

VALUE OF B2B THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SURVEY

SUITE DREAMS ARE MADE OF THIS >

WHAT FTSE 350 C-SUITE REALLY THINK
ABOUT THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

grist



CONTENTS

1.0 Executive Summary	03
2.0 Key findings	
2.1 How thought leadership provides value	04
2.2 Why thought leadership fails	06
2.3 What the C-suite want	07
2.4 How and when to reach the C-suite	10
2.5 The impact of thought leadership	14
2.6 Future content	17
2.7 Executive personas: from visionaries to sceptics	18
3.0 Conclusion	20
4.0 About Grist	21

About the research

Independent market research agency, Coleman Parkes, undertook the research on behalf of Grist, conducting over 200 interviews with senior executives at a range of organisations in the FTSE 350. Interviewees were segmented by role as follows: CEO, senior legal, finance, risk, marketing and sales, human resources and technology. The interviews were carried out in July and August 2016.

1.0 Executive Summary

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 era of seemingly endless content, one organisation's words of wisdom must compete for attention like never before. Much content fails to hit the mark, often navel gazing, generic and conceptual. It is also often supplier-centric when it should be client-centric.

It is in this context that Grist wanted to find out what the client thought – what exactly the C-suite at FTSE 350 firms expected from thought leadership, how and when it was consumed and what would make it better. The results of the first *Value of B2B thought leadership survey* shed light on this and more. Key findings are summarised right.

1. Be useful. Senior executives seek out thought leadership that helps them stay ahead of emerging trends (66%) and helps them make better, more informed decisions (60%). **See section 2.1→.**

2. Failure comes in threes. Thought leadership fails when it proves too generic (63%), lacks original insight or ideas (58%) or promotes the advisor rather than addressing client need (53%). **See section 2.2→.**

3. Let the client see their clients. The thoughts of clients (57%) matter more than any other voices or sources. Readers want to know what those they serve – or whose business they want to win – are thinking and doing. **See section 2.3→.**

4. Keep it short and punchy. Two formats – 800-word articles (63%) and 300–500-word blog posts (57%) – are preferred more than any other. **See section 2.3→.**

5. It's complicated. Senior executives rely on multiple sources, online and offline, to get their thought leadership fix. Asked to identify from where they are most likely to seek out thought leadership material, respondents most commonly identified professional services/advisory firms (44%), industry events (43%) and online search (40%). **See section 2.4→.**

6. Facebook, the professional network? Facebook – more commonly associated with friendship and familial connections – was cited as the social network senior executives were likely to engage with thought leadership on. Facebook was referenced by 79% of respondents, compared with Twitter (73%) and LinkedIn (68%). **See section 2.4→.**

7. Monday lunchtimes matter. Two thirds of senior executives seek out thought leadership on a Monday while the two hour slot between 12 noon and 2pm is the single most popular time. **See section 2.4→.**

8. The C-suite ignore most of what you write. Senior executives read on average 31% of all the thought leadership that comes across their desks. To get noticed – and read – copy needs to be truly compelling. **See section 2.5→.**

9. Readers want to be creators too. Asked to look forward and imagine content that would be most useful in the future, four in five respondents said that they wanted content that they – and their peers – were involved in developing. **See section 2.6→.**

Separately, the research pointed to different attitudes and approach to thought leadership depending on the senior executive's role and function. Grist has developed a series of personas – from the visionary CEO to the sceptical marketer – to help understand these differences. **See section 2.7→.**

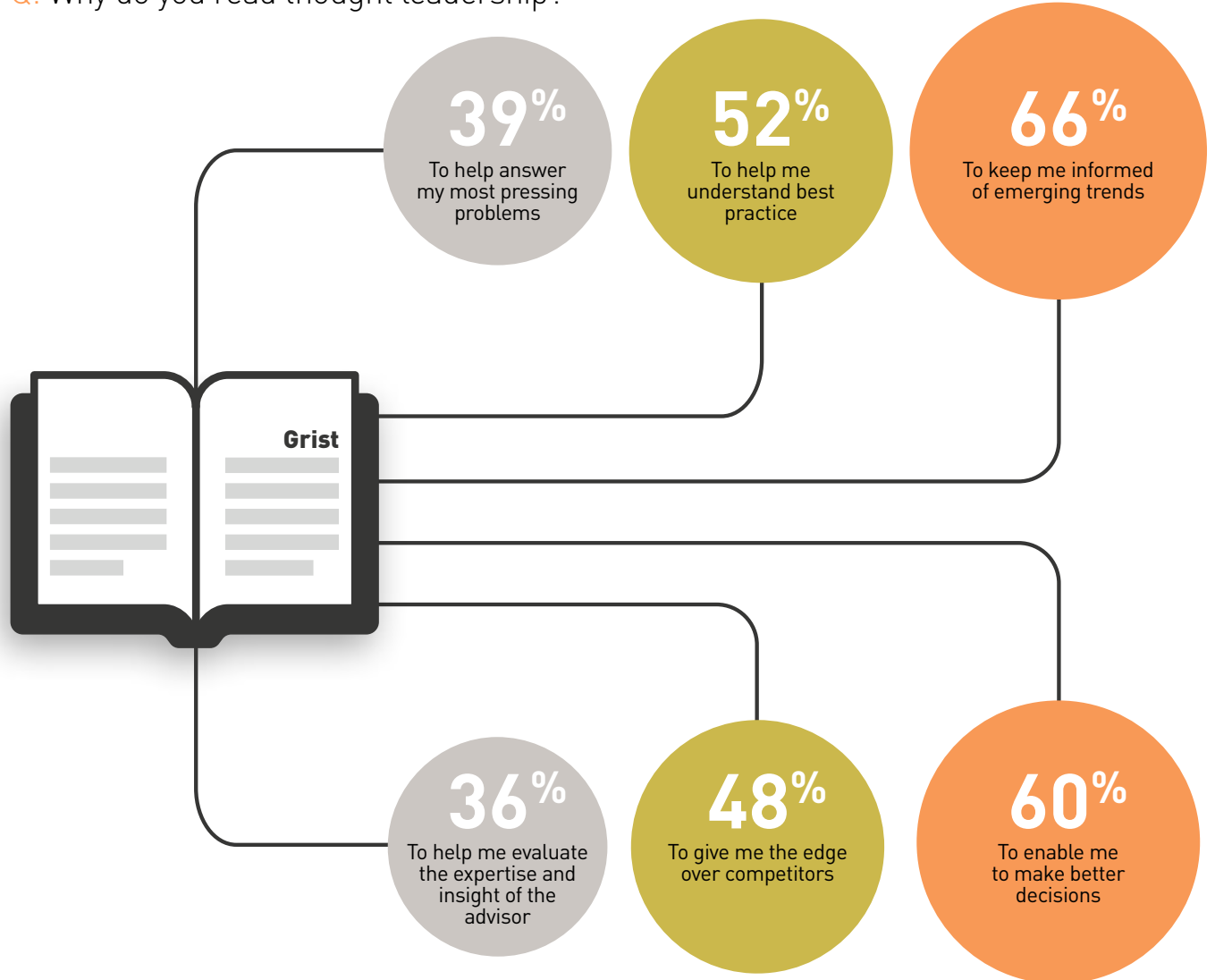
2.1 How thought leadership provides value

Before asking how, ask why

Senior executives use thought leadership to stay ahead of emerging trends (66%) and to help them make better, more informed decisions (60%). Those two responses proved by far the most popular when respondents were asked why they read such content and reflect the fundamental objective of successful content marketing – to be of use.

Notably, only one third (36%) of respondents read thought leadership to help them evaluate the expertise and insight of the advisor. If such evaluation happens, it is often tacit and a result of the provision of useful information. In other words, naked demonstrations of salesmanship appear less effective than evidence of clear-sighted understanding of a client's needs. →

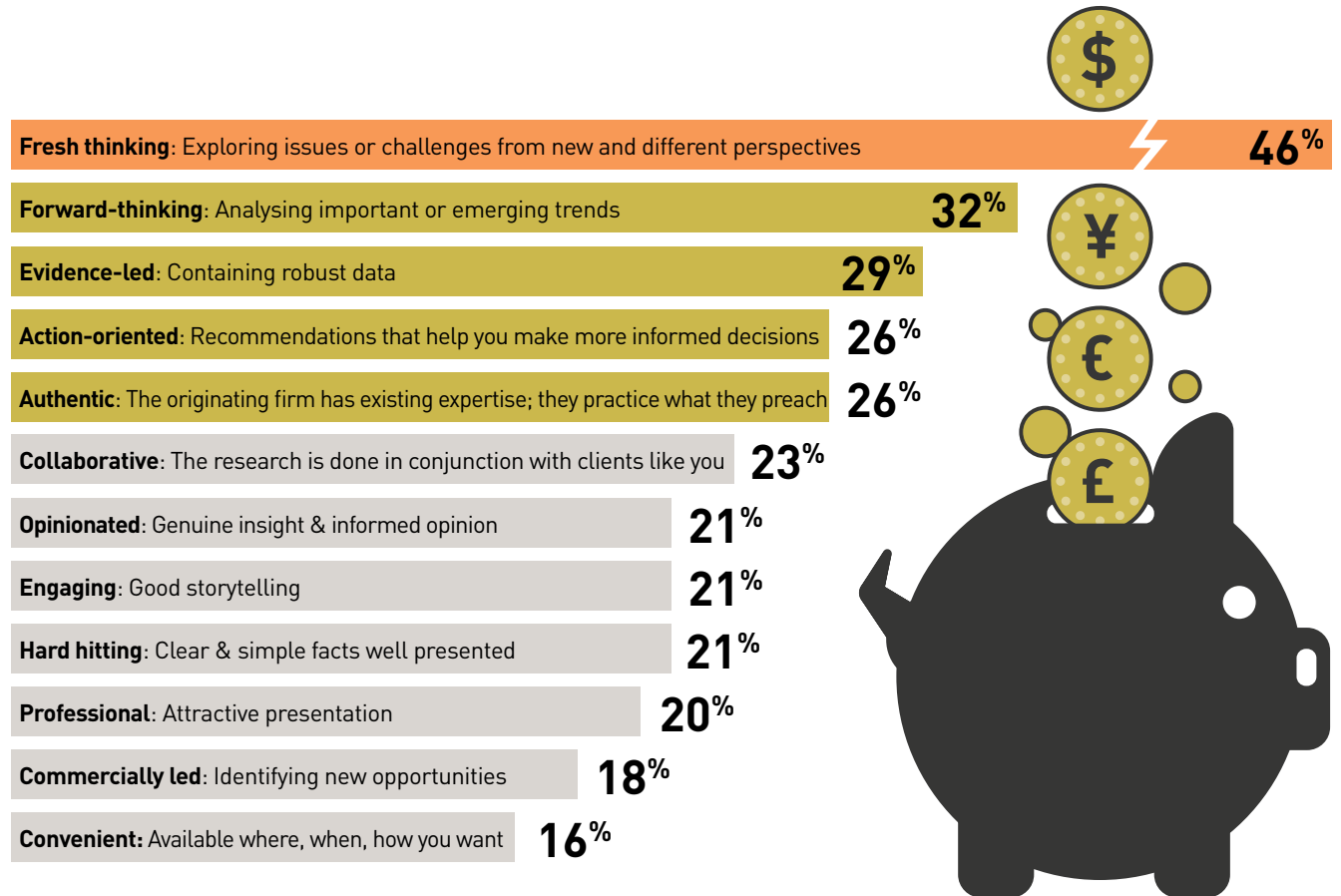
Q: Why do you read thought leadership?



2.1 How thought leadership provides value continued

And in terms of those needs, senior executives are looking for fresh, forward-thinking content above all else. Respondents want content that explores issues or challenges from new and different perspectives (46%) and analysis of important or emerging trends (32%). Evidence-based (29%), action-oriented (26%) and authentic (26%) content was also cited as valuable by a significant number of senior executives.

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

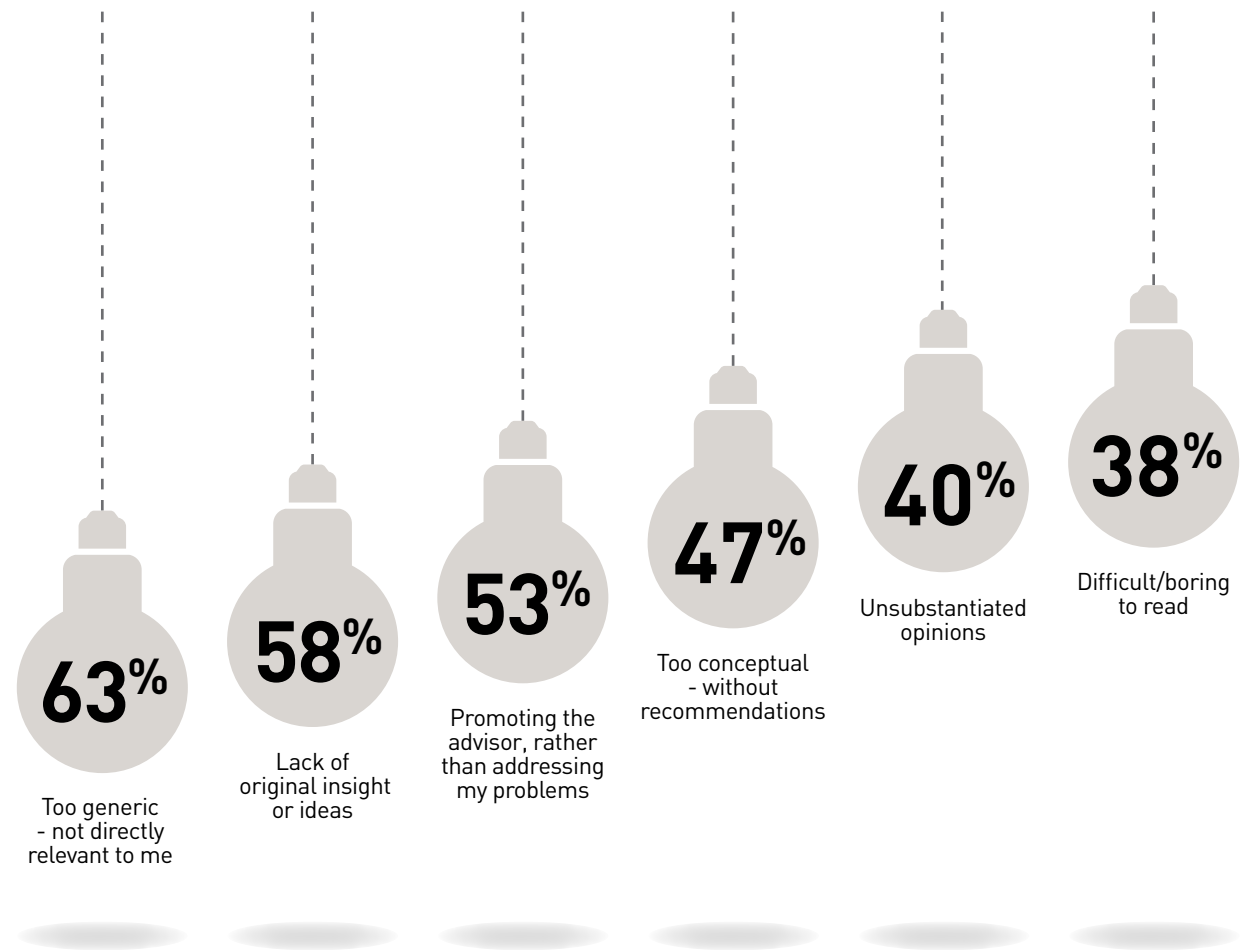


2.2 Why thought leadership fails

Thought leadership succeeds when it proves useful, demonstrates an understanding of the target audience and provides fresh thinking. It fails, therefore, when it proves too generic (63%), lacks original insight or ideas (58%) or promotes the advisor, rather than addressing the reader's needs (53%). The last of these reasons underscores the point made in the section above while the first demands of the advisor that it really understands its clients and their needs.



Q: What turns you off thought leadership?

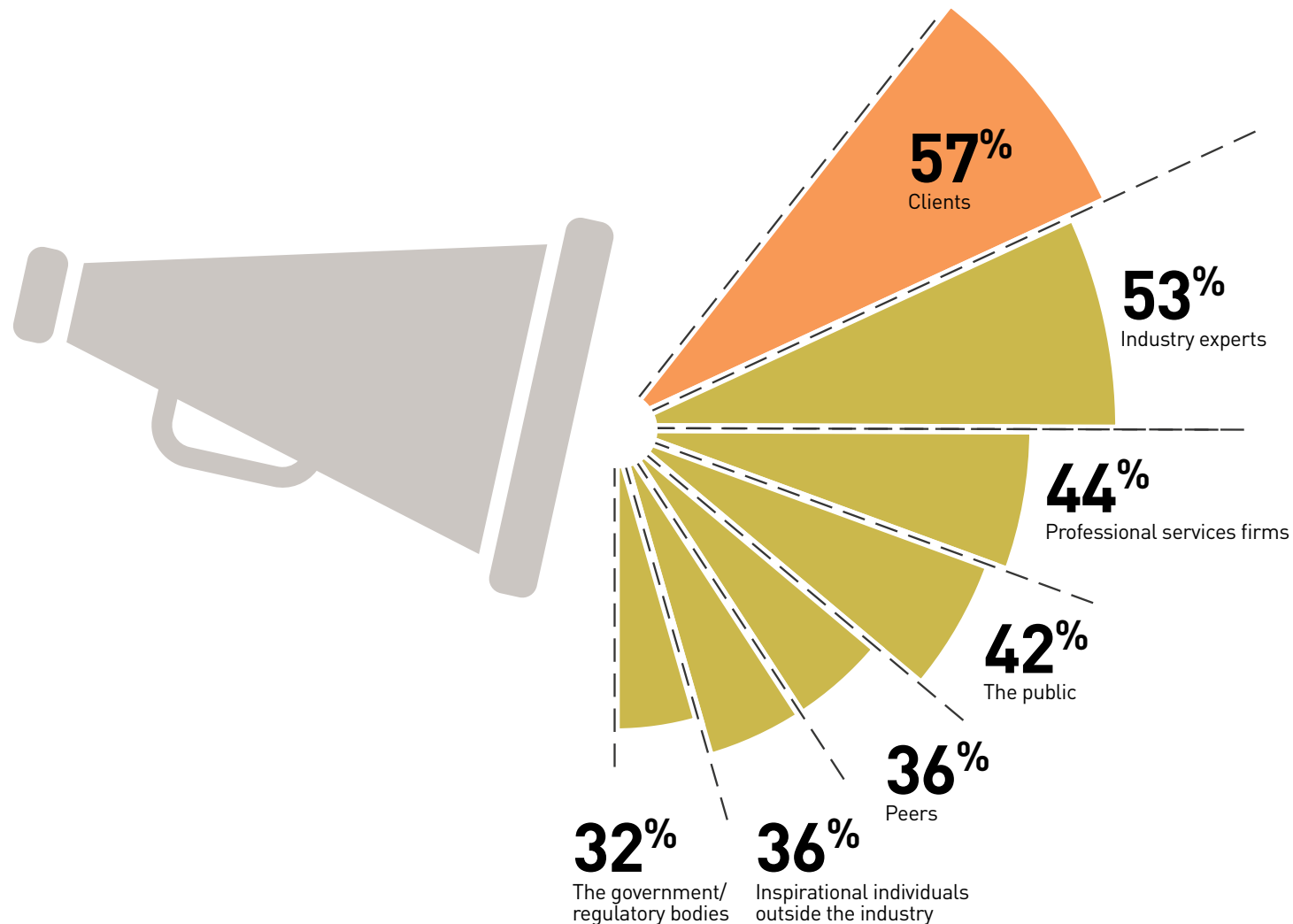


2.3 What the C-suite want

Reaching the client's client

The thoughts of clients (57%) matter more to senior executives than any other group, according to the survey. Readers want to know what those they serve – or wish to serve – are thinking and doing. Reflecting those views makes thought leadership more valuable. Other voices that matter include industry experts (53%), professional services firms (44%), the public (42%), peers (36%) and inspirational individuals outside the industry (36%).

Q: Whose views do you most want to hear?

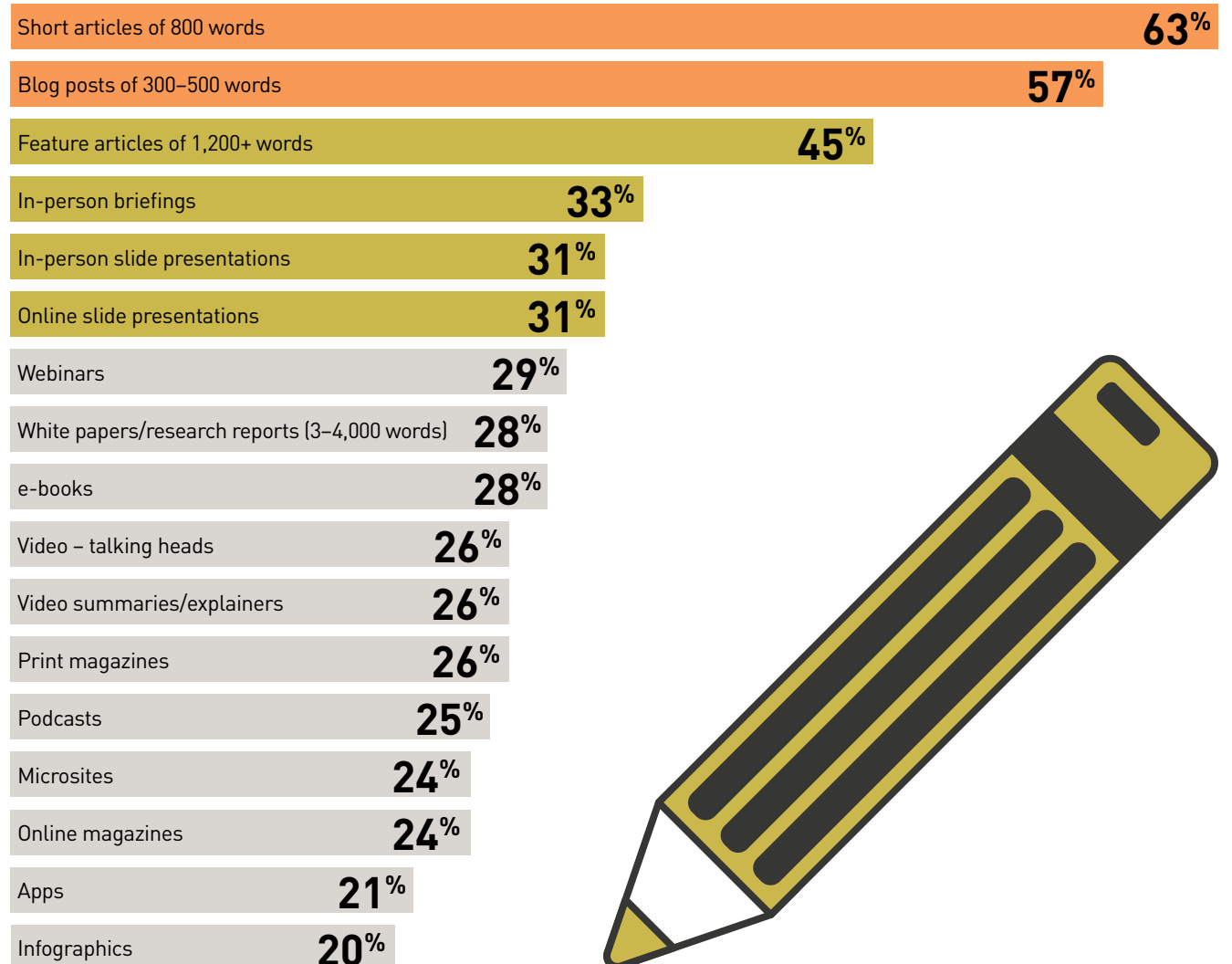


2.3 What the C-suite want continued

Short and punchy

Asked how senior executives prefer to receive thought leadership, two formats stood out – short articles of 800 words (63%) and blog posts of 300–500 words (57%). A significant minority are prepared to read longer pieces – feature articles of 1,200+ words (45%) and white papers and research reports of up to 4,000 words (28%). Taken together, the written word would appear to be the preferred format when compared to video (26%), audio podcasts (25%) and infographics (20%). In-person briefings (33%) and in-person slide presentations (31%) matter but, again, do not rate as highly as key text-based content types. —————>

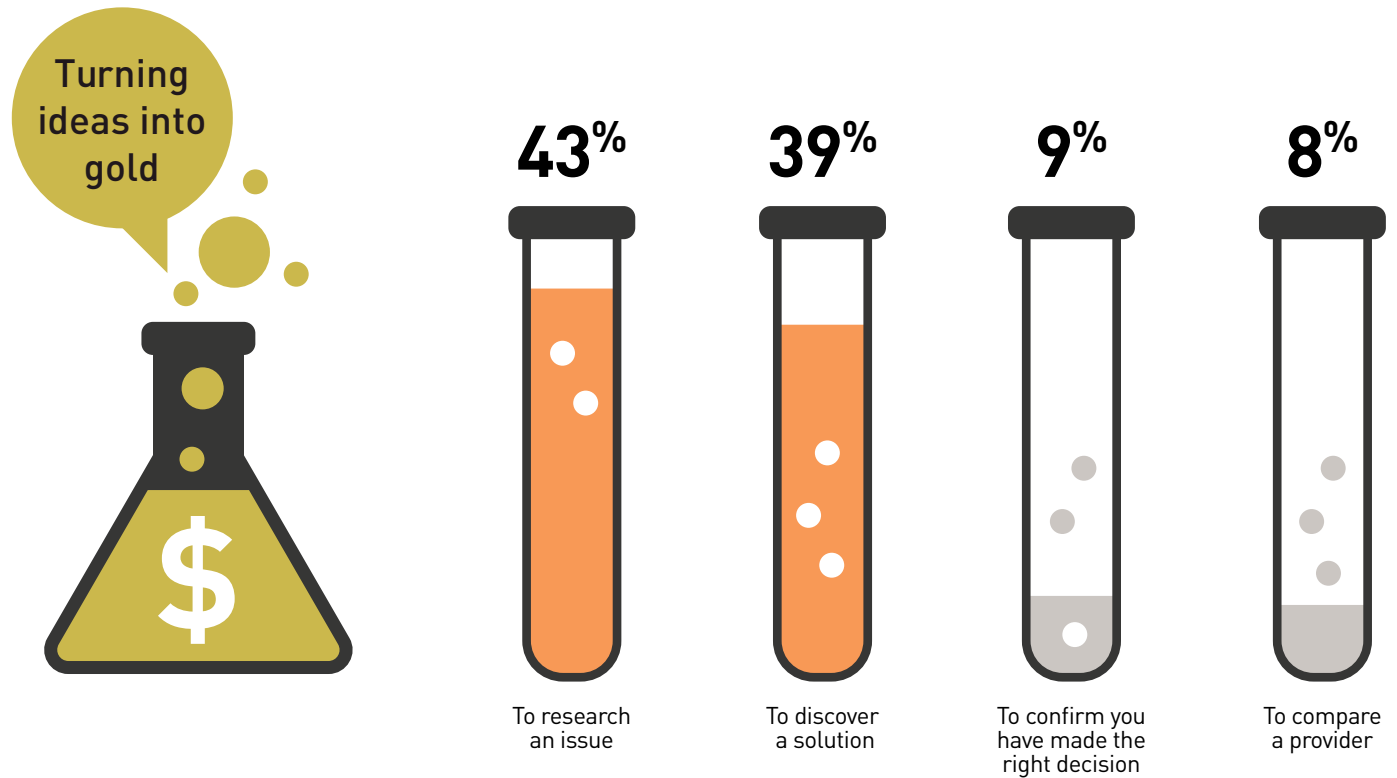
Q: Which of the following formats do you prefer?



2.3 What the C-suite want continued

It is likely that some format types work better at specific stages of the sales cycle – white papers at the research stage and in-person briefings nearer the decision-making stage, for example. Asked separately to identify at what stage thought leadership provides most value in decision making, 43% of respondents indicated that it was when researching an issue, while 39% said it was when looking for a solution.

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



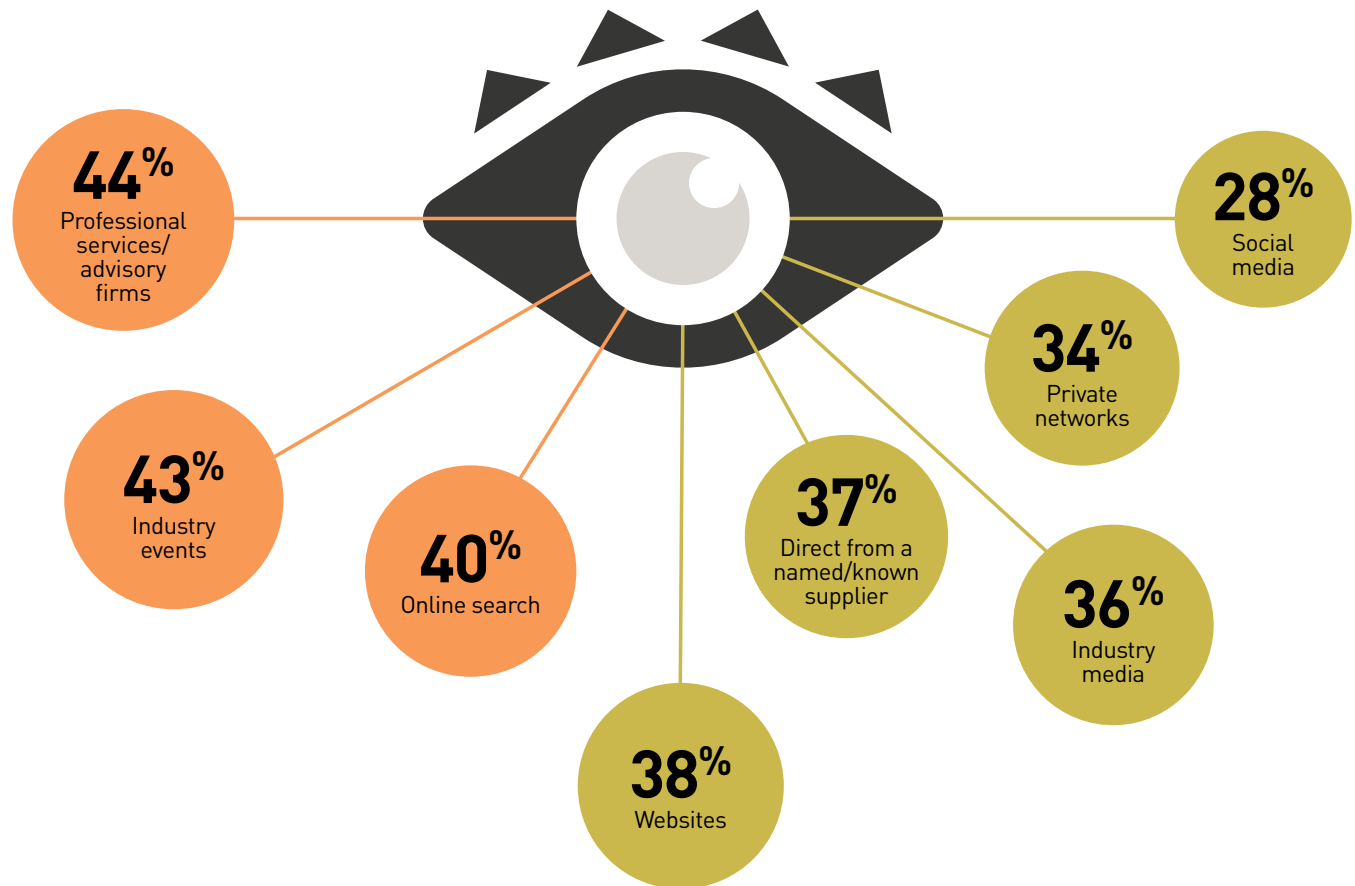
2.4 How and when to reach the C-suite

A series of questions sought to shed light on the successful execution of thought leadership – to understand when best to deliver content and through which means.

Multiple sources, virtual and physical

Asked to identify from where they are most likely to seek out thought leadership material, respondents most commonly identified professional services/advisory firms (44%), industry events (43%) and online search (40%). Industry media (36%) and social media (28%) appeared slightly further down the list, perhaps indicating the declining impact of traditional B2B publications as media transitions from print to digital and the likelihood that users don't seek out information from social media in the traditional sense – rather it is 'pushed' in their direction. —————>

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

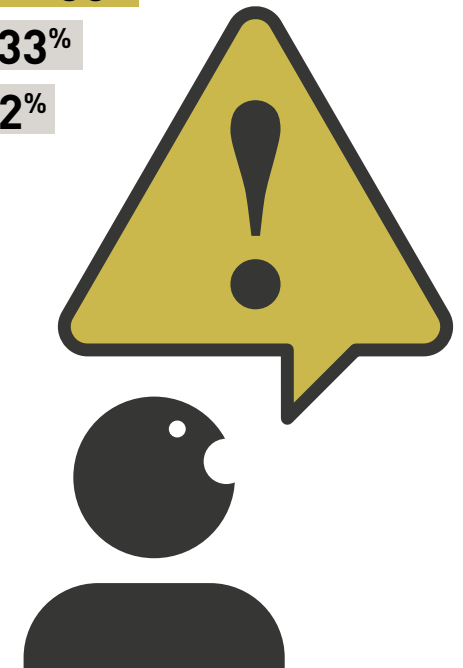
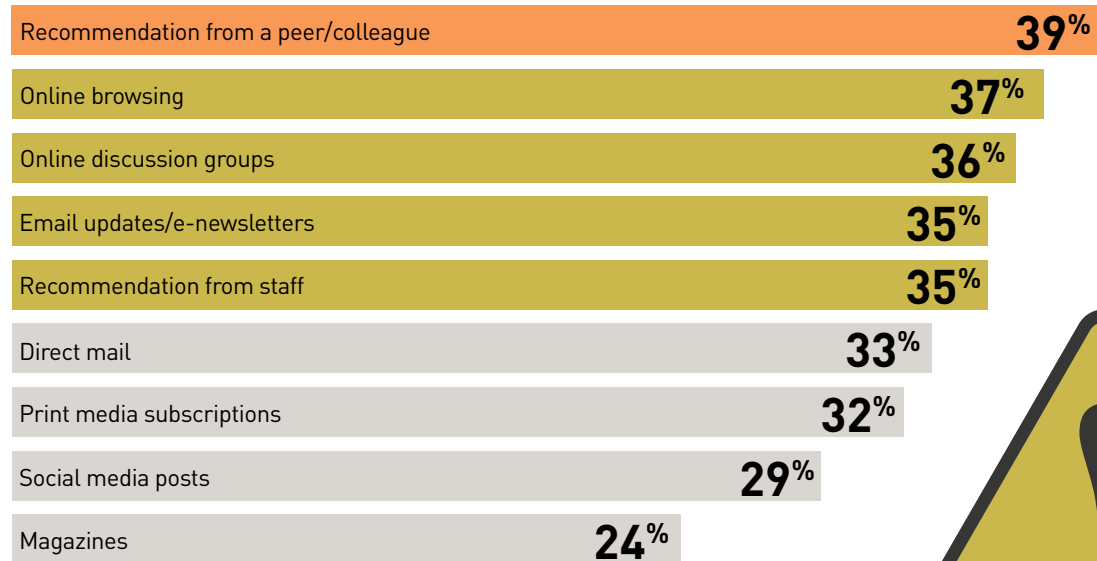


2.4 How and when to reach the C-suite continued

Overall, the results suggest that senior executives use a combination of physical and virtual sources, relying on multiple means and happily marrying face-to-face contact with internet-derived sources.

This point was reflected in responses to the next question. It asked which means was most likely to prompt engagement with thought leadership information. Again, a range of responses were given similar weight. Recommendation from a peer/colleague (39%) was the most popular answer followed by online browsing (37%) and online discussion groups (36%).

Q: Which of the following are most likely to prompt your engagement with thought leadership information?

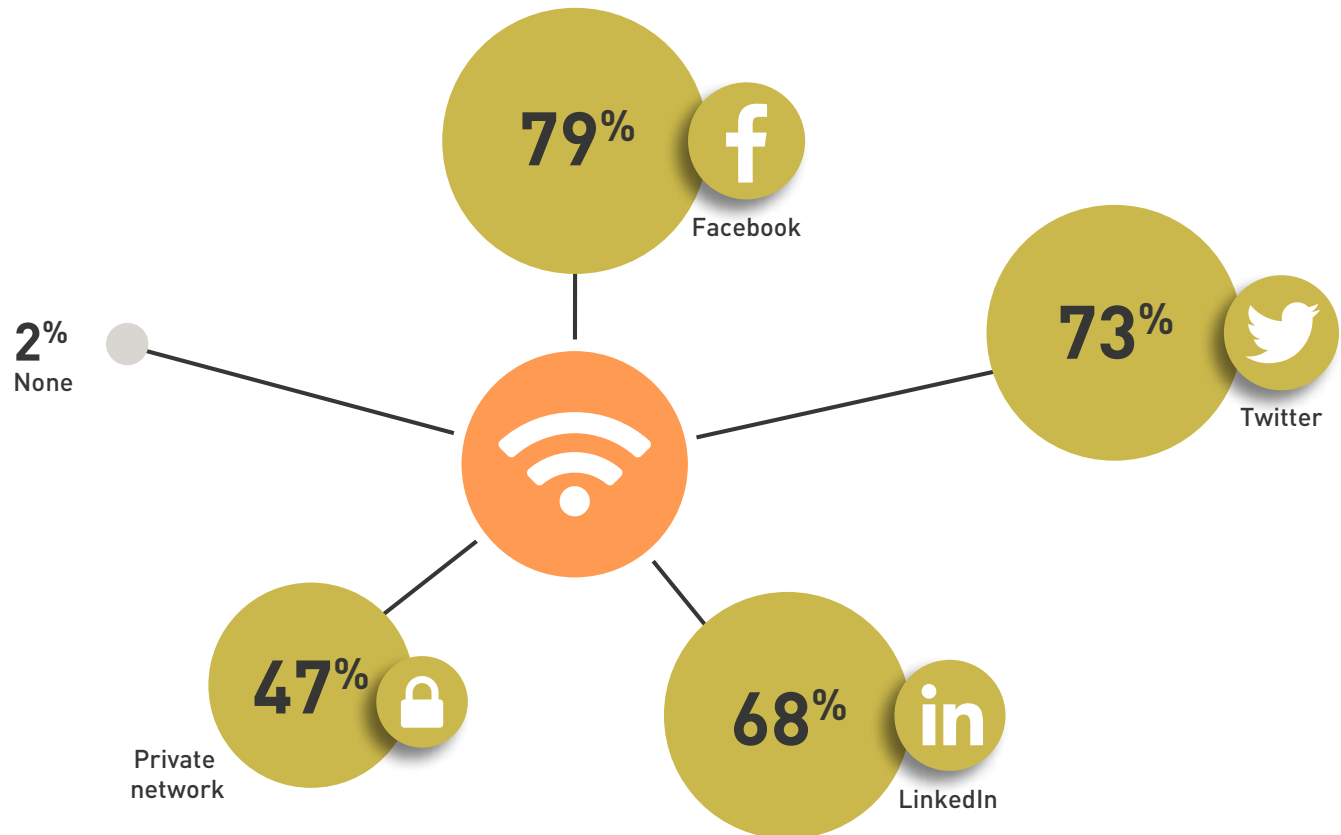


2.4 How and when to reach the C-suite continued

Facebook, the professional network?

Notably, Facebook – more commonly associated with friendship and familial connections – was cited as the social network senior executives were most likely to engage with for thought leadership. Facebook was referenced by 79% of respondents, compared with Twitter (73%) and LinkedIn (68%). Given LinkedIn’s role as the self-described world’s number one professional social network, these results might surprise. On the other hand, given that Facebook is used by 1.7 billion people every month – and over a billion every day – it is perhaps less surprising to see its influence spill into the world of professional thought leadership. —————>

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



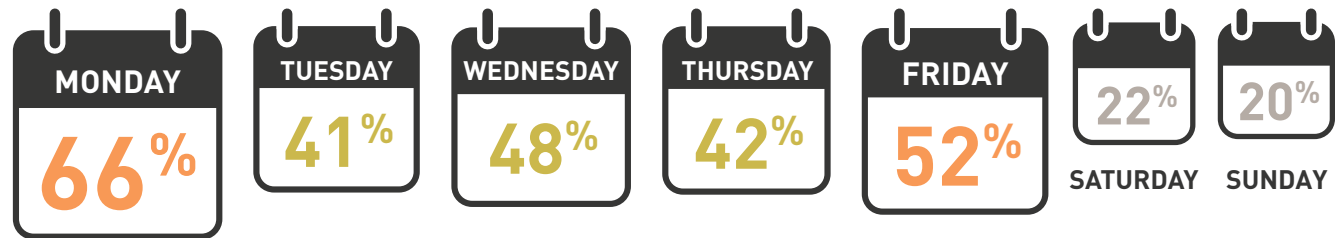
2.4 How and when to reach the C-suite continued

Tell me why I should like Mondays

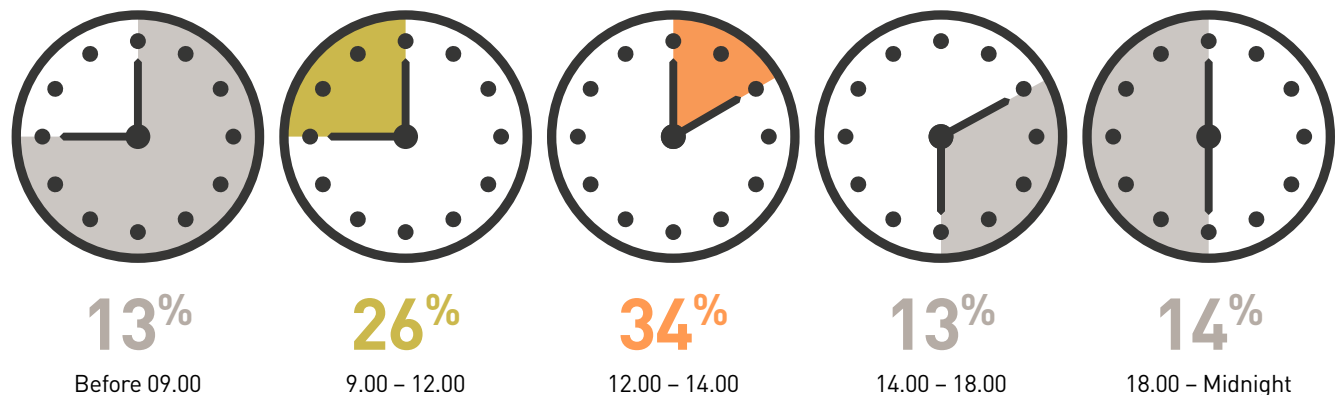
Two thirds of senior executives seek out thought leadership information on a Monday, making it the most popular day to engage with content by a large margin. Notably Friday (52%) is the second most popular day, countering a common view that the end of the week is the graveyard slot for content marketing. While Saturday (22%) and Sunday (20%) are the least popular days, the fact that one in five respondents are prepared to engage with thought leadership at the weekend is likely to be a product of easy access to information via digital media and smart devices.

If Monday is the most popular day to seek out thought leadership information, lunchtime is the most popular time to view the content. According to the survey results, 34% of senior executives selected the 12 noon to 2pm time slot. The working morning, between 9am and 12 noon, was the second most popular (26%), while as many said they viewed thought leadership content between 6pm and midnight (14%) as they did between 2pm and 6pm.

Q: On which days of the week do you typically seek out thought leadership?



Q: What time of day are you most likely to view thought leadership?



2.5 The impact of thought leadership

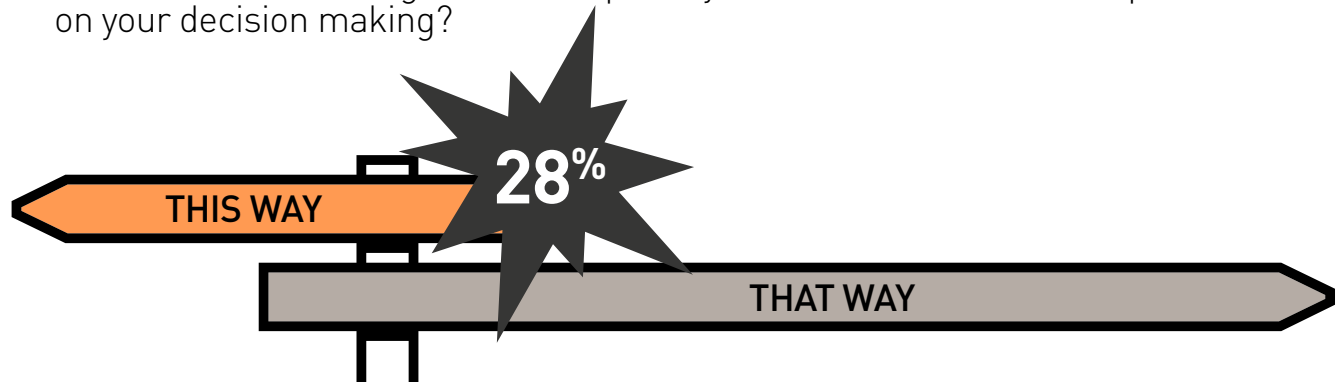
The Grist survey sought to understand how much thought leadership content readers saw, what influence it had and what responses it typically elicited.

Asked first to assess the impact of the thought leadership that comes across their desks, senior executives said that 31% gets read and 28% has an impact on decision making. →

Q: How much of the thought leadership that you come across do you actually read?



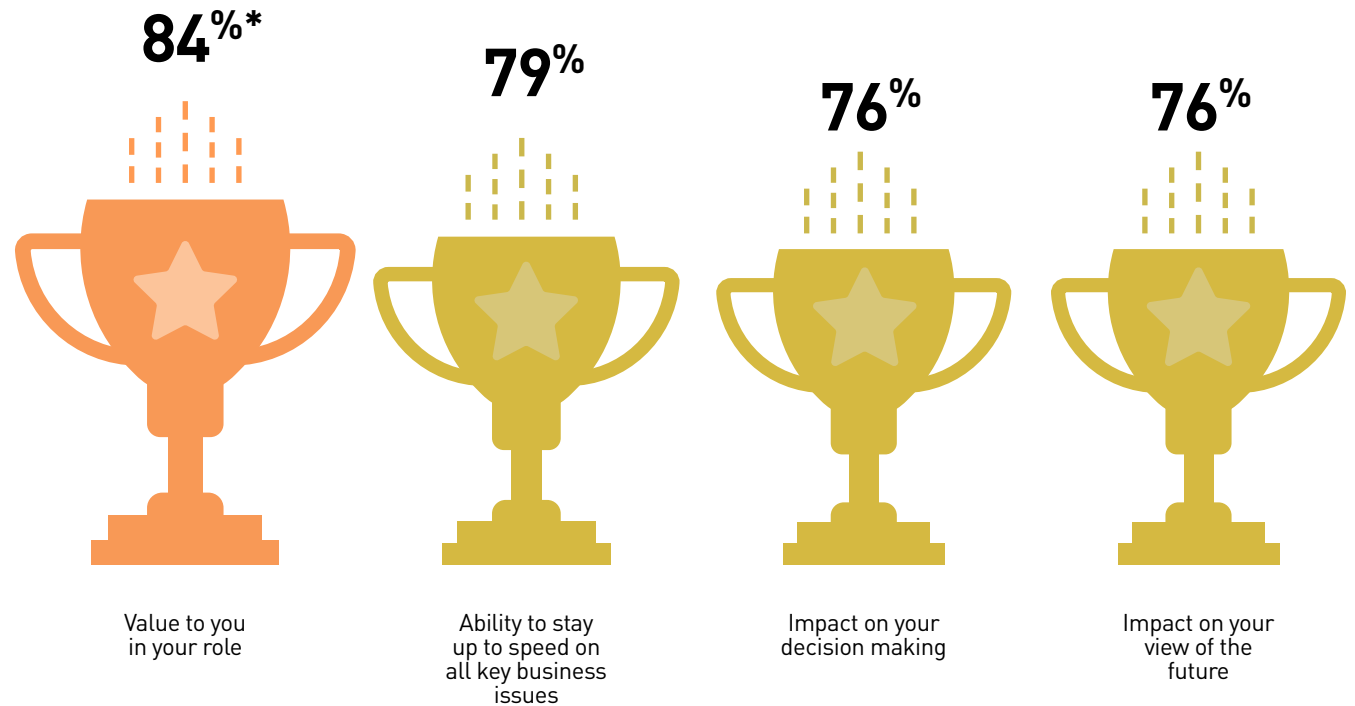
Q: How much of the thought leadership that you come across has an impact on your decision making?



2.5 The impact of thought leadership continued

When asked to rate thought leadership they read, senior executives are positive about its effect. More than four out of five (84%) believe it plays an important part in adding value to their role, while just below that number indicate its importance in staying up to speed on key business issues (79%), decision making (76%) and taking a view on the future (76%).

Q: How would you rate thought leadership in terms of the value it provides to you?

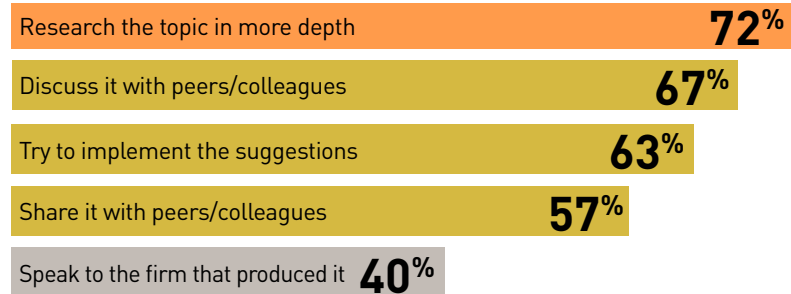


*Percentage rating important/very important

2.5 The impact of thought leadership continued

When thought leadership matches the reader's needs, a number of actions typically follow – 72% of readers are motivated to research the topic in more depth, 67% discuss it with peers or colleagues while 63% implement the suggestions.

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

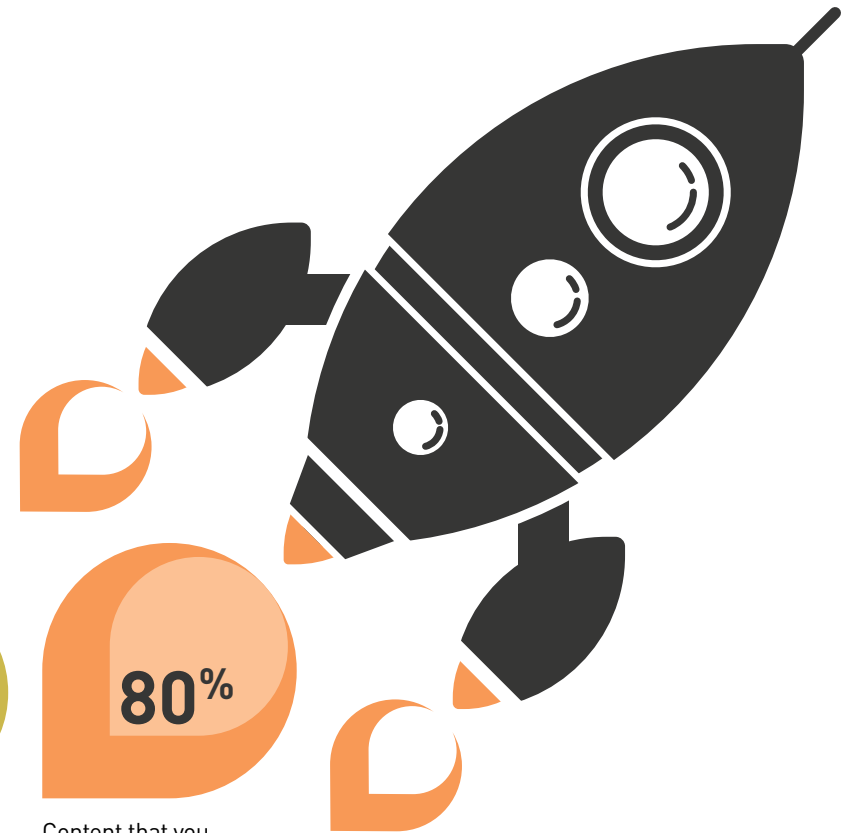
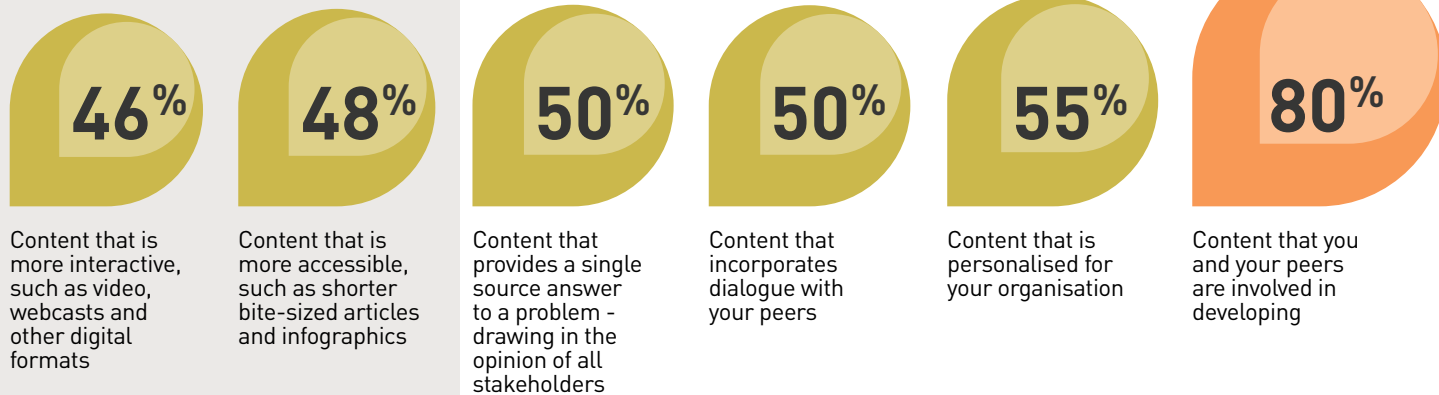


2.6 Future content

Readers want to be creators too

Asked to look forward and imagine content that would prove most useful, four in five senior executives said that they wanted to read, watch and listen to material that they – and their peers – were involved in developing. For those devising and managing content, this presents an interesting opportunity: the very people they want to reach through thought leadership appear willing to be interviewed and become active participants in the process.

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



2.7 Executive personas: from visionaries to sceptics

While most of the senior executives interviewed shared homogenous views on thought leadership, there were a number of notable differences across job titles. The research pointed to the following personas:

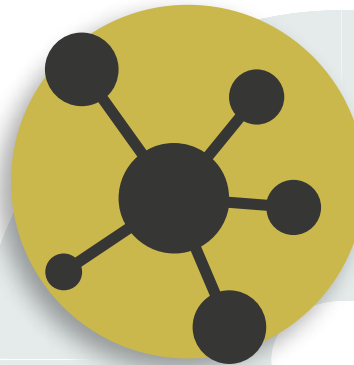
CEOs (aka the **visionaries**)

- Wants to be challenged by innovative thinking and emerging trends
- Dismissive of the generic and conceptual
- Leaves action-oriented best practice to those lower down the organisational food chain



Finance (aka the **open network**)

- Eschews the generic and conceptual
- Seeks commercially led ideas
- Values opinion of industry experts and peers
- Active at the beginning of the week



Technology (aka the **closed network**)

- Values emerging trends
- Watches thought leadership videos and longer forms of content
- Seeks peer recommendations
- Fan of Twitter
- Happy to engage on a Friday



2.7 Executive personas: from visionaries to sceptics continued



Legal (aka the **researchers**)

- Uses thought leadership to evaluate the expertise and insight of advisors
- Shuns advances from professional services and advisory firms
- Prefers short 800-word articles
- Engages with thought leadership via Twitter
- Values clear and simple facts



Marketing and sales (aka the **sceptics**)

- Sceptical about most thought leadership
- Seeks out content that will improve decision making
- Less likely to trust social media
- Values opinions of industry experts
- Likely to engage at lunchtime

Human Resources (aka the **solution seekers**)

- Seeks out thought leadership to answer questions, seek solutions
- Happy to browse online and receive direct mail
- Wants to be better informed to make better decisions
- Turned off by lack of insight



Risk (aka the **information junkies**)

- Needs to evaluate the expertise and insight of an advisor or supplier
- Keen to hear from industry experts
- Values industry media
- Likely to turn to social media

3.0 Conclusion

The research is great news if you are in charge of your B2B firm's marketing and communications programmes. Thought leadership is clearly valued by the C-suite and they are happy to receive it from their advisers.

However, thought leadership must provide a return on investment: both for the firms that invest the money to produce it and the senior executives that invest the time to view it. To take advantage of this opportunity and build long-term relationships, you need to respect your readers.

The C-suite are a sophisticated and demanding audience, and will not respond to rehashed marketing material. But you have a real opportunity to break the mould: to get under readers' skins, address their most pressing concerns and help them make better decisions by exploring the future. Once you've done that successfully, you can begin to reinforce your position as a trusted partner.

And as the research makes clear, a trusted partner needs to produce content that is insightful not undiscerning, specific not generic, useful not self-serving. Perhaps, most importantly, it needs to include the views of clients and other industry experts. In short: show, don't tell.

Findings ranged from the expected to the consensus-challenging. Monday lunchtimes prove a popular time to receive thought leadership material but so, too, do Fridays, while one in five will happily seek out thought leadership at weekends. Build these insights into your planning.

Consider, too, that Facebook matters in the world of B2B. Marketing teams, content teams and agencies need to work through the consequences of this and come up with a compelling editorial plan for this and other social networks.

There is no silver bullet. Only a third of the thought leadership that is produced gets noticed. Distribution needs to be

widespread and take in a whole array of influencers. The only certainty is this – you must truly know your audience if you are to have a chance of success.

Return on investment will not be immediate. Thought leadership works well at the beginning of the sales funnel, not at the end. You need to be in it for the long haul, providing genuinely helpful content – being there when the client needs help, not just when they want to purchase services.



4.0 About Grist

At Grist, we create content with purpose. We are a strategic B2B 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 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.

To find out how Grist can help you, contact **andrewrogerson@gristonline.com**

Contact

Andrew Rogerson
andrewrogerson@gristonline.com
M: 020 7434 1445
www.gristonline.com

