

Thought leadership: 6 ways to develop and share your unique voice

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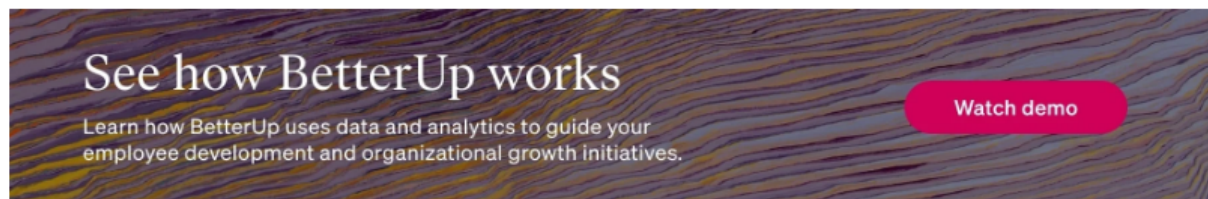
Moving forward as a thought leader

Research shows that thought leadership is one of the most valuable tools organizations can use to build credibility. Yet as interest grows, so does the competition to break through the noise.

Sometimes it seems like everyone wants to do it. But what is thought leadership exactly? What value can it bring to your business or career? What does it take to become a thought leader?

In this article, we'll define thought leadership and answer these common questions. We'll also offer ideas for developing your unique voice and share best practices for thought leadership marketing. And we'll wrap up with examples of thought leaders and what makes them successful.

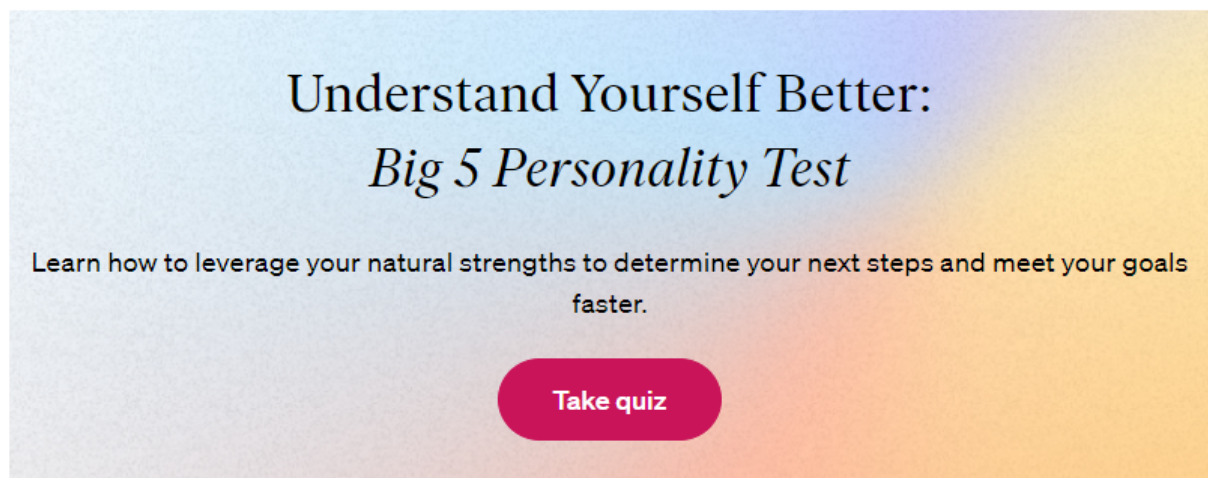
Let's start with defining thought leadership.



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What is thought leadership?

Thought leadership content provides meaningful insights into industry topics and timely issues. It builds trust with customers, prospects, investors, and

other stakeholders in your organization.

The lines between thought leadership and other types of content marketing often get blurred. Unlike other marketing content, it's not about what your product or services can do for customers. Instead, thought leadership focuses on providing information, education, ideas, and advocacy.

Thought leadership is delivered in multimedia formats, including:

- Articles, opinion pieces, and blog posts
- White papers, reports, and ebooks
- Video and podcasts
- Webinars, events, and conference presentations
- Data visualizations

What is a thought leader?

A thought leader shares informed insights and opinions about a subject, industry, or field of expertise. Thought leaders can be authors, consultants, chief executives, coaches, or subject matter experts. They can also be organizations or companies. They tap into the **expert power** that draws from both deep technical knowledge and extensive experience in an industry or field.



What value does thought leadership bring?

Thought leadership is one of the most effective ways organizations can demonstrate value to customers -- especially during a tough economy -- according to the 2022 LinkedIn-Edelman B2B Thought Leadership Impact Report.

The report found more than half of B2B decision-makers use thought leadership to evaluate potential vendors and partners. And nearly 90% of those surveyed said thought leadership increases trust and brand reputation.

But for thought leadership to bring value to you and your brand, it first needs to deliver value to your audience. When considering a topic, start by asking: What value will this bring our audience?

Audiences consider thought leadership to be valuable when it:

- Defines their challenges and the best ways to overcome them
- Makes sense of industry trends – why they matter and what to do about them
- Challenges status quo thinking and sheds light on blind spots
- Shares valuable knowledge through research data and deep subject matter expertise
- Communicates a clear vision for the future of their industry and provides a roadmap for moving forward

For providers, effective thought leadership can:

- Build trust and credibility
- Strengthen and differentiate your customer and employer brand
- Engage the C-suite and other business leaders, influencers, and others in compelling conversations
- Win early adopters, advocates, and new business, as well as drive growth with existing customers
- Provide a foundation for building an effective content marketing strategy

- Stake out new industry categories

How to become a thought leader

Creating thought leadership isn't something you can do overnight. It takes time, expertise, and commitment to build authority and recognition in your field.

There's a common misconception that successful thought leaders are born with creative talent. Like other skills, creativity can be developed and nurtured with the right support and practice.

“Creativity is a skill, not a talent. It can be learned. If we trust our selves, we can do more than we ever imagined. ...Mostly, we're in a race to find our voice, change the culture and make an impact that we can be proud of. Our best work happens when we contribute something new, something generous, something that makes an improvement.”

--- Seth Godin, [The Practice: Shipping Creative Work](#)

As Godin suggests, creating successful thought leadership takes a combination of discipline and skills powered by the motivation to make a difference.

We'll break that down into six steps to help you get started:

1. Find your why

You'll need to tap into an inner reservoir of [intrinsic motivation](#) to keep going,

especially in the beginning of your thought leadership journey. A good place to start is with [The Golden Circle](#), a business theory created by Simon Sinek and his book [Start With Why](#). The central idea is that to inspire others, you first need to find what inspires you.

Tapping into your [core values](#) and inspiration will help spark your innate drive. This will carry you much farther than external rewards like getting positive feedback on social media.

Begin by asking yourself:

- What cause am I passionate about that is related to my profession or business?
- What things in my industry and in the world am I unhappy about and wish to change?
- Why should people care?
- Why do I get out of bed every morning to get to work?
- Why do I do this rather than anything else?

The process of discovering your why will also help you find a clear focus for brainstorming content ideas. For example, if you're a people manager, you may be inspired to find and share research and stories about [new and surprising ways to motivate a team](#).

2. Learn from others

Become a dedicated student. Follow respected leaders in and outside your areas of expertise, as well as competitors. Look for people you respect who aren't just talking, but who are also [leading by example](#). Ask colleagues and customers about their go-to sources for industry trends and inspiration. What issues and topics do they wish were getting better coverage? On LinkedIn, look to see who the thought leaders you admire are following. Here's where to find that information on their profiles:

Consume thought leadership in all forms and channels. Engage with the content. Leave comments, ask questions, share the good stuff on LinkedIn, and add your point of view.

Make time to:

- Read books, white papers, reports, and blogs.

- Listen to podcasts.
- Watch webcasts, TED Talks, and YouTube.
- Attend events and conferences.

A great way to work audio content into your schedule is to listen while you drive or exercise.

3. Set clear goals

You'll need an action plan backed by solid goals to keep you motivated and on track. Break down the process into incremental steps with [SMART goals](#). For example, an early goal may be to read and share two new thought leadership pieces a week. The goal is specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely.

If you work with an [executive coach](#), they can help you [set or assess your goals](#) for thought leadership and connect them to your [career path](#).

4. Hone your communication skills

You don't have to be a great writer or speaker to become a thought leader. But you do need to [build your communication skills](#). Good communication is one of the [key characteristics of top leaders](#).

A good place to start is learning [how to tell a good story](#). Storytelling is a powerful tool for [inspiring others](#) to take action, try something new, or make a change. Personal anecdotes, customer stories, and concrete examples help you connect with your audience.

Not that comfortable with talking in front of groups? Get practice by volunteering to make presentations at work. Step up for speaking engagements at local professional associations and business groups.

5. Develop your unique voice

Thought leaders who stand out have a distinctive voice and personal brand. Here are some ways you can develop a voice that's compelling, memorable, and inspiring:

- Draw from all your experiences. Include early jobs, personal failures, and humorous situations.

- [Practice authenticity](#): Bring your perspective as a whole person

- **Practice authenticity.** Bring your perspective as a **whole person**.
- Find a niche where you have the ability to make the complex simple.
- Develop a distinct point of view. Ask yourself what's different about it?
- Look for ways to challenge the status quo.

6. Be active on social media

Having thousands of followers on social media doesn't make you a thought leader. But social media is a necessary digital marketing tool for becoming a go-to source in your industry or a force for change. It's also one of the best ways to stay on top of the latest trends and tune into what your customers, target audience, and competitors are saying.

This doesn't mean you should become a social media junkie. Avoid wasting time by being intentional and practicing **healthy social media habits**. Commit to an activity level, but limit the time spent.

Use these tips for being strategic about social media:

- Look at where your intended audience is and meet them there.
- Be helpful and generous.
- Get controversial while staying positive.
- Share plenty of content besides your own. Comment on others' posts and stimulate conversation.
- Aim for engagement (comments and shares) more than likes.
- Show up with consistency.





Best practices for thought leadership marketing

Your thought leadership [strategy and tactics](#) will depend on your organization, goals, and resources. As you develop your plans, here are six guidelines for building a successful thought leadership program.

1. Commit to quality

Prioritize quality over quantity and focus more on long-term goals than quick wins. Show your audience that you respect their time by giving them valuable, high-quality content that speaks to their needs.

Three ways to elevate your thought leadership include:

- Create content standards to guide development from concept through review and publishing.
- Develop an editorial planning process that aligns with your organization's core values and marketing goals.
- Vet topics and messaging. Check with internal subject matter experts, sales executives, and those closest to your customers. They know your audience, their biggest concerns, and the language they use.

2. Adopt an audience-focused mindset

Walk in the shoes of your audience by crafting personas that describe each segment as if they're someone you know. Whether it's the CEO, CFO or CHRO, you need to understand their priorities, motivations, and what keeps them up at night. Know what they want to read, watch, and listen to.

For every topic, ask: What makes this hard at this moment in time? For example, what about [leading and managing people](#) is more difficult during times of high inflation and uncertainty? Reflect some of this sentiment in the opening. Be an advocate for your audience. Make them the hero in your story.

3. Conduct SEO research

Apply search engine optimization tactics. You want your content to be at the top of Google search results when your audience looks for help. SEO research tells you the terms (keywords) and questions your audience uses. This also helps you avoid using [corporate jargon](#) by speaking in your readers' language.

Optimize your content by using these keywords in natural ways. SEO research also helps you confirm if topics are of real interest to your audience. In addition, you can use it to analyze competitor content and identify “white space” opportunities where there's less competition.

4. Feature both storytelling and data

Speak to both hearts and minds by telling stories and backing up concepts with research. Use up-to-date statistics from both internal and third-party research to build credibility. Bring abstract ideas to life with customer case studies and real-world examples. Contextualize the piece early by making the connection between the topic and what matters to your audience. It should quickly answer: Why should I read this?

5. Plan for how you will use it

Having a distribution plan and following through is as important as creating the content. You can have the most compelling, groundbreaking content, but without an audience, it doesn't help anyone. It's hard to break through the noise, but you can build your audience by engaging them in multiple ways.

Here are some tactics to increase your thought leadership reach and engagement:

- Require a detailed distribution plan as part of project approval. Including this at the onset helps drive accountability for more engagement.
- Work with [sales management](#) and customer teams. Ask them to identify priority clients and prospects they plan to engage or invite.
- Promote content through your company's external and internal channels. Include your website and newsletters, as well as internal communications. Create email and social media templates with bite-size insights. Encourage key team members and employees to customize and share these with their networks.
- Pitch to media. Share content with journalists, industry publication editors

- Pitch to media. Share content with journalists, industry publication editors, and industry influencers. Credible research with industry statistics often captures their attention.
- Collaborate with others. If you team up with a third-party organization in creating the content, they'll be a partner in getting the word out. You can also extend your reach by offering a guest post in an industry blog.
- Host a webcast. Spark more engagement by backing up new thought leadership with an online event. Include an industry expert and customer to bring the story to life.

6. Measure the impact

Use both qualitative and quantitative metrics to analyze how people engage with your content. Downloads and social media data give you a surface snapshot. Dig deeper to see what questions people are asking. With online content and events, watch for interaction and attrition.

Though it's difficult, try to measure sales impact. Research shows [40% of thought leadership producers say they're able to link business wins back to specific pieces of content.](#)



Examples of thought leadership

Brené Brown, Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, Tony Robbins, and Ariana Huffington are all thought leaders with star power. There are also plenty of examples who may not be household names, but who are recognized as thought leaders in their industry. Here are four examples of communicators who offer insight and inspiration on HR, diversity, and leadership:

- [Adam Grant](#) is an organizational psychologist, bestselling author, and host of [WorkLife with Adam Grant](#), a TED podcast. He focuses on work life, leadership, and helping others succeed. As a BetterUp Science Board member and advisor, he's helped inform and drive research for new coaching methodologies and techniques.
- [Dee Marshall](#) is an entrepreneur, 2022 LinkedIn Top Voice, and subject matter expert on diversity and women's success. She is CEO of [Diverse & Engaged LLC](#), a leadership development and diversity consulting practice. She contributes to Essence Magazine, Fox Good Day NY, and many other publications. She also co-hosts the [Brown Table Talk Podcast](#), which provides practical tips on how women of color can win at work.
- [Josh Bersin](#) is an author, blogger, and speaker often cited as one of the leading HR and workplace industry analysts in the world. He began his career as a serial entrepreneur with the goal of making work life better by helping HR professionals learn and develop world-leading practices. He is the founder and CEO of The Josh Bersin Company, which provides research, advisory services, and professional development for HR teams.
- [Sallie Krawcheck](#) is an outspoken financial industry executive, blogger, and author focused on helping women reach their financial and professional goals. She is CEO and co-founder of Ellevest, a digital investment platform for women. She also chairs the Pax Ellevest Global Women's Index Fund, which invests in top-rated companies for advancing women.

Moving forward as a thought leader

The path to becoming a thought leader isn't easy, but it can be incredibly rewarding when you do it well. If you want to make this a professional goal, [working with a BetterUp coach](#) can help you make it a reality. They will help remind you of the big picture: with persistence and hard work, you can reach your full potential.

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