



# BUILDING THOUGHT LEADERSHIP **WITH CONTENT**

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# INTRODUCTION

**A**s the saying goes, content is king. In the last five to six years, what we've seen and practiced has been an almost insane amount of content on our Email on Acid site. Along with a number of companies pushing out content regularly, we are advancing an industry and company narratives.

But that begs a question: What makes a good thought leader? Can a good company be a thought leader, and what's the difference between content and thought leadership?

*Here's our view:*

**Content** is the material. A **thought leader** is what you become when you have created a body of material that inspires a wide range of people to look to you as an authority.

In other words, you can't make yourself a thought leader. You have to earn the title. A good thought leader is a company or an individual that gives back without expecting an immediate return.

## That's what content is: the long play.

The email industry has a number of thought leaders who fit that bill. Each of them has consistently given back to the industry to improve it and move it forward. That volunteer effort is one of the qualities that sets our industry apart from others.

We are all in it together, working to make ourselves smarter and better at what we do and sharing what we've learned. This is a



## You can't make yourself a thought leader. You have to earn the title.

quintessential activity that any individual or company must possess and practice regularly.

Also, this service mindset that drives the need to give back through sharing knowledge and experience is something that one must provide to a wide base, not merely internally within a company or to a defined group, such as customers or prospects. You must make yourself available to many groups, address many audiences, and meet people where they are.

In the B2B world, with its constant churn of professionals in each discipline, smart content can help marketers make decisions. It can also expose challenges or weaknesses.

In this partnership with Ascend2, we review a survey of marketers and their responses to questions about what makes a great thought leadership program: everything from types of content to budget and structure. We're taking a deep dive into the playbook of great thought leadership strategy and how any company can achieve it.

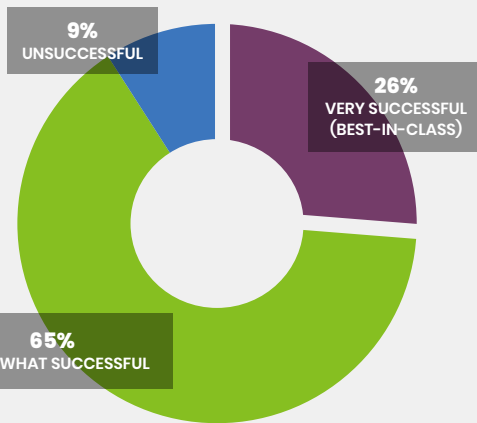
*One last note before we dive in:*

We're also going to see what we can apply from this study to other marketing channels, such as social media, to make our entire marketing team better.

**Let's go!**

# REPORTING ON BEST-IN-CLASS MARKETERS

Which best describes the **SUCCESS** of thought leadership content at overcoming challenges?



According to our findings, just over a quarter of marketers classify their thought leadership content as “very successful” at overcoming strategic challenges. This white paper will look at how these best-in-class marketers approach the topic and what we can learn from them.

One perpetual challenge is measurement. Key performance indicators (KPIs) for content aren't the same as they are for other areas of marketing because content is the long play. It's not a convertible medium. In the B2C world, there's often a straight line between content and conversion. Not so much in the B2B world.

Even though it doesn't have that direct relationship to sales or revenue, thought leadership content is an indicator of intent. We can judge people's interest by the content they engage with, whether that's a blog post, a tweet, a LinkedIn article, or a white paper like this.

In B2B, intent is everything. Many marketers don't know how to measure intent, however, and that's where their programs can break down.

Tools like HubSpot and Salesforce can help, but the challenge is that it's easier to put content out there than to measure its impact.

Generally speaking, success is judged according to the response your content generates, such as read rates or read times, retweets, shares to friends or to content aggregating services, or time on a web page.

Rarely can we measure how successfully that content moved a customer or a prospect further down the intent path without a good attribution model. For that reason, we're not surprised that only 26% of marketers claim the “very successful” title for their thought leadership programs.

**65%**  
of those surveyed  
only rate their thought  
leadership content as  
“somewhat successful”

# STRATEGY IN THOUGHT LEADERSHIP



We're pleased to see that nearly two-thirds of marketers say they have strategies for their thought leadership programs. Too many marketers put tactics first. They'll say they need a blog, a Twitter account, or a LinkedIn company page without first thinking about how those tactics fit within an overall content strategy.

Strategy is the "why" of any marketing program. Tactics are the "how." They're easier and more fun to work with, but without a strategy – which includes the metrics you'll use to measure success – you could end up wasting considerable time, money, and human resources on tactics that just don't work.

Your thought leadership content strategy can be as basic or as complex as you want. We believe the key to successful thought leadership is a comprehensive approach that considers your brand equity, your unique selling proposition, your brand value, your company's mission and vision, and the tone you want to set.

Your content should paint a picture of your company that extends beyond your founder's story or your company history. Both are important, but you need to know these other things before you can build a workable content strategy.

Who are you? What do you stand for? These are essential to clarify first before you start thinking about becoming a thought leader.

Your content strategy also doesn't begin and end with blog posts, video blogging, or tweeting. It's everything you do: the products you release, the press releases you write, the conferences you attend.

All of these things influence your content and drive a central message. That message is your personality. It's sales-focused, but in our experience, great thought leadership isn't just about the sale but about educating the end user. That person might be your buyer, a sales influencer, or the person who will actually use the product or service you sell.

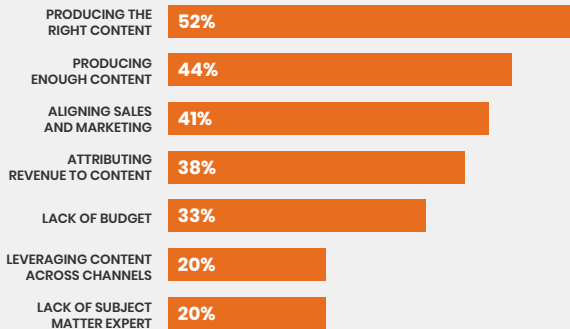
Later we'll show how the sales message is nowhere to be found in your content strategy or thought leadership.

The study is encouraging in that the people who are most successful at thought leadership are based in strategy. They've taken the time to think through the things that make up their content. It dispels the notion that anybody can throw together a blog post, a guide, or even a keynote speech. You must adhere to a strategic path to be successful.

You can do email half-heartedly, or even badly, and still make money (although you make more money when you do it well). In thought leadership, it's impossible to have lasting influence if you don't do the strategic heavy lifting first.

# CRITICAL CHALLENGES FOR THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

## What are the most critical CHALLENGES to producing content for thought leadership?



**Producing the right content:** 52% of marketers say this is the greatest challenge to their success. Our response? It's easy to produce the right content if you've done the requisite work on your strategy, as we explain on Page 4.

If you're having trouble generating content, review that section. You must be in touch with your customers, prospects, leads, or whomever you want to engage with content or wherever you want to direct your thought leadership.

Too often, companies are so wrapped up in themselves and the messages they want to project that they forget who their customers are, what motivated them to convert, what they fear, what challenges they face.

True thought leadership means writing about the things your customers care about. It's

easier, too, because it gives you a clear focus for your content.

These three topics are all fodder for good thought leadership, but they are in descending order of priority:

**1. What your customers are going through,** either regularly or temporarily

**2. What your industry is going through:** trends, upheavals, evolutions

**3. What your company is going through:** how you have evolved or overcome a challenge in a way that your customers or others can learn from

Centering your thought leadership on the first two topics should be 80% of your effort because it makes you that much more credible.

**Aligning sales and marketing:** This is another perpetual challenge that marketers might not think is as serious as it is.

On one hand, marketers are not concerned with closing sales. Their job is to generate good leads for the sales team to convert.

It's a constant struggle because sales isn't the same as marketing, and marketing isn't sales.

# 52%

of marketers say "Producing the Right Content" is the greatest challenge to their success.

If you have aligned sales and marketing teams with good communication, coordination, and input from both, you can strike the balance between what sales wants and what marketing can provide.

Walling off sales is not the answer. The greatest marketers are people who know how to sell and can craft content that sells without an outright sales pitch. The greatest salespeople are the ones who know what customers need to learn before they can be guided to a sale.

When each team understands what the other does, what the secret sauce for success is, and shares information between teams or team leaders, you will develop a common understanding and you'll work toward the same goals.

You'll always have some areas to negotiate, but things will work out better when you have close coordination and good understanding of the other team.

That's critical to thought leadership. If what you're talking and writing about doesn't influence intent, then you are misaligned on your end goal, which is to drive a sale. We aren't judged on clicks or retweets for success but on how many sales the company produces. That's what pays our salaries and keeps the lights on.

### **Leveraging content across channels:**

Marketers might not see this as a challenge, but we have some news: You might not be doing it as well as you think you are.

Your thought leadership content will drive the greatest impact when you can custom-design it for different channels. But that doesn't mean you just repurpose the same blog post across Twitter and LinkedIn.



## **We aren't judged on clicks or retweets for success but on how many sales the company produces.**

The goal is to achieve an orchestrated channel integration program. These are rare indeed but worth the effort.

A truly orchestrated channel integration requires you to create a strategy (there's that word again!) and a sub-strategy (and again!) for each channel that respects the purpose and capability of that channel.

What we have today is not orchestrated channel integration. We have content coordinated across channels. This means you spread an idea evenly across your channels, like a big-box company with a Christmas marketing theme that shows up in every email and social media post.

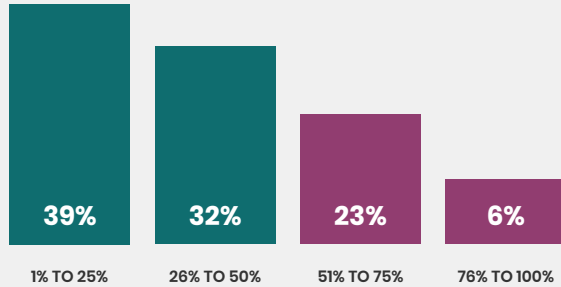
Decide how email, or social media, or guest blog posts, or white papers, or conference presentations can support your theme. Then integrate their actions and insights to other channels.

Do a channel propensity study in which you look at consumer cohorts and what the primary method for communications should be. Sometimes it's an email. Sometimes it's social. Other times it's direct mail.

It takes a lot of work to get to that nirvana, but you can get there through small steps if you use incremental innovation, which builds on one small improvement at a time. It won't happen overnight, but you can orchestrate over time and gather insights along the way.

# BUDGET ALLOCATION

Which percentage of the content marketing BUDGET is used for thought leadership?



Let's not kid ourselves, people. Great thought leadership takes money. You might think it doesn't cost anything to write a blog post, but that's only one piece of the puzzle. For 71% of marketers in this survey, this seems to be an unfamiliar concept.

You have to write it, build it, record, or design it. Then you have to distribute it. Distribution to the right outlets is part of thought leadership. If nobody reads what you write, are you a thought leader? No. Are you producing results? No again.

Distribution comes in many forms, but among them is paying for placement, such as using promoted tweets or boosting your display to more Facebook or LinkedIn followers.

The content creation itself takes money. The fastest way to deploy your content and develop your thought leadership is to outsource the creation. That takes budget because you can't palm off the work on a cheap developer and expect to get top-shelf results. You need someone who knows your voice and brand and can create work that aligns with it without significant oversight.

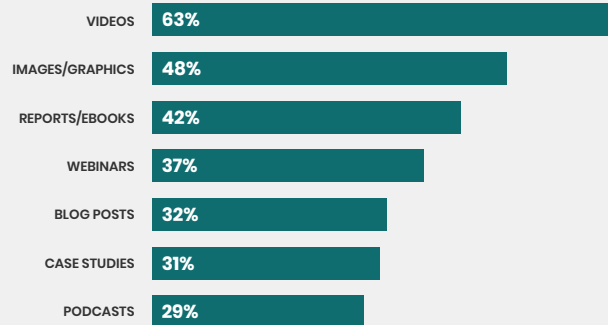


## Great thought leadership takes money.

*(See Page 11, Resource Allocation, for more discussion on these ideas.)*

# EFFECTIVE CONTENT FORMATS

## What are the BEST FORMATS used for thought leadership content?



Some people absorb information best by reading. Others are visual learners. Still others prefer to have things told to them. What's encouraging about these findings is that marketers are spreading their content out among a wider variety of formats.

You can't build an effective thought leadership library on blog posts alone. Your blog might be the most gripping reading in your industry, but if your customers aren't into reading, it's a wasted effort.

Create a cohort of different media types, and make sure your buyers are being served appropriately. That means you need to know your customers, users, influencers, and prospects intimately – not just as personas but as people.

Also consider where your target audience is in the chain of command. The higher up they are, the less time they have to spend on research. Some executives like to watch videos, while others prefer to listen to podcasts on their commutes or during downtime.

People on the front lines might not have time to spare during working hours. A lunch-and-learn

session is ideal because they can multitask and then go back to the session recording later for details.

Video is becoming more popular, so we are not surprised to see it ranks No. 1 among formats in this survey.

The earliest thought leadership centered on books, articles, white papers, and guides. Webinars rose in prominence with the internet. Now videos are finding their own niches, whether you use them for product demonstrations, interviews, TED Talk-style presentations, or filmed events. There's no better way to communicate your brand personality than through a well-edited video of reasonable length.

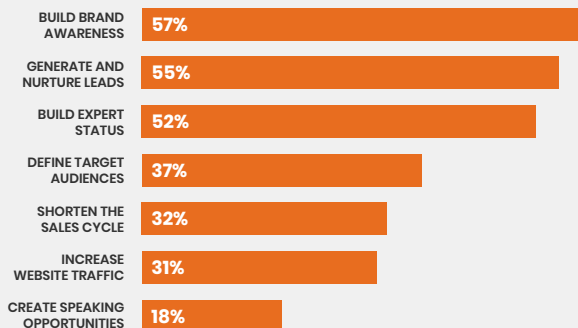
Know your KPIs: Each format has its own units of measurement for success. Define what they are for each channel, and be sure you're measuring against your outcome and your attribution tracks through to conversion.

Real thought leaders know what formats of content resonate with their users.

This becomes a lever they can pull to influence customers in the pipeline.

# CONTENT PERFORMANCE

## What does THOUGHT LEADERSHIP CONTENT do most effectively?



Authentic thought leadership doesn't give you a pitch. It gives you a reason to believe.

Thought leadership works on the theory that people will buy from smart companies. We mentioned on Page 2 that content marketing and thought leadership are a long play, not a means to an immediate conversion. Here's where we bring that home.

Your customers might not need your product or service today. But they need your education

about how to do their jobs better in the areas where your company has unique expertise.

Your goal for thought leadership: Build enough high-quality, useful content in a variety of formats and channels to reach a wide range of people who follow you because you provide unique insights or helpful information without asking for anything but their attention. When they need your product or service, your company will be the one they think of first.

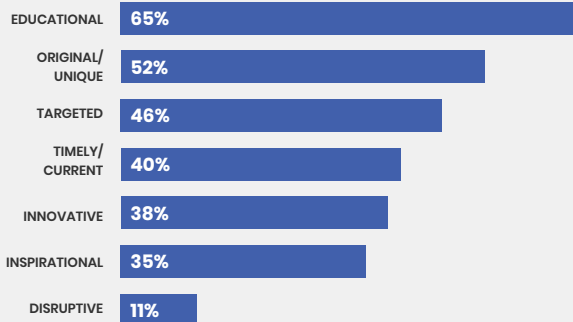
That's where intent comes in, and the ability to detect, measure, and attribute their activity across the intent life cycle. We are surprised not to see "detecting intent" as an answer in this survey question.

Also, with 55% seeing content as a lead generation source, when people read smart content, they sign up to get notified of other material. This is critical for capturing that information and the ability to market to those prospects.

**55%**  
see content as a lead generation source.

# CONTENT CHARACTERISTICS

## Which CHARACTERISTICS are most important for thought leadership content?



We're encouraged to see that education and originality rank highest among the most desired characteristics for thought leadership content. When you plan out your content, remember that each piece must align with these qualities.

Never repeat what someone else wrote, no matter how much you agree with it. Your content, your company's perspective, and your audience will differ from other writers. Always put your own spin on anything you produce.

Create your own content following all of our recommendations in this guide: creating strategy, outsourcing, distributing it among multiple channels, and making it educational and unique, not a thinly disguised sales pitch. This will help you build a program that others will seek out and respect – and that is how you become a thought leader.

As much as people flock to companies that consistently deliver smart content, they will distance themselves far from companies that pitch like used-car salesmen on the last day of the month.



Education and originality rank highest among the most desired characteristics for thought leadership content.

# RESOURCE ALLOCATION



As we mentioned in the budget allocation discussion on Page 7, outsourcing is the best way to manage the time-consuming process of building thought leadership content. We're pleased to see 46% of marketers combine it with in-house resources.

But it's important to understand that outsourcing can be a scary deal. We're talking about asking someone else to create material that is critical to your business operations. Putting your brand equity or brand voice in someone else's hands can be terrifying.

That's why we believe you need to balance the effort. Unless you have a team of 30 people

and have the time and money to dedicate people to the project, outsourcing will help you accomplish your goals faster. Look at your in-house talent, and see where you need to augment with skilled professionals to achieve content at the scale you need to make the impact you want.

Outsourcing can help you achieve scale in other disciplines as well. The percentage of marketers who combine in-house and outsourced thought leadership are in line with people who outsource some aspect of their email programs in order to achieve the velocity they want.

In our early survey titled Email Marketing Effectiveness, we saw that in executing an email marketing strategy, 54% of respondents used both internal and external teams. This practice extends to content as well. So, just like companies that use Email on Acid for pre-deployment checks, don't be afraid to use external companies that drive rapid results.

Entire Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) companies have been built to enable companies to protect their investments in their email programs and give them advanced strategies at scale.

**46%**  
of marketers combine  
outsourcing with  
in-house resources.



## CONCLUSION:

### BUILDING TRUST AND AUTHENTICITY AS A THOUGHT LEADER

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It takes more than writing blog posts, social media comments, research reports, or white papers to become a thought leader. One or two tweets aren't enough to establish yourself and your brand as reputable and credible sources of information, inspiration, and guidance by your industry peers, your clients or customers, and the wider world beyond your immediate market area.

As we've seen in this guide, you need a plan. You need to understand what your brand

equity, voice, mission, and vision are. You also need to think first about how you can use thought leadership to give back to your community, instead of using it as a thinly disguised sales pitch.

That is what will bring people to your door before they need what you're selling. When they finally do, they'll remember the brands who helped them out without asking anything in return.

### EMAIL ON ACID'S RESOURCES FOR EMAIL MARKETERS

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As we reviewed the findings of this report, we realized that our own 11-year-long road to thought leadership has closely tracked the paths laid out here.

Sharing our knowledge and experiences with our wider email community is baked into our brand mission and vision. We have built a broad library of resources, including infographics, videos, blog posts, case studies, webinar recordings, and guides that you are most welcome to visit.

Our co-founder, John Thies, is regularly invited to speak at industry conferences, and a number of our Email on Acid colleagues

are contributing to the growing body of knowledge and experience for our peers in the email industry.

We agree that thought leadership content must hew closely to your brand's mission, vision, equity, and voice. Your customers and peers will think of you as a thought leader only when they find your content helpful in their own marketing efforts.

As the saying goes, "As a brand, you succeed only when your customers do."

**Here's to your success!**

# METHODOLOGY

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**Ascend2** benchmarks the performance of marketing strategies, tactics, and the technology that drives them with a standardized online questionnaire and a proprietary 3-Minute Survey format. This survey was fielded to a panel of marketing professionals and marketing research subscribers.

## Primary Marketing Channel

- B2B 59%
- B2C 33%
- B2B and B2C equally 8%

## Number of Employees

- More than 500 24%
- 50 to 500 23%
- Fewer than 50 53%

## Primary role in company

- Owner / Partner / C-Level 52%
- Vice President / Director / Manager 36%
- Non-Management Professional 12%

**Email on Acid** offers the most comprehensive and flexible email pre-deployment platform of its kind. As the industry leader in email production management, the company's platform helps developers, marketers, and enterprise organizations deliver email perfection. By upending the arduous manual pre-deployment process, Email on Acid achieves efficiencies, improves marketing ROI, and protects brand reputation with patent-pending automation.

From end-to-end content checks to accessibility, deliverability, analytics, to email previews on over 90+ clients and devices, Email on Acid's flexible pre-deployment platform takes the guesswork out of email preparation. With click-to-fix tools and automated solutions, you no longer need to be an expert to create email perfection. It seamlessly fits into any email preparation process, saving users time, money, and resources. Co-founded by industry thought leader John Thies, Email on Acid was born out of a desire to help make email marketing better for everyone.

Email on Acid is trusted by top companies such as Verizon, Coca-Cola, Celebrity Cruises, Publishers Clearinghouse, IBM, Hilton, eBay, and Samsung. Established in 2009, Email on Acid is based in Denver Colorado. To learn more, visit [emailonacid.com](http://emailonacid.com).

