

A person wearing a VR headset with a colorful, abstract digital environment reflected in the lenses.

Helping your market learn can also help you earn

Insights gained after surveying
300 executives and managers in the
manufacturing ecosystem involved
in making decisions on offerings
with **long sales cycles**.

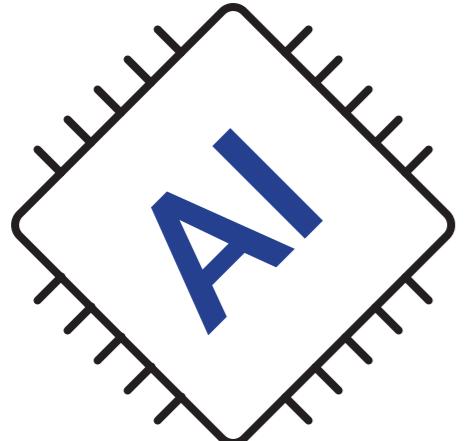


INTRODUCTION

In a business environment flooded with information, content that helps customers and prospects learn something new and valuable **cuts through the noise and improves business outcomes**. This is the finding from a first-of-its kind report conducted by business-to-business (B2B) marketing firm RHBlake. The study measured how **thought leadership** content created by sellers of products **with long sales cycles (LSC) influences purchasing** by executives and managers in manufacturing and process industries.



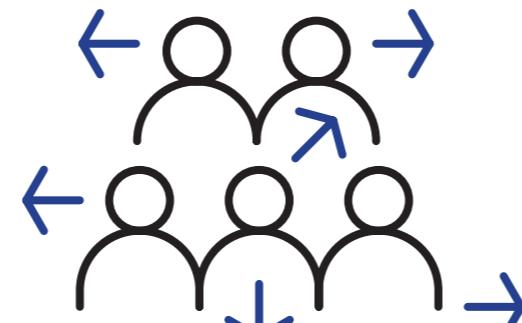
Marketers of **long sales cycle (LSC)** offerings have several distinct challenges, including:



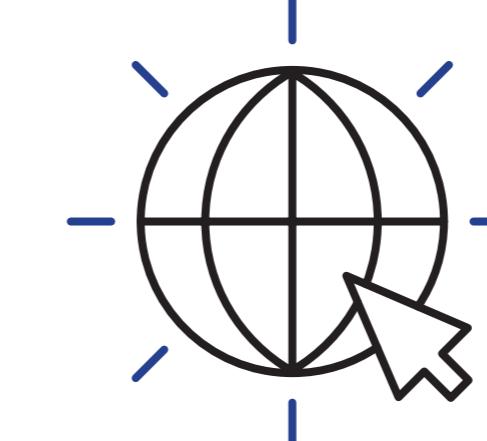
Harder to capture market attention in a world flooded with information, exacerbated by AI-generated content. Buyers have more information than ever before, making them more overwhelmed than empowered.¹



Buyers are more skeptical today about marketing information. Google reports a huge rise in the keyword **“legit”** in the past five years, meaning buyers are increasingly verifying potential suppliers, product claims, and customer reviews.²



Ever-larger buying teams struggle to align, slowing sales cycles and producing more “no decisions.” The average B2B buying team today has 11 members;³ researchers estimate that **40-60% of buying projects end in no decision.**⁴



Buyers spend more time researching independently online than they do meeting with potential suppliers, if they meet at all: **33% of buyers** want a seller-free buying experience.⁵ This self-education means marketers have less influence.



Greater risk to the business in making the wrong decision. Offerings with long sales cycles tend to be **high-investment, relatively complex, and have a far-reaching impact on the organization.**⁶



Though daunting, **these challenges also present opportunities** to marketers of LSC offerings. Marketing professionals must improve their ability to influence changing buying

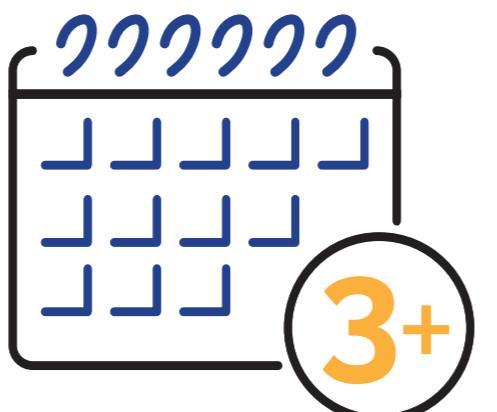
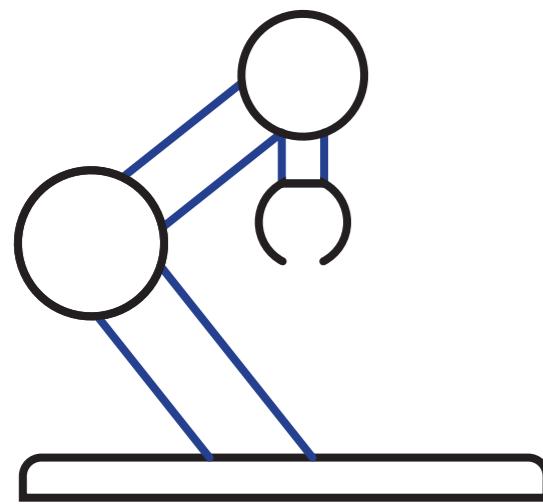
behaviors — and better support their salespeople — by convincing buyers of the value of the offerings with high-quality thought leadership content.

DEFINITIONS & METHODOLOGY

For this report, we define **“thought leadership”** as **content that delivers expertise, guidance, or a unique perspective on a professional topic or field** (such as technology, business processes, industry trends, etc.). This content may be presented in many formats: articles, blogs, podcasts, presentations, research reports, videos, webinars, whitepapers. It excludes advertising or product and promotional literature.

For the study, data was collected by a leading global research firm via a survey of a random sample of B2B executives, managers and other decision-makers from various industries and company sizes. Participants were screened to isolate individuals who:

Work for a company that sells physical or digital products — such as capital equipment, software and/or services -- to manufacturers and process industries.



Are involved with purchasing products that have sales cycles of three months or more. The sales cycle was defined as the time from the point of first contact with a potential customer to when a final purchase decision is made.

Participate in purchase decisions for products or services in their company.

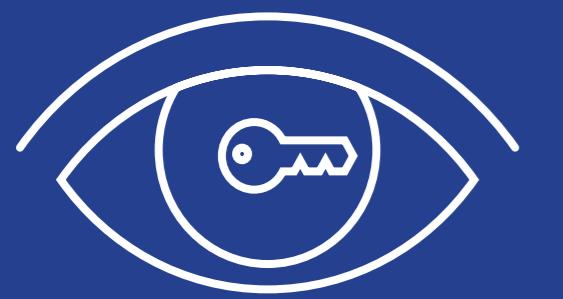


The survey garnered **300 respondents** from Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. Standard analytic research data quality controls were applied.

The margin of error is +/- 4.9%.

**Responses
from**

**4
Continents**

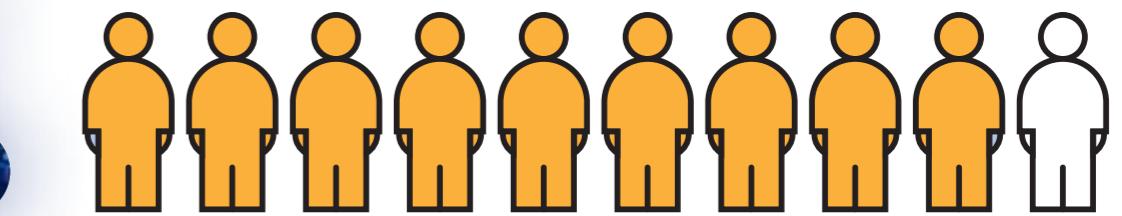


KEY FINDINGS



1. Thought leadership opens eyes, doors and wallets.

Eyes.

90 % 

of decision-makers indicate that they are more likely to consider buying from an organization that produces thought leadership content. From this, one can conclude that companies not producing thought leadership are restricting marketplace consideration.

Doors.

The report found that

88%

of decision-makers said they would be more receptive to sales outreach from an organization that produces thought leadership content. We noted earlier that many buyers prefer not to meet with salespeople onsite. Good thought leadership helps mitigate this trend and opens doors for salespeople. Top-line opportunities are thus improved with thought leadership.



Wallets.

Good thought leadership can even improve bottom lines. This is based on the report's finding that **76% of decision-makers say they are more likely to pay a premium** to work with an organization that produces thought leadership content. This means marketers can do more than just build awareness and preference; their efforts can improve profitability.

2. Buyers give thought leadership their most precious gift: time.

The study showed that 39% of decision-makers spend more than 6 hours a week reviewing thought leadership content. Six hours is a sizable amount of time in a busy workweek, even a whole day of work by some standards.⁸ If customers and prospects are investing a day a week reviewing thought leadership, **successful marketers should have high-quality thought leadership, as well as good methods** to get such content in front of customers and prospects.

39%

**spend more than
6 hours
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leadership content**



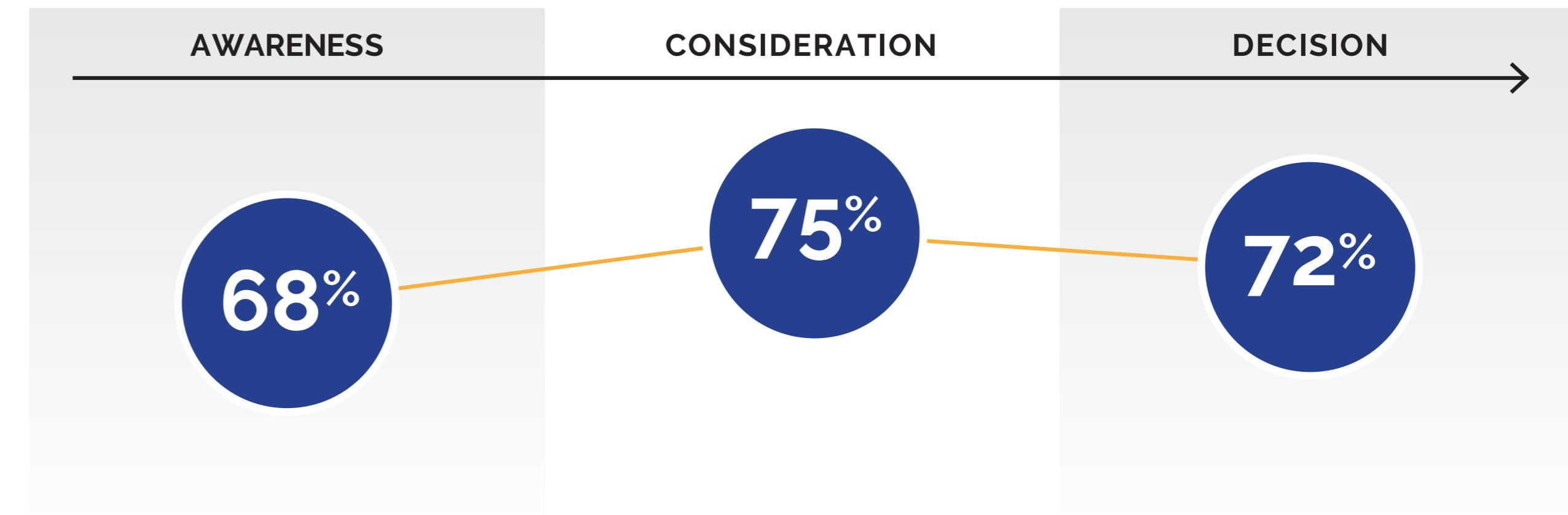
said that thought leadership content led them to research a product

Time spent studying thought leadership content improves a reader's knowledge, and even changes their minds. This is based on the study's finding that 87% of decision-makers said that thought leadership content led them to research a product, service, or solution they were not previously considering.

Use of thought leadership during the buying journey.

The study revealed that decision-makers rely on thought leadership throughout the buying journey, with 72% indicating that they engage with thought leadership content during the decision-making stage. This finding shows that thought leadership content is being included in internal justifications to educate other stakeholders.

High % of decision makers rely on thought leadership across the buying journey





3. Thought leadership burnishes reputations, boosts market share and buoys buying.

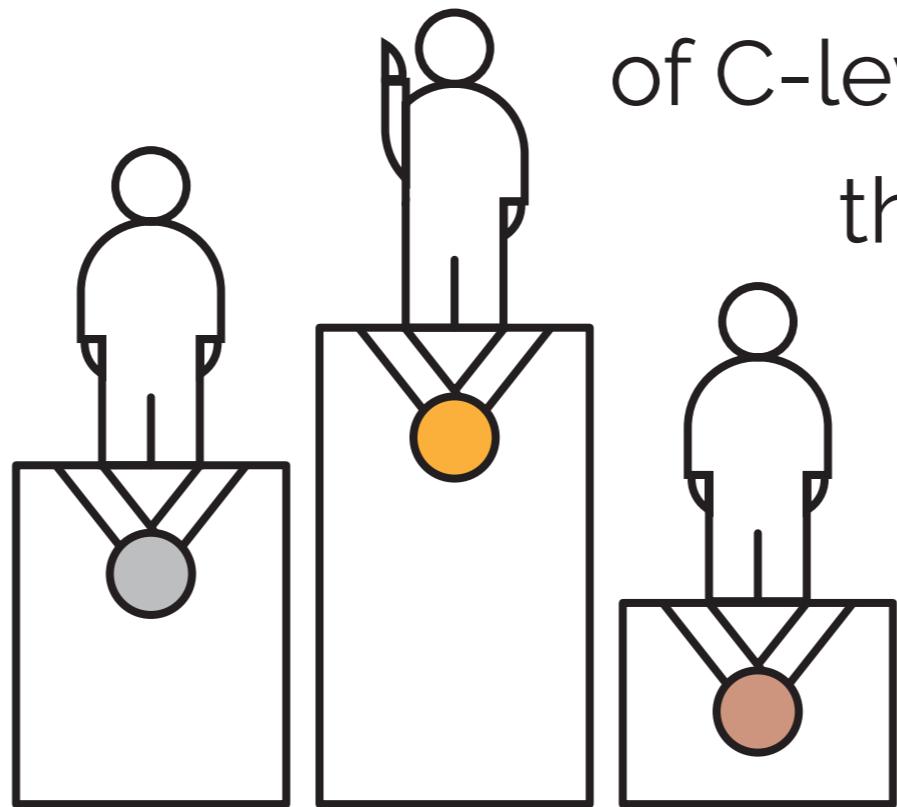
Marketers' job descriptions often say, "build the brand" and "increase awareness and preference." Thought leadership content helps meet these objectives. The study showed that **92% of decision makers think more positively of organizations that consistently produce thought leadership content.**

Preference is hard to earn, and often is a result of a buyer's previous experience with a supplier. If the experience was good, buyers are likely to buy from the supplier again. Good thought leadership increases the chances of repeat orders, and also increases the chances of first-time orders, as **90% of decision-makers say that thought leadership increases trust in existing or potential suppliers.**

Marketers need to grow market share, which requires winning customers from competitors.

Thought leadership helps here too: 83% of decision-makers said that thought leadership content helped them realize that there are other suppliers who are smarter, more informed, and more visionary than their current supplier.

Thought leadership helps win attention, but does it help win the order? The answer appears to be yes, as 84% of C-level decision-makers said that they purchased or started working with an organization that produces thought leadership content.



84%

of C-level said that they purchased or started working with an organization that produces thought leadership content

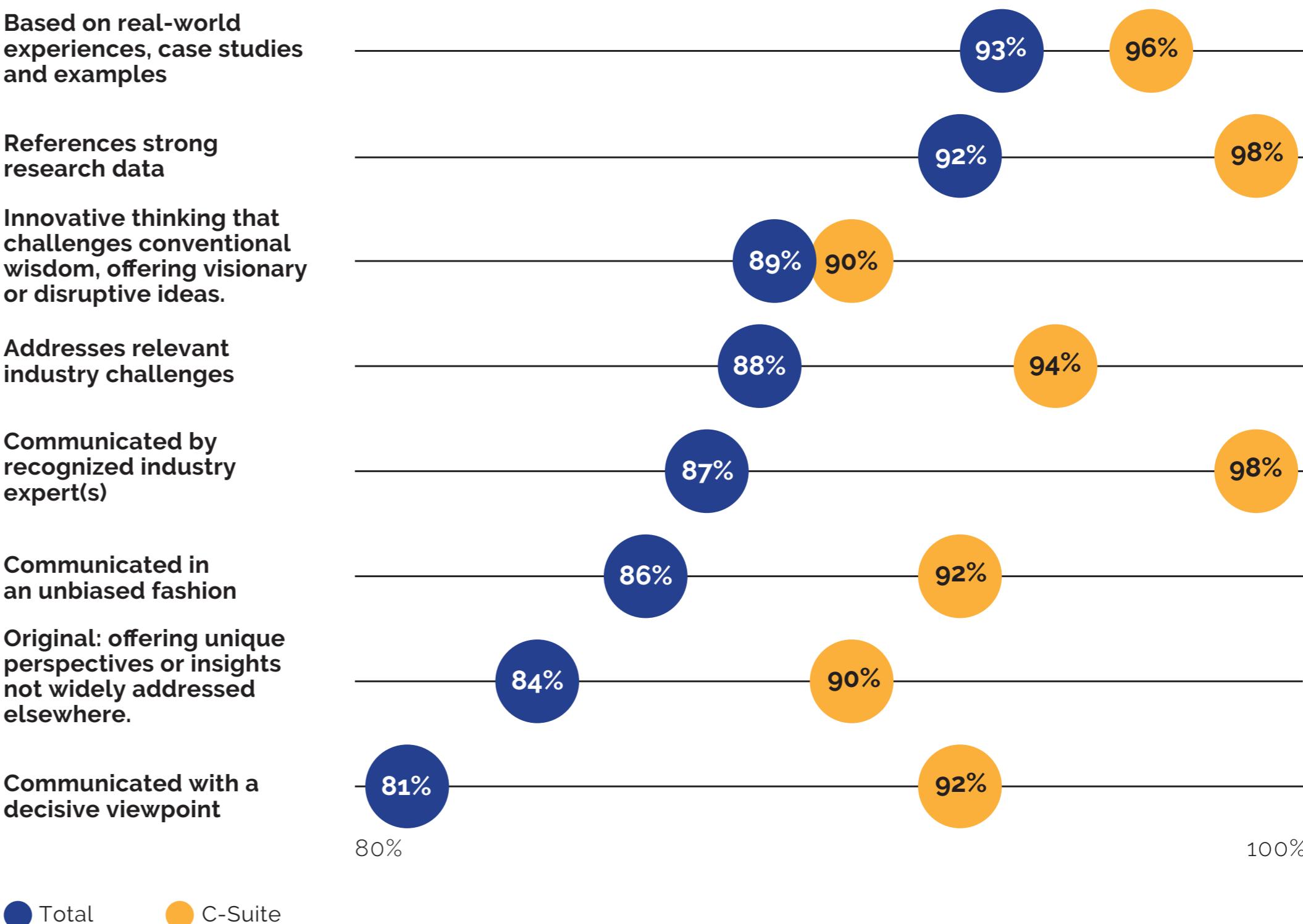
4. Good thought leadership shows actual good thinking based on real experiences.

Some marketers disguise promotional material as thought leadership, hoping to present it as valuable industry insight. **This doesn't work.**

B2B decision-makers have high standards for thought leadership. They look for content based on research that is relevant to business needs and communicated from a professional and unbiased perspective. C-suite expectations are even higher across all characteristics.

What is good thought leadership?

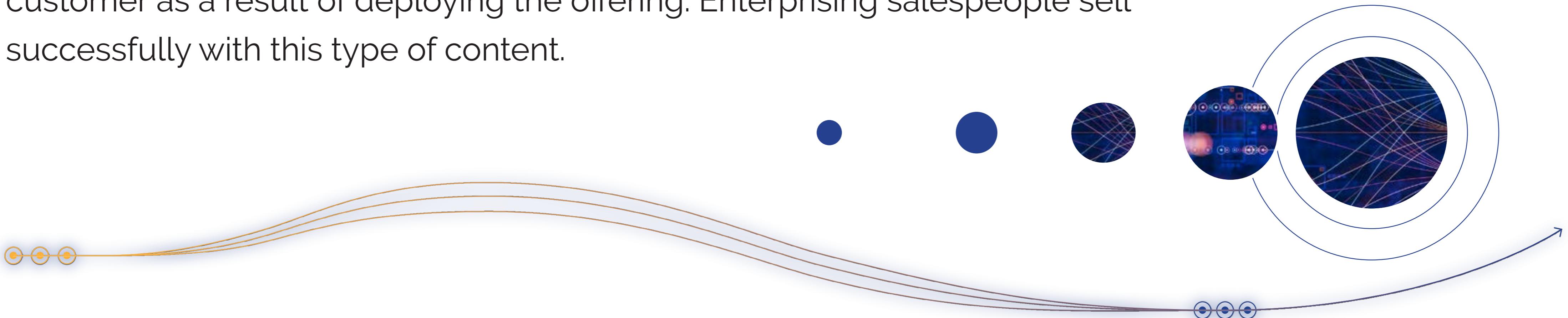
(% decision-makers rate as important or very important)



93%

of decision-makers said that the best thought leadership is based on real-world experiences, case studies and examples.

The best examples of thought leadership include successful implementations that show a novel business approach (leading thoughts), along with benefits that accrued to the customer as a result of deploying the offering. Enterprising salespeople sell successfully with this type of content.



5. The multiplier effect.

Quality thought leadership also significantly increases the chances of content being shared, especially among influential audiences. **Based on thousands of**

Voice of the Customer interviews we have conducted with B2B manufacturing decision-makers, word of mouth is a critical factor in shaping decisions. **By creating high-quality thought leadership, you can better position yourself at the heart of these important discussions, allowing your brand to expand its reach in a cost-effective way.**

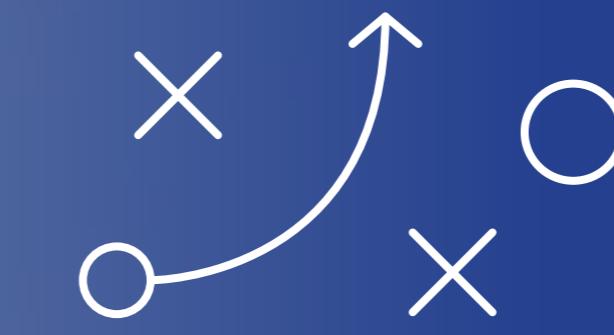
Furthermore, since the content is shared by a trusted source, it carries greater credibility and can significantly impact the perception of your expertise, ultimately driving trust in your brand.

72% & **88%**

of decision-makers

of C-Suites

Indicate they often or always share thought leadership content with their colleagues or network.



FINDINGS YOU CAN MAKE

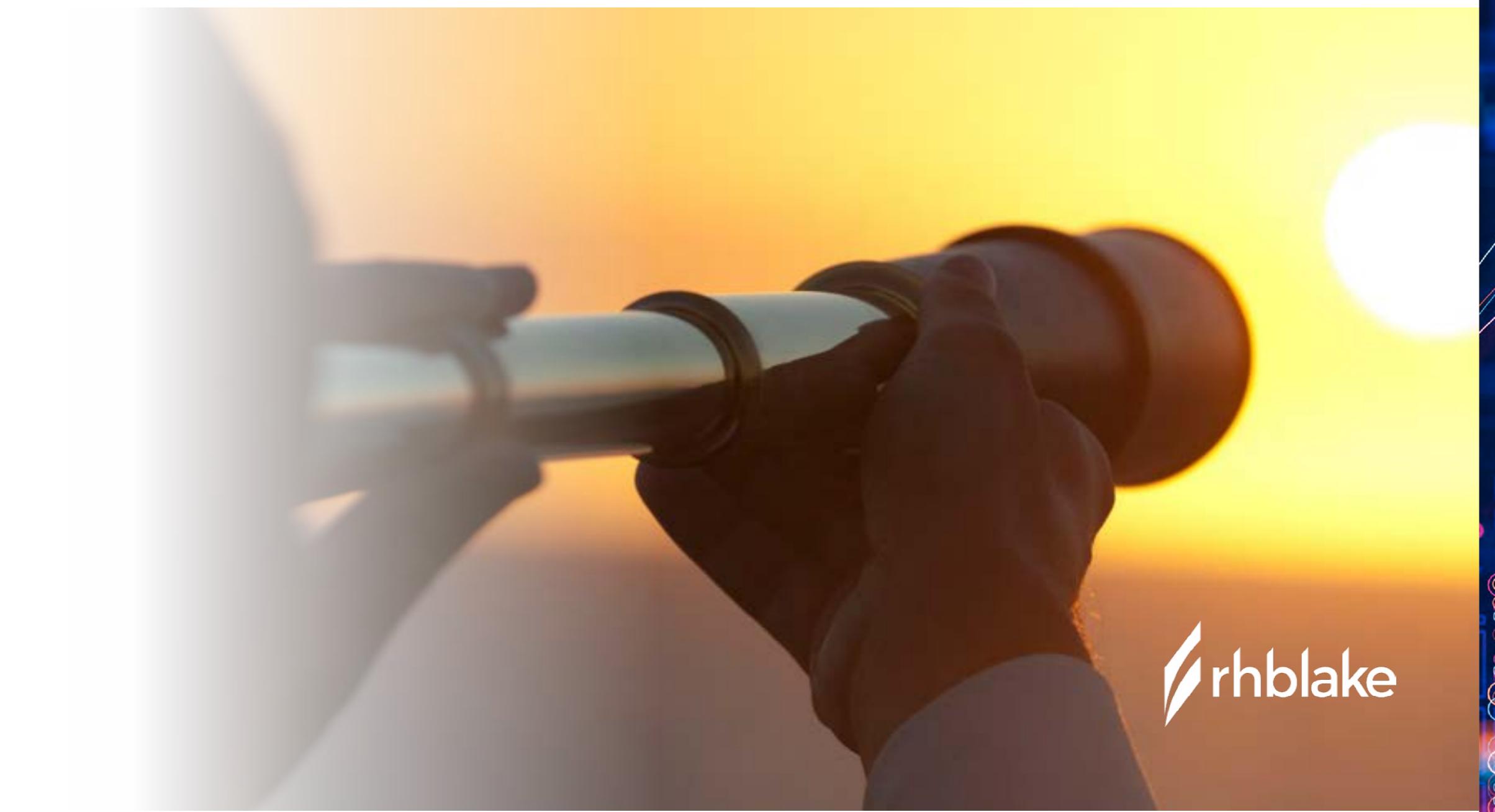
If thought leadership is not already part of your marketing investment, we hope this thought leadership has given you good reason to consider including it.

To accompany the report's findings, we challenge you to find **the following 5 things:**

1. Find the right content.

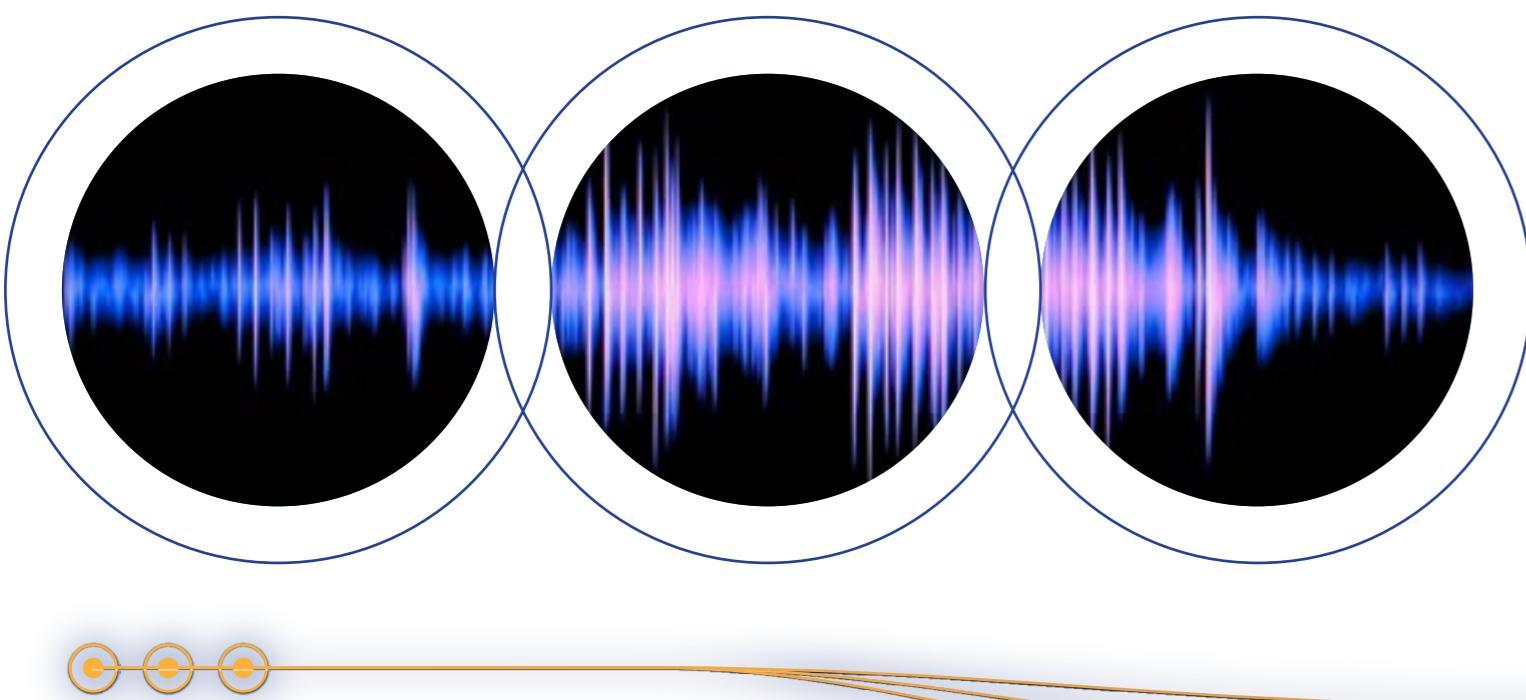
If your company markets LSC offerings, your offerings have a degree of complexity that came from excellent engineering, extensive experience or innovative ideas. Your offerings have unique selling propositions, or "plus 1s;" competitive elements that appear in your column during a buyer's evaluation. So, you have: differentiated technologies or applications; proprietary business models or proven processes, or advanced

R&D or engineering from which to find thought leadership. Explore your "plus 1s" and find areas that make business sense to promote with thought leadership. Since much of the value of your company resides in "plus 1s," highlighting them in public thought leadership may take some management convincing. But business is a balance of risk and reward.

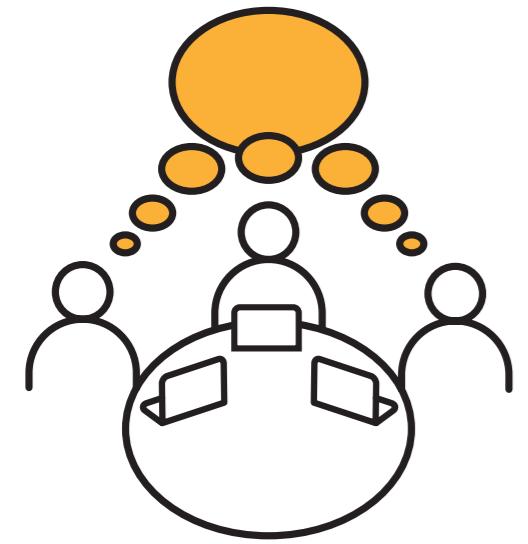


2. Find the right voice.

If you are fortunate, you will find a Subject Matter Expert (SME) in your company who is a master of their craft and receives career satisfaction from sharing knowledge. Such a person may already have good content to work with, such as a paper presented at a conference, or internal training content that can be re-purposed.



If you can't find a person willing to share knowledge easily, you must make an extra effort. Most SMEs are aware of their contribution to company success. Express to them that external thought leadership developed with their knowledge will allow them to make an even bigger contribution, and enhance their career. Sometimes SMEs will state that they don't have the time. In our experience, with careful planning, you can respect their time and still get what you need.



3. Find the right content developer(s).

An experienced writer who is familiar with your industry and with your type of offering is a good place to start. As stated earlier, thought leadership content can be presented in many formats, so you may need a content development team. If you're fortunate, the voice you found will have written or prepared something that can be the basis for thought leadership. If so, **good marketing content developer(s) should work with the SME to cast the technology, process or subject in the most accurate and appropriate light.**

If you do not have a ready basis for developing external content, you may need to find a more seasoned content developer who is familiar enough with the industry you serve, the products you provide, the values available to your customers from your offerings and with business in general. **Such a content developer can ask the right questions to draw out the best ways to create compelling content that demonstrates true thought leadership appealing to target audiences.**

4. Find the right delivery.

Connecting with the right audience at the right time through thought leadership is crucial to the success of your program. A proven way to accomplish this is by conducting **Voice of the Customer** research to uncover or validate their buying process, and then strategically aligning your content distribution with the key stages of their journey.



5. Find the right future.

Thought leadership should not be a one-and-done project.

It should continue in your strategic marketing. You want to be a thought leader, so just like the sales force wants to grow sales every year, and engineering and product management want to develop new products and features every year, you want to enhance the effectiveness of your thought leadership every year.

And like sales, engineering and product management **take cues from customers on what to develop and sell**, you must take cues from your customers with regards to **what thought leadership produces the greatest results**.

Then do more of what works and less of what doesn't.



About RHBlake

For more than 30 years, RHBlake has helped leading organizations in the manufacturing ecosystem build and execute marketing programs that drive targeted awareness, preference, leads, and margin expansion.



How we help



1. Agency partner:

For clients who can benefit from strategic insight and deep, comprehensive marketing.



2. Program solutions:

Following an initial assessment, RHBlake develops customized programs based on client objectives and priorities.



3. Defined projects:

An excellent way for clients to see the measurable value of a leading industrial and manufacturing-specialized marketing agency.



Let's put our
heads together

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