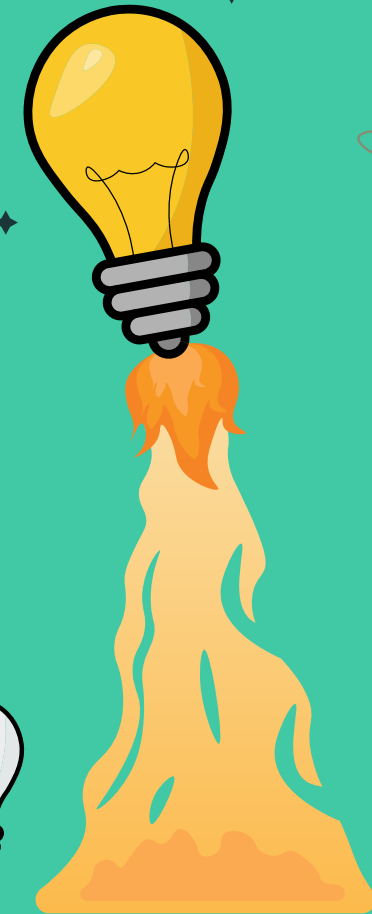




VansonBourne

A brief guide to...

Thought Leadership



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In conducting research for content programmes, the Vanson Bourne team is often asked: ‘So, how do we ensure our thought leadership activity is a success?’. Precisely the question to ask and one we have a multi-layered answer to, based upon a raft of experience. Ultimately, a response we felt worth sharing.

So, what gives us the right to pontificate? In essence nothing, ours is simply a perspective, to be stacked with all those other opinions. The Vanson Bourne viewpoint is though supported by hundreds of research programmes conducted - at the B2B tech coalface - over the span of some 20+ years. A whole swathe of which have incorporated a thought leadership component we’ve been intimately involved in.

Like any good piece of thought leadership, this article will make no pretension to having all the answers. It will though look to reflect upon - and share - approaches which have worked and delivered success. Whilst, in our view, it is not about codifying a specific, rigid, methodology - given ‘real-world’ complexities and budgetary/timescale realities - we do lay out a loose directional framework. One intended to support you in shaping richer - more impactful - content, as well as amplifying the associated audience resonance.

As with all of our ‘A brief guide to...’ series, this outline is intended to act as an initial reference point for good practice. Helping you avoid the bear traps, whilst simultaneously delivering a source of inspiration and illumination - directly shaping your thought leadership activity, as well as maximising its impact. We hope you find it informative.

Thought leadership, why bother?

A hard, commercial, rationale

Let's not hide from the fact that to deliver truly engaging, illuminative, thought leadership requires time, resource and effort. In parallel with cross-team, senior stakeholder, buy-in. Which immediately poses the question: 'Is the business bandwidth justified?'

In our experience, if the exercise is viewed purely as a functional, mechanical, siloed one, then - to be frank - no. In contrast, if the thought leadership activity is viewed as a central plank of the marketing strategy - and integrated as such - it will repay the investment in spades. Well executed thought leadership can ultimately...



Drive category illumination

Helping reinforce and inform commercial discussions at a strategic (C-suite, decision maker) level, as well as strengthening your positioning as an innovative operator - across the B2B tech vertical landscape. The inherent benefits being increased trust and value within the brand.



Catalyse brand awareness, as well as overarching proposition cut-through

Propelling 'mental availability', as well as helping gain exposure across key industry and business channels/ publications/events.



Support demand generation momentum

With unique data, insights and/or proof points helping provide supporting narratives - as well as compelling collateral - for broader 'ground seeding' activities.

What are you looking to achieve?

A clarity of purpose

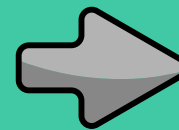
It is, of course, imperative that all such thought leadership activity dovetails with your overarching marketing strategy.

With this firmly front-of-mind, the first thing you need to do, prior to anything else, is absolutely nail down what your thought leadership programme is looking to accomplish. What do you want your target audience of customers/prospects to learn? Is there a piece of knowledge or central message you would like to impart? What is your unique 'hook'?

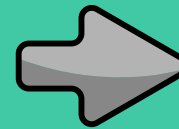
We fully appreciate that this firmly falls within 101 territory. That said, it is surprising how often such basic fundamentals are overlooked, or - to be frank - actively ignored. Don't worry, we get it, in the maelstrom of day-to-day business - with the associated pressures, shifting priorities and distractions - we can all take our eye-off-the-ball.

Of course, without clear purpose the content will simply get lost, failing to be heard against the morass of competing, background, noise. By defining the purpose of your thought leadership activities, you are setting out governing guidelines - a structure, if you will - to work within.

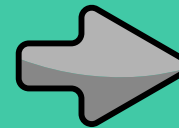
In our view, with each piece of content a number of fundamental questions need to be both considered and answered:



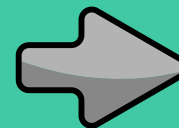
Who is the audience for this content?



What problems do they have, which this content can help inform, solution signpost or solve?



What is the overarching, pervading, message to support this need? How is this unique (to your business)?



How will you most effectively reach the intended audience?

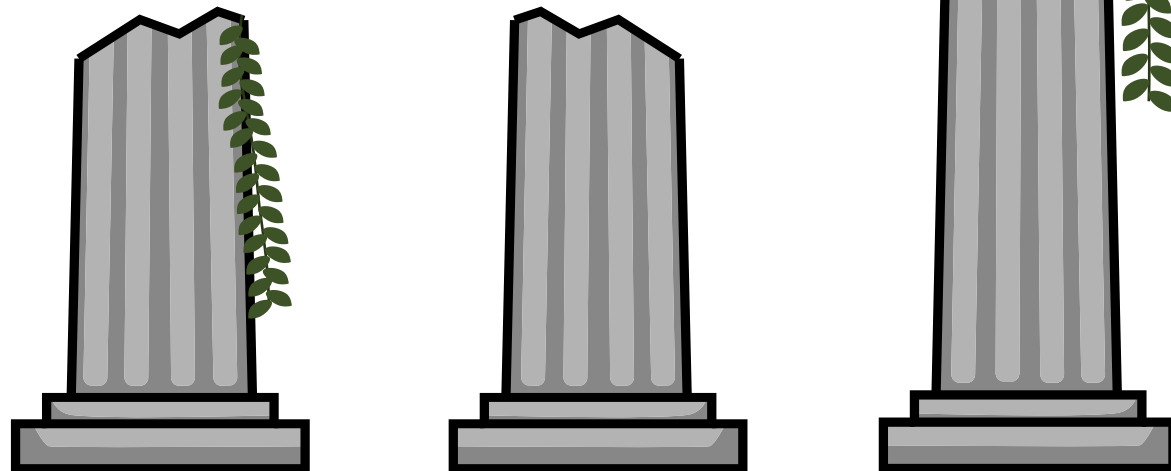
Enmesh the key pillars of your proposition

Incorporating your brand, product and values

It's critical, as already mentioned, that any such thought leadership activity fully aligns with the central themes inherent within your brand pillars and proposition narrative - as well as the overarching marketing strategy. Of course, whilst interweaving fresh, credible - directionally illuminative - insights and opinions.

In essence, any thought leadership without such integrated content will lack brand cohesion, failing to make an impact or provide global understanding.

This doesn't mean there isn't a place for specific, standalone, content. There will always be an audience looking to absorb highly relevant, topical, material. It is simply that such activity must dovetail with the higher-level strategy to provide a cohesive, rounded, brand identity.



Key stakeholder buy-in and promotion

Reputational leverage and amplification

Experience has demonstrated, time and time again, that senior stakeholder engagement - from the outset - is another key component to achieving thought leadership success. Such an approach provides a facility to...

Stress-test your thought leadership programme

Ensuring the activity focus (as well as it's associated objectives) are coherent and business aligned. Whilst also serving to create buy-in amongst the key stakeholders within the organisation.

Ensure all internal knowledge and opinion has been fully digested

Enabling all the detail and nuance of the marketplace, as well as target customer/prospect considerations, have been taken on-board.

Provide increased amplification

With direct buy-in, the senior exec team are far more likely to help support in the promotion and amplification of the thought leadership output.





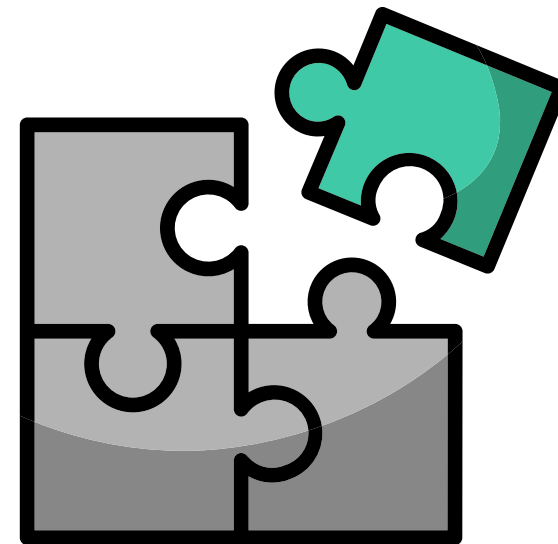
The value of integrating survey research

Helping bridge the trust gap

Up to this point, we have taken as read that most thought leadership content is orientated towards building trust and credibility through helping and informing the customer/prospect audience, rather than being a clumsy direct 'selling' vehicle simply dressed up as 'thought leadership'. Unfortunately, the reality is that a lot of published content tends to be built around bad-faith gimmicks - which deliver more fluff than fact.

Within the tech space - as across most B2B verticals - this is resulting in an **ever-widening trust gap**, with customers and prospects alike increasingly failing to trust the content brands publish.

If well executed though, true thought leadership can catalyse the lead pipeline, shorten the sales cycle and boost credibility. With original, independent, survey research (encompassing relevant, trending, topics) being at the very core of the solution. The hard research numbers helping validate and 'size' central observations, being an independent arbiter of the market reality.



Whilst this is not the forum to fully unpack research best practice (do see [A brief guide to... Research for Content](#)), it is worth briefly highlighting a few of the considerations with such survey activity:

- 1 Target the appropriate audience** - invest time in thinking about the type of respondents you wish to target (based upon their territory, organisational size, vertical, role, needs, pain points, etc). Who will be the most informative to your thought leadership activity?
 - 2 Carefully select the conversation/topic narrative** - picking an area of topic relevance is key. Ideally a theme around which your customer/prospect audience is already talking and/or one that aligns and contributes to your overall strategy and objectives. Opinion leader articles and industry blogs can often act as a source of inspiration. Direct relevance helps drive respondent engagement, as well as the richness of the survey data outputs.
 - 3 Be focussed, less is often more** - resist the temptation to squeeze too much into the survey questionnaire. This generally adds time and complexity, rarely leading to a good outcome. An extended survey often indicates a lack of clarity in terms of the content focus. Avoid the 'spray and pray' approach at all costs.
 - 4 Employ a robust methodology** - approach the construction, broadcast and targeting of your survey with care, consideration, as well as a high attention to detail. The old adage holds true, rubbish in - rubbish out.
 - 5 Sweat the data outputs** - invest time, effort and headspace in mining the results. Run crosstabs to provide subset analysis of specific participant groupings, territories, etc. Dive into the open-ended comments. Seek out the narratives and pictures-in-the-numbers. Truly 'sweat' the data, albeit doing so with the thought leadership framework - and the associated headlines - firmly front-of-mind.
- Of course, given the expertise required in conducting survey research well, it's often easier partnering with a specialist research consultancy. We would say that though!**

Where do we need to get to?

What success looks like

'Winning' thought leadership is - in our experience - built upon understanding widely acknowledged, real-world, industry challenges/needs, as well as mapping out routes to success. Providing contextualised, nuanced, solutions - incorporating insightful logic, potential approaches, whilst outlining mindset and/or ethical considerations.

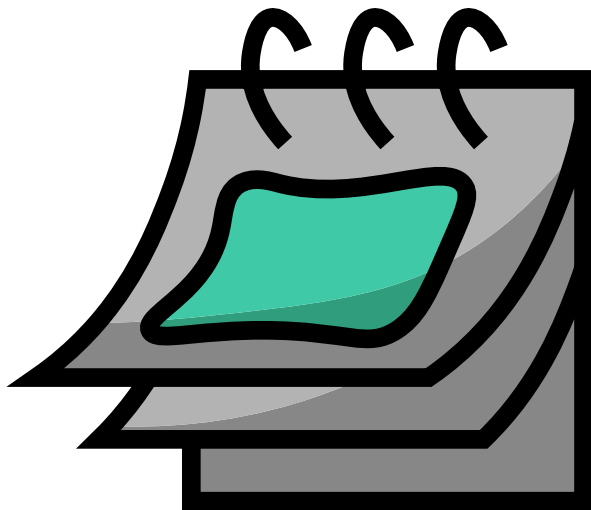


Such an approach is often backed-up by hard, evidential, research numbers. All communicated in an accessible fashion. Rather than being an overwhelming amount of confusing, unstructured, data which serves little purpose and has zero narrative flow.

Such thought leadership content requires no explicit brand 'plug'. Just to be clear though, that is not to say your comms agency doesn't have value in promoting the content, much the reverse. It's more that the related positioning and outbound messaging is different. Ultimately, we are helping the customer/prospect audience gain access to knowledge, of which only you hold the key.

A calendar of activity and impactful collateral

Maximising your bang for buck



Through intelligent construction of the thought leadership outputs, you can extend-the-life of the content. Delivering the initial ‘bang’ as well as the ‘rolling thunder’ - drip-feeding narratives over the forthcoming months.

Creating such a calendar will allow you and your team to be more strategic in your approach, as well as realising far greater value from the resource investment. In such content scheduling, each component piece can be interlinked and build knowledge incrementally - creating a wider landscape, which takes your customer/prospect audience along a path of continual growth.

It is also important to view the thought leadership output in more broader terms than the delivery of a particular asset such as a whitepaper/eBook. Yes, those can absolutely be the hero asset, but could this be complemented with additional collateral (infographics/videos/animations/webinars) - to maximise the cut-through and landing footprint? Just a thought. If you’ve gone to all the trouble (time and expense) of crafting something powerful, why wouldn’t you go the extra mile to amplify its impact?

Helping you win

So, there you go, that's the download of our key insights to delivering winning, impactful, thought leadership content. Do we have all the answers? Clearly not. At the very least though, we hope our guide sparks a few synapses and provides some valuable direction.

One final thought to leave you with: In this knowledge economy of ours, great thought leadership is able to create and deliver 'value'. If your content has vertical relevance and intellectual/commercial 'worth' you know you are absolutely on the right tracks.

Direction and guidance

Of course, we would be very happy to talk through our approach to thought leadership with you - or for that matter - any aspects of the research and insight process. Do view us as an expert sounding board, if guidance is required.

After all, Vanson Bourne has been supporting tech businesses in the delivery of market research and insight programmes for over 20 years.

**Want to know more?
Don't hesitate to get in touch:**

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vansonbourne.com