THOUGHT LEADERSHIP
DISRUPTED

New rules for the content age
DOES THOUGHT LEADERSHIP STILL HAVE VALUE?

The content landscape has exploded, with publishers, brands and agencies all contributing to a very crowded space. In this context does ‘thought leadership’ retain the same currency it once did?

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), in association with Hill+Knowlton Strategies, conducted a wide-reaching piece of research to answer this question and consider the challenges marketers face today in the new content age.
“The challenge for B2B content is that it competes in a huge array of media fighting for time against other always-on entertainment.”

John Rudaizky, Brand & Marketing Leader, Partner, EY
OUR METHODOLOGY

Phase 1
An advisory board meeting comprising 10 senior UK marketers to inform the focus of the surveys and shape our thinking.

Phase 2
An online survey of more than 1,600 global executives who either produce or consume thought leadership content, on their motivations, actions and perceptions.
The Results
3 in 5 global executives admit sometimes feeling confused or overwhelmed by the volume of content they encounter:

68% agree that volume has gone up, with only 5% thinking it has decreased.  

56% think that intrusiveness has increased.  

Nearly 16% think the value of content has decreased somewhat or a lot.
and, as a result, are refining their shortlists

- In the last 12-24 months, nearly 75% of executives became more selective generally about the thought leadership they consume, with just over 80% citing the volume of content as the reason for this change.

- 44% engage with less than 20% of the thought leadership they see.
But there are rewards for getting it right

After consuming compelling TL most respondents ‘do something’ as a direct result:

- 70% consume more from that source
- 53% sign up to a newsletter
- 47% share via social media
Big rewards…

Thought leadership can build loyalty and sales

- 76% of senior executives are influenced in their purchasing decisions
- 67% would be willing to **advocate** for that brand or organisation **externally**
- 83% would be influenced in their **choice** of potential business partner
And, the executive audience is still hungry

- 68% consume thought leadership on at least a weekly basis. 33% do so daily
- 20% have increased consumption ‘a lot’ over the past 12 months
- Less than 5% have reduced consumption either a little or a lot.
The bar is set high and getting higher

Executives and marketers agree: Compelling TL is ‘innovative’, ‘big picture’, ‘credible’ and ‘transformative’.

According to executives unimpressive TL is ‘superficial’, ‘sales-driven’ and ‘biased’

‘Sales driven’ does not make marketers’ top 3 as a quality of unimpressive thought leadership. Instead they cite ‘jargon-laden’
And ‘credible’ brands have an advantage

**Trust** is established through the quality or nature of the research and whether the data is ‘credible’.

‘Challenger brands’ who want to break through and make the shortlist must employ rigour: for an unfamiliar source to prompt engagement, it needs to be a ‘source of hard facts’ (47%).
What’s getting in marketers’ way?
Mainly, themselves

More than 60% strongly agree or somewhat agree that **internal alignment is a barrier to thought leadership production.**
80% of marketers plan to increase the amount of thought leadership content they produce in the coming 12 months.

<20% Nearly half believe that less than 20% of their current output gets engagement.
Nearly half of all marketers (47%) cite differentiating their company from the competition as a primary objective of thought leadership.

Four in ten (42%) cite gaining recognition for their company or key individuals as experts/authority in their field.

Only 28% of marketers cited helping their audience to become more knowledgeable as a key objective. Yet, 82% believe that to create compelling thought leadership, the content needs to centre on the audience’s interest rather than profiling the brand.
The top ROI measures are achieving policy/issues objectives and citations in press or third party publications (35%, 28%).

Only two in ten cited social media shares or time spent with content (24%, 21%).

The disconnect between these measures and the goal of creating content that is audience-centric underscores a duality with which marketers are struggling.

...and that’s a challenge for marketers
When asked about who was not involved in the planning of thought leadership, but should be marketers cited:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media partners</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All employees</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers/other outside sources</td>
<td>47%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
“It’s important for all companies to have a clear idea of their brand internally before you go ahead and talk about how that manifests itself externally. To be credible you have to have a clear understanding of what you want to portray.”

Hamish Rickman, VP Marketing, Virgin Atlantic.
So what is effective thought leadership?

96% of consumers like to encounter thoughts and ideas that go beyond current thinking.

‘It’s mindshare before market share.’

Rebecca Edwards, Chief Communications Officer,
GE Oil & Gas
Appendix: advisory board & survey demographics
Advisory Board members

Aina Bolstad, Senior Marketing Communications Manager, Microsoft
Rebecca Edwards, Chief Communications Officer, GE Oil and Gas
Nicholas Graham, Global Director Digital Marketing, Huawei Technologies
Rachel Grant, Global Director of Media Relations, McKinsey
Sandra Higgison, AVP Product Marketing, Genpact
Hamish Rickman, VP Marketing, Virgin Atlantic
Severin Roald, SVP Corporate Communications, Telenor
Mark Rose, Brand Communications Manager Europe, BP
John Rudaizky, Partner, Global Brand & External Communications Leader, EY
Andy Weitz, SVP, Global Marketing & Communications, Aon
We surveyed

806 marketers

- 25% Rest of World
- 21% North America
- 25% Asia
- 29% Western Europe

Geography

Samples annual global revenue

- <$500m: 66%
- >$5bn (very large companies): 15%

C-suite or equivalent

- 57% YES
- 43% NO

838 business thought leadership consumers executives

- 20% Rest of World
- 23% North America
- 30% Western Europe
- 26% Asia

Geography

Samples annual global revenue

- <$500m: 53%
- >$5bn (very large companies): 22%

C-suite or equivalent

- 41% YES
- 59% NO
About us

About The Economist Group:
In an era of information overload, The Economist Group Content Solutions help organizations be heard by the world’s most influential people.

With 60 years experience of delivering content to clients, bolstered by 650 expert analyst and editors worldwide across 200 countries and underpinned by an unrivalled in-house survey panel that bolsters the qualitative and quantitative analysis we undertake, we have the depth and breadth to deliver vital business intelligence which can rise above the noise.

Learn more at http://ebrandconnect.economist.com/

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We help brands and the public communicate.

H+K offers senior counsel, insightful research and strategic communications throughout the world. With over 85 offices in 47 countries around the globe, our teams collaborate across time zones, languages, and cultures to help clients make solid decisions and craft compelling campaigns in today’s measurable world.

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