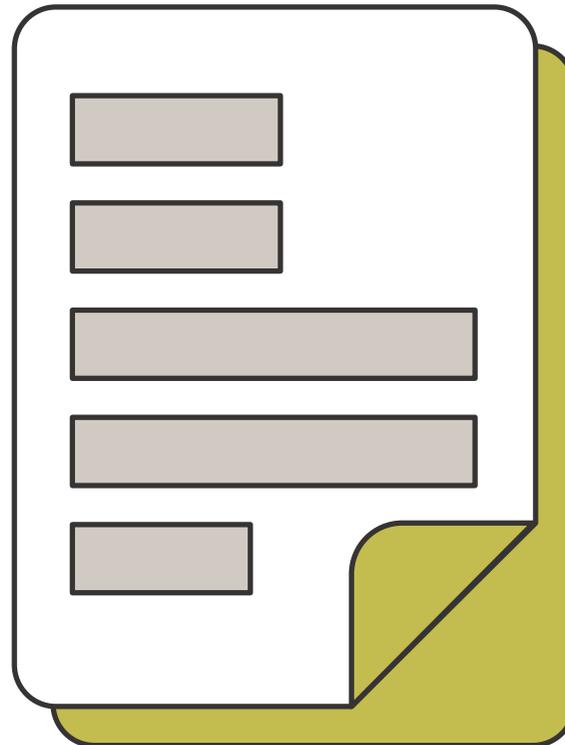
Companies produce thought leadership as a way to showcase expertise – that they understand both the market and the challenges clients are facing – while the audience reads thought leadership to gain insights from experts. But there is also a commercial imperative to all of this: the producer wants to convert the reader to become a client, and the reader wants the expert to help them with their business.

The fact that nearly all respondents (99%) said thought leadership was critical or important when assessing the suitability of new advisers shows how integral these programmes can be for new business development.

The commercial nature of thought leadership becomes clear in the answer to our very first question: when asked why they read thought leadership, 68% of senior executives said they wanted to get an edge over their competitors. It's all about remaining informed and up-to-date to help push their businesses forward.

But does it really make an impact?

Q: Please select the top three reasons why you read thought leadership?



2.4 The commercial importance of thought leadership continued

Content overload spurs a need for analysis

While business leaders clearly seek out thought leadership to help them make better business decisions, the amount that actually impacts those decisions is small – a mean average of 29% globally.

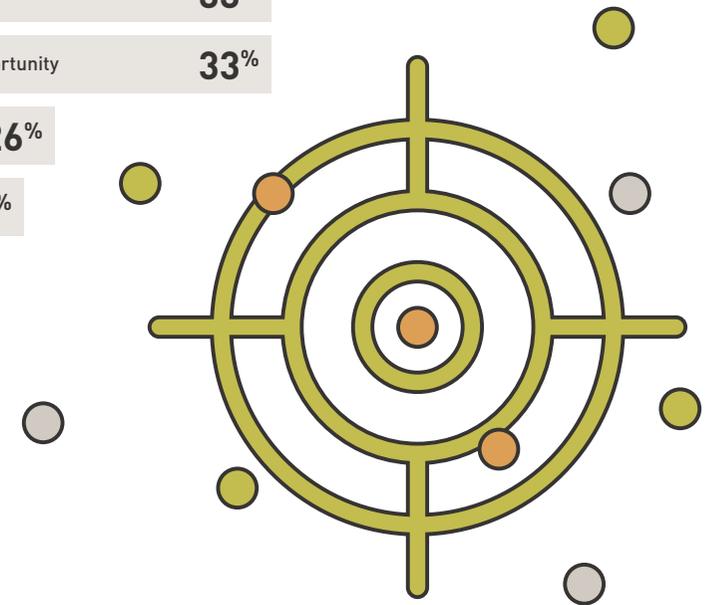
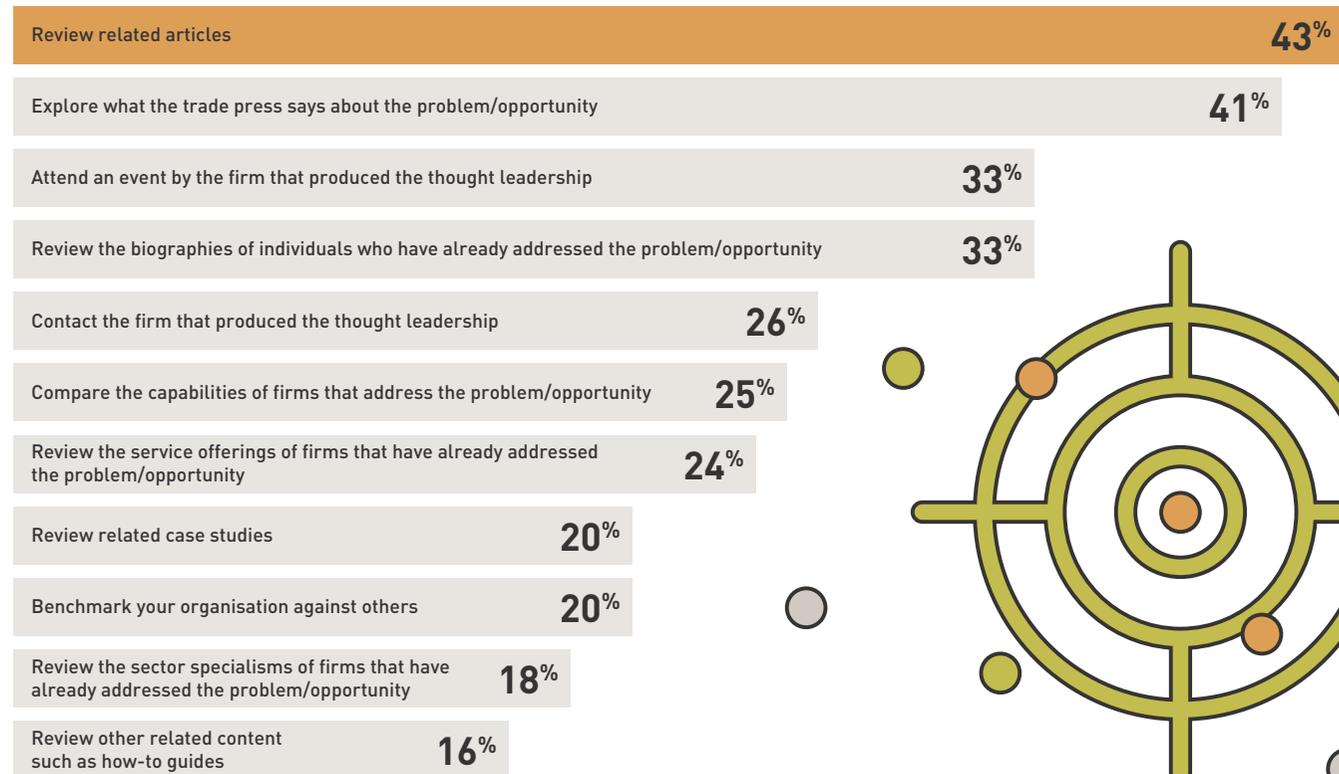
As we said earlier, this means the need to stand out with robust analysis and strong research is essential if you want your thought leadership programme to hit home.

The good news is if your thought leadership does strike a nerve, 43% of people will go on to read your related content – in America, this could be as much as 50%.

Interestingly, Asia Pacific business leaders are less likely to act after reading than those in other regions – less than 30% would take the majority of actions we listed. The exceptions are simple: they will explore what the trade press is saying (39%), or they will review the biographies of those who addressed the problem previously (36%).

Although only 20% of respondents cited benchmarking as a typical action, in our experience, this is growing in importance.

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



2.4 The commercial importance of thought leadership continued

This means that a well-rounded communications strategy is needed – do some PR outreach on your findings to ensure the trade press is aware of your research, and ensure you have internal experts front and centre in all content. Scale up your findings and deploy a full programme of content related to the survey using an integrated communications programme. This will ensure there's plenty of related content for readers to peruse, and plenty of reasons for you to engage with them again.

Thought leadership as a commercial differentiator

From our findings, what's clear is that strong thought leadership can spur actions in the audience that are beneficial for the author company:

- 26% will contact the firm
- 24% will review service offerings
- 20% will review case studies

That said, opportunities provided by the thought leadership will only be as good as the rest of your content strategy. Thought leadership is not a strategy in and of itself; it is a tactic, something tangible to bring life to your strategy. It should sit alongside other tactics such as campaigns, events, PR and content distribution methods. Our survey showed 33% will attend an event you host if your thought leadership hits the mark, so consider multiple distribution and activation methods. Hosting a roundtable that brings industry leaders together to discuss the themes emerging from your thought leadership not only helps bring more awareness to your hard work, it also brings in hot leads.

Thought leadership can grab attention, but you need to ensure you can follow through the message across all channels, including sales and business development. A joined-up approach is key to the ultimate success of thought leadership.



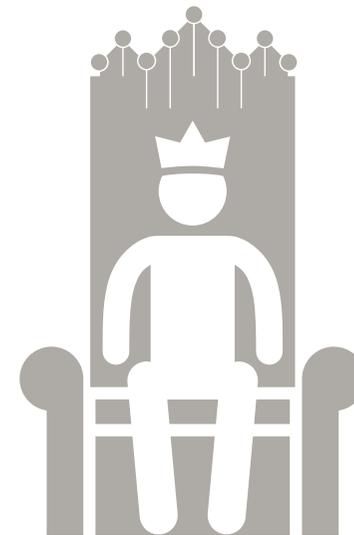
THE MAJORITY OF YOUR AUDIENCE READS THOUGHT LEADERSHIP TO GET AN EDGE OVER COMPETITORS, SO ENSURE YOUR INSIGHTS ARE ROBUST AND ENGAGING.

2.5 Key takeaway: Data's king in this world

The sample size doesn't have to fill a stadium but you do need data to drive your thought leadership programme. Data inspires trust and confidence, it aids commercial decision-making and it helps to give your clients an edge over their competition.

Data also gives your content something that no one else has – new opinions and new ideas to cut through the noise and reach the target audience.

We'll say it again: Today's thought leadership consumer is savvy and wants real, intelligent content backed up by thorough research to help them make commercial decisions. Data and research are growing in importance in this field. The good news is that the format that research takes is wide open – and very attainable. Grist and Coleman Parkes can help you get there.



2.6 Data's role in thought leadership

How we design surveys

We liken building a survey to building a house – you need a solid design and robust foundations before any building work can commence. Our initial steps when designing a survey are:

1 The right objectives

Beware the most common trap: no successful B2B survey sets out just to ask some interesting questions. The first step in an effective research-based campaign is to think through what you want the survey to achieve.

2 The right audience

Define your audience carefully. Your survey must reach out to people who can provide genuine insight into the topic at hand, so think carefully about the job roles, sectors and regions.

3 The right story

Start with the end in mind and work backwards. Think about the story you want to tell and/or hypothesis you want to prove. What headlines do you want to see in the media? And what sales conversations do you want to have with clients and prospects?

4 The right questions

It sounds obvious but to get the right answers, you need to ask the right questions. The questionnaire must engage your target respondents by sparking a conversation they'll enjoy and not be too long.

5 The right sample

Make sure you know how many people you need to reach: different target audiences require sample sizes to be representative of the group as a whole. At the same time, be realistic about what can be achieved.

6 The right method

Different data collection exercises suit different audiences. An online approach may work better for more junior respondents, but telephone outreach will be necessary for the C-suite. If you need to probe deeply, then telephone is best.

7 The right outputs

There is a wealth of content marketing assets you can generate from the results of a survey. Which to use will depend on a range of factors, including the reading habits of your target audience and your likely internal use.

3.0 About us

Grist has a strategic partnership with independent market research firm Coleman Parkes 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 content marketing and thought leadership 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 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

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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