

Thought Leadership Is More Than Content

An eBook From

COMBLU



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oday, many organizations look at thought leadership as a way to differentiate its content. While seemingly a reasonable objective, in reality thought leadership is not a content strategy. It is a cultural imperative inside organizations committed to innovation and disruption. Breakthrough product lines, radically different processes, introduction of new industry

categories, the reinvention of staid industries, the creation of standards that stimulate collaboration and new platforms for growth, etc. are all part of the DNA of thought leadership. True thought leadership is not possible without a culture that lets big thinkers thrive by supporting calculated risks, encouraging new ways to do things, pushing others to go beyond the obvious, thinking about new approaches and consistently measuring impact in order to enhance and refine. True thought leaders back up their ideas with research and additional voices. Then, they inspire others to add to the thought stream.



The output of thought leadership eventually becomes part of an overarching strategy that includes change management, and the stimulation of broader conversation and collaboration, both internally and externally. One of the methods for engaging others is content that reflects the thought leadership instead of creating thought leadership to fulfill a content plan.

The following Thought Leadership Maturity Model™ helps organizations determine where they fall on the maturity progression and identify the steps they need to take to reach the next level, if desired. Some organizations thrive as a prolific publisher. Others have committed subject matter experts who can contribute a differentiating POV to the marketplace. These companies choose to be the best at these points on the progression without going further.



The Scorecard

The scorecard considers the following aspects of thought leadership:

- Strategy
- Sustainability
- Credibility
- Inspiration
- Culture

For each dimension, the scorecard presents a series of questions across a 'crawl, walk, run' continuum. For example, under sustainability, it prompts discussion around such things as: topic selection methodology, relevance filters, content planning, resource planning, SME identification and training, and long-term conviction. In contrast, the section about credibility probes around voice, differentiation, partnership with influencers and content performance.

For each question, the user rates their organization on a scale of 1-5 according to their maturity or capability presented in each question.

The process determines how well best practices are being applied and provides insights into how to get to the next level. Ultimately, the information provides a basis for:

- Objectively defining the current state
- Determining the appetite for specific thought leadership strategies
- Identifying the delta between current and future state
- Pinpointing the functions and roles that need to collaborate
- Allocating budget to the program
- Creating meaningful KPIs for the program
- Testing thought leadership assets for differentiation and alignment with overarching strategy
- Analyzing the culture for thought leadership readiness

User rates their organization on a

1-5
scale



The Assessment Tool

While creating the ComBlu Thought Leadership Maturity Model™ and Assessment Tool, we surveyed a handful of organizations that aspire to produce great thought leadership. Here are some of the insights from the group and the implications of what they told us.

First some background on the people who shared their insights. Fifteen of the 22 people were from large companies: eight had 1,000 to 10,000 employees and seven had over 10,000 employees. The vast majority were in the technology sector with professional services and finance making up the majority of the rest.

When asked to rate themselves on the ComBlu Thought Leadership Maturity Progression Model, half self-selected as Prolific Publishers with two claiming to be Breakthrough Innovators, and one identified as a Visible Thinker. When asked what prevented their organization from getting to the next level, most reported the biggest obstacles to be a lack of resources or time constraints of SMEs.

Beginner:

SME who is sporadically quoted in articles or delivers an occasional presentation at conferences; more of a PR program than a thought leadership initiative.

Proof of Concept:

A single topic is created for use in a one-off campaign or in a pilot for a select business area.

Prolific Publisher:

A strategic content marketing program with lots of content but not necessarily attributed to SME(s) who serve as face of the brand.

Visible Thinker:

Sought-after expert who adds insights and unique POV to the conversation.

Breakthrough Innovator:

Contributes ideas about how to reinvent industries or business processes, invent new products or industry categories, etc.



Beginner



Proof of Concept



Prolific Publisher



Visible Thinker



Breakthrough Innovator



Other common obstacles included too many silos, compliance restrictions, and an inability to agree on the right topics. One respondent reported that their organization had yet to prove the value of thought leadership content in relation to other content.

In our experience, thought leadership is less about topics and more about a culture of innovation and disruption from which thought leadership naturally flows. Siloes impeding collaboration, lack of alignment and under-indexed resource allocation are all indicative of a culture that will not organically support true thought leadership. So is the lack of SME participation, which was reported by 50% of our sample. These organizations have not yet figured out how to grow a culture in which thought leadership thrives and SMEs are rewarded for forwarding new ideas. Successful organizations work to turn their internal SMEs into external influencers and SMEs understand their role in building brand equity. Sixty percent of the respondents considered their SMEs to have a broad industry footprint but very few are known outside of their sector.

Sixty percent of respondents also reported that their organizations lack a thought leadership roadmap which encompasses defined processes, tools, skill sets and resources, and a system for governance. The editorial plan is one of the tools included in a roadmap.

Thought leadership topic selection is a multi-faceted process and most respondents use more than one of the following methods:

- Customer insight research
- Listening
- Interviews with SMEs
- Interviews with customers
- Google industry trends

Some also employed: monitoring legislative trends, working with product and engineering teams, and benchmarking to define topics. Only a few reported having a well-defined topic modeling process which again is indicative of a lack of a thought leadership culture or early stage thought leadership maturity.

The most common thought leadership assets included eBooks, white papers, webcasts and speaking engagements. A few reported publishing books through a traditional publisher and many use earned media to gain credibility for their thought leadership programs and POVs. Most reported some collaboration with influencers to either co-create content, conduct original research or speak together at conferences.

60%
of respondents reported that
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thought leadership roadmap



When asked what makes great thought leadership, responses varied, but included:

- Unique POV (predominant response)
- Engaging presentation of information
- Interpretation of trends into actionable insights
- Ideas that have broad industry impact
- Driver of new products and services
- New data or information

The story told by these folks underscores the need for more deliberate and defined investment in thought leadership. Without a sustainable approach supported by a culture of innovation, true thought leadership is elusive.



ComBlu's thought leadership scorecard helps organizations build a plan to get them to the desired point on the *Thought Leadership Maturity Progression*. Contact us if you would like to *take the free assessment*.



About ComBlu

ComBlu specializes in content strategy, thought leadership programs and content marketing. We objectively assess the collective content and experience needs of your key stakeholders and determine how well equipped your organization is to deliver that content efficiently. We then create workable plans and programs to enhance and deliver compelling content to target audiences.

Some of ComBlu's services include:

- Mapping and streamlining processes across functions and business units
- Determining the right personalization approach for the company's content marketing maturity
- Providing insights for topics and content assets for specific segments and personas
- Building integrated content roadmaps
- Identifying the skills and training required to staff content operations
- Reviewing the tech stack to assure automation success and creates governance for both centralized and self-publishing models

About the Author

Kathy Baughman is president and co-founder of ComBlu, a firm specializing in content strategy, thought leadership programs and content marketing. Over the past 35 years, she has worked with both emerging brands and large enterprises in developing content and thought leadership strategies. Kathy has the ability to analyze a client's current approach and offer unique, fresh perspective that leads to innovation and growth.

Kathy is a frequent speaker at industry conferences, with appearances at SXSW, The Gilbane Content Conference, New York's Content Meet-up, Social Media & Community 2.0 Strategies Conference, the Department of Defense Social Media Conference, and the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) Summit.

Kathy also conducts webinars on a variety of topics and leads workshops for organizations seeking to better grasp content strategy. Kathy is a board member of WOMMA and served on its executive committee. She is an adjunct professor for Georgetown University, and a past board member of the Council of Public Relations Firms.

Kathy has authored several research reports, white papers and eBooks including Content Supply Chain, the CMOs Guide to Personalization, The Alchemy of Content and the Content Vortex. She also wrote two annual research reports for Lithium, The State of Social Engagement 2015 and 2016.

