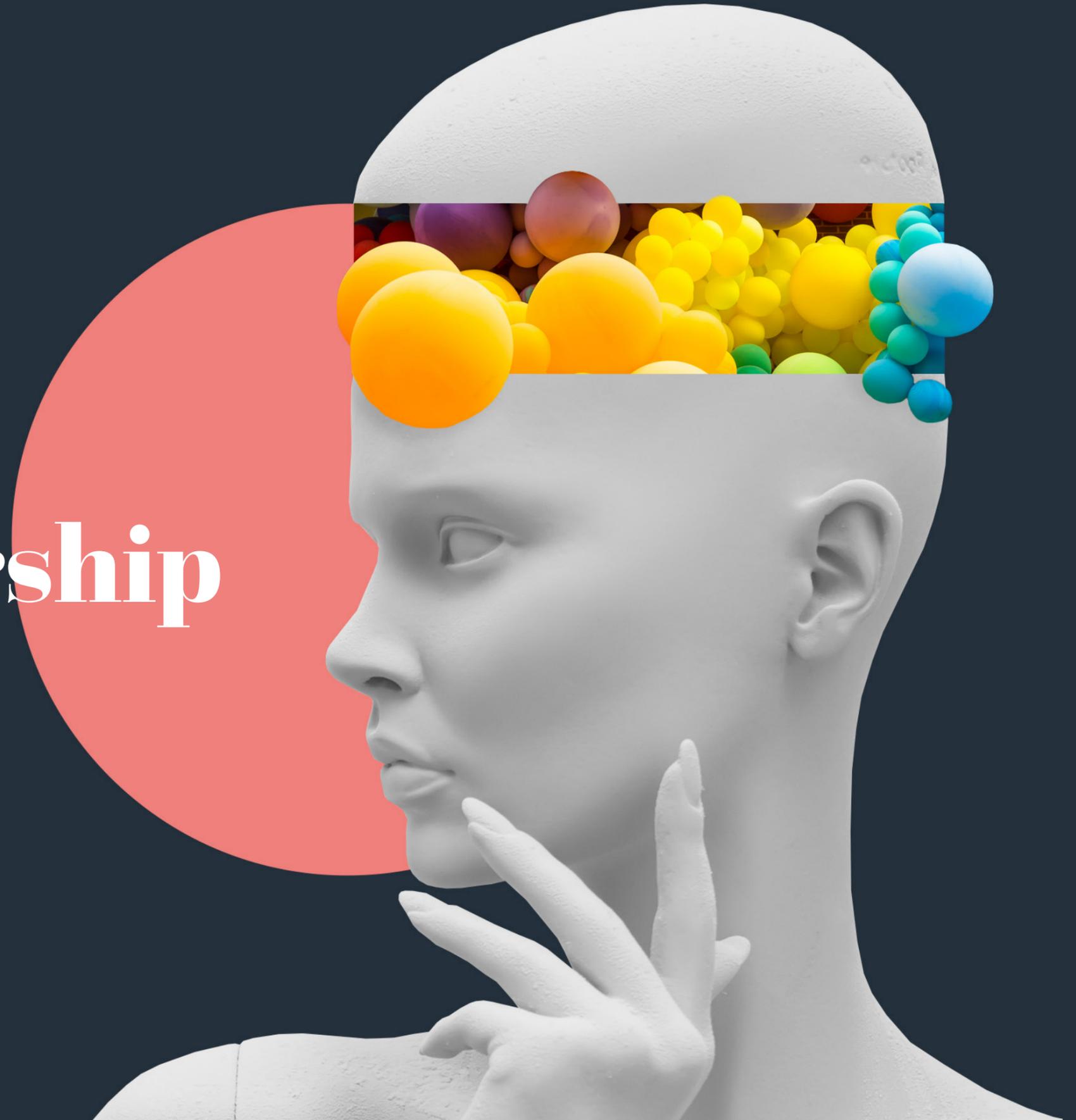


**jdj**

Brand strategy + design agency

# A guide to thought leadership design

July 2021



# Are you ready to become a thought leader?

Thought leadership is one of the most effective marketing tools in the marketer's armoury. It establishes trust and validates a company's or individual's authority on a subject matter, creating connections that can then lead to new business further down the track.

**But thought leadership can be hard to get right.**

This guide is for anyone wanting to create a thought leadership strategy. Whether you're experienced in creating thought leadership content or are looking to create a campaign for the first time, the content in this eBook will guide you through the basics of what exactly thought leadership is and why you should do it, right through to the nitty-gritty of planning and publishing your content.

# 1

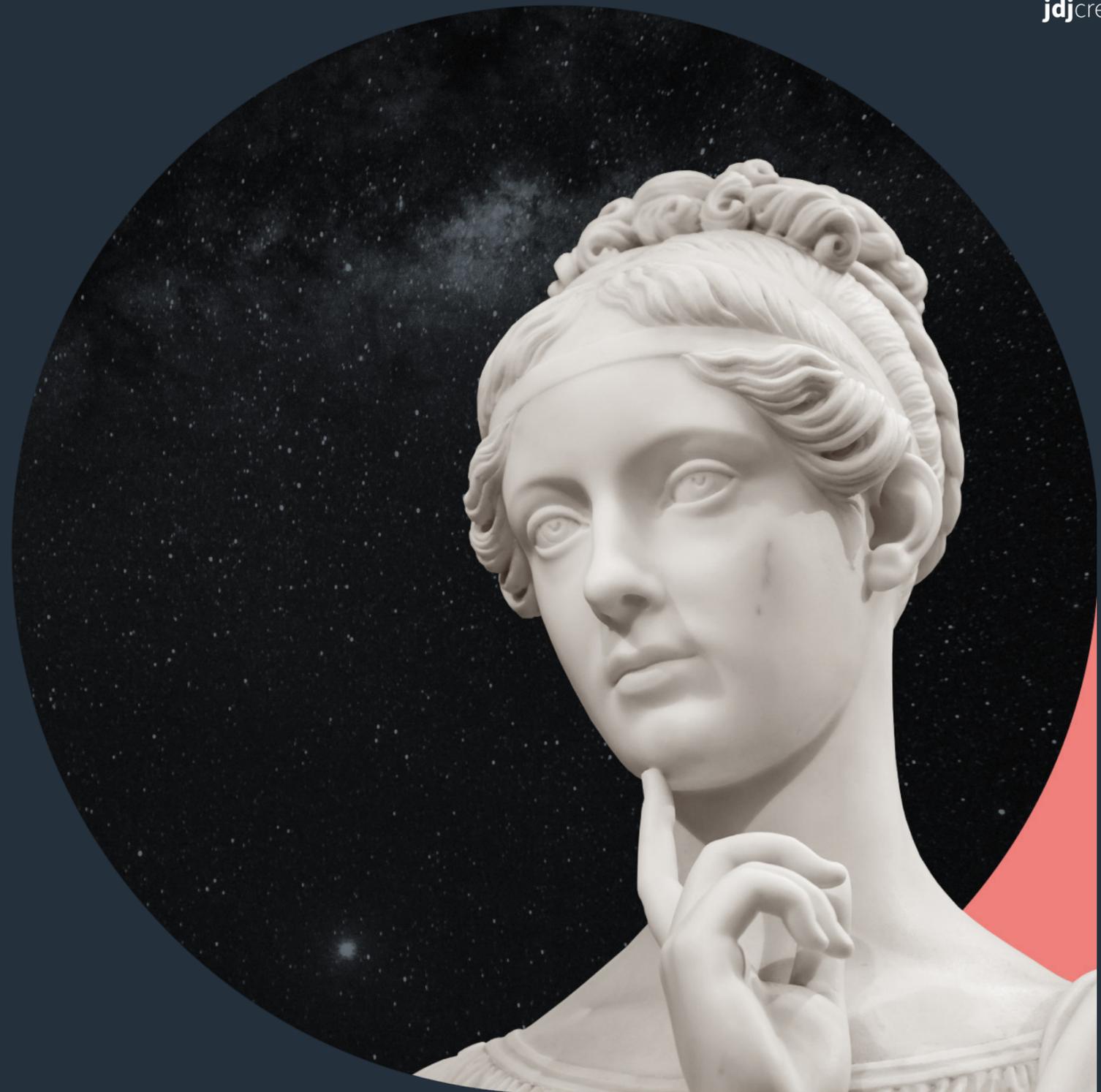
## What is thought leadership?

An essential element of a successful content marketing strategy, thought leadership is content that is educational, thought-provoking and inspirational.

It is original thinking from an expert source that is trustworthy, distributed for free and insightful.

Subtly different from the other forms of content that marketers create daily, thought leadership represents something

deeper. Something profound. Forming part of a wider content marketing strategy, it has its own set of goals, is targeted to a different audience segment and occupies a unique position at the top of the sales funnel.





## Why create thought leadership?

**Brands, businesses and individuals who create excellent thought leadership are seen as trusted experts in their field. Because of this, their words carry clout.**

Their audience listens to them and acts upon what they have to say. Exceptional content can even change a way of thinking.

This is powerful.

From a marketing perspective, it means you can raise awareness of your products and services, without ever explicitly mentioning them. It can generate leads. Your target

audience can share it, boosting online engagement. Mostly targeting a top of funnel audience, thought leadership starts new conversations with your expertise already established.

In short, creating good thought leadership materials puts you front of mind whenever a customer has a problem you can solve.

## Who can be a thought leader?

**Anybody can be a thought leader, regardless of age or background. But, in order to inform arguments, leaders have extensive experience in their field, often amassed over many years.**

The key element that can make somebody a thought leader, however, is a willingness to share knowledge and insightful opinion.

Think of your own organisation. Are you open to sharing insights with colleagues and close contacts? Most people are. But are you also hesitant when it comes to communicating this information with the wider world?

Afraid of being judged or seen to be wrong without relevant figures to back up their claims, many people simply refuse to commit to an opinion in public. This means so many beneficial insights go unpublished. Anecdotal evidence derived

from decades working in specialised professions remains internalised.

However, while statistics are useful, extrapolated analysis based on previous trends is equally informative. An expert's viewpoint, backed up by the credibility of experience, can also rightly be termed thought leadership. But to become a thought leader, you need to share these thoughts. In fact, not hiding behind known facts sets insightful thought leadership apart from the rest.

And if you or your business are not sharing opinion, knowledge and insight, the chances are you'll lose business to the competitors who are.

## Thought leadership for brands

As we've seen, it's not unusual for individual people to become experts in a subject.

The good news for brands is that they comprise many of these individuals. Therefore, the opportunities for creating thought leadership are multiplied.

Brands just need to approach thought leadership differently. For example, when publishing opinions, it is advisable to put a face to your contributors. People are often more relatable than a brand. This could be the CEO or any leader within the business. Jeff Bezos remains the face of Amazon. Steve Jobs was Apple. Putting a face to the name makes the content appear more personal and trustworthy. It also allows

for an ongoing conversation on social media, with people able to communicate one-to-one with the author.

Brands can also partner with other thought leaders to create in-depth research. Through endorsing this research, or being affiliated with it, brands can both demonstrate their expertise and benefit from association with a trusted source.

*Research by Mantis shows*

70%

*of marketers think brands can be thought leaders<sup>1</sup>.*

## Is thought leadership the same as sales copy?

Thought leadership is not copy to sell your products.

In most examples of thought leadership content, there is no mention of the products at all. That's because your audience will know your company sells products or service. But they're not at that stage of the funnel yet. Right now, they are reading, listening or watching your materials to learn. So educate, don't sell.

That's why the content needs to be insightful and positioned correctly. For then, when they're ready, your audience will seek you out, eager to find out more.

Think of thought leadership as a slow sale. It is about making introductions with potential clients and customers. By being open and sharing expertise, your audience will get to know you and your brand, and over time come to trust you. When you then introduce sales collateral to them, they'll be more receptive to considering your offering.

<sup>1</sup> <https://mantisresearch.com/thought-leadership/>

## Avoid the weak thought leadership trap

The problem many marketers find when creating thought leadership is that too much of it is just not very insightful. While lots of content is regurgitated tropes, true thought leadership is unique.

*Research by Edelman in collaboration with LinkedIn shows that only*

**15%**

*of decision-makers rate the quality of thought leadership as 'excellent'.*

*Given that*

**49%**

*say thought leadership influences their purchasing decisions, this is surprising<sup>2</sup>.*

This also means there is a great opportunity for brands who create great content. Because, when done well, the benefits of thought leadership are immense.

<sup>2</sup> <https://business.linkedin.com/marketing-solutions/b2b-thought-leadership-research>

# 2

## Thought leadership vs. content marketing

Because it is content, many marketers group thought leadership within the context of the wider term of content marketing. But, although there are similarities, the two are not the same. Where content marketing can entertain or provide light relief, thought leadership is always educational. With a focus on quality rather than quantity, great thought leadership can take longer to create than an average blog or article, but its rewards can be well worth the investment.

The differences between thought leadership and content marketing go deeper however.



*An increasingly important part of an overall marketing strategy, research shows that*

**70%**

*of marketers now actively invest in content marketing<sup>3</sup>.*

## The benefits of content marketing

**Content marketing is the creation and distribution of content online for the purposes of stimulating interest in a product or service.**

An increasingly important part of an overall marketing strategy, research shows that 70% of marketers now actively invest in content marketing.

Distributed mainly across a company's own website or social media channels, content marketing can take many forms, including blogs, video, infographics and eBooks. With the ultimate goals of educating an audience with a view to making a sale, these pieces of content will often be littered with enticing calls-to-action, and be geared towards steering an audience through the sales funnel.

Mainly targeting a B2C audience, there are plentiful benefits of a good content marketing strategy. Namely establishing trust with different audience segments, either increasing retention or generating new leads. Building authority through consistently producing high-quality articles, will also positively impact SEO efforts, creating another potential method of attracting clients.

## The benefits of thought leadership content

**A subsection of content marketing, thought leadership has a very specific aim - to change somebody's way of thinking.**

Often reserved for the top of a sales funnel, thought leadership is often the first impression the reader will have of the company.

This may lead to increased credibility and brand affinity, and hence shorten the sales cycle, but these are not the main aims of thought leadership. That is to start the sales conversation through original and unique thinking.

Because it is not sales led, thought leadership often takes place off-site. There is less need for self-promotion or frequent calls-to-action. Indeed,

much thought leadership content promotion is limited to the author's byline.

This may seem counterintuitive, but the benefits can be reaped further down the line.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hubspot.com/marketing-statistics>

## To focus on thought leadership or content marketing?

Thought leadership and content marketing are both effective methods of marketing. Both are essential to companies who want to stand out in their industries. Indeed, thought leadership can be a vital part of a wider content marketing strategy.

Because of their distinct target audiences and objectives, the two methods require subtly different writing styles and distribution channels.

At this stage, thought leadership is written with the aim of beginning a conversation. It wants to provoke the reader into responding with their own thoughts and opinions. Its sole aims are to educate and encourage discussion for further learning.

Indeed, the Edelman and LinkedIn Thought Leadership Impact Study, states that one of the top three characteristics of low-quality thought leadership content is that it ‘emphasises selling something instead of imparting valuable insights’<sup>4</sup>.

Think of thought leadership as a way to elevate your brand or personal standing above others in your field.

Content marketing and thought leadership can work hand-in-hand, but for best results, it’s essential to understand the different mediums and use them in conjunction with each other, rather than as a confusing mashup of styles, objectives and media.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.edelman.com/research/2020-b2b-thought-leadership-impact-study>



# 3

## Planning your thought leadership material



### Thought leadership strategy

Although thought leadership is essentially sharing knowledge for free, there is, almost always, a purpose behind it.

Whether big brands admit it, thought leadership is marketing, designed to build relationships and ultimately generate

sales. With that in mind, the planning process, as with all marketing content, is essential.

# Thought leadership strategy

These tips put you on the right footing from the very beginning of your strategy.

## 1

### Think about your goals - Why are you creating thought leadership materials?

Before starting any marketing strategy, it's essential to understand why you are creating this content. Be honest here. While the initial answer may be an altruistic desire to share knowledge, most of the time, they'll be a more revenue-based motive behind the decision.

Is that an aspiration to increase traffic to your site? Is it a lead gen tactic? Is it to raise brand awareness? Once you know your commercial and business aims, you can set measurable goals that will underpin the entire strategy.

## 2

### Understand your target audience - Who are you creating thought leadership for?

Knowing who your target audience is will influence the approach you take to content creation. Although there are likely to be multiple stakeholders to whom you wish to appeal, our experience has shown that it is best to focus your content towards one audience. With decisions made across the board, it's hard to know who to target, although the C-suite is a good starting point. Remember though, that while these individuals have influence, they are rarely the decision-makers - that could be a manager one or two rungs down the ladder.

## 3

### Generate content ideas - What are you going to produce?

Because of the need for expertise, write thought leadership on a topic on which you can add insight and a useful opinion. There's already a lot of information in the world, and a lot of it is superficial. To stand out from existing content or voices, you need to have something unique to say. Without an original angle or new data to take the conversation forward, your reader will not be engaged. At best this will be a waste of time and resource for you, at worst it may negatively affect opinions about your company.

The content must also align with your goals and target audience. Think about what questions your target audience is asking online. Consider future trends in your industry. Or react to a current news story that will interest your audience. By giving an insightful opinion you're in a great position to benefit from a heap of search traffic.

There are many things on which to base your leadership. But as a rule of thumb, follow content marketing fundamentals by creating content that is relevant and timely, and you won't go far wrong.

# 4

## Learn from your competitors

Your competitors are also a useful source of content ideas. Follow their output to discover what they think is important to talk about. Learn what their opinions are on current news stories and trends in your marketplace. And discover opportunities where you have something new to contribute.

Conversely, you may have opinions on topics that are not part of their conversation. This could be another opportunity. Answering the questions executives are asking while your competitors are not could be the move that gets you the sale over them.

# 5

## Create relevant and in-depth content

When creating content, it's essential to catch the reader's attention. Having picked a topic you are knowledgeable about, how you present it is vital to its success. One of the best ways to communicate your message effectively is through storytelling.

Good storytelling is a skill, and it is essential for a successful piece of thought leadership. It strengthens your ability to influence your audience, engaging them in a way that otherwise wouldn't be possible. By telling stories, your content will be unique and more memorable.

On top of the messaging, how you layout the report is essential. Research shows that uninspiring visual execution is the second most common reason thought leadership fails<sup>5</sup>. We'll provide our design pointers in chapter four, to ensure you avoid common pitfalls.

# 6

## Distribute content

As we'll discuss in the next section, there are a number of channels through which to distribute your thought leadership. Whether a whitepaper, a guest blog, or a video your content can be distributed in a variety of ways.

Ultimately, your audience will determine where to position your thought leadership. By making it as easy as possible to share, you can increase your reach, and the success, of your content.

# 7

## Measure results

Finally, it's essential to determine how you'll measure the success of a campaign before launching it. While your individual goals will heavily influence this, these results are likely to revolve around page views, social shares and other engagement metrics. We look at measuring success in chapter six, but knowing which metrics to monitor should be a key element of your planning strategy.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.longitude.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SixHallmarksofGreatThoughtLeadership.pdf>



# 4

## What channels to use for your thought leadership

While it's true that the important part of thought leadership is the content itself, getting your audience to interact with that content is a challenge. There are several mediums that you can use to deliver your content.

**Potential mediums include:**

- Reports and whitepapers
- Video content
- Long-form blog articles
- Guest articles
- Webinars
- Presentations and slide shares
- Social media posts
- Podcasts
- Press releases

*According to research, 47% of thought leadership is found organically, through search or social feeds.*

*32% is a referral from colleagues or sources such as email lists,*

*and the final 18% is via paid channels<sup>6</sup>.*

**! However you choose to disseminate your content, always keep this maxim in mind: Make it easy to find!**

<sup>6</sup> <https://business.linkedin.com/en-uk/marketing-solutions/blog/posts/B2B-Marketing/2019/building-trust-through-thought-leadership->

# Potential thought leadership mediums



## Reports and whitepapers

Because of the length of content and breadth of research, thought leadership lends itself to reports and eBooks. These are longer than a blog post and offer an opportunity to present your insights engagingly.

By incorporating infographics and other visual elements, these documents can be as visually pleasing as they are informative.



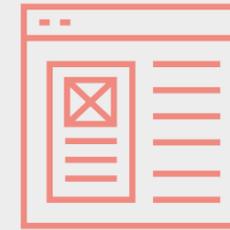
## Video content

Video makes up an ever-increasing percentage of all content consumed on the internet today, making it a great way to deliver your thought leadership. Whether a series of short videos, explainers, interviews or live content, video is great for communicating your insights.



## Long-form blog articles

Organisations with good blog followings can utilise this by using it as a vehicle to deliver thought leadership content. Often shorter than a white paper, a blog can be produced more quickly, allowing for immediate reaction to a news story or product launch.



## Guest articles

For businesses looking to increase their exposure, guest blogging provides this opportunity. Thought leaders can benefit from the authority of established sites, using them to show their expertise and grow their own following.



## Webinars

Web seminars offer a simple way for thought leaders to present their ideas to a captive audience all around the world. A secondary benefit is an opportunity for your audience to put a name to a face within the company, starting conversations and adding trust to the opinions you express.



## Potential thought leadership mediums



### **Presentations and slide shares**

Often a vital part of a webinar, presentations and slide shares can explain your insights visually. After the webinar, the speaker can share these graphics on social media, or use them to add visual interest to blog posts.



### **Podcasts**

Podcasts are an excellent way to promote original thinking to a busy audience. Whether an interview with leading figures or in-depth analysis from a key team member, decision-makers can consume podcasts on the go, be that the daily commute or during a workout.



### **Press releases**

While not a direct way to convey all your insights, a press release can showcase the standout information, encouraging people to read more. When distributed to relevant outlets, this information can reach a larger audience.



### **Thought leadership on social media**

As it offers a direct channel between you and your target audience, social media is a great channel through which to grow and cultivate your thought leadership. By understanding your audience and the type of content they consume, you can create material that will resonate with them. Remember, people visit social media sites in their free time, so don't waste their time. To get the most from your efforts, it's essential to have a good-looking profile and update it regularly.

# 5 Design pointers

There's already a lot of thought leadership content in the world. While what you've got to say may be interesting, all too often the message is hidden behind dull presentation. One of the best ways to stand out from the crowd is through inspired design.





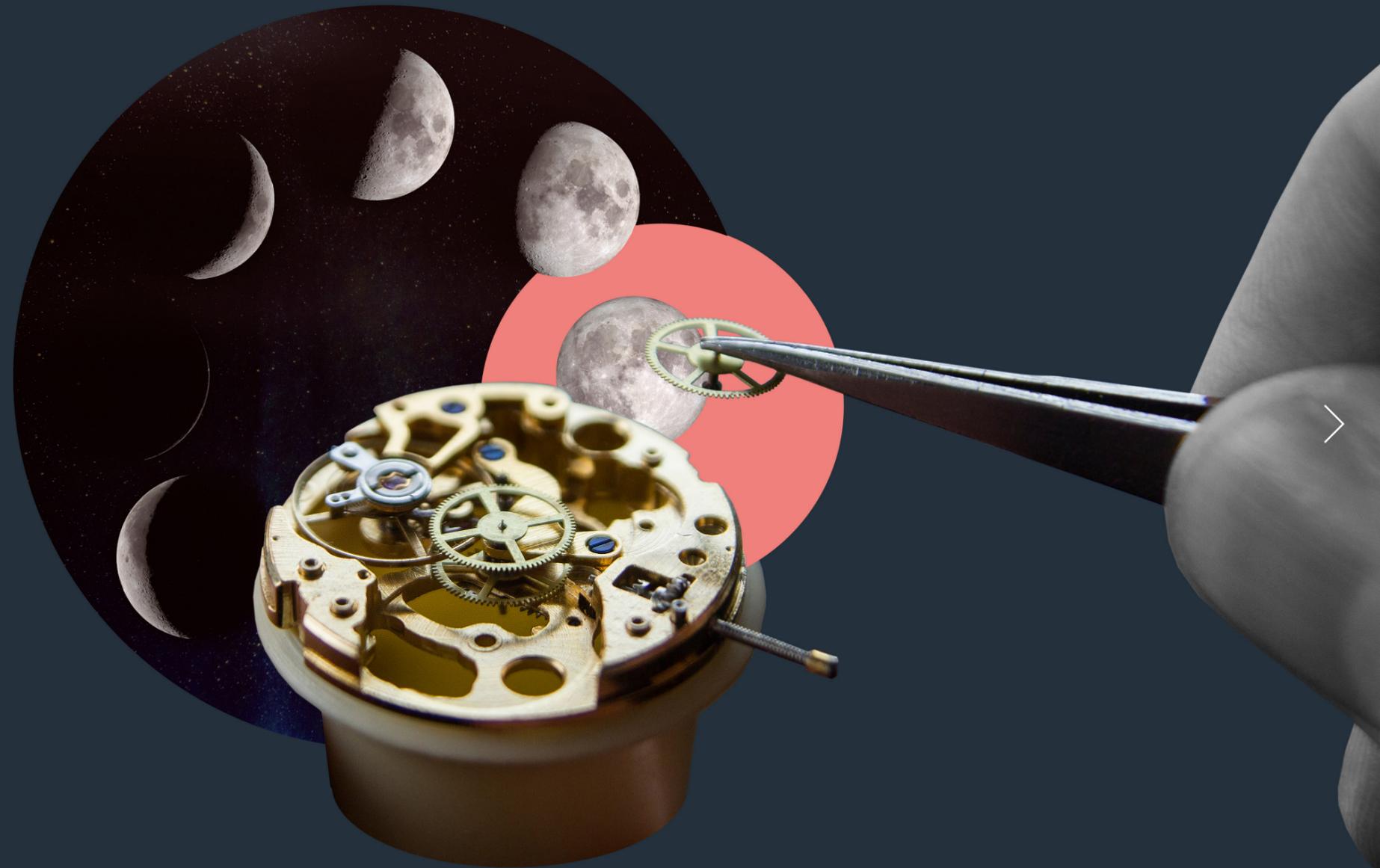
# 6

## JDJ's key stages of thought leadership design

If you choose to partner with a design agency to create materials for your thought leadership, it's important to choose one who understands your values and your target audience.

JDJ's process for designing your thought leadership materials is defined by distinct phases that ensure timely decision making and deliver remarkable results. To ensure all milestones are met, we

will invite you to access our project management system. We dedicate a project manager to your thought leadership project who serves as your key point of contact.



## JDJ's key stages of thought leadership design

1

### Research

Through interviews with key stakeholders, we are able to get an understanding of your sector and target audience. This understanding allows us to make design suggestions, such as which facts could be highlighted or which data could be repurposed for social media.

2

### Quotation

You share your creative brief, establishing media and channels. We work in partnership to agree milestones and set delivery timelines, incorporating key stakeholder approvals.

3

### Creative foundations

We work within your brand guidelines to establish visual themes for your report or article. Through the formation of a visual language to be used across any graphs, diagrams or infographics, and the creation of initial layouts we're ready to move on to the first draft.

4

### Checking

At this stage, the first draft is ready for proofreading. We'll check the document for obvious errors, before passing to your team for full proofreading and data checks.

5

### Final checks to launch

We implement any content revisions before passing the document back for a final review of the content and data. Once signed off, we'll prepare files for print or upload. Get ready for launch!



# 7 Promoting thought leadership and measuring success

Having researched your thought leadership, written the most insightful piece possible and packaged it in your chosen format, the last step is to publish it, promote it and measure its impact.





## Measuring the success of thought leadership

While the goal of most thought leadership will be to generate sales, in the short term the aim will probably be to raise brand awareness and influence an audience's way of thinking. The goals you set in the planning stage will influence how you measure success.

When judging how effective your thought leadership has been, perhaps the most instantly obvious KPI will be the number of page views. Tracked using Google Analytics (or your own analytics programme), page views can show how many people visited your content on your website.

Pay attention to how long they spent on the page to see how engaged they were, if they took any subsequent actions on your site, and where they came from. If promoted effectively, this should be from several sources, including email marketing and social media. If one of these sources stands out, consider using this as your primary marketing source next time around, or put further efforts into underperforming traffic sources.

You should also look at social media figures to see if your content is resulting in an increase of page followers. You can also use built-in analytics to see if the people interacting with your content are from the right target demographic and if not think of ways to tailor your content to get it in front of the right people.

It's also vital to monitor the number of backlinks to your site. A significant piece of content will provide new insight or data into a subject. With this in mind, you can expect that other people will link to your material in their own content. Gaining these links back to your site will show your content is authoritative, increasing your ranking in search engines and increasing the reach of your post exponentially.





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# Contact us

At JDJ, we work as trusted partners to in-house creatives – providing extra resources to help produce omnichannel thought leadership materials.

We flex our expertise to suit your content marketing strategies, whether creating reports or micro-content that reflects your branding style.

We hope this guide helps your business to produce insightful thought leadership,

challenge norms and reach its marketing goals. If you're interested in partnering with us to create your next piece of thought leadership, please **feel free to get in touch** for an informal conversation. Together we can create material that inspires.

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**For an informal conversation with one of our team, please get in touch with us using the channels below.**

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