5 Success Factors of Effective Thought Leadership Marketing

Isoke Mitchell, Christy Ferguson

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By Analyst(s): Isoke Mitchell, Christy Ferguson

Thought leadership marketing can differentiate and establish credibility in competitive markets. Yet, confusion exists about what is necessary for success. Product marketers can use these five success factors to evaluate readiness for and execute a thought leadership marketing program.

Overview

Key Findings

- Thought leadership is often used as a content marketing tactic, leading to materials that may not provide a unique viewpoint or establish a differentiated customer-centric position with buyers.

- Implementing a thought leadership strategy requires long-term commitment and investment to be successful, yet there's often a focus on one-off pieces of thought-leading content that achieve only short-term marketing goals.

- Because thought leadership marketing and content marketing are often mistakenly interchanged, content creation to support thought leadership is often outsourced to agencies or consultancies, limiting its effectiveness.

Recommendations

To improve demand generation from thought leadership efforts, product marketers must benchmark against these five success factors:

- Build your thought leadership marketing program by connecting a customer-centric mission to your offering in the market.

- Strategize cross-functionally for effective thought leadership marketing development and implementation by securing executive leadership commitment and sponsorship of the thought leadership marketing program.

- Approach thought leadership marketing as a long-term play by regularly evaluating your thought leadership marketing program for relevance and refreshing as appropriate.

- Develop a unique POV and remain ahead of your target buyers by gradually evolving your thought leadership marketing program.

- Align your thought leadership marketing program to your content marketing strategy by incorporating your unique POV supported by organizational competency and expert internal knowledge base.

- Create thought leadership by linking directly from your core intellectual property. Recognize that thought leadership ideation cannot be outsourced; only elements of the marketing execution can be outsourced.

Introduction

Since many technology and service providers play in disruptive, uncertain and competitive markets, providing technology or services is not a strong enough differentiator. Thought leadership is essential to influence technology buyers and prospects that are investing in technology or service solutions. Thought leadership marketing, if done well, can build trust by showcasing an understanding and vision for the future of the market you serve, differentiate you from your competition, and increase awareness.

Thought leadership marketing is your intellectual property (IP) applied to your ideal customer's future and a path for communicating your differentiation. It's made tangible through your organization's marketing activities, including content, product and customer marketing.

Thought leadership marketing communicates your unique point of view, introducing your organization to an audience as a market visionary in a particular segment and, ultimately, paving the way for more specific buying interactions. It is the systematic delivery of your IP that can provide differentiation, establishing you as a preeminent expert in a given field to customers for whom your products and services are an ideal fit.

A truly effective thought leadership marketing program is not a finite tactical project that exists in isolation. Instead, it is a long-term initiative involving considerable investment and cross-functional orchestration.

Analysis

According to the 2022 Gartner Technology Buying Behavior Survey, 40% of tech buying teams reviewed or read research as a part of their purchase process, with over 50% relying on thought leader resources during the early stages of the buying process. [1] Examples of thought leadership information that buyers value in the early stages of buying cycle include perspectives on the future of technology or the buyer's industry or function. While later stages are an ideal time for buyers to evaluate product compatibility, integration, implementation and support details and quantifiable results to deepen relationships. [2]

As shown in Figure 1, technology marketers that are planning to develop a thought leadership marketing program should weigh their situation against the five success factors that Gartner has identified for an effective program.

Figure 1: Five Success Factors of Thought Leadership Marketing

Five Success Factors of Thought Leadership Marketing
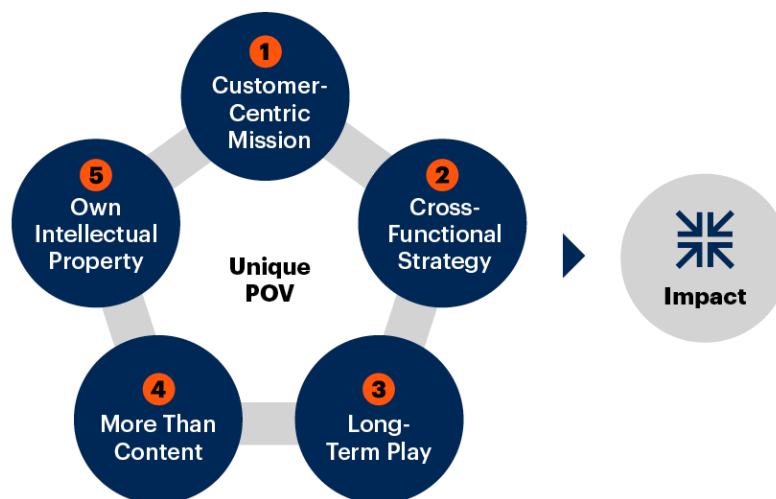
Source: Gartner
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Evaluate Readiness for, and Execute on, a Thought Leadership Marketing Program

A lack of thought leadership isn't generally something that first comes to mind when a buyer decides against a purchase or disqualifies a provider from consideration. It may be why a buyer doesn't engage earlier in the buyer's journey with the organization or doesn't buy, but the feedback may sound like, "You didn't understand my business problem."

We know that, as buyers assess vendor capabilities and competency, thought leadership helps to differentiate you from your competitors and alternatives, build trust, and establish your reputation and credibility as an expert in your field. Additionally, thought leadership marketing:

- Amplifies your leading innovations, thoughts and ideas in an accelerating world of change.

- Extends your permission to play earlier in the buyer's journey and with key enterprise and buyer personas, especially with new prospects in a segment or buyers with high authority in their organizations.

- Strikes a balance between being authoritative and humanistic while staying approachable, even as a leader.

- Educates your ideal customers about the future direction of technology and prepares them for the way forward.

- Helps you retain customers by establishing yourself as a credible provider that will continue to evolve, and that the buyer will want to partner with and do business with you long term.

Factor 1: Customer-Centric Mission

Ensure Your Thought Leadership Marketing Program Is Directly Relevant to Your Target Audience

Thought leadership marketing, as with all marketing, has goals of:

- Establishing a vision for the future to clearly position your company in the market

- Building domain expertise that leads to increased credibility for your company

- Raising awareness of your brand and thus attracting prospective buyers to your offerings

Therefore, your thought leadership marketing program **first** needs to be directly relevant to your target audience and, ultimately, either offer them advice that they can (or must) act on, or change their views — even if in the longer term. **Second,** your thought leadership marketing must be directly relevant to what you do in the market and present a focused, unique point of view (POV) that aligns back with your buyers. While thought leadership marketing should not include product-specific content, it should provide guidance that buyers will find valuable and should take, whether or not they buy from you. Effective thought leadership marketing can support your point of view and eventually lead to your offering. Your thought leadership must be applied and emerge from the work you do to further your customers' mission and business priorities.

To ensure you are maximizing the potential of your thought leadership marketing program, you should evaluate:

- **Who are your ideal customers?** Describe the market segment you are serving, beyond firmographic attributes to incorporate their business needs and situation. Does your thought leadership stance result from deep experience in a particular industry subsegment, for instance? (See The Enterprise Persona — Defining Your Ideal Customer Profile.)

- **What stage in the buying process are these customers?** Focus on how buyers participate in the buying process, as well as the information the buyer needs to validate their thinking and build consensus around a technology purchase decision. Does your thought leadership marketing provide guidance on actions to take based on where the customer is in the buying journey? (See Tool: Buyer Persona and Job-Based Buying Journey Template.)

- **What is your most highly differentiated source of business value to these customers?** That is, what is unique about your approach to solving your customers' problems or your view of the future ideal state for their function or industry? What about your offering makes that possible? (See Tech Marketers: Make Your Differentiators Clear as MUD.)

- **How will you protect that differentiated stance in the longer term?** For example, you might develop a maturity curve in which the thought leadership requirements are aspirational for most of the industry. Then, articulate a path for each prospect to achieve that ideal state.

Thought leadership must be applied to your customers' situation. It must be tied to a problem or complexity they face or will face, but they don't know how to solve.

Thought leadership should provide a unique POV, something your customers don't already know.

Factor 2: Cross-Functional Strategy

Promote Your Differentiated Expertise and Vision by Securing Executive Leadership Commitment and Sponsorship of the Thought Leadership Marketing Program

True thought leadership drives the need for collaboration between product, marketing, customer success, and sales, and may include partners. Organizational coordination plays a huge part in enabling credibility, amplification and time to market.

An effective thought leadership marketing program, while managed and directed by marketing in its execution, has its roots in the source of your differentiated expertise and vision, and will draw heavily on those resources. Therefore, having executive leadership commitment and sponsorship of the program is a critical success factor for any thought leadership marketing program.

Ultimately, thought leadership marketing supports all stages of the customer life cycle. If you stake out a thought leadership position through marketing, but do not carry it through to your sales and customer success interactions, it is, at best, a tactical marketing campaign. Thought leadership marketing offers great opportunities for salespeople and customer success managers to drive engagement, and they must be able to use it appropriately. Successful thought leadership marketing requires training and enabling the sales team — and anyone who talks to the customer during the buying and owning cycles — so they can articulate thought leadership messages and stories. This customer-facing enablement strategy must be part of the technology marketer's core responsibilities.

Factor 3: Long-Term Play

Develop a Unique POV and Remain Ahead of Your Target Buyers by Gradually Evolving Your Thought Leadership Marketing Program

Establishing your company as a provider that can meet today's needs and has a vision for the future is a long-term endeavor— whether it is presenting an alternative or a completely new way of thinking. Consequently, to sustain an active thought leadership marketing program, your company must have an intellectual curiosity that encompasses fact-based research and encourages open debate and a culture focused on delivering customer value. Your organization needs to identify a long-term roadmap for how it will impact your market to showcase why your buyers should care about these issues or market opportunities. It requires commitment, investment and consistency.

To that end, a senior executive should champion the overall program. In most cases, a separate steering committee owns and drives the thought leadership topics. It also assigns professionals to conduct research, create the supporting assets (such as sales enablement, content assets, and media pitches), and serve as the public spokesperson/spokespeople for this POV.

To identify these key spokespeople, the committee should evaluate:

1. **Domain expertise on the topic** — Individuals should be available to be heavily involved in the development of the story to ensure consistency of the POV and comprehensiveness of the research.

2. **Public speaking skills and persuasiveness** — Spokespeople need to be articulate, professional, and able to engage an audience, including media representatives, analysts, customers, partners and shareholders/investors.

3. **External recognition and influence** — They should be able to leverage their existing personal brand or be willing to build a personal brand leading to name recognition. This includes having an active social media presence. At a minimum, they should be comfortable with someone else managing their brand profile.

Thought leadership marketing must evolve gradually. Discrete pieces of research or content creation efforts do not constitute thought leadership marketing. A thought leadership marketing program must be consistent in developing a unique POV that remains ahead of your target buyers. Identify the most innovative customers that align with your offering, and ensure you can support their requirements. This will enable you to vet your offerings and should result in a thought leadership asset, such as a case study.

Thought leadership marketing should be systematic in:

- *Reinforcing the importance of external influencers in establishing credibility*

- *Providing access to your thought leaders*

- *Anchoring in your positioning and brand value*

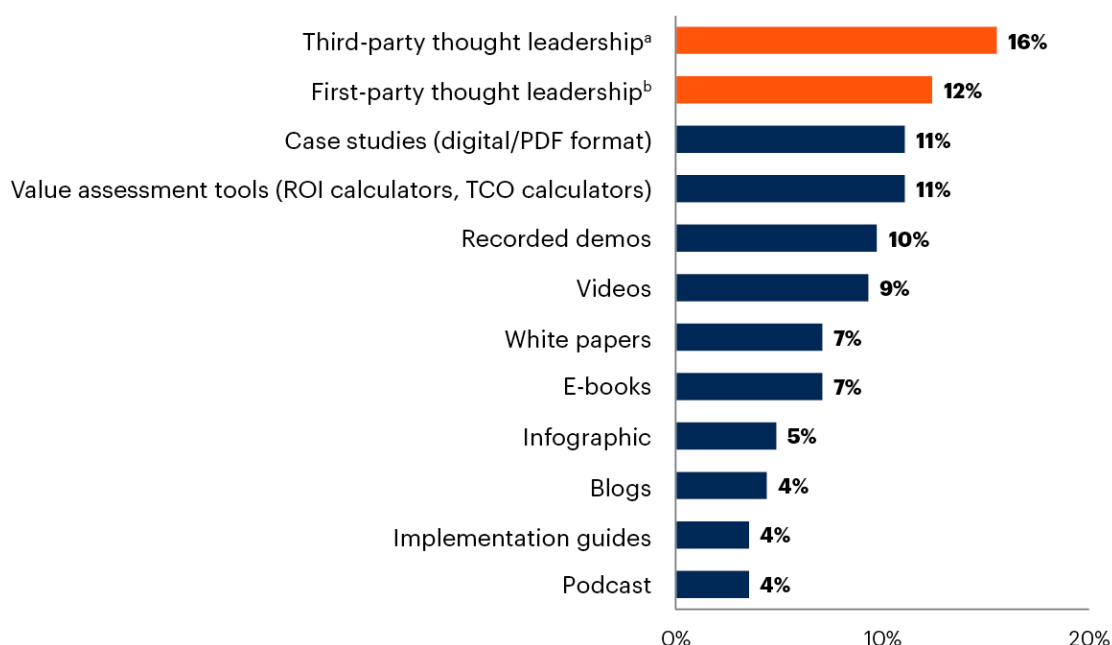
Factor 4: More Than Content

Create Thought Leadership That Presents a Unique Perspective in Which a Particular Use Case May Apply

Thought leadership can fuel demand generation efforts. According to the 2022 Gartner Technology Marketing Benchmarks Survey, third-party generated thought leadership content and thought leadership content created by their organization were the best-performing asset type for marketing-qualified leads (MQLs; 16% and 12%, respectively — see Figure 2). [3] However, initiating a thought leadership marketing program is different from creating thought leadership assets, and the marketing program can proceed only when thought leadership already exists in your organization.

Figure 2: Asset Type in Marketing Plan and Best Performing MQL

Asset Type in Marketing Plan and Best Performing MQL
Best Performing MQL; Multiple Responses Allowed

Asset Type	%
Third-party thought leadership[a]	16%
First-party thought leadership[b]	12%
Case studies (digital/PDF format)	11%
Value assessment tools (ROI calculators, TCO calculators)	11%
Recorded demos	10%
Videos	9%
White papers	7%
E-books	7%
Infographic	5%
Blogs	4%
Implementation guides	4%
Podcast	4%

n = 225; Any of the asset types are included in marketing plan, excluding "not sure"

Q. And which is the best performing; that is, which generates the largest number of marketing-qualified leads (MQLs)?
Source: 2022 Gartner Tech Marketing Benchmarks
[a] Content created by an independent third party (trade or industry association or publication, media, analysts).
[b] Content created by/for your organization (primary research or other data-driven content).
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You can build a strong content marketing strategy that is aligned with your thought leadership marketing program. Nevertheless, authentic thought leadership needs to come from competency and an expert knowledge base that your organization has built over time. Competency and expertise may arise from a provider's participation in the development of a breakthrough technology or service framework.

Establishing a unique POV is integral to your offering, and it will inform your sales interactions, marketing activities, product or service offering decisions, and service engagement across the customer life cycle. This includes participation in events or relevant stakeholder groups (such as industry or standards bodies, academia or research organizations, and panels you choose to sponsor), and how you can get your ideas credited in independent external forums. The more independent the sources are perceived to be, the better.

Be mindful: If you think of thought leadership marketing as a content marketing tactic, you will not succeed. However, it must meet the requirements of all good content and engage audiences by unfolding a compelling story (see Improve Messaging and Communications Through Storytelling). Content marketing is essential for tech marketers in generating leads, driving conversions and multiplying web traffic. It is also important to meet the varying needs of the numerous participants in technology buying decisions at multiple stages in the buying cycle. (see Develop Marketing Content That Drives Conversion Throughout the Buying Journey). Yet, regardless of how important content marketing may be, alone, it is not thought leadership marketing. And, there is observable confusion in the market between content marketing and thought leadership marketing — among both customers and providers.

Many types of important content required throughout the customer life cycle are not thought leadership, as shown in Table 1. Without an effective content marketing strategy, much of the content launched is undifferentiated, purposeless and, put simply, noise (see Tool: Content Marketing Strategy Template for Tech Marketers). Over time, this makes it harder for buyers to distinguish content that is valuable for them and shortens the window of opportunity to engage with buyers.

Table 1: Content Marketing Versus Thought Leadership Marketing

Content Marketing	Thought Leadership Marketing
Solves problems	Sparks conversations
Information focuses on presenting the specific use case of a solution or associating a use case with a solution.	Information presents a new way of looking at the business or technology landscape in which a particular use case might sit.
Assets that demonstrate the business impact to existing business models.	Solutions that present a vision for future emerging business models, or lead to breakthrough solutions that "raise the tide," resulting in strategic, hard-to-get business benefits.
Success relies more heavily on quantitative measurement.	Success relies more heavily on qualitative measurement.

Source: Gartner (February 2023)

The contextual impact of each marketing method relies on both qualitative and quantitative metrics. Content marketing relies heavily on quantifiable results (website traffic, conversion rates and downloads), while thought leadership marketing relies on qualitative insights (understanding, credibility, influence and sentiment). Neither qualitative nor quantitative metrics alone can tell you the whole story about how well your marketing is performing.

Factor 5: Own Intellectual Property

Do Not Outsource Thought Leadership Creation — It Must Be Directly Related to Your Core IP and the Value You Deliver

Thought leadership marketing is IP externalized as a story to customers and prospects through your marketing, communications, and employee and partner interactions. You cannot outsource the creation of your ideas or the source of your research and insights; otherwise, it is not *your* thought leadership.

What you *can* outsource are elements of the marketing execution. For example:

- You can contract **writers** to help the subject matter experts turn their insights into consumable content through interviews or for draft editing and writing support. Their assistance can also include editing and proofreading.

- You should evaluate utilizing **designers or illustrators** to create graphical representations of your ideas. Thought leadership can involve incredibly complex issues with dozens of moving parts. A good design agency will enable you to simplify the complexities of your solution, along with the range of business benefits that it addresses.

- You may evaluate using the same **design firm** to craft compelling, engaging visual stories and presentations for use with analysts, in media and news outlets and marketing channels, or during customer meetings and speaking opportunities with prospects.

- You can use **market researchers and fact-checkers** to support your research needs.

- You can leverage an **external PR agency** with media network connections to support the promotion of your thought leadership marketing to journalists and influencers.

- You might evaluate collaboration with an **academic or research firm** to develop original research to support your POV.

Summary

A thought leadership marketing program is a powerful strategy for organizations with originality and vision in both the fiscal and behavioral senses. It is a long-term investment that is a substantial proportion of your go-to-market budget and requires sponsorship from executive leaders. These programs are not tactical and require a customer-centric vision for your unique POV, with a comprehensive plan to produce supporting research backed by a strong marketing strategy. In addition, cross-functional teams must be willing to leverage this POV in a go-to-market and product strategy.

Evidence

[1] **2022 Gartner Technology Buying Behavior Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand how organizations approach large-scale buying efforts for enterprise technology. The research was conducted online from November through December 2021 among 1,120 respondents in organizations with at least 20 employees and $1 million in annual revenue, and residing in either North America, Western Europe or Asia/Pacific regions. The North American countries represented in the survey were the U.S. (36%) and Canada (7%). The European countries were France (12%), Germany (13%) and the U.K. (20%), and Asia/Pacific countries were Australia (6%) and Singapore (5%). Industries surveyed included education, financial services, government, insurance, healthcare, manufacturing, natural resources and energy, media, retail, services, telecommunications, transportation, utilities, and wholesale. Respondents representing information technology organizations were excluded from the survey.

Respondents were required to be at a manager level or higher, aware of large-scale buying efforts for technology occurring during the past two years, and directly involved in the evaluation or selection of products or services for technology projects.

Qualifying technology purchases included new, replacement or expansion purchases of software, services, hardware, managed services or integrated solutions. At least 70% of the purchases reported by respondents had contract values of at least $250,000. Approximately 87% of expansion purchases resulted in at least a doubling of the original contract value. The survey was developed collaboratively by a team of Gartner analysts and Gartner's Research Data, Analytics and Tools team.

Disclaimer: Results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

[2] **2021 Gartner Technology End-User Buying Behavior Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand how organizations approach large-scale buying efforts for enterprise technology. The research was conducted online from October through December 2020, among 1,500 respondents in organizations with at least $1 million in revenue and 20 employees in the U.S. (33%), France, Germany, the U.K. (15% each), Australia, India (8% each) and Canada (5%). Industries surveyed include manufacturing and natural resources, banking and securities, retail, government, insurance, healthcare, communications, media, services, education, utilities, and transportation. Of note, technology vendors across industry categories were excluded from this sample.

Respondents were required to be manager level or higher in a role that involves the evaluation or selection of products or services for technology projects, and aware of large-scale buying efforts for technology (including net new purchases, renewals and replacements) occurring in the past two years.

For the purposes of this study, "large-scale" purchases are defined as followed:

- Organizations with fewer than 250 employees: Purchases of more than $15,000.

- Organizations with 250 to 999 employees: Purchases of more than $25,000.

- Organizations with over 1,000 employees: Purchases of more than $50,000.

The survey was developed collaboratively by a team of Gartner analysts and Gartner's Research Data, Analytics and Tools team.

Disclaimer: Results of this study do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but do reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

[3] **2022 Gartner Technology Marketing Benchmarks Survey.** This survey was conducted online, from 8 March through 9 May 2022. A total of 381 respondents were collected from technology-focused organizations with more than $10 million in revenue located in the U.S., Canada or the U.K. This report is based on analysis of 238 respondents from organizations with $100 million or more in revenue. Respondents were required to have one of the following primary job functions/roles:

- CEO/president/founder

- Demand/lead generation

- Marketing leadership

- Sales leadership

- Web/digital social marketing

- Marketing operations/analytics

They were also required to have knowledge of the marketing budget and spend for the company or business unit and knowledge of the marketing campaign/programs tactics. At the country level, quotas were established to guarantee a good distribution in terms of product offering (software, technology services, and hardware) and company size (revenue).

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Document Revision History

5 Success Factors of Effective Thought Leadership Marketing - 1 December 2021

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Recommended by the Authors

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

Content Marketing Essentials for CMOs

Tool: Content Marketing Strategy Template for Tech Marketers

Develop Marketing Content That Drives Conversion Throughout the Buying Journey

Improve the Quality and Impact of Your Thought Leadership

Tech Marketing Benchmarks Survey 2022: Demand Generation Insights Innovation

Insight: Always-On Experiential Marketing to Support Buyer Engagement

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