

Outthinking the Competition: What the Best IT Services Firms Do Differently with Thought Leadership



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Summary

The global IT services industry has grown rapidly since 2021 to become the largest sector in the \$5.4 trillion global IT industry, according to Gartner. But the industry is also much more competitive today. In the U.S. alone, the number of IT services firms increased 37% between 2002 and 2022, according to the Census Bureau. The result: It has gotten much harder for their clients to tell them apart.

That's why thought leadership is now important to IT services firms. Our 2025 surveys of IT services firms and their customers show that thought leadership highly influences which firms get the work.

We surveyed 200 executives in 11 industries around the world who make decisions on which IT services to use (average company revenue of \$11.7 billion). The quality of an IT services firm's thought leadership content was their third most important buying criteria, with nearly eight in 10 saying that it highly or very highly influences their purchase decision. Thought leadership was more influential than ratings of IT analyst firms, and even more important than the price of a project.

Yet most IT services firms don't realize how important thought leadership is today in customers' buying decisions. Using the same decision criteria we used with buyers of IT services, 300 IT services firms (average revenue of \$2.6 billion) ranked thought leadership a distant 8th as a factor in their customers' decisions. Less than 60% believe it is highly or very highly influential.

Let that sink in: *79% of executives who decide which IT services firms to use rely on thought leadership from those firms to help make their decisions. Yet only 59% of IT services firms believe their thought leadership content has the same degree of influence on which firms' clients choose.* Perhaps this helps explain why the average IT services firm spends only 1.7% of revenue on thought leadership and has fewer than six people whose jobs are to make them seen as thought leaders.

Nonetheless, we also found that 12% of IT services firms take thought leadership seriously. We identified these firms as "Leaders" because they said their thought leadership programs have a very high impact

on revenue. From the way they answered 32 questions, they differ markedly from the 16% of IT services firms that said their thought leadership programs had zero impact on revenue. We refer to this group as "Followers."

In addition to our surveys, we also interviewed heads and other managers of thought leadership at Accenture, Capgemini, IBM, Tata Consultancy Services, Virtusa and other IT services firms – as well as executives from other industries who decide on which firms to use, and IT services industry veterans, analysts and financiers.

From our survey and interviews, we found that the Leaders in thought leadership at IT services firms differ from the Followers in seven fundamental ways:



INVESTMENT

1. They invest six times more on thought leadership and twice as much on research to develop compelling views. Leaders spend nearly twice the average and more than six times what Followers spend on thought leadership. But more important, leaders appear to concentrate their spending on fewer topics than Followers, which spread their smaller investments across too many topics, and which makes it hard to formulate big new insights on any of them. What's more, Leaders spend 57% of their content budget on research, while Followers spend only 28%. Spending on research gets client attention. When asked what types of thought leadership content they valued the most, clients chose long primary research reports. Leaders also differed in how they conduct their research. They do most of their own studies (58%) and co-brand 42% with IT analyst firms, publishers or others. Followers do the opposite: co-branding 65% of their studies, and branding as their own 35%.



MEASURE

2. They are much more likely to measure the revenue impact of thought leadership, and much more likely to believe it drives revenue. All Leaders say thought leadership drives their firms' revenue. And they're much more likely to monitor the quality of their content.



PROCESSES

3. They have more rigorous processes for thought leadership research and are less likely to let generative AI do their thinking. The best IT services firms at thought leadership bring greater rigor to the research they conduct, especially in research design. Leaders are twice as likely as Followers (69% vs. 34%) to have a rigorous research process. Leaders also conduct more extensive marketing than Followers. And Leaders more often help business developers turn thought leadership messages into sales pitches. What's more, Leader firms are more selective

than Followers in where they use generative AI in producing content. While nearly half the Leaders (47%) use AI to gather and summarize secondary research, less than a third use it in other content development tasks – e.g., identifying topics, creating insights, outlining narratives, and writing and editing prose. Follower firms are more likely than Leader firms to use generative AI in all but one of nine content development tasks that we asked them about.



- 4. Their top managers are bigger advocates of, get more involved in and more often view thought leadership as a competitive advantage.** Leading IT services firms have more and higher-level internal advocates for thought leadership. Their top management is nearly eight times more likely to be involved in developing content than the people running Follower firms (86% of Leader firms vs. 11% of Follower firms). Why more advocacy and involvement? In part, it's because executives in our Leaders group view *thought leadership* as a key to gaining *market leadership* – i.e., as a competitive advantage. In 83% of Leader companies, top management sees thought leadership as a competitive advantage – more than twice the number of Follower firms (30%).
- 5. They collaborate more strongly with sales, marketing, and service innovation – functions that view thought leadership content as essential for creating demand (i.e., for marketing and selling services) and developing new services.** They have strong working relationships with marketing, sales and service innovation. 80% of Leaders said their thought leadership groups work tightly with the company's sales function. Only 34% of Followers' thought leadership groups work closely with sales. Twice as many Leaders as Followers – 62% vs. 30% – always or usually turn their content into new services.
- 6. They have more thought leadership talent, and they value research skills the most.** Leaders have a big talent advantage. Some 78% said they were talent rich or abundant – six times the number of Followers who said the same thing. Leaders view research and analysis, developing unique perspectives, and writing and editing as the three most important skills. (Followers did as well.) But the skill in which Leaders say they need the biggest improvement is in marketing and distributing thought leadership content. Followers said their most sought-after skill is the ability to develop unique perspectives.





7. **They centralize thought leadership to create consistently high-quality content, and to have it report above marketing, sales, and service innovation on the organization chart to avoid becoming captive to their parochial demands.** Centralizing thought leadership is important to having revenue impact. Half the Leader firms centralize their thought leadership activities vs. 0% of the Follower firms. In Leader firms, the thought leadership group is also more likely to reside high on the organizational chart and report not to market, sales, or service innovation but rather to the strategy group or higher. That's the case at 42% of Leaders -- nearly three times the number (15%) whose thought leadership groups report to the head of strategy or higher at Follower firms.

This report explores how clients of IT services firms and the firms themselves use thought leadership. In particular, we drill deep on what the best IT services firms do thought leadership - the firms we call "Leaders" - do differently. We then explain how all IT services firms can improve their games.

IMPACTS



SECTION 1: Why Your Customers Need Thought Leadership

Longtime followers of the global information technology industry have known for years that the single-biggest segment is not software or computer hardware but rather telecommunication services. Perhaps that's not surprising. Digital data must travel instantaneously across offices, companies, and geographies to be useful, right?

Indeed. In fact, in 2020 telcos accounted for 37% (\$1.3 trillion) of the \$3.6 trillion spent worldwide in total on IT, according to Gartner.¹ Telecom service revenue was more than twice that of the device makers and nearly three times that of software companies. The only sector close to telecom in 2020 was IT services (\$992 billion).

But who's king in the IT industry has shifted this decade. For 2025, Gartner forecasts IT services will be in the lead, with 31% (\$1.7 trillion) of a \$5.4 trillion global IT spending pie. (To see how IT spending worldwide has increased since 2015, see Exhibit 1.)² Communication services will be second (a 23.5% share) and software third (23%).³

Why this epic shift in spending toward IT services? It's their job to help companies deal with the huge complexities of AI and other digital technologies, and make unprecedented changes in how they operate. IT services firms are now the primary beneficiary of this need. (Exhibit 2.)

Exhibit 1: The 10-Year, \$2 Trillion Explosion in Global IT Spending (Gartner Data), in trillions

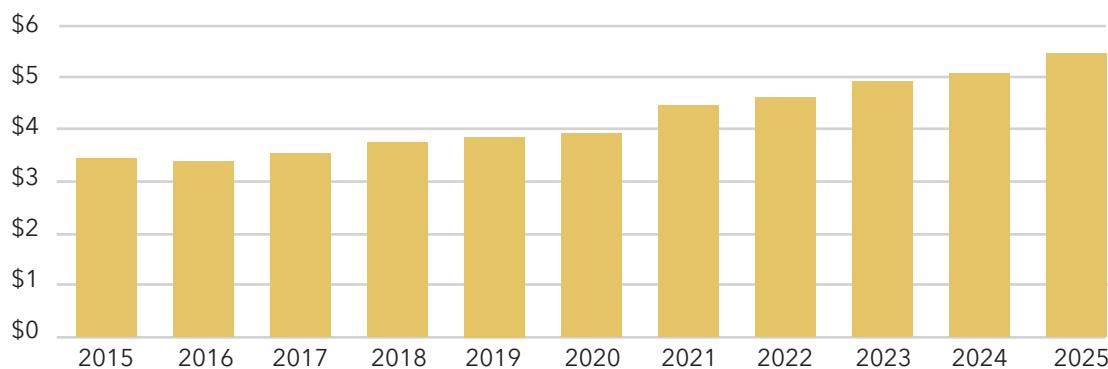
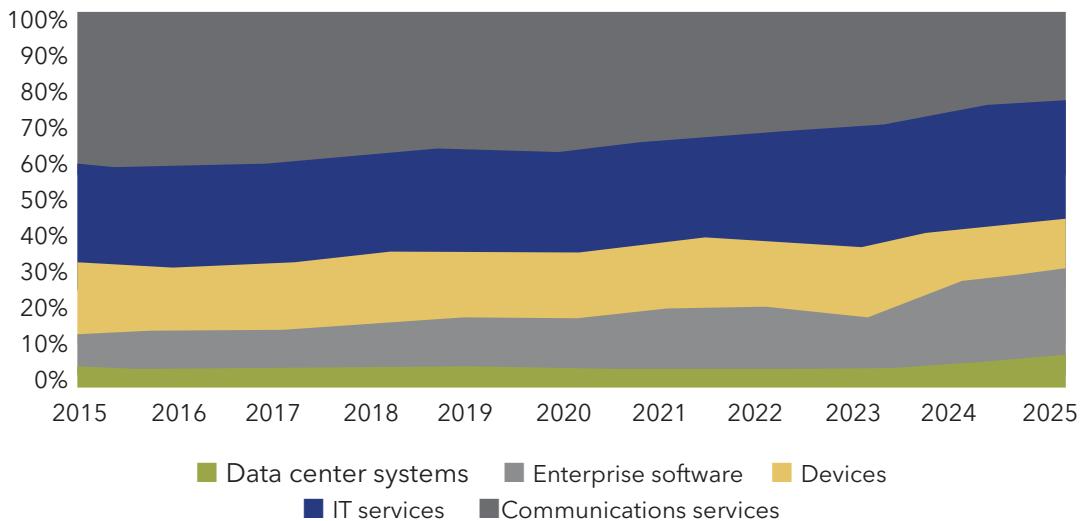


Exhibit 2:

Since 2023, IT Services Has Carved Out the Biggest Piece of the Pie
(Gartner Data)

Gartner: Worldwide IT Category Spending Percentages (2015-2025)
(Source: Gartner press releases)

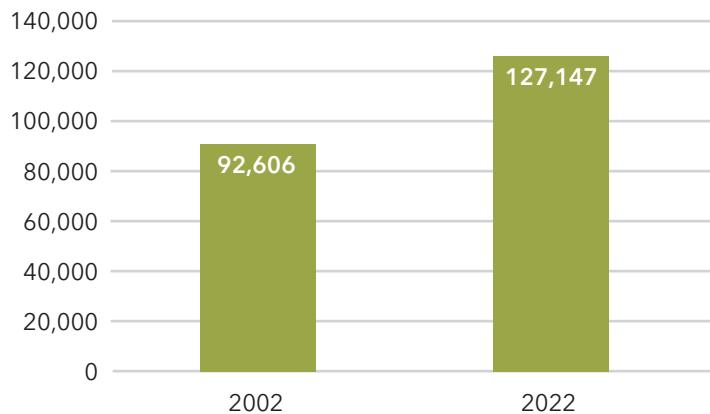


Yet IT services firms can't get complacent. The reason is the insatiable demand for their services quite predictably has also been met with an increase in the number of those firms. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, the number of computer systems design and related firms in America grew 37% between 2002 and 2022, from 92,606 to 127,147.⁴ (See Exhibit 3.)

Exhibit 3:

A Booming U.S. Industry: IT Services

Number of U.S. Computer Systems Design and Related Services Firms (Source: U.S. Census Bureau)



Of course, the U.S. is not alone in launching new IT services firms. In India, whose IT services companies own 9% (\$137 billion) of the global IT services industry,⁵ startups appear to be proliferating. One gauge of that is membership to NASSCOM, the Indian trade association for IT services, technology and other digitally focused firms. A ChatGPT analysis of its membership estimates that another 200 or so Indian IT services firms joined between 2020 and 2025, bringing the total to about 2,100 of its more than 3,000 member firms.⁶

The number of IT services firms around the world should continue to grow. The barriers to entry – always low – are even lower today. Employees can work from home; offices aren't necessary. Just consider Dayton, Ohio-based [Centric Consulting](#). The firm began with a remote workforce in 1999 and remains so to this day, with 1,300 employees.

Like those of the last 30 years, new IT services firms can tap talent from less-expensive regions of the world. Their people can learn online and earn a degree in software engineering without going to a college campus. What's more, many tasks that used to require experts from multiple business and technology domains are now automated. AI looks like it's poised to unleash a whole new set of IT services firms. Those with employees in talent-rich, lower-cost geographies and who can master generative AI stand to automate key aspects of software development.

That means clients of IT services firms have a burgeoning number of choices today that they didn't five years, much less 10 years ago. That's great for them – until the time comes to pick one for the job at hand.

As IT Services Firms Increasingly Sound Similar, Customers are Increasingly Confused

More competition in IT services means more customer confusion – especially with so many firms using variations of refrains that go something like "We help our clients use AI to engineer digital superiority." Asked to digest such bland brand messages, companies that use IT services firms are having a harder time deciding which ones to put on their short lists. If your IT services firm isn't recognized as having deep expertise in solving any of their problems, then clients will see you as having commodity services, if you're seen at all.

That's not attractive to clients. And it's not attractive to the growing number of private equity firms that have been buying and selling IT services firms. "We never want to invest in a [tech services] company that's basically doing commodity pricing," Anup Hira, a partner at



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Mounting customer confusion about which IT services firms to use is reflected in several recent studies of IT buyers. In a 2024 survey of 721 executives, 65% said IT purchasing decisions had grown in complexity, and that the average number of people involved in those decisions increased to 26, from 20 in 2022.⁷

With all that in mind, we surveyed 200 executives this May about how they choose IT services firms. These executives spanned a range of functional areas: sales, marketing, service, finance, R&D, IT, procurement, supply chain, and others.

Nearly two thirds (64%) said they were the key decision-maker on the IT services purchase; 36% are part of the team that makes those decisions. Their companies' average revenue was \$11.7 billion, and 23% had more than \$20 billion in revenue.

They were roughly evenly split among these sectors: banking, insurance, retail, media and entertainment, technology, consumer packaged goods, industrial manufacturing, transportation, travel and hospitality, telecom, and life sciences. Half work in North America, 30% in Europe and the UK, 16% in Asia-Pacific, and 5% in the Middle East.

We also surveyed IT services firms. We fielded an extensive survey (32 questions) of 300 people involved in thought leadership at these firms. We also interviewed more than a dozen producers and consumers of thought leadership, and IT services financiers and former strategy executives. From all this we gained a clear picture on the state of thought leadership in the tech services industry.

Let's start with the customers of IT services firms. Our survey of executives who decide which IT services firms to use shows thought leadership is now a key factor in their buying decisions.

Customers Expect Thought Leadership from IT Services Firms

Our first major finding is that **thought leadership content** from IT services firms now greatly influences which firm their clients choose. We asked executives who play roles in deciding on which IT services firms to use to rate the importance of nine criteria to their purchase decisions. (We used a 5-point scale, from no influence to very high influence.)

At the top of the list is a tech services firm's **marketplace reputation and credibility**. (See Exhibit 4.) We defined this as the recognition

it has achieved through awards and other measures. What we found was that reputation tops all others. Some 84% of companies that use IT services firms said it highly or very highly influences their selection decision. This shows why brand marketing is crucial to the success of IT services firms. Without strong brand management, it's hard to establish a strong reputation.

Ranking second was published **customer case studies and testimonials**, which 80% of the buy-side executives said is highly or very highly influential. Client case studies and testimonials are the proverbial proof in the pudding – the evidence that demonstrates a firm's brand claims and quality of the advice it provides in its research reports, white papers, and conference presentations.

Those two factors didn't surprise us as being at the top of the list. But what *did* surprise us was the third-ranking factor: **thought leadership content**. Nearly eight of 10 (79%) buyers of IT services said this was highly or very highly influential. We were surprised because it topped by a full 10 percentage points what they ranked seventh: **IT analyst firms' ratings and recommendations**.

We're not saying that IT analyst firms' ratings are unimportant. In fact, 69% of buyers of IT services said they were highly or very highly influential on their choice of an IT services firm. How Gartner, Forrester, IDC, HFS, and others rate you still matters a lot. However, we know several IT services firms that spend much more time and money on trying to get the analyst firms in their camp than they do on thought leadership.

Thought leadership also tops, albeit slightly, other criteria that we expected to rank above it. One was quality of the work that those firms had done before at their companies (chosen by 78%), and customer references (77%). The quality of thought leadership content also topped:

- Showing industry, functional and/or technology depth (e.g., illustrated by the experience of the people listed in a project proposal)
- How big the tech services firm is, and
- Its fees/price for a project

8 OUT OF 10 (79%) buyers of IT services said Thought Leadership was highly or very highly influential.

Exhibit 4:

What Influences How Customers Choose IT Services Firms?

Buying Criteria of Executives Who Decide on IT Services Firms to Use		
Rank	Factor	% High or Very High Influence
1	Marketplace reputation and credibility	84%
2	Published customer case studies and testimonials	80%
3	Thought leadership content	79%
4	Quality of prior work at their company	78%
5	Customer references	77%
6	Industry, functional, technology depth	75%
7	IT analyst firms' ratings and recommendations	69%
8	Size of the IT services firm	65%
9	Price of a potential project	63%

Q9 in survey of 200 buyers of IT services firms, asked to rate the influence of nine factors (no influence, slight influence, moderate influence, high influence or very high influence).

The quality of an IT services firm's thought leadership is a more important factor in clients' purchasing decision than it was in 2020. About three quarters (76%) said reading thought leadership content from IT services firms is a more important influence than it was five years ago. Only 11% said it was less important.

Other surveys of executives who decide on which IT services to use have had similar findings. For example, a MomentumITSMA/Grist survey conducted in 2021 found thought leadership was critical to 50% of executives in evaluating potential advisors and solution providers. Quality content would make 78% think about working with such firms, and poor content would make 72% look at competitors.⁸

The importance of thought leadership to buyers of IT services shows up in the answers to another question in our survey. We asked these executives how much time they spend each week reading the thought leadership content from IT services firms. If you think less than an hour a week, you'd be far off. The average was 7.7 hours/week. That was about two hours more per week than what we found in 2022 in a

similar survey.⁹ And more than one quarter (27%) of executives who select IT services firms spend more than 10 hours a week reading this content.

The most voracious readers of such content are executives in insurance (9.3 hours/week) and life sciences (9.1 hours/week). (See Exhibit 5.)

Exhibit 5:

Clients and Prospects are Reading Your Content
(and Your Competitors')

Hours per Week That Executives Who Choose IT Services Firms Read their Content	
Sector	Average Hours Per Week
Banking and financial services	6.8
Insurance	9.3
Retail	6.8
Media and entertainment	8.8
Software/technology	8.3
Industrial manufacturing	8.2
Consumer packaged goods	6.2
Transportation	7.2
Telecommunications	7.0
Life sciences	9.1
Travel and hospitality	6.6
Average across sectors	7.7

Clearly, thought leadership is important to buyers of IT services. But what about sellers? How much do they value the thought leadership content they bring to market? The answer was surprising.



SECTION 2: IT Services Firms Grossly Undervalue Thought Leadership's Impact on Customers

At IT services firms, we surveyed people involved in thought leadership. They work in a range of IT services firms, from very large ones (20% had revenue of more than \$5 billion) to very small ones (5% had revenue of less than \$100 million). Overall, the average revenue was \$2.6 billion; the median was \$952 million.

Like their customers, did these IT services firms see thought leadership as instrumental to getting work? The answer is not to the same degree as their customers see it.

We asked thought leadership professionals at IT services firms to rate the importance of the very same buying criteria that we surveyed their clients on. (See Exhibit 6.) To our astonishment, IT services firms ranked thought leadership content eighth out of the nine criteria. Only 59% believe it is highly or very highly influential to their clients' purchasing decision. That was a full 20 percentage points less than it was rated by executives who decide on which IT services firms to use. (See Exhibit 7.)

Instead, those on the sell side rated the quality of their prior work (82%), customer case studies and testimonials that they published (78%), and project price (77%) as the top three highly/very highly influential buying factors.



“IT services firms ranked thought leadership content eighth out of the nine criteria. Only 59% believe it is highly or very highly influential to their clients' purchasing decision. That was a full 20 percentage points less than it was rated by executives who decide on which IT services firms to use.”

Exhibit 6:

Factors That IT Services Firms Believe Sway Buyers

What IT Services Firms Think Influences Clients' Selection Decisions		
Rank	Factor	% High or Very High Influence
1	Quality of prior work at their client	82%
2	Published customer case studies and testimonials	78%
3	Price of a potential project	77%
4	Marketplace reputation and credibility	73%
5	IT analyst firms' ratings and recommendations	72%
6	Industry, functional, technology depth	71%
7	Customer references	70%
8	Thought leadership content	59%
9	Size of the IT services firm	53%

Survey of 300 executives in IT services Firms, asked to rate the influence of nine factors in how clients choose them (no influence, slight influence, moderate influence, high influence or very high influence).

How can this be explained? Our view is that many IT services firms may underestimate the degree of client confusion about which firms to use. Not too long ago, competition was lighter and clients had fewer choices, and demand greatly outstripped supply. Your past work at a client was the best predictor of your future work, and being competitive on price was essential. That, in turn, meant tapping lower-cost regions of the world for IT talent.

Exhibit 7:

Buyers of IT Services are More Likely to Value Thought Leadership Than Sellers

Who Thinks Thought Leadership is Critical to the IT Services Buying Decision?	
Executives at 200 companies in 11 industries who decide on which IT services firms to use	Managers involved in thought leadership at 300 IT services firms
79%	59%

Today that marketplace is gone. With an explosion of IT services firms, buyers have many more choices. But what comes with that is greater difficulty in determining the right ones to use. Thought leadership is crucial to help sort that out. Investments to boost brand recognition are also important here.

Paltry Spending on Thought Leadership

With an outdated notion of the competitive landscape and customer needs for a deeper understanding of their capabilities, many IT services firms skimp on the people, research, and marketing investments required to be recognized as thought leaders in their domains.

Tech services firms spend 1.75% of revenue on thought leadership, for both content and marketing. In fact, 45% of the IT services firms surveyed spend less than 1% of revenue on thought leadership activities. Only 5% of them invest 6% or more of revenue on thought leadership.

Nonetheless, by 2027, the IT services firms that we surveyed expect to increase their thought leadership budgets an average 23.5%. Even so, that would mean the average IT services budget for thought leadership would rise from 1.75% of revenue this year to 2.16% in two years. Still, that's less than half the 5.9% of revenue average across B2B sectors that we found in 2022.¹⁰ And it's a third of the 6.2% spent on marketing as a percentage of revenue in U.S. B2B services firms tracked in 2024 by Deloitte.¹¹

Another gauge of lack of investment is the number of people working full time on thought leadership. The average IT services firm surveyed has less than six (5.9 to be exact) people working full-time on thought leadership content and marketing of that content. And team size is directly related to revenue: The bigger the company, the larger the thought leadership team. (See Exhibit 8.)



Exhibit 8:
Thought Leadership is Thinly Staffed

Average Thought Leadership Team Size	
Company Revenue	Thought Leadership Team Size (No. of Employees)
More than \$5 billion	9.2
\$1 billion to \$5 billion	7.0
\$500 million to \$1 billion	5.5
\$250 million to \$500 million	3.9
\$100 million to \$250 million	1.9
Less than \$100 million	2.2
Average all IT services firms	5.9

Average number of people on the thought leadership team (including content and marketing professionals dedicated to thought leadership) at 300 IT services firms.

Who Controls the Thought Leadership Budget?

For the average IT services firm, the lack of attention to thought leadership can also be seen in who controls and manages its budget. In only about one in nine companies (12%) does a thought leadership research function control the budget. But our data shows that there's no dominant manager of the thought leadership budget.

More commonly, the budget is managed by strategic planning/corporate development (in 23% of the firms), by marketing (22%), or by multiple functions (15%). Next come the service lines (by region, industry, technology, etc.), who managed the thought leadership budget in 13% of the IT services firms surveyed. A thought leadership research group finished ahead only of sales and service delivery. (See Exhibit 9.)

Exhibit 9:

Who Controls the Thought Leadership Budget?

There's No Dominant Owner

Percentage of Functions at IT Services Firms That Control and Manage the Thought Leadership Budget	
Strategy/corporate development	23%
Marketing/corporate comms/PR	22%
Multiple departments control their own budgets	15%
Service lines (region, industry, technology, etc.)	13%
Thought leadership research group	12%
Sales/business development	9%
Service delivery/service innovation	5%
Investor relations	2%

What does that say to us? It's that thought leadership has barely evolved as a self-standing function in most IT services firms – self-standing in that it is given a budget and allowed to determine how to spend it.

Why Do They Invest in Thought Leadership and How Do They Measure the Impact?

What are IT services firms hoping their thought leadership investments will achieve? We asked our survey participants to name the three most important reasons from a list of eight. (They could also choose "other," although only two did.)

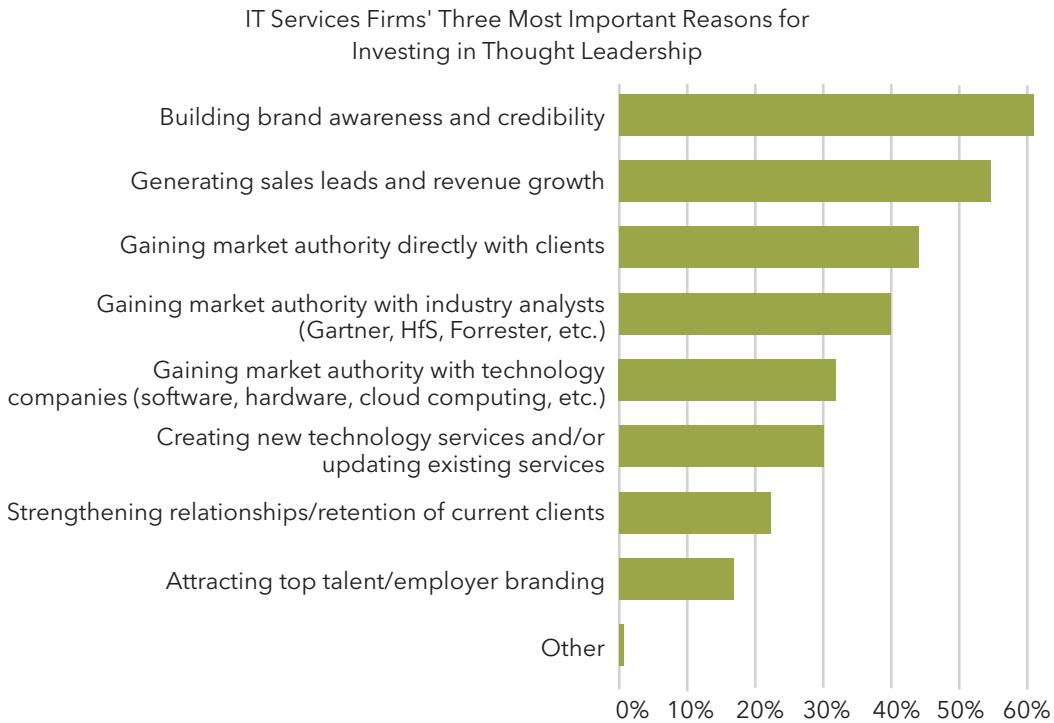
The most frequent reason is building brand awareness and credibility. It was cited by 61% as a top three factor. (See Exhibit 10.) Following that was generating sales leads (54% picked that). And 44% chose gaining market authority – i.e., having clients see them as an expert in some area (vs. having a third-party confer that authority).

Close behind (chosen by 40%) was influencing IT analyst firms so that they'd recognize their IT services firm as an authority. That was cited more often than was gaining market authority with software, hardware, cloud computing, and other technology companies.

Only 30% of IT services firms said using thought leadership to create new services or update existing services was a top three reason for investing. And even fewer (22%) said customer retention was one of their three most important goals for thought leadership.

Exhibit 10:

Why Invest in Thought Leadership? Brand and Revenue Top the List



We then asked how they measure the impact of thought leadership.

We provided 10 metrics and asked which ones they use.

First, the good news: Only 3% had no formal metrics for gauging the impact of their thought leadership activities. Now the bad news: For the 97% who have metrics, the most frequently used were not revenue, leads, and proposals - as we would hope, given that we believe thought leadership should help drive market share leadership.

Instead, they more often cited other metrics that can't be turned into dollars and cents. The most common (cited by 53%) was social media engagement (likes, shares, mentions). (See Exhibit 11.) Slightly behind (at 51%) were mentions or rankings by the IT analyst firms. Following that were brand awareness (47%), earned media coverage (46%), and downloads or views of thought leadership content (45%).

Far less frequently cited metrics were revenue-related:

- Requests for proposals (34%)
- Inquiries from potential clients (31%)
- Revenue (22%)

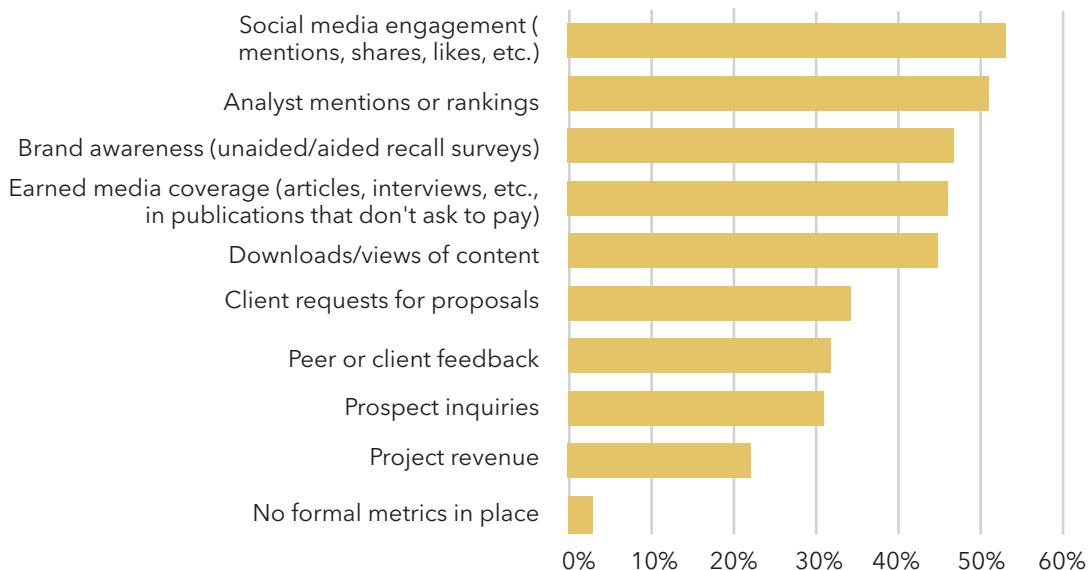
That tells us this: Most IT services firms depend on non-financial metrics because they can't directly connect thought leadership to client purchasing decisions. Many of these people, since they can't prove that thought leadership impacts the top line, aren't willing to argue that it does, even if they have anecdotal evidence.

Over the years, we've heard some get into a defensive crouch, telling executives *not* to expect thought leadership to drive revenue, only "brand enhancement." But this becomes a problem during downturns when corporate functions must justify their budgets. With no proof it moves the revenue needle, thought leadership budgets often get squeezed.

Exhibit 11:

Most IT Services Firms Aren't Tracking the ROI of Thought Leadership

How IT Services Firms Gauge the Impact of Thought Leadership



Does Thought Leadership Drive Revenue? Most Say "If at All, Not Much"

We then asked our IT services participants what impact, if any, their thought leadership programs have on revenue growth. Nearly two-thirds (64%) said "none," "slight," or "moderate" impact. In contrast, far fewer - 36% - said "high" or "very high" impact. But of those, only 12% said "very high."

That makes our findings on how they measure thought leadership more understandable. Most IT services firms don't measure the revenue impact it because they don't think has much, if any, revenue impact.

Biggest Barriers to Improving the ROI on Thought Leadership

Whether they rigorously measure the revenue impact of thought leadership, we wanted to know what holds their companies back from getting higher financial impact. We asked them to choose the three biggest barriers to improving their returns from a list of 11.

None of the barriers stood head and shoulders above the others. The four most often chosen barriers were: lack of thought leadership talent; limited buy-in and participation by senior managers; lack of internal recognition and rewards for internal experts to participate in thought leadership programs; and difficultly measuring the ROI. (See Exhibit 12.)

Low-quality content rarely was a top three barrier (chosen by only 13% of the respondents). Twice as many said ineffective marketers were a top three barrier.

Exhibit 12:

What's Holding Thought Leadership Back? Talent is the Top Barrier

Biggest Barriers to Dramatically Improving the ROI on Thought Leadership		
Rank	Barrier	Frequency of Mention as Top 3 Barrier
1	Attracting skilled thought leadership talent (editors, researchers, marketers, etc.), whether employees or contractors	44%
2	Limited senior leadership buy-in and participation	40%
3	Lack of internal recognition and rewards for subject experts to participate	38%
4	Measuring ROI	35%
5	Ineffective internal collaboration among thought leadership researchers, salespeople, marketers, subject experts)	29%
6	Ineffective marketing programs	26%
7	Getting agreement on topics to focus on	23%
8	Insufficient budget	18%
9	Ineffective reporting structure for thought leadership content group	17%
9 (tied)	Excessive focus on generating immediate client work rather than longer-term opportunities	17%
10	Low-quality content	13%



SECTION 3:

Comparing the Best and Worst IT Services Firms at Thought Leadership

If some IT services firms are generating very high revenue impact from thought leadership and others are generating none, this begs the question: **What are the former doing that the latter aren't doing?** This is the most important issue that we explored.

The answers from the survey respondents who said "no" impact or "very high impact" were the ones we felt were most critical to compare. That is where the biggest insights come from for any thought leadership research - including studies on the practice of thought leadership itself, which is what this one is about.

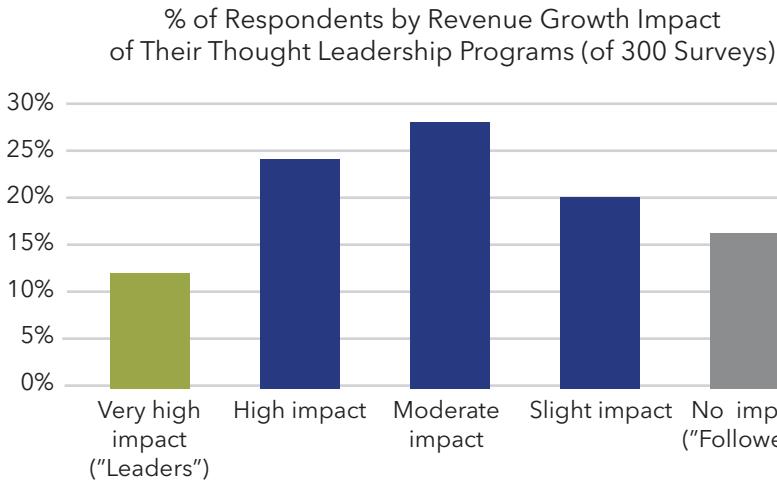
With that in mind, we wanted to know whether the IT services firms that answered "very high impact" or "no impact" differed significantly on how they answered our other survey questions. If there were stark differences - in how much they spend, where thought leadership reports, how they produce and market content, and other areas - it would shed light on what all IT services firms need to do to turn their thought leadership activities into revenue generators.

To quickly identify these two subsets of our survey participants, we'll refer to those that said thought leadership had very high impact (36 surveys, or 12% of the 300-participant survey base) as "Leaders." And we'll call those who said no impact (47 respondents, or 16% of the base) as "Followers." (See Exhibit 13.)

High Impact = LEADERS
No Impact = FOLLOWERS

Exhibit 13:

Thought Leadership Bounties (Revenue) Go to the Few



But first, one factor that *doesn't* show a big difference is the size of companies that we term "Leaders" and "Followers." We point this out because you may think that generating revenue from thought leadership requires a huge budget – an immense investment that only the largest IT services firms could fund (e.g., Accenture, IBM, Capgemini, etc.). But the average size of the "Leaders" vs. the "Followers" in our survey doesn't indicate that. The average revenue of "Leaders" is larger than that of "Followers," but only by 24%: \$3.1 billion vs. \$2.5 billion.

So thought leadership doesn't necessarily favor those with the deepest pockets.

Now let's deeply explore what IT services "Leaders" and "Followers" at thought leadership do differently. We'll also present how they compare to the average for all 300 IT services firms surveyed.

We'll compare Leaders and Followers in seven areas:

- 1. Investments:** Spending more overall, and more on research.
- 2. Measures:** Monitoring content quality (more than quantity) and its top-line impact.
- 3. Processes:** Developing rigorous methods for creating content (both research- and non-research-based), and for creating client demand for the related services (i.e., determining the optimal marketing mix, and equipping salespeople to sell as thought leaders).

4. **Advocates:** Creating the right types (internal leaders who view thought leadership as a competitive advantage in demand creation and service innovation) and in the right places (leaders who can put those beliefs into action).
5. **Connections:** Explicitly tying thought leadership research to both demand generation activities (marketing and sales) and to service innovation (methodology development and training & development) so the firm can meet rapidly increasing demand for its services with high-quality supply.
6. **Talent:** Attracting and developing people to gain the rare skills of conducting exceptional best-practice research, luring buyers with that content (writing articles, visualizing data insights, running seminars, etc.), teaching salespeople how to sell with it, and helping service delivery managers ramp up supply.
7. **Structure:** On the organizational chart, making sure the thought leadership content group does not report to marketing, sales or service delivery, but rather to strategy, corporate development, or another high-ranking officer so that thought leadership can fuel demand- and supply-creation without becoming captive to either.



The first letters of those seven areas purposely turn into the acronym "IMPACTS." (That should make them easier to remember!) More importantly, we use this acronym because our research and collective decades of experience in thought leadership at IT services firms demonstrate that if you excel in these seven areas, your thought leadership investments should shift from being a cost center to a revenue producer.

Let's explore each factor, and how Leaders, Followers, and the average IT services firm fared on them. On each front, we then explain what to learn from the Leaders on how to turn thought leadership into a competitive advantage.

IMPACTS



Investments: Spending More Overall, and On Research

The issues of how much to invest, and on what, clearly separate the best IT services firms at thought leadership from the worst (Exhibit 14):

- Leaders spend six times what the Followers spend: 3.2% vs. 0.5% of revenue.
- Followers invest 71% less on thought leadership content development and marketing than the average IT services firm: (1.75% of revenue).
- When asked about the size of their thought leadership budget in 2027, Leaders predict a 25% increase on average from their 2025 budget; Followers expect only a 6% boost.

Exhibit 14:

The Best Spend on Thought Leadership (and the Worst Spend Little)

Thought Leadership Spending: Comparing Leaders, Followers and All IT Services Firms					
	Spend as % of Revenue	Spending Plan by 2027 (Increase, Decrease, etc.)	% of Content Spent on Research-Based Content	% of Content Spent on Non-Research-Based Content	Size of Team (Full-Time Equivalents)
Leaders	3.2%	+25%	57%	43%	9.7
Followers	0.5%	+6%	28%	72%	2.8
All IT services firms	1.75%	+23%	42%	58%	5.9

Large spending differences between Leaders and Followers also show up in what they spend their budgets on. We asked survey participants to estimate how much of their content investments went to research studies (surveys, best-practice case study research, etc.) and non-research content. By non-research content, we mean such things as interviewing the firm's consultants and other experts to produce white papers, blogs and other articles, or having them write those articles themselves. Increasingly, IT services firms are turning to generative AI to crank out such content, as you'll see later in the report.

The Leaders spend the majority of their content budgets (57%) on research-based content. That is more than twice the percentage of the

Followers, which spend 28% of their content budget on research. The average across all IT services firms was 42% on research. (See Exhibit 14.)

What's more, Leaders appear to focus their investments on fewer topics than do Followers. We make this observation on a question we asked about how their companies choose topics. The highest percentage of Leaders (67%) said they devise a content strategy plan, which then determines their topics. That was more than twice the percentage (30%) of Followers; they are more likely to take a tactical approach to topic choosing. For example, 53% of Followers turn to AI for topic suggestions, making it their most frequently used approach.



“Leaders appear to focus their investments on fewer topics than do Followers.”

Answers to another survey question further suggest that Leaders are more intentional about how they allocate their investments. When asked about their leadership team's involvement in content development, 86% of Leaders characterized it as “highly” involved or playing a “critical role” (meaning, they drive topic strategy and other aspects of thought leadership). In contrast, only 11% of Followers said the same thing; 60% of these IT services firms said their leadership team was not involved at all or had only limited involvement.

For its thought leadership programs, India-based Tata Consultancy Services (revenue of \$30 billion) has invested heavily in primary research since 2011, when it conducted a study on cloud computing, surveying more than 600 companies. Every year since then, it has conducted [surveys](#) of large global companies worldwide on a range of digital business topics including social media, AI, Internet of Things, and cybersecurity. “There is no way that thought leadership can make an impact and give us a differentiated voice without research,” says Serge Perignon, global head of TCS’ Thought Leadership Institute and services marketing. “It’s very hard to break through all the noise without very specific data points. We need our own data, our own voice, our own points of view. Research-based thought leadership is a paramount ingredient to impactful marketing.”²⁴

From our experience, the 72% of the content budget that Followers spend on non-research content typically captures internal subject experts' knowledge gained from their client work. While this is important, SME views often reflect insights they've gained from a few dozen (at most) client projects. That is far fewer than those that are gained when best-practice research explores the experiences of multiple dozens or hundreds of companies.

All to say, thought leadership research based on anecdotal or even deep experiences with just a few clients won't deliver the rare insights that must be gained today to produce groundbreaking solutions to complex issues.

From two questions that we asked, the 200 executives in 11 industries that choose IT services firms indicate a strong preference for extensive best-practice research. One question was about the qualities of thought leadership content they valued. We gave them a list of nine and asked them to list the three they valued most. (See Exhibit 15.) The three most frequently mentioned were:

- Relevance: That the content addressed a big issue at their company (chosen by 53%).
- Statistical evidence from quantitative surveys showing how many companies were dealing with an issue of relevance. 52% chose this.
- Case study evidence of real companies (identified by name) that shows how they are dealing with the issue. 43% chose this.

In our conversations with such executives, they spoke about the value of primary research, especially real case studies. Says Micah Friedman, chief transformation officer at UK-based company Edyn Limited, a \$100 million revenue hospitality services firm¹²: "The experience of solving problems – done in case examples – is where you can see qualitatively how the problem was solved and the outcome."

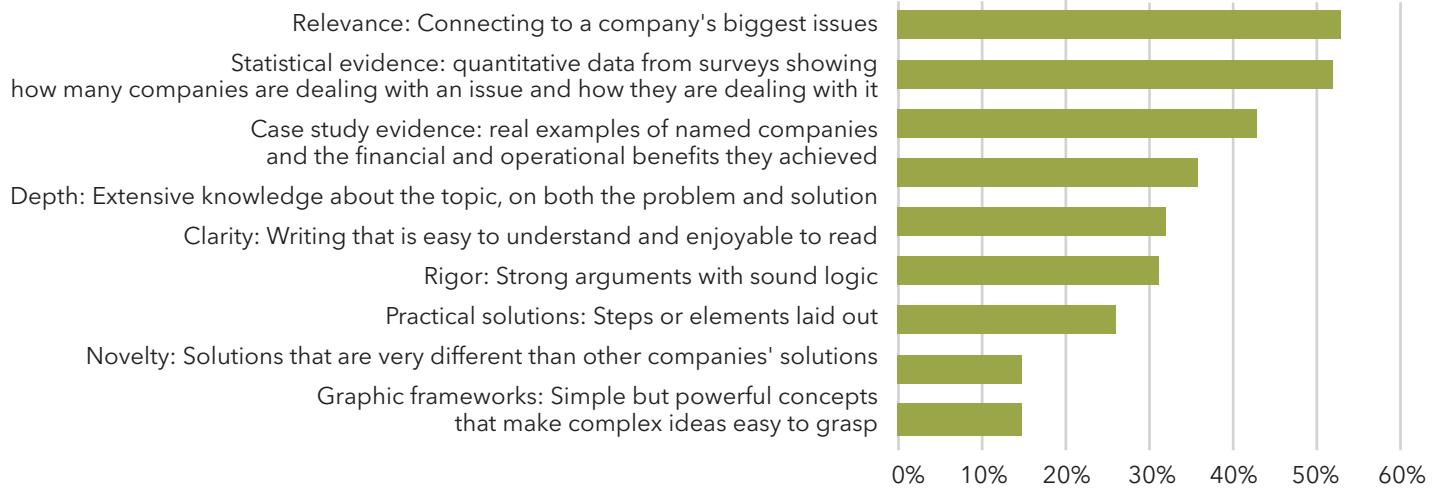
Eric Singleton, a former CIO at consumer goods, technology companies and government agencies, and co-founder of Strax Networks (an augmented reality marketing services firm), agrees. "I've always felt that case studies carry a different aura for me. If it's a good one ... that aligns with what you're doing, then we follow up [with them]. They're in sort of a class of their own."

RELEVANCE STATISTICAL EVIDENCE CASE STUDY EVIDENCE

Exhibit 15:

Above All, Buyers Want Relevance and Evidence

What Buyers of IT Services Value Most in Thought Leadership Content



The other question asked was about which formats of thought leadership they find most valuable. By "formats," we mean research reports, white papers based on secondary research and authors' experiences, blogs and other short articles, videos, webinar or conference presentations, books, and more. Here again, we asked them to pick three out of nine formats that we listed. The most frequently valued format was long primary research reports. (See Exhibit 16.)

Exhibit 16:

How IT Services Buyers Like Content to be Served to Them

Thought Leadership Formats That IT Services Customers Like Most



Section 3: Comparing the Best and Worst IT Services Firms at Thought Leadership

While we didn't ask our IT services respondents this, we know from our own client experience and interactions with thought leadership professionals that the thought leadership *research* budget usually pales in comparison to the thought leadership *marketing* budget. And when compared to the total marketing budget, spending on thought leadership research typically is a fraction of that.

Our conclusion on thought leadership investments: IT services firms that want to differentiate their services and get market attention must invest in rigorous primary research that unearths best practices in the marketplace - including their clients and other companies -- on issues relevant to their clients.

And, of course, that research needs to be in sync with their firm's service strategy. Why research a fascinating issue that the firm has no intention of building a service around? (You might laugh, but we've seen this several times. It often happens when a practice leader or other individual plans to leave an IT services firm with a new area of expertise that captures their fancy.)

If funding for deep best-practice research somehow can't be justified, the discussion should be about where to reallocate some budget. A marketing budget with sizable investments in brand-building events (e.g., sports sponsorships), IT analyst road shows (remember: a higher percentage of clients see thought leadership as more influential in their IT service purchasing decisions than IT analyst recommendations), and other activities might be a good place to look.

A last note about thought leadership research: The IT analyst firms have long promoted their services in conducting co-branded thought leadership research for their clients, which of course include IT services firms. But with co-branding comes an intellectual capital issue. Are the insights truly from your company? Or are they from the analyst firm that conducted the study with or for you? We believe your audience will figure it's the analyst firm, particularly because their business is conducting research.

This is another issue on which the best IT services firms at thought leadership differ significantly from the worst. On average, the Leaders brand 58% of their research studies as solely their own; they co-brand 42% of their studies with IT analyst firms, publishers, and others). In contrast, the Followers co-brand 65% of their research studies, and brand 35% of their studies as their own.

Largely speaking, we think the disadvantages of co-branding a study with another organization - unless they are a business partner that you bring onto your projects (or vice versa) - outweigh the advantages. Not

everyone agrees with us. Ben Pring, a former VP and analyst at Gartner and co-founder of Cognizant's Center for the Future of Work, told us: "If you're a no-name [IT services] brand and you're trying to get established, there's no obvious solution to it. You can do it yourselves and control it and could be really high quality. But if nobody knows your name, you can't get any visibility for this in the marketplace. It's just a tree falling in the forest. But if you go with a brand that you're trying to leverage, then perhaps it gets watered down. It becomes a bit 'me too.' You can't control it as much. That tension is always there."

Tackling the “Quality is in the Eye of the Beholder” Problem

We've heard this question since the late 1980s: What constitutes outstanding thought leadership content? If you knew exactly what drives clients from reading to reaching out, you'd work hard to make sure your studies, white papers, conference presentations, books, and blog posts reflected those attributes. For example, what makes a "big" idea big?

We have research-backed insights on those attributes – at least, about the ideas expressed in thought leadership content. (We're taking graphics and formats out of our criteria here. We asked about the most desired formats in another question.) The attributes that your clients say are more important should drive your content. But please note that of the nine below, all of them matter, just not to the same degree. Your content needs to be strong on all nine criteria, but strongest on the most important ones.

How clients rank them is very similar to how Leaders at IT services in thought leadership rank them. Here's how clients rank them (Exhibit 17):

1. Relevance
2. Statistical evidence from surveys
3. Case study evidence
4. Depth
5. Clear writing
6. Rigor
7. Practical solutions
8. Novel solutions and conceptual frameworks (that graphically simplify complex ideas). These two are tied for eighth.

Exhibit 17:

Do Clients and IT Services See Eye-to-Eye on Quality Content?

Comparing What Tech Services Firms and Their Clients Define as Quality Content				
Ranking Criteria	Clients of Tech Services Firms	All Tech Services Firms	TL "Leaders" among Tech Services Firms	TL "Followers" among Tech services Firms
Relevance	1	4	1	4
Rigor	6	5	7	7
Case study evidence	3	1	3	1
Statistical evidence from surveys	2	2	2	9
Novel solutions	8	6	7	2
Clear writing	5	7	4	4
Practical solutions	7	3	6	2
Depth	4	8	5	7
Conceptual frameworks that graphically simplify complex ideas	8	9	9	6

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Measuring: It Boils Down to Gauging Content Impact and Quality

In 2023, IBM's thought leadership research group, the IBM Institute for Business Value, unveiled the results of groundbreaking survey of more than 4,000 top executives around the world (average size company was \$14 billion in revenue). The study asked them whether reading thought leadership content from consulting, tech services, and other firms directly influenced their decisions on which ones to use. The answer in many cases was a definitive yes. The IBM researchers calculated that thought leadership influenced \$265 billion in such purchases annually, including \$99 billion in technology alone.¹³

Yet despite growing statistical and anecdotal evidence that high-quality thought leadership content and effective marketing produces revenue, many thought leadership professionals still must prove the ROI. We saw this in the answers to a survey question that asked them about the biggest obstacle to getting top management support for thought leadership. (We provided five obstacles, along with the ability to indicate that there were none in their firm – i.e., that they already have top management support for thought leadership.)

Across all 300 IT services firms, the most frequently mentioned barrier was poor ROI measures. Not surprisingly, it was the biggest obstacle in the Followers, but not in the leaders. (See Exhibit 18.)

 “The IBM researchers calculated that thought leadership influenced \$265 billion in such purchases annually, including \$99 billion in technology purchases alone.”

Exhibit 18:
"Show Me the Money" Still Rings True

Biggest Obstacles to Gaining Top Management Support of Thought Leadership Activities			
	All IT Services Firms	Leaders in Thought Leadership	Followers in Thought Leadership
1	Poor ROI measurement of thought leadership investments	Lack of awareness of how to develop and market thought leadership content effectively	Poor ROI measurement of thought leadership investments
2	Little personal experience in seeing how thought leadership can open client doors and influence buying decisions	Poor ROI measurement of thought leadership investments	Lack of awareness of how to develop and market thought leadership content effectively
3	Lack of understanding about how thought leadership content can lead to service innovation	Lack of understanding about how thought leadership content can lead to service innovation	Lack of understanding of value that clients place on thought leadership
4	Lack of awareness of how to develop and market thought leadership content effectively	Lack of understanding of value that clients place on thought leadership	Lack of understanding about how thought leadership content can lead to service innovation
5	Lack of understanding of value that clients place on thought leadership	Little personal experience in seeing how thought leadership can open client doors and influence buying decisions	Little personal experience in seeing how thought leadership can open client doors and influence buying decisions

Senior management of most IT services firms still want proof that thought leadership drives revenue. That, of course, means that thought leadership managers need to get the proof. Yet we've heard for decades how difficult that is. Salespeople don't reveal or don't ask clients why they chose their firm. Marketing doesn't have access to the lead pipeline.

But if thought leadership professionals are looking to claim the content they produce was the primary reason why clients chose their firm, they're asking for trouble. Thought leadership is one of several factors at play. Measurement needs to prove correlation, not causation. As Micah Friedman told us, "If [some content] was really impressive, it was something I spread around to the other executives and said, 'Hey, I think they got the essence of this. There's something here, and we should be talking to these guys. We'll learn something.'"

In other words, thought leadership will spark a conversation with an IT services firm, which might spark further conversations, and then perhaps lead to discussions with other clients of the firm, a requested proposal and, if on target, a project.

But if thought leadership professionals can't gather the evidence that thought leadership is driving initial conversations, RFPs and project wins, the next best thing to measure is something they have 100% control over: the quality of the content they produce. If you can get rigorous here, you'll have the insights to:

- Guide your content developers before they begin their work. "Remember, we said at least three compelling case studies of named companies. . ."
- Know when a piece of content is ready to go to market. For example, "Do our three case study examples show significant-enough financial and operational improvements?" If not, find other metrics from those companies, or gather information on others.

What's more, you could compile strong leading indicators of the future performance of your thought leadership campaigns. But why measure that, you might be asking?

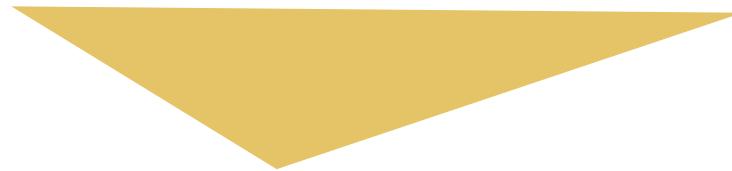
Here's our logic: Ultimately, the payoff from thought leadership comes when clients read a research report, white paper, conference presentation, and/or other content from an IT services firm and decide, "They have the expertise we need." Yes, there must be a chemistry fit between the client and the IT services firm's client officer, the person(s) who sells the work, and the project team. However, it's the expertise revealed in the thought leadership content that gets the client to think "They're better."

If you agree with that logic, then it behooves the thought leadership group- most of all - to produce outstanding content consistently. The nine criteria we mentioned earlier - novel solution, relevant problem, case study evidence that the solution is effective, and the others -- can all be measured. At the very least, you can make what appear to be subjective evaluations far less subjective, and perhaps objective but based on arbitrary indicators. (Example: You could say that every article you publish needs at least three real examples of named companies whose improvements were quantified in financial terms.)

If you produced and measured every piece of content with that criteria in mind, you'll have a scorecard of the quality of your content. If you've done what's necessary to make every or most pieces of content strong, you could have a good leading indicator of how many leads that content will produce.

Does that sound far-fetched? We don't think so, looking at other industries that have measured the quality of their products to try to predict future demand. Back in the 1980s, the late Harvard Business School professor David Garvin found that Japanese car companies' higher-quality automobiles helped them increase their share of the U.S. market.¹⁴ Bain & Company, the consulting firm, has claimed for years that in most industries its Net Promoter Score of a company's products or services can predict 20% to 60% variations in organic revenue growth among competitors. "In other words," says the company's NPS website, "a company's NPS is a good indicator of its future growth."¹⁵

We think the same quality principles that have been used for decades in other industries should apply to thought leadership content.



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Processes: Using Rigorous Methods for Content Development and Marketing

In our survey, we wanted to assess the techniques IT services firms use to develop and market content that they hope their audience will view as "thought leadership." We begin here with our findings on their content development processes. We then follow that with our findings on marketing.

Quality software is the result of highly skilled people following rigorous methods for determining requirements, designing an "architecture" that enables the resulting system to be updated quickly rather than having to be torn apart, and writing code. All that is important, whether the engineers use agile or waterfall approaches.

Like quality software, creating consistently high-quality thought leadership content requires rigorous methods and talented people in each stage of the content development process. And without consistently high-quality content, IT services firms will waste a lot of marketing and sales investments in trying to peddle me-too, superficial ideas.

That's our experience. It's also what can be concluded from the data we collected from four survey questions:

- How IT services firms come up with the topics that they write about and present in speeches, webinars, and what not
- What processes (including content quality standards) - if any - they use to create non-research-based content on the topics they choose (e.g., white papers based on internal subject experts' client work, secondary research, etc.)
- What guidance they give content developers on thought leadership studies they conduct
- Whether they are using generative AI to accomplish the three prior points: determine topics, create content, and produce research reports.

Our overriding conclusion is that thought leadership content development at most IT services firms (and perhaps most B2B firms) is an idiosyncratic endeavor. If you looked at most of these firms, you'd find their researchers, writers, editors, and consultants (writing their own content) using their own methods.

That's a recipe for considerable inconsistency: great content followed by poor content followed by average content followed by poor content, and so on.

We'll look at what the average IT services firm does in content development, and what the Leaders and Followers do differently (if they are different).

Most IT Services Firms Don't Have Solid Methodologies for Content Development

A rigorous process for thought leadership content development begins with determining what topics a firm should invest in developing content for, within a given timeframe. Should the number of topics align with its service lines – e.g., five out of 10 topics devoted to a service line generating 50% of the firm's revenue this calendar year? Should one topic be on a future service line? Should more than one – for example, to test the waters of a new service line that hasn't been launched?

With this in mind, we asked our 300 survey participants to explain how they chose the topics they write about. (See Exhibit 19.) We had them check off one or more of nine common ways to choose topics. Most frequently (by 51%), they determine their choices from a strategic content plan. That's good, but of course that means nearly half don't do that. Almost as many (46%) let IT analyst firms tell them what to write about, and nearly the same number (45%) look at what competitors publish. Many (41%) ask AI for topic suggestions. Less than 40% use internal and customer input to determine topics.

Exhibit 19:

What Should IT Services Firms Write About? No Method Dominates

How IT Services Firms Decide on Topics for Their Content

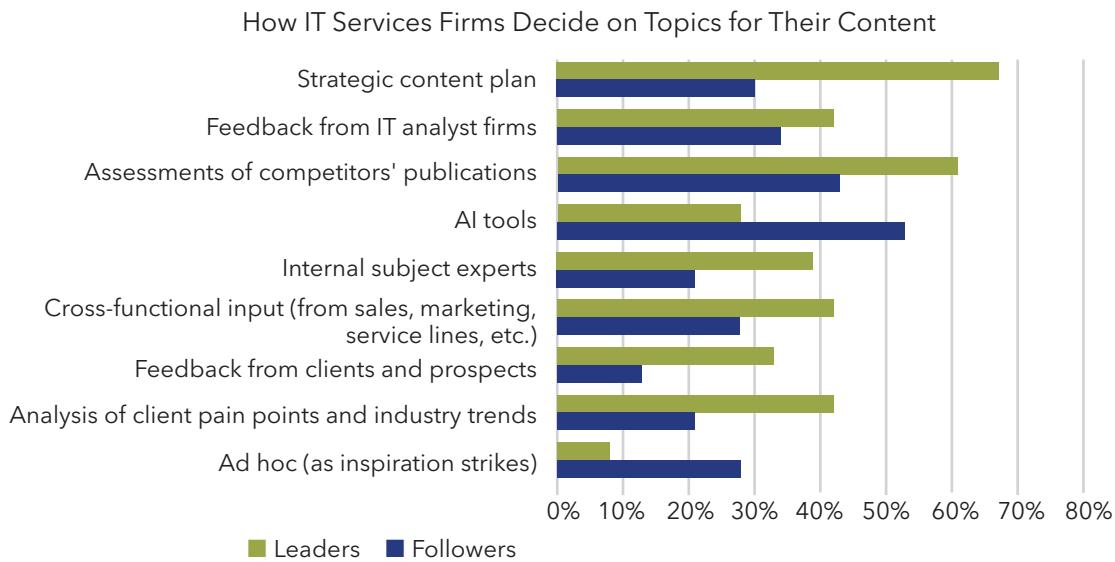


How do the best IT services firms at thought leadership – our “Leaders” – decide what topics are in or out? Most frequently, they create a content strategy that determines topics. Two-thirds (67%) do that, more than twice the percentage of the Followers (30%). Leaders’ second most frequently used tactic is competitor assessment, used by 61% vs. 43% of Followers. (See Exhibit 20.)

Surprisingly, Followers most frequently use AI to decide what to write about. More than half of them do this (53%). We must note, as you’ll read in the sidebar (“Generative AI in Thought Leadership”), more Followers than Leaders use AI in the different aspects of the content development process that we asked them about.

Exhibit 20:

Leaders Strategize on Topics; Followers Listen to AI Suggestions



We then asked IT services firms to give us an overall idea of how they create thought leadership content – whether research-based or not – after the topics are selected. We offered four choices, from least rigorous to most (Exhibit 21):

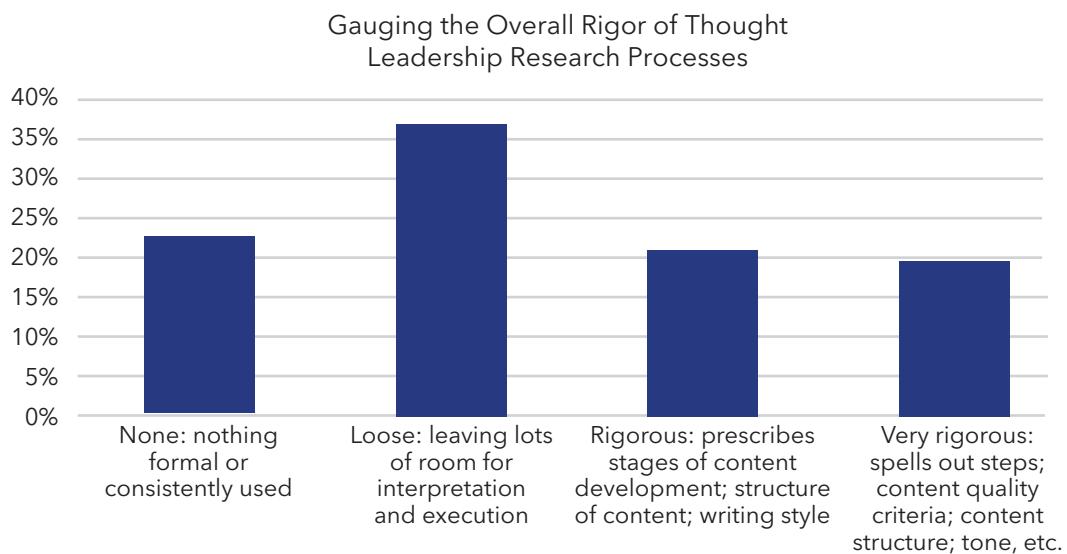
- No formal process was in place. About one in five said this (22%).
- A process that leaves great room for interpretation and execution (e.g., a barebones, one-page outline, or vague quality criteria). Some 37% chose this.
- A process that prescribes the stages of content development, the structure of content, the writing style and tone, etc. Only 21% chose this.
- A process that explicitly states the qualities of compelling ideas; a narrative structure for explaining the ideas; how to convey them;

and how to display them (use of graphs, charts, frameworks, photos, videos, audio, and other non-text elements). The fewest number of IT services firms chose this -- 20%.

From this data, we argue that a strong majority of IT services firms -- 80% -- do not have a rigorous process for content development. Only one in five does.

Exhibit 21:

Most IT Services' Content Development Methods aren't Rigorous



This is a major difference between the best IT services firms at thought leadership (the Leaders) and the rest. Nearly 70% of Leaders had a rigorous or very rigorous process. That was more than twice the number of Followers (34%). (See Exhibit 22.)

Exhibit 22:

Most Leaders Have a Rigorous Content Development Process; Most Followers Don't

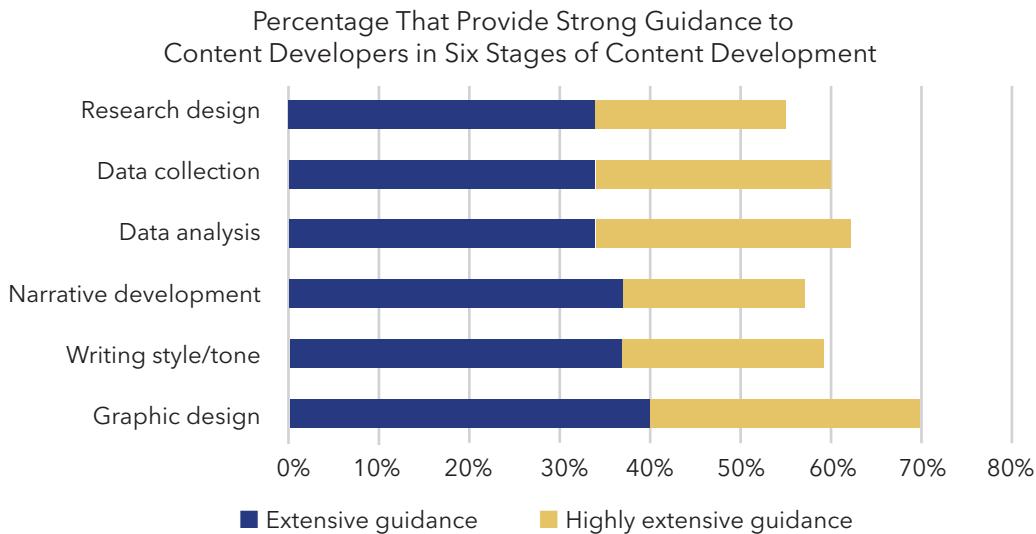


But we weren't satisfied with leaving our benchmarking of content development rigor at that high a level. Toward that end, we asked IT services firms how much guidance they give their content developers (whether employees or outside agencies, including survey houses) in six fundamental stages of the thought leadership content development process. They answered each question on a five-point scale, from "no guidance" to "highly extensive" guidance.

In each of those six stages, on average only a minority (30% or fewer) of IT services firms give content developers highly extensive guidance. (See Exhibit 23.) But the picture looks better when you combine survey respondents who said "extensive" guidance with those who said "highly extensive" guidance.

Exhibit 23:

Creativity in Content Development is Running Too Wild



How do the Leaders and Followers compare on this front? Combining their "extensive" and "highly extensive" guidance scores, Leaders provide more guidance in five of six content development areas. The only arena in which the Followers provide more guidance than Leaders do is on graphic design. The visual appearance of thought leadership documents is, of course, crucial. But the ideas contained in those documents are even more so.

The biggest gap between Leaders and Followers in how they guided their content developers was in research design: 91% of Leaders do so; only 56% of Followers do so. (See Exhibits 24 and 25.) From our experience, this doesn't surprise us.

Exhibit 24:

The Rewards of Strong Guidance in Thought Leadership
Research Design



The three of us (separately and together) have designed dozens of primary research studies over the last three decades for consulting and IT services companies. We tell companies that the research design stage is where they plant the seeds for illuminating findings to grow -- or not. Decisions made in this first phase of the research process greatly determine whether the research findings will be deep vs. superficial, novel vs. nothing new, and persuasive vs. highly arguable.

Francis Hintermann, global managing director of Accenture's global thought leadership research group (Accenture Research), explained to us that the company's choice of research topics and issues to investigate "is a work of co-creation. It starts with our colleagues in the business practices of our industry groups, and our colleagues in marketing, and our clients and ecosystem partners."

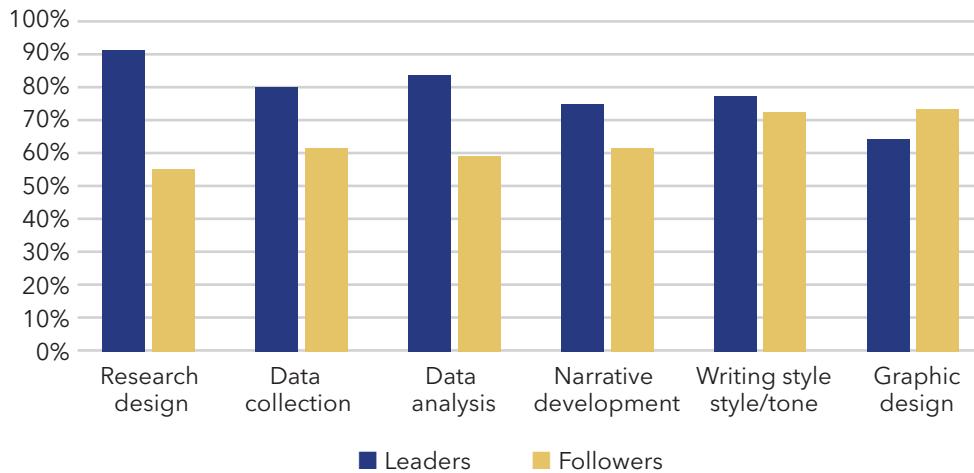
Jerome Buvat, vice president and global head of the Capgemini Research Institute, knows this well. "You need to choose a topic that is researchable," said Buvat, who has led the €22 billion consulting and IT services firm's thought leadership group since 2019. "This sounds very basic. But so many of our colleagues come up with brilliant ideas that are not researchable in the sense that ... you'll be able to find answers in the market or with clients. ... It's very important to bear that in mind. I think the success of the quality of the content will come from the quality of the hypotheses and the quality of the questions you're asking."

With the explosion in thought leadership studies, rigorous research design is no longer a luxury: in topic bounding (determining a topic that is researchable given the constraints of time and budget), initial hypotheses generation (to find "white space" in the market), and research methods selection (using quantitative surveys, qualitative "best" and "rest" practice case study interviews, and generative AI for extensive desk research).

Exhibit 25:

Leaders Ahead in 5 Out of 6 Content Development Areas

Where Leaders Lead in Guiding Content Development (%)
That Give Extensive or Highly Extensive Guidance)



Perhaps because many are less experienced at conducting thought leadership primary research, the Followers were far more likely to work with research or publishing companies on studies. We asked what percentage of their studies were co-branded with and conducted by research, analyst firms, and publishers.

The ratio for Followers is 35%/65% -- 35% conducted internally; 65% conducted by outsiders. The ratio for Leaders was very different: 58% conducted in-house vs. 42% co-branded and conducted by external partners. (See Exhibit 26.)

Exhibit 26:

To Partner or Not to Partner on Research: Leaders More Often Go It Alone



Leaders Lean on Earned Media, Followers More on Paid Media

We also wanted to know how IT services firms market thought leadership content -- whether studies, white papers, books, op-ed placements, or other material. For example, do they use their company website blogs or social media posts (both of which are free) more often than paid advertorials or search engine ads? What's more, we wanted to understand their emphasis among four basic marketing channels: owned, earned, shared, and paid media.

First, let's look at their thought leadership marketing tactics. In frequency of usage of nine tactics, the most popular by far is social media channels (by 63%). A distant second and third are their company's website (43%) and email marketing (42%). Much lower on the list: op-eds (19%) and advertorials (17%). (See Exhibit 27.)

Exhibit 27:

How Do They Market Their Content? Social Media is By Far the Favorite Tactic



In marketing tactics, there was little difference between Leaders and Followers. The most frequently used tactic by both were their company website/blog (used by 58% of Leaders and 60% of Followers). The only big difference was in paid digital advertising: 36% of Followers did this vs. only 14% of Leaders.

What did Leaders and Followers emphasize among the four basic categories of marketing channels? And did that differ much among all IT services companies surveyed?

The only sizable difference was in *earned media*: Leaders allocated a much larger percentage of their thought leadership media budget to earned media (28%) than did Followers (15%). (See Exhibit 28.) We've long contended that earned media is the most valuable type, in part because it's the hardest to attain. Earned media are platforms (publications, conferences, seminars, webinars, etc.) that external gatekeepers (editors, conference organizers, and others) invite others to participate in solely on merit, without requiring "pay for play." The op-ed you send to an IT publication or *Harvard Business Review*; the invitation to speak at an industry event (and sometimes be paid for); the podcast invitation without a fee - all those are examples of earned media.

Earned media is powerful for thought leaders because it increases their credibility. A well-respected conference, business journal, podcaster, or business magazine is opening up its digital or print pages, conference speaking agenda, or podcast channel to you. Our finding that Leaders in thought leadership commit a larger share of their marketing budget to generate earned media is what we would expect.

Exhibit 28:

Owned vs. Earned vs. Shared vs. Paid: What's the Media Mix?

Percent of Thought Leadership Marketing Budget Allocated to Owned, Earned, Shared and Paid Media			
Media Category	Leaders	Followers	All Surveys
Owned Content published on your own platforms (e.g., website, blog, webinars, newsletters, company-hosted podcasts, company seminars and conferences, branded reports, publications)	41%	44%	34%
Earned External recognition and publicity (e.g., guest articles in third-party journals, press mentions, invitations to speak at industry events, guest podcast appearances, award submissions)	28%	15%	22%
Shared Social media platforms like LinkedIn, Medium, X where you post content at no direct cost	16%	17%	21%
Paid Sponsored promotion to amplify TL content (e.g., paid ads, promoted social media posts, sponsored content on third-party sites, pay-for-play speaking engagements)	15%	24%	23%



A

Advocates: Having Champions in the Right Places

The most talented thought leadership group can't get much traction if others in the firm ignore its invitations to collaborate. And without strong involvement and sincere encouragement, thought leadership is not likely to have much, if any, revenue impact if its activities and their outputs are dismissed internally.

Conversely, one or all of us have worked with (or at) consulting and IT services firms that revere thought leadership: Accenture, Deloitte, Tata Consultancy Services, Cognizant and (a long ago) Computer Sciences Corp.'s management consulting unit, CSC Index, in the 1990s. We have seen the importance of having the CEO and practice leaders who recognize the power of groundbreaking insights to open doors to clients' CEOs, business unit leaders, C-suite chiefs, and chief information officers. The people producing and marketing thought leadership need advocacy -- not benign neglect -- in high places in their firm.

"Thought leadership needs to be CEO-led," Malcolm Frank, who led strategy and marketing at Cognizant's from 2005 to 2019, explained to us: "It requires senior leadership. We had remarkable leadership from Frank D'Souza." D'Souza was Cognizant's CEO from 2007 to 2019, a period in which revenue soared sixfold (from \$2.8 billion to \$16.6 billion) and market cap more than threefold (from \$12 billion to \$41 billion). In 2019, D'Souza co-founded tech services-focused private equity firm Recognize, where he is managing partner.

Said Malcolm Frank: "Frank [D'Souza] really believed in thought leadership at Cognizant. And it wasn't just him. It was our incredible board." On that board, Cognizant's thought leadership advocates included then-board members John Klein¹⁶ (board chair) and Robert E. (Bob) Weissman, whom Frank said, "was a very important voice in this."¹⁷

But far more frequently we've seen little company collaboration with, and encouragement of, IT services' thought leadership groups. These behaviors can play out like this:

- **Practice leaders and consultants:** When they make little time to let thought leadership researchers, writers, and editors tap their expertise, the firm's content exudes superficiality and impracticality.
- **Marketing:** When marketing underestimates the potential client interest in groundbreaking studies, such research (starved of mar-

keting investments) suffers a long uptake or is shuffled aside when it's time to promote the next study in line (no matter how weak it may be).

- **Sales:** Even when marketing invests heavily to promote a groundbreaking study, thought leadership merely becomes an intellectual, "brand-building" exercise when business developers don't know how to answer client inquiries about it and how to open doors with it. (In some companies, "brand building" can be a euphemism for "We have no idea if it had any value.") Helping generate revenue needs to be Job 1 for thought leadership groups.
- **Service innovation:** When heads of practice development or service delivery view thought leadership as expensive marketing brochures promoting woolly concepts, they don't recognize the *service innovation* potential of thought leadership research. This can be hugely frustrating for researchers who discover an emerging best practice that the firm could pioneer and, if a service offering were developed, could become a premium-priced new revenue stream.

From our experience, without strong internal collaboration on those four fronts, a thought leadership group is destined to become an internal "ivory tower" – a thinktank isolated from being able to help marketing drive market interest, salespeople sell, and service innovation heads deliver new methods and unique services.

Turning CEO Advocacy into Company Advantage

What does it take to turn IT services CEOs and their direct reports into staunch advocates for thought leadership? The key element is getting them to recognize how thought leadership can be used to out-market, outsell and out-deliver the competition. In short, it requires understanding how thought leadership – if given the license from the top of the firm and executed expertly -- can confer a competitive advantage.

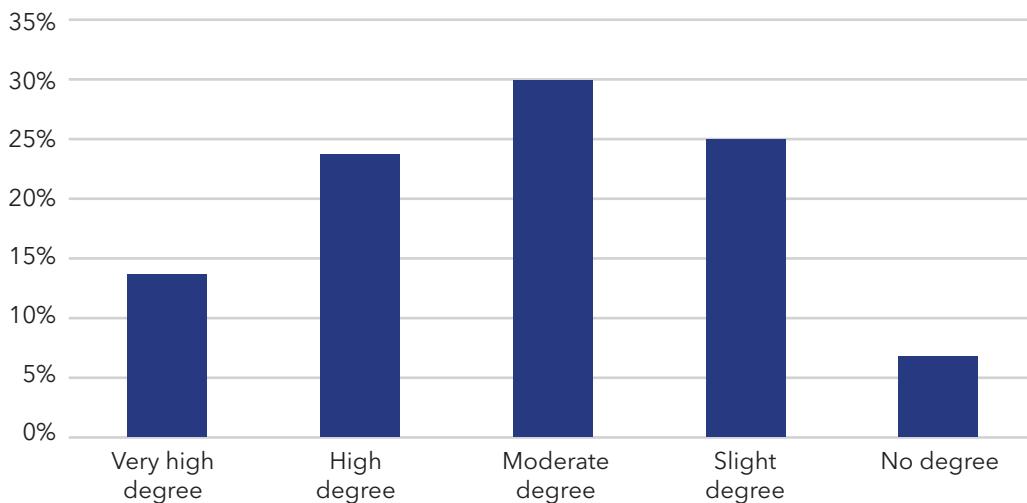
Yet most of the IT services firms we surveyed don't see it that way right now. We asked them to rate on a five-point scale (no degree to very high degree) the extent to which top management in their firms viewed thought leadership as a competitive advantage. Only about one in seven (14%) said "very high degree." About a quarter answered "high degree." But many more -- 62% -- said "moderate," "slight" or "no" degree. (See Exhibit 29.)

Exhibit 29:

Is Thought Leadership a Major Competitive Advantage?

Most are Skeptical

Degree to Which IT Services Firms' Leadership Teams View
Thought Leadership as a Competitive Advantage



However, this view – thought leadership as competitive differentiator – is one that clearly separates the most from the least proficient IT services firms at thought leadership. Some 83% of the Leader firms' top management views it as a competitive advantage. That's nearly three times the percentage (30%) of the Follower firms. (Exhibit 30.)

Exhibit 30:

The Best IT Services Firms at Thought Leadership Regard It as Competitive Advantage

**Comparing IT Services Leaders and Followers on the
Degree to Which Their Top Management Teams View
Thought Leadership as a Competitive Advantage**

83%

OF LEADER FIRMS

say their top management team
views thought leadership as a
competitive advantage

30%

OF FOLLOWER FIRMS

say their top management team
views thought leadership as a
competitive advantage

In fact, thought leadership is a key way that IT services private equity firm Recognize seeks to differentiate its portfolio companies. Founded in 2020, the firm invests exclusively in one sector (IT services) and currently manages over \$3 billion in client assets across 13 portfolio companies. "Improving how our portfolio companies drive differentiation, which includes driving thought leadership and being smart about solving problems, is a very critical factor," Anup [Hira](#), a Recognize partner, said to us. "We want to see things that drive the P&L and the valuation: how customers talk about them; feedback from their [technology company] partners; and analysts' feedback."

When Top Management Views Thought Leadership as an Advantage, They Get Involved

Along with asking their views on thought leadership as competitive advantage, we wanted to know how involved top management was in developing content. Were they hands off - delegating this to junior consultants, editors, writers, and researchers? Or did practice heads and other company leaders write articles? Did they work with content developers to codify expertise and turn it into blogs, white papers, seminar presentations, and more?

We asked companies to tell us how involved top managers were in content development. We asked them to choose which one of the following statements best characterized their "state of involvement" in thought leadership:

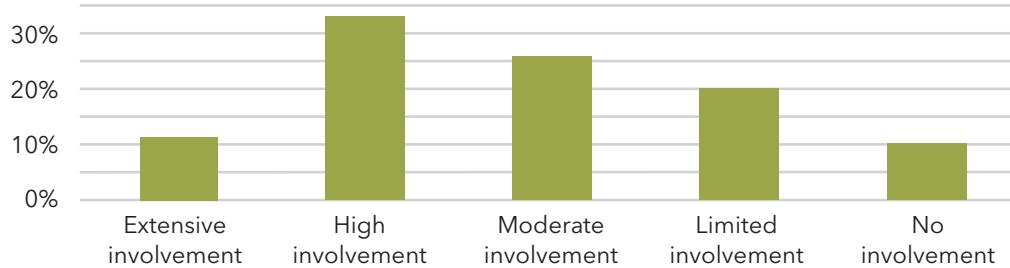
- None: Leadership does not contribute to or participate at all.
- Limited: Leadership occasionally shares ideas but doesn't contribute content in whole form
- Moderate: Leaders provide insights and appear in some content (e.g., articles, marketing events, interviews)
- High: Leaders actively shape and review content, and present it (author articles, do public speaking)
- Extensive: Leaders drive thought leadership strategy, author key articles, and participate in marketing events.

As you can see in Exhibit 31, a small majority of IT services firms (54%) said company leaders are, at the most, moderately involved in developing content. But one big "aha" to us: A high percentage - 44% -- said top managers in their firm were highly or extensively involved.

Exhibit 31:

Company Leadership and Content Development:
Spectator Sport or More?

Extent to Which IT Services' Leadership Teams are Involved in
Developing Thought Leadership Content



Comparing Leaders and Followers showed a sizable difference in involvement. Some 86% of top management in Leader firms are highly or extensively involved - nearly eight times the percentage in Follower companies. In fact, at 60% of Follower companies, top management is only slightly or not involved at all in content development. None of the 36 Leader companies had zero to slight leadership involvement in content. (Exhibit 32.)

Exhibit 32:

In the Best IT Services Firms at Thought Leadership, Company Leaders Take Part

How Much Top Management at Leaders and Followers are Involved in Developing Thought Leadership Content

86%

OF LEADER FIRMS' TOP MANAGEMENT

are highly or extensively involved in developing thought leadership content

11%

OF FOLLOWER FIRMS' TOP MANAGEMENT

are highly or extensively involved in developing thought leadership content

"The importance of [thought leadership] at Accenture is directly related to the engagement of our CEOs since the end of the 1990s," Accenture Research's Hintermann explained to us. The company's market cap has grown from about \$14 billion in 2001 (the year of its initial public stock offering) to \$150 billion by October 2025. Revenue has increased fivefold since 2002, to \$68 billion.¹⁸ "All of our CEOs have had a strong engagement in thought leadership."

Why have Accenture's top leaders strongly believed in thought leadership for four decades? In a world in which the half-life of conventional wisdom has declined markedly, Hintermann said it's crucial for the firm to bring new wisdom to the table. "We are convinced that the first thing we have to address when we meet clients, when we meet CEOs and the rest of the C suite, is to change the business ideas they have in mind. Any change starts with a new business idea. And that's why we've been investing" in thought leadership for so long. Hintermann's 300+ thought leadership group is testimony to the power of the new ideas it continually brings to market.

It's hard to argue with that, looking at Accenture's revenue growth since 2002, and comparing it to such competitors as DXC Technology (from \$11 billion revenue in 2002 to \$13 billion in 2024).¹⁹

Capgemini's leaders have had similarly high involvement in thought leadership initiatives for years. The France-based global consulting and IT services firm, whose revenue nearly doubled between 2010 and 2024, makes sure it has a company executive "sponsor" each research study it takes to market, according to Buvat, the head of the Capgemini Research Institute. "We have a very senior sponsor for every single piece." His research group asks those sponsors what they want the studies to explore, and what they predict the research will find.

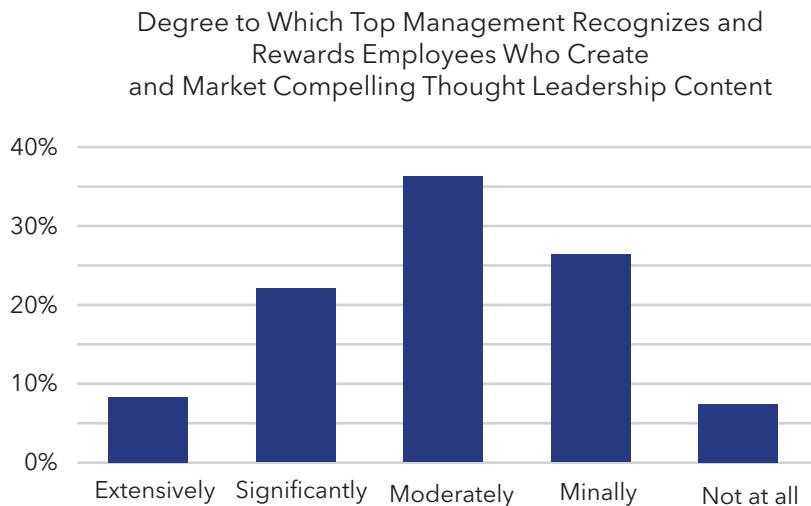
When top management knows thought leadership can drive revenue - and if they get productively involved in the company's thought leadership activities - they can start seeing the impact. Past clients who haven't been in touch reach out to talk about a new research report. A door that's been closed for years at top levels of a large company opens. That's when top management sees thought leadership as a competitive advantage, Buvat told us.

Our research found the most progressive IT services executives realize that to keep their thought leadership machine cranking out hits, they must recognize and reward those responsible for those hits. On this front, the IT services industry may be behind other B2B sectors (especially consulting and financial services) in rewarding their best thought leadership professionals. When we asked respondents how

much company leaders recognize and reward employees who create and market compelling content, the percentages were disappointing. Only 8% characterized it as "extensive." Four times that number said "not at all" or "minimally." (See Exhibit 33.)

Exhibit 33:

The Rewards for Outstanding Thought Leadership Professionals Can Be Few



But this, again, is one major way that Leaders differ from Followers. Slightly more than half the Leaders said such recognition and rewards were significant or extensive. Only 30% of Followers said the same. (See Exhibit 34.) Still, with only slightly more than half the Leaders strongly rewarding their thought leadership staff, all IT services companies have work to do to keep their best thought leadership professionals.

Exhibit 34:

Who Loves Their Thought Leadership Professionals? Leader Firms More Than Follower Firms



IMPACTS



Connections: Tying Thought Leadership to Demand and Supply

Exceptional thought leadership content has little impact as a PDF with nary a download, or as the focus of a press release that's been ignored by the press. Unless the findings of a groundbreaking study find their way into business developers' pitches to clients or marketing's pitches to media and other influencers, it's just another forgotten study.

And that's just on what we call the "demand" side of thought leadership – that is, a company's marketing and sales activities that put its big insights into the hands of companies that are motivated to make big changes. The "supply" side of thought leadership can be an ever more neglected stepchild. By supply, we mean the people in an IT services firm paid to create methodologies that its consultants and software development people use to run projects, as well as the internal training & development programs that those "delivery" personnel use to get up to speed on the latest service development.

We had a few questions in our survey about how much thought leadership research departments are collaborating with their colleagues on the supply and demand sides. The short answer is they're collaborating somewhat on the demand side (but not nearly enough with salespeople). And they're hardly on the same planet with the supply side of their companies, collaborating sporadically if at all with service innovation and service delivery.

Let's start with the supply side of the house. You may recall the finding we cited near the beginning of this report about the most important reasons for investing in thought leadership. As the exhibit below shows, it is sixth on the list of reasons we offered. Less than a third (30%) said it was a top three reason for investing in thought leadership.

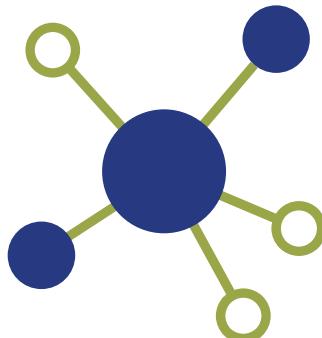


Exhibit 35:

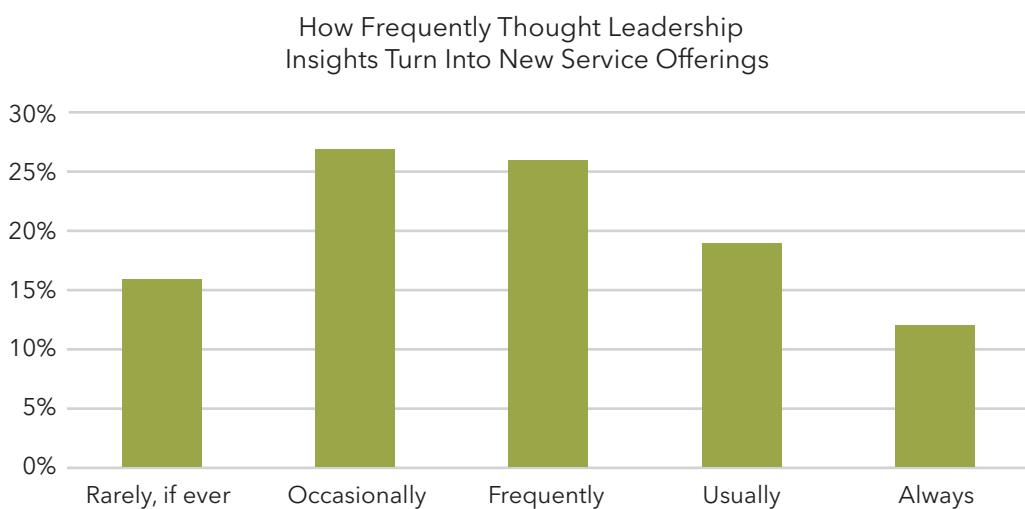
Why IT Services Firms Spend on Thought Leadership

IT Services Firms' 3 Most Important Reasons for Investing in Thought Leadership		
Rank	Investment Reasons	% Selecting
1	Brand awareness and credibility	61%
2	Sales leads and revenue growth	54%
3	Gaining market authority directly with clients	44%
4	Gaining market authority with industry analysts	40%
5	Gaining market authority with technology companies	32%
6	Creating new technology services or updating existing ones	30%
7	Strengthening retention of existing clients	22%
8	Attracting top talent/employer branding	17%
9	Other	1%

It's not that service innovation groups are altogether ignoring thought leadership as a key input. In fact, 31% say they usually or always convert the insights of thought leadership research into service offerings. But a greater percentage - 43% -- say they do this only occasionally or rarely, if at all. (See Exhibit 36.)

Exhibit 36:

Thought Leadership Sometimes Fuels Service Innovation



The best IT services firms at thought leadership – our so-called Leaders – are twice as likely to turn thought leadership into service offerings than the Followers. Some 62% of Leaders say they do it vs. 30% of Followers. (Exhibit 37.)

Exhibit 37:

The Best at Thought Leadership Monetize Their Content



Buvat, Capgemini's thought leadership research chief, has watched this happen. "Some of our research is the trigger for new offers. Some our consultants, on the back of our research, come up with ideas, saying, 'We didn't realize that our clients were so interested.'" Hintermann said it's highly rewarding to see his group's research findings cited in Accenture consulting reports for clients.

As head of strategy, marketing and thought leadership at Cognizant for many years, Malcolm Frank was in the perfect position to see how primary best-practice research could lead to new service offerings. "Thought leadership done properly, is a sense-and-respond vehicle," he said to us. "It's not three people in a room, ivory tower model, cooking up ideas. I always told people, 'You have to go on the walk: Spend lots of time with lots of clients and have conversations, do presentations, get white papers in front of them.' ... This is how it comes back into strategy. Very quickly you're going to see a market [opportunity]. That enables you to move much faster than the competition."

But, again, only 31% of all IT services firms surveyed said they regularly turn thought leadership into service innovation. And we wonder how serious even the Leaders are at this game. Only 25% of them said it was a top-three driver. Still, that was more than twice the number of Follower firms that said the same. (Exhibit 38.)

Exhibit 38:

Most Leaders and Followers Aren't Tying Thought Leadership to Service Innovation



Another indicator that most IT services companies don't see the opportunity to "scale" groundbreaking thought leadership research - "scale" meaning training dozens or hundreds of internal people to master the expertise gained by the authors of the studies - can be seen in our question about who controls the thought leadership budget. Only 5% of the firms we surveyed said service delivery/service innovation controls that budget. Only 11% of the Leaders said service delivery manages the thought leadership budget. Not one Follower firm's service delivery group runs thought leadership. (See Exhibit 39.)

The connection between thought leadership and service innovation has yet to be made. That, we believe, is a major opportunity for IT services firms that want to leapfrog their competition in thought leadership: turn their most compelling best-practice research into new services.

Exhibit 39:

Who Controls the Thought Leadership Budget? Not Service Delivery



Thought Leadership's Connection to Sales: Weak

How about the connection between thought leadership and sales? It's stronger than the weak or non-existent tie between thought leadership and service delivery. But it's not significantly stronger. When we asked about how much thought leadership and the sales function were collaborating, nearly 60% said "not at all" or "minimally." Here is how we defined those terms (Exhibit 40):

- No collaboration: Salespeople don't know about thought leadership content until clients get it.
- Minimal collaboration: Salespeople are informed about the company's thought leadership programs before they go to market but aren't prepared to go prospecting with it.
- Major collaboration: Marketing prepares the sales organization long before content goes to market – on whom to target, how to open doors, etc.
- Extreme collaboration: Marketing trains salespeople on how to sell services to prospects who respond favorably to thought leadership programs.

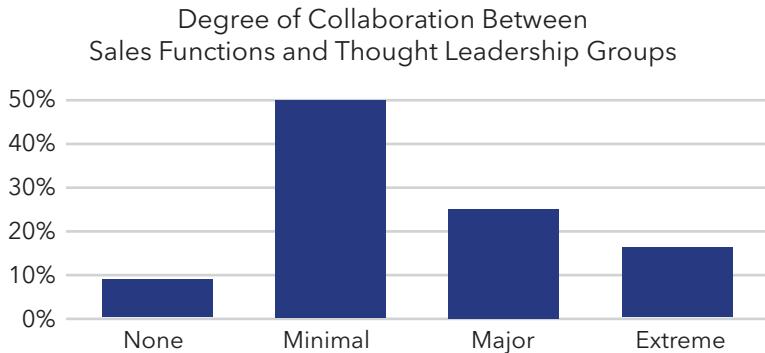
That is a warning sign for the 59% of thought leadership groups that do great work but are shunned or given short shrift by their firm's sales force. In a world of increasing competition among tech services firms, and mounting customer confusion about how to solve their problems and which IT services can best do it, salespeople need thought leadership at the point of sale more than ever. "The Challenger Sale" book established that in the last decade. A new book, "The Framemaking Sale," makes an even tighter connection between thought leadership and business development.²⁰

This is important at IBM's Institute for Business Value group. "In our offering content, we make sure that our thinking and our data is contained therein," noted Anthony Marshall, global leader of IBM's Institute for Business Value. "And there are specific big deals ... where we assign the most relevant individual (within IBV) to engage with that deal team."

Capgemini's thought leadership research group goes a step further. It uses AI to help sales teams better understand and use its content. "For each report, we have an AI tool, an AI agent, if you will, that our sales colleague can use to ask any question they want," Buvat said. "Instead of having to read the report if they have a question from their clients, they can actually ask the tool, and know, immediately."

Exhibit 40:

At the Handoff, Sales is Dropping the Thought Leadership Ball



The picture is much different in Leaders. Four out of five say their thought leadership groups' collaboration with sales is "major" or "extreme." (Exhibit 41.)

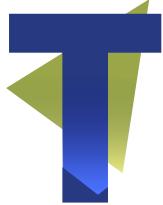
Exhibit 41:

A Thought Leadership/Sales Partnership



For Accenture, thought leadership is embedded in its business culture. This means thought leadership content isn't produced and marketed by an isolated team in an ivory tower. "It's produced with business leaders. It's co-marketed with business leaders," Accenture's Hintermann told us.

"Every time we publish a piece, it's sent to the group executive committee so they are aware, and then they forward and cascade that onto their own teams," Capgemini's Buvat explained. The firm has a communications platform called Daily Connect, and 80,000 Capgemini employees follow the company's thought leadership group. Many use it regularly.



Talent: Acquiring It, Developing It, Retaining It

Our research suggests there's an acute talent shortage in thought leadership. The number of highly skilled thought leadership professionals – whether researchers, editors, marketers, market event managers or others – is extremely finite.

What leads us to say this? We asked IT services firms to name the three largest barriers to dramatically increasing the ROI on thought leadership. We gave them 11 barriers from which to choose their top three. Attracting skilled thought leadership people was the biggest barrier, chosen by 44% as a top-three obstacle to higher ROI. They mentioned it as a big barrier even more frequently than they did another big barrier: measuring the ROI on thought leadership. (See Exhibit 42.)

Exhibit 42:

What Prevents Increasing Thought Leadership's ROI? Talent More Than Other Barriers

Ranking the Biggest Barriers to Improving the ROI on Thought Leadership



How Big is the Thought Leadership Talent Shortage?

Getting sales and service development chiefs in thought leadership's corner doesn't happen by sheer force of personality alone. Even the most persuasive thought leadership chief is not likely to win over heads of sales and service development unless his or her "products" - especially research reports, white papers and books - are compelling enough to open client doors.

In turn, the quality of a thought leadership group's products is the result of a) rigorous content development processes (as we wrote about in the "Process" section) and b) the abilities of the researchers, writers and editors who follow those processes. The skills of those thought leadership content professionals make or break those processes.

This is a fundamental "talent" piece of the thought leadership puzzle. (Skilled marketers who know how to promote thought leadership content are another.) We asked the 300 IT services firm to sum up the skills of their thought leadership *content* professionals - the people who produce their research reports, white papers, presentations and other educational (vs. blatantly promotional) content. We didn't ask them to rate their skills of their marketing team. We asked them to assess their content talent as a *whole*, on a five-point scale, from best to worst:

- **Talent abundant:** Very highly equipped to produce content that is widely recognized, sets industry benchmarks and influences clients, analysts, and competitors.
- **Talent rich:** Highly equipped to regularly produce high-quality content that resonates with audiences.
- **Talent inconsistent:** Moderately equipped with solid expertise but inconsistent execution.
- **Talent deficient:** Somewhat equipped but struggling with depth, originality, and consistency.
- **Talent devoid:** Not at all equipped with the skills to produce content with impact.

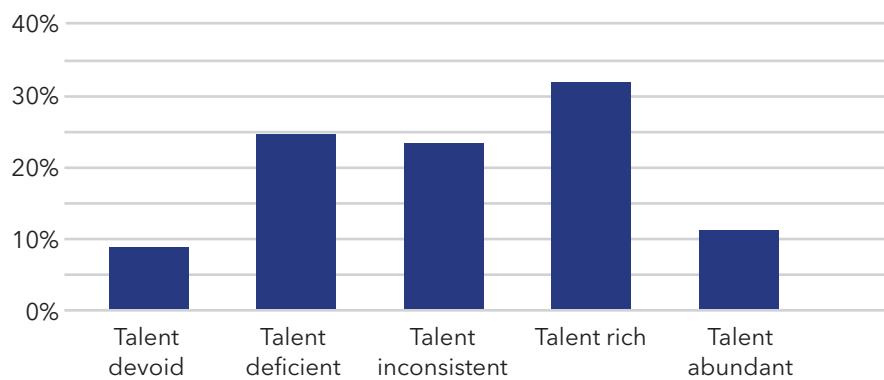
About a third (34%) put themselves in our talent deficient or devoid categories. About a quarter (24%) rated themselves as talent inconsistent. And 43% gave themselves high marks as either talent rich or talent abundant in producing compelling content. If you view the label "talent inconsistent" as neither strong nor weak, then IT services firms with strong thought leadership talent outnumber the ones with weak talent, 43% to 34%.

Still, only about one in 10 rated their content teams as “talent abundant.” (See Exhibit 43.)

Exhibit 43:

From Devoid to Abundant: Understanding the IT Services Thought Leadership Talent Landscape

How IT Services Firms View Their Thought Leadership Skills



But the talent assessment across all 300 IT services firms hides a wide disparity in talent quality between thought leadership “Leaders” and “Followers.” The Leaders are six times more likely than the “Followers” to have people who produce high-quality content. Some 78% of Leaders are talent-rich or talent-abundant; only 13% of Followers can say the same. (See Exhibit 44.)

Exhibit 44:

“Leaders” in Thought Leadership Have a Big Talent Advantage



What Skills Count Most in Thought Leadership?

We wanted to hear from IT services firms about the skills they believed were the most critical to running effective thought leadership programs. We asked them to pick the three most important skills from a list of 11. (See Exhibit 46.) Generally, we found that skill requirements can be seen in a hierarchy of three types, starting with the most important (Exhibit 45):

- They regard **content development** skills as the most important (we've made green bars for these skills), followed by ...
- **Marketing** skills (bringing thought leadership content to market - see the red bars), followed by ...
- **Program/project management** and **collaboration** skills (blue bars)

Exhibit 45:

Content Talent is King



Exhibit 46:

A Hierarchy of Skills, with Content Development at the Top



We found little variance between “Leaders” and “Followers” in what they see as their three most critical thought leadership skills. Only two skills showed some difference (more than 10 percentage points):

- Process and project management: 32% of “Followers” said this was a top three skill, but only 19% of “Leaders” said the same.
- Generative AI proficiency in content ideation and writing: a top three skill of 17% of Followers but only 6% of Leaders.

Which Skill Needs the Biggest Improvements? Making Insightful Arguments

After asking them which three skills were most critical to thought leadership, we then asked which three of those same 11 skills they needed to improve the most. They cited five most often, four of which are content development skills and one a marketing skill. (See Exhibit 47.)

One skill stood above all others in the frequency with which IT services firms said it must be improved: strategic thinking. In the survey questionnaire, we defined this as “developing unique, forward-thinking perspectives to be used in thought leadership content.” Put another way, it’s about making a novel, persuasive argument on a business/technology problem and a superior way to solve it.

Exhibit 47:

The Skill in Biggest Need of Improvement: Making Novel and Persuasive Arguments



From our experience, there are two core “subskills” required to develop unique, forward-thinking arguments. The first is the ability to extract groundbreaking insights from research data, case studies, and client experiences. Pattern recognition is crucial to insight-making. The second subskill is narrative development: the ability to construct a powerful argument (from insights that are based on data and best-practice case examples) on superior ways to solve the issue at the heart of a study.

The ability to make novel and persuasive arguments about better solutions to complex business problems is the rarest of all skills in thought leadership. It no wonder that the business world since 1990 has revered these thought leaders on how businesses should capitalize on digital technology:

- The late Harvard Business School Prof. Clayton Christensen (known for "disruptive innovation")
- The late Michael Hammer ("business reengineering")
- Professors Eric Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee (the digital economy and AI)
- Prof. Thomas H. Davenport ("competing on analytics," "generative AI and citizen software developers," and "business process redesign")

All had or have the capability to a) conduct deep research on how companies used digital technologies and b) identify practices that lead to quantum improvements in revenue, cost, quality customer retention, profitability market share, and other core measures of business success. They mastered the art of making novel, persuasive arguments.

"You have to surround yourself with thinkers," said Perignon of Tata Consultancy Services. "You have to have the writing part; you can always figure that out. But you must have a team of great thinkers" - idea people who can use data to "construct compelling arguments," he told us.

Every IT services firm now needs people inside their company -- or business partners such as professors and independent consultants -- who excel at making unique and persuasive arguments. Like Christensen, Hammer and the others, they need to thrive at leading rigorous, best-practice thought leadership research. IT services firms with a high-powered primary research capability have a big advantage over those that don't. Said Perignon: "There is no way we can make an impact and have our own differentiated voice without research-based thought leadership."

In comparing Leaders and Followers on skills in which they need the most improvement, we found interesting differences. Leaders more

often said it was marketing and distribution (56%). (See Exhibit 48.) Followers more often said their No. 1 skill area for improvement was strategic thinking/creating novel perspectives.

Exhibit 48:

What Thought Leadership Skills Need the Greatest Improvement?



Winning the Thought Leadership Talent War

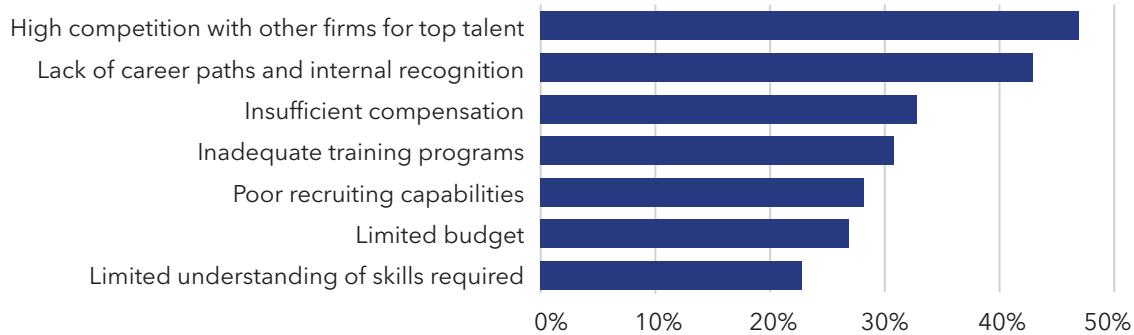
We asked IT services firms about their biggest hurdles in attracting top-tier thought leadership professionals, whether researchers, editors, marketers, or others. From a list of seven, we asked them to choose the ones that hampered them most.

The most frequently cited hiring challenge: high competition with other firms for top talent (meaning, in part, that compensation may be a hurdle). Nearly half (47%) cited this. The second was lack of career paths and internal recognition for thought leadership roles. Some 43% chose that. (See Exhibit 49.)

Exhibit 49:

What Limits IT Services Firms from Getting Top Thought Leadership Talent

Biggest Challenges in Attracting Top Thought Leadership Professionals



Section 3: Comparing the Best and Worst IT Services Firms at Thought Leadership

How "Leaders" and "Followers" answered this question speaks volumes about how they value thought leadership talent.

Twice as many Leaders than Followers say a top challenge is competing for thought leadership talent. We interpret this data this way: The best IT services firms at thought leadership know there is a severe shortage of exceptional talent (especially in researchers and editors to develop content). They know the salaries such people command in the marketplace. And that, we feel, is why fewer Leaders (19%) than Followers (46%) say compensation is a key challenge. Leaders know what they have to pay these people to attract them.

The best IT services firms at thought leadership better understand the skills they need, which also makes them better at evaluating people who knock on their doors. It's why, we believe, only 14% of Leaders said "limited understanding of skills required" was a challenge, and only 14% said they had poor recruiting capabilities. (Some 33% of Followers said their recruiting capabilities for thought leadership talent was poor.) (See Exhibit 50.)

Exhibit 50:

What Distinguishes the Best IT Services Firms at Getting Thought Leadership Talent

Biggest Challenges in Attracting Top Thought Leadership Professionals





Structuring: Where Thought Leadership Reports Determines How Much Impact It Can Have

We'll make a bold statement here, one that we believe no other research on thought leadership has made to date: Where a thought leadership group reports in an IT services firm – or for that matter, in any B2B company – determines how much impact it can have on the top and bottom line.²¹ Where your thought leadership group appears on your organizational chart matters greatly.

Second bold statement: *If your thought leadership group **doesn't** report to an executive above marketing, sales, and service innovation, you will diminish its ability to drive revenue and service innovation.*

Here's our reasoning: If thought leadership research reports to marketing, it becomes captive to marketing's interests – increasing the firm's brand recognition and reputation. The downside of this is that others in an IT services firm – especially service line leaders, consultants, service innovation officers, and service delivery heads – then view the marketing organization's thought leadership content in the same way they view other marketing collateral: more or less, as fancy promotional material.

This doesn't at all minimize the importance of marketing to promote groundbreaking ideas. Effective press outreach, memorable social media posts, insightful marketing events, and other well-run marketing activities are fundamental to getting big concepts noticed in the marketplace. In fact, one long-time IT services veteran we spoke to, Praveen Bhadada, sees marketing as more important than thought leadership to the growth of IT services firms. "I score great marketing higher than great thought leadership," said Bhadada, a former chief of staff to the CEO of Persistent Systems (a \$1.3 billion India-based IT services firm), an ex-managing partner of Zinnov and now CEO of NEOVAY Global (a consultancy to tech services and tech firms). "[Having high] analyst

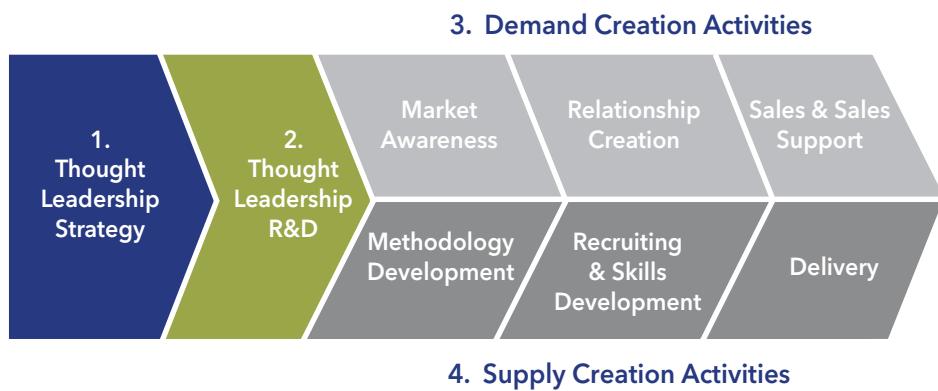
ratings at Gartner will give you a lot more leads than an in-depth white paper on product engineering. Yes, you will get some applause on LinkedIn, but that's not going to generate many leads."

But in our experience, when a thought leadership research group reports to marketing, its output is seen as *marketing* content – not content with the seeds for new services. It precludes other people in an IT services firm from viewing groundbreaking thought leadership research as content to ignite new services or create new methods for existing services. Where a thought leadership group reports in an organization will dictate its strategy – which includes which functions will be its beneficiaries.

That strategy should be to fuel both demand-creation (marketing and sales) *and* supply-creation (service enhancement and innovation). Thought leadership's place on the organization chart determines its strategy. Bob Buday's book graphically illustrates this²² (Exhibit 51):

Exhibit 51:

The Demand and Supply Sides of Thought Leadership



Copyright 2022, Robert S. Buday, author of "Competing on Thought Leadership" (Ideapress Publishing)

We can back up this assertion from our interviews, survey data and vast experience in thought leadership at IT services firms – working *in* these firms and consulting *to* them. At Leaders, marketing controlled the thought leadership research budget in only a quarter of them, compared with 38% of the Followers. In 42% of Leaders, the thought leadership budget was controlled by a thought leadership group or by strategic planning/corporate development. That was the case in only 15% of the Followers. (See Exhibit 52.)

In none of the Follower firms did the thought leadership research group control and manage its own budget.

Exhibit 52:

Thought Leadership Strategy Should Follow Org Structure

Who Manages the Thought Leadership Budget	Leaders	Followers
Strategy/corporate development	28%	13%
Thought leadership research group/institute	14%	0%
Investor relations	0%	2%
Reporting to top of firm (and not to marketing, sales, or service innovation)	42%	15%
Marketing/corp comms/PR	25%	38%
Sales/business development	8%	11%
Service development/service innovation	11%	0%
Reporting to demand-creation or supply-creation functions	44%	49%
Service lines (regional, industry, technology)	11%	17%
Multiple departments control/manage their own thought leadership budgets	3%	19%
Reporting to service lines (central TL function or decentralized TL function)	14%	36%

Other data on our Leaders and Followers show how IT services firms can empower or neuter the impact of thought leadership by how they structure it. We asked our survey respondents what thought leadership activities are centralized, decentralized, or a mix of the two. The most common structure was "hybrid": thought leadership strategy (most importantly, what topics to create content on) was set centrally, but business units had power to create their own content on those topics. Some 30% of respondents said this was how thought leadership operates in their firms. (See Exhibit 53.)

The next most frequently mentioned structure, by 22%, was decentralization: Business units and other client-facing teams independently

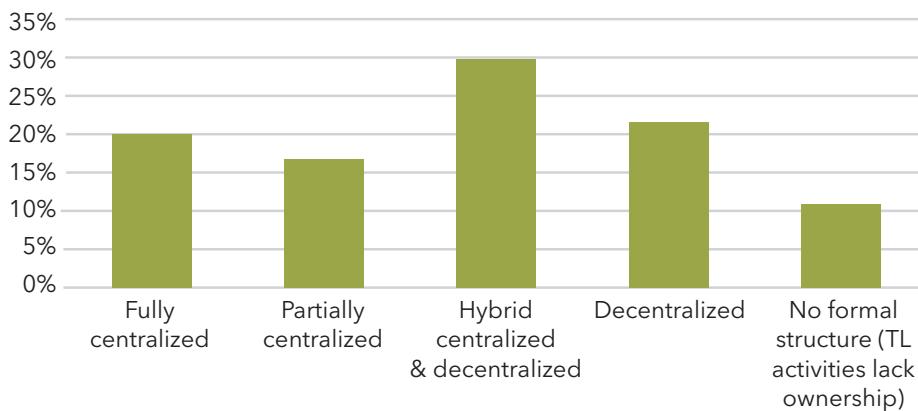
manage their own thought leadership activities. But only one in five IT services firms surveyed said their thought leadership activities are fully centralized.

Half the Leaders have a dedicated thought leadership group. In stark contrast, not one of the Followers has one.

Exhibit 53:

Thought Leadership Activities are Not Often Centralized

Org Structure of Thought Leadership Function



Leaders and Followers were markedly different on the centralization/de-centralization front. Half the Leaders (50%) were fully centralized; 0% of the Followers were. Instead, 81% of Followers' thought leadership activities were either decentralized or had no formal structure. (Exhibit 54.)

Exhibit 54:

Centralization is a Best Practice

Comparing Leaders and Followers on Whether Thought Leadership Activities are Centralized

50%

OF LEADER
firms said fully centralized

0%

OF FOLLOWER
firms said fully centralized

20%

OF ALL SURVEYS
firms said fully centralized

That makes it easier to understand why the thought leadership groups in the best IT services firms for thought leadership have a much larger headcount than those in the Follower firms. Leaders have an average 9.7 people dedicated to thought leadership vs. 2.8 for Followers.

Centralized thought leadership groups enable an IT services firm to:

- Decide what topics to cover or not to cover
- Generate a uniformity of messages, rather than studies that come to market that contradict other studies in the firm that come to market around the same time
- Give thought leadership researchers, editors, writers, and graphics people the opportunity to sharpen each other's skills

As mentioned previously, centralized thought leadership groups that report to the top of the company (either to the head of strategy, finance, the COO, or CEO) increase the chances that their research is embraced by both the demand side of the house (marketing and sales) and supply side (service development and innovation).

We also must state that thought leadership shouldn't report to service development/innovation, and for a similar reason it shouldn't report to marketing or sales. If thought leadership reports to service delivery, it will be encouraged to capture the firm's existing client work and current methods – not do primary research on best practices that might go way beyond the firm's client base.

The wrong reporting relationships do impact thought leadership. Only about one in five Leaders (vs. 40% of the Followers) said an ineffective reporting relationship was a big barrier to improving their ROI. Thought leadership should report to strategy or above, as it does at Accenture. The company's 350-person thought leadership research group, Accenture Research, has been reporting to its chief strategy and innovation officer ([Bhaskar Ghosh](#)) since 2020.

Over the last five years, IBM has increasingly centralized its thought leadership research in internal thinktank, the IBM Institute for Business Value. As Anthony Marshall, global leader of IBM IBV, told us: "Five years ago, thought leadership in IBM was more fragmented. Various parts of the organization would produce thought leadership of varying degrees of quality. Some of it was good, some of it wasn't. What has happened over the past five years is greater centralization within the IBV, and a greater delineation of responsibilities between marketing and IBV. That's been extraordinarily positive."

IBV is now seen as the thought leadership content creation engine in IBM, Marshall said. "Marketing is now focusing on what it does best: deploying and enabling that content, and making sure it drives maximum value for clients and the business. This symbiosis has made us all far more effective in creating and deploying the great thought leadership that IBM is known for."

Section 3: Comparing the Best and Worst IT Services Firms at Thought Leadership

Ben Pring, a former Gartner analyst and executive at Cognizant's Center for the Future of Work, put it this way: "The successful period we had in Cognizant was when we had a centralized budget. We weren't dialing for dollars around the rest of the firm [to get funding] or trying to do cross-funding with the rest of the firm. They just funded it. That worked very well because that meant that we had one identifiable boss [Malcolm Frank] who was our Medici prince," alluding to the Italian family that rose to political power in the 15th century. "If he was happy and saw the value of it," it a research project was funded.

The problem of decentralized thought leadership activities funded by various business units is one of disagreements and delays, Pring told us. "Without a central figure with power and budget, you're going to be stuck in this netherworld of complexity and non-alignment. It's one of the reasons why many things, not just thought leadership, struggle to (achieve) escape velocity."



SECTION 4:

Taking Thought Leadership to a Higher Level

The key differences that we've pointed out between Leaders and Followers at thought leadership provide a roadmap for improvement. We don't, however, believe an IT services firm can go from a Follower to a Leader in a matter of months. It is likely to take a concerted effort at assembling the right talent, high-functioning research processes, effective marketing and selling, strong connections to sales and service innovation, and other pieces that we laid out in the IMPACTS acronym.

Many IT services firms today (especially the big ones) have management consulting businesses, which in turn came with thought leadership groups. In these IT services firms, the question is less about how to launch one and more about how to improve one that exists. We believe a good way to start is to assess where your thought leadership group is today. We lay out four stages in which we've seen thought leadership operate in IT services and other companies for years: from "window dressing" to "mastery." (See Exhibit 55.)

Moving from left to right requires greater investment and established processes in research, publishing, and marketing – especially in conducting primary, original research. It means shifting performance measures from web-based ones (downloads, views, social media mentions/likes) to inquiries and leads (requests for proposals, win rates, billing rates, etc.). The table on p. 73 provides a rough range of the magnitude of the investment. The key changes in processes are (in research) moving from capturing subject experts' field experience to rigorously collecting best practices in the marketplace (clients and other companies).

The shift in advocacy – where the mandate for thought leadership emanates from – is one from the middle to the top. At the mastery stage, the CEO and practice line heads are advocating for thought leadership, as well as heads of marketing, sales, and service innovation. Moving from left to right in the table also requires a thought leadership group to establish strong working relationships with heads of marketing, sales, and service innovation. Thought leadership research reports produce door openers for business developers: diagnostic tools and sales research debriefing presentations, for example.

The talent model to go from “window dressing” to “mastery” also changes significantly. First, thought leadership professionals are hired: in research, writing, social media, and editing to move to the “intensive” model. You need a sizable thought leadership research team, and a sizable publishing team (editors, writers, graphic artists), although many on the publishing team can be contract workers. The “mastery” model requires a deep team of researchers, writers/editors, graphics, multiclient-funded research team, salesperson(s) to sell the research, social media marketing, and marketing events managers.

Where do the “intensive” and “mastery” models of thought leadership report to? Either the head of strategy or the CEO/COO -- not to marketing, sales, or service innovation. You don’t want your thought leadership team to become captive to the demands of marketing (where the brand marketing budget can crowd out the thought leadership budget), sales (thought leadership content turned into sales decks and brochures), or service innovation (which can focus thought leadership professionals on codifying the firm’s existing but uncodified practices, and away from collecting best practices outside the firm’s client base). Thought leadership must serve all three internal clients. But its activities can’t be shifted to please one function at the expense of the other three.

Having the CEO support thought leadership goes a long way. Catrinel Bartolomeu, who until recently was director of editorial and thought leadership content strategy at Cognizant, credits Cognizant CEO Ravi Kumar for his strong support of research-based thought leadership. When the company published a study on generative AI’s impact on jobs, Kumar was quick to act, Bartolomeu told us. (She is now director of content strategy and thought leadership at BetterUp.) As soon as the report (“[New Work, New World](#)”) was published, Kumar asked the thought leadership group to build a client workshop around it and use it in Cognizant’s own assessment of corporate functions.



“Thought leadership must serve marketing, sales, and service innovation—but never become captive to any one of them.”

Exhibit 55:

Moving Up the Thought Leadership Learning Curve

	Window Dressing	Lite	Intensive	Mastery
Investment	<1.0% of revenue	1.0%-2.4% of revenue	2.5%-3.0% of revenue	>3.0%+ of revenue
Measures	Downloads, social media mentions, page views	Survey report downloads	Revenue, RFPs, wins	Revenue, firm profitability, RFPs, wins
Processes	Research: No primary research; superficial blog posts and articles (increasingly written by generative AI) Marketing: SMEs do their own (write blog posts, articles, etc.)	Research: Broad surveys on broad topics, sprinkled with case anecdotes from secondary research Marketing: Small marketing group issues white papers, ghostwrites blog posts, etc.	Research: Thought leadership research group conducts extensive primary research (based on both survey and case study interviews) Marketing: Sizable group with strong skills in press pitching, event marketing, social media marketing, op-ed placement.	Client-funded research programs focused on deep research on clients' practices. Marketing: Substantial group with deep specialization in PR, event marketing, publications, social media marketing, op-ed placement, and more.
Advocates	None at the top, only individual subject experts	CMO, individual subject experts	Heads of strategy, marketing and sales	CEO, practice leaders, and heads of marketing, sales, service innovation
Connections	None to service development or sales	None to service development; little to sales	Strong connections to marketing and sales	Tight connection to service innovation through mutually run methodology development group
Talent	No centralized thought leadership talent; editing/ghostwriting outsourced to contract workers	No internal research capability; small staff of writers	Strong internal quantitative and qualitative research capability; sizable staff of editors, publication writers, social media marketers, event marketers, etc.	Manager of client-funded research programs (head of thought leadership); sizable staff of ghostwriters, editors, event marketers, publication managers; methodology developers; trainers
Structure	Activity reports to marketing, or to business practices (fully decentralized)	Activity reports to CMO, and to marketing managers in practices (largely decentralized)	Thought leadership research reports to strategy head (or CEO); centralized thought leadership research, TL marketing group (publications, etc.); decentralized marketing groups take content to their clients	Thought leadership research reports to CEO/COO; centralized TL research, TL marketing, methodology development, and training activity for TL research-driven new best practices.

More competition is ahead in IT services over the rest of this decade. Clients will have many more IT services firms to choose from – if they know who they are and are convinced they have superior expertise at solving their specific needs.

Says Euan Davis, head of thought leadership as VP of growth markets at midsized tech services firm Virtusa: “For the last five years or so, minimizing the importance of thought leadership hasn’t worked at IT services firms. The pace of change has accelerated, and clients and prospects want to understand their suppliers’ headspace. You have to proactively go to a client or prospect with a point of view on how things are changing,” he told us. “If you don’t have one, you’re going to get a short shrift from your customers and prospects because you can’t satisfy them. … Thought leadership is more important than ever.”

“You have to say, ‘This is how we think you could be using AI technologies in all their forms,’” Davis added. “‘This is how we think your industry will look in the next two years, three years, or even five years.’ You have to have that context before you even enter the room … otherwise, your firm is just a commodity at the end of the table that’s never going to be listened to.”

To do this, IT services firms need to reposition themselves as strategic thinkers -- not mere implementers. “They tend to be so dependent on tools -- SAP, OpenAI. The flavor changes, but it’s where they can make money by implementing that technology,” noted long-time IT services and enterprise software industry analyst Vinnie Mirchandani. As a result, he believes, thought leadership becomes an afterthought because strategic thinking tends to result from working with a multitude of technologies that deliver unique benefits across numerous business processes. IT services firms need thought leadership to articulate how their services deliver unparalleled outcomes. Those that can do this “start to dominate a category that previously no other company had done.”

IT services firms that move up the thought leadership mastery curve will have a big advantage in creating demand and supply of superior expertise. Those that aren’t there yet have big opportunities – and work – ahead.

Using Generative AI to Conduct Research: Leaders are More Cautious Than Followers

In our survey, we asked IT services firms whether they use generative AI tools such as OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, Perplexity AI, or others to *conduct* thought leadership research. To shed light on this, we asked them about their use of such AI in nine general steps in the research process - beginning with topic selection and ending with multimedia content creation.

In each of those research steps, at least 31% of the IT services firms are using generative AI. Said Jerome Buvat, Capgemini's thought leadership research chief: "I believe AI can be tremendously helpful in every stage of our thought leadership research process - starting with scoping what's been written on a certain topic."

(Our survey did not ask them how they use generative AI in *marketing* their research. But we did have several discussions about that in our interviews with heads of thought leadership.)

We found nearly six in 10 of IT services firms use generative AI tools to write prose for the research they publish: reports, white papers, blog posts, and other content formats. That surprised us. We thought many more were using generative AI to decide on topics to research (using ChatGPT et al for "white space" analysis - seeing what others have written). But writing from whole cloth with generative AI - or using the technology to write prose from a human-written outline? We assumed more companies would think, "If it's thought leadership, it needs to be our words - not AI's words." Apparently not.

Said one former senior executive at a midsized IT services firm: "I have been a proponent of doing CXO surveys" to develop thought leadership content. "I tried doing that at [a prior firm]. But even a \$20,000-\$30,000 budget to poll 500 executives globally was thought of as [extravagant]. They said, 'Why do we need to spend that money? We can just ask ChatGPT to write something.' The notion of making it fact-based, research-based is not very intuitive in the tech services world."

We also surveyed executives in 11 industries, all of whom play key roles in deciding which IT services firms to hire. From their answers, we believe IT services firms must tread cautiously with generative AI in thought leadership. We asked these 200 executives how they view thought leadership content from IT services (or any other companies)

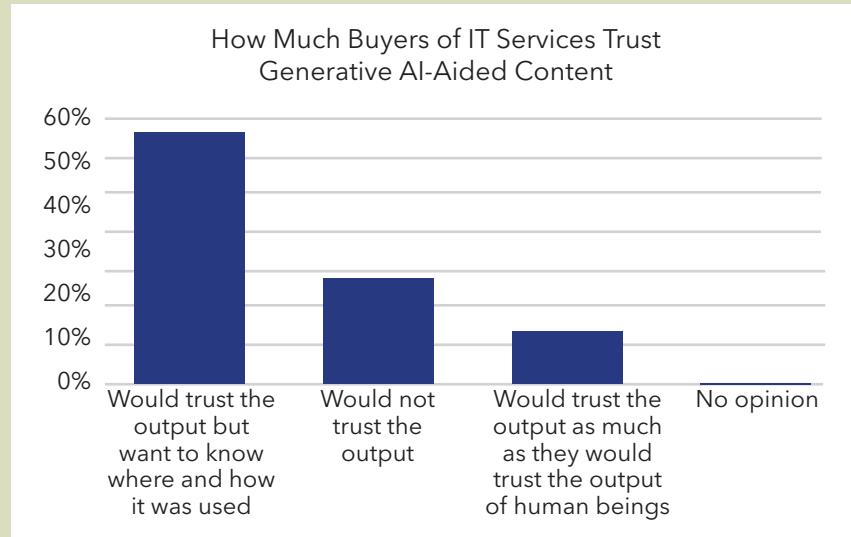
that used generative AI to help create the content. Did they trust such content? We asked them to select one of these four answers:

- "I would not trust it."
- "I would trust it because I realize it is useful in developing content. I just want to know where and how they use it."
- "I trust the output of generative AI as much as I trust that of human beings."
- "I have no opinion on this topic."

Nearly three-quarters (72%) said they would trust the output. However, most of them (58%) want to know where and how generative AI was used in the content. More than a quarter (28%) said they would *not* trust content from IT services and other companies that used generative AI to produce it. That was twice the percentage of those who said they'd trust the output of generative AI as much as they'd trust the output of human beings. (See Exhibit 56.)

Exhibit 56:

Most Buyers Would Trust AI-Aided Content, With Caveats



What this says to us: To try to convince the 28% of buyers of their services who don't trust the output of generative AI, IT services firms must explain where and how they use the technology, and that they verified the output was accurate. It might also help to communicate *why* their IT services firm used generative AI - for example, to uncover hard-to-find previous research studies in the marketplace that had important data to share, to summarize long interview transcripts (and thus free researchers to conduct additional interviews), and so on.

How IT Services Firms are Using Generative AI in Thought Leadership

How exactly how are IT services firms using generative AI in their thought leadership research process? We asked about nine aspects of developing research-based content – whether they were using it today and, if not, whether they expect to use it by 2027.

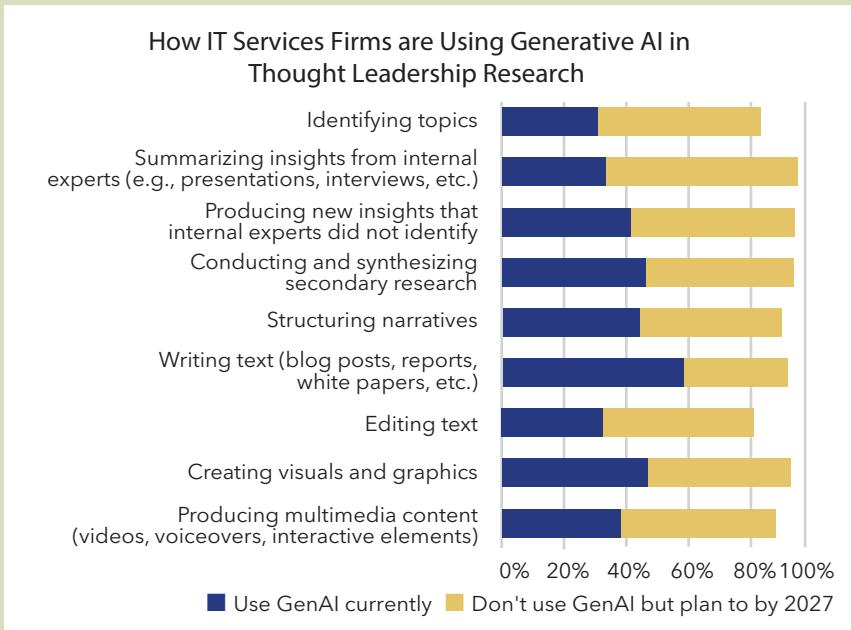
By far, they are most frequently using it to write the prose for research output: research reports, white papers, blog posts, and so on. Some 59% do this today, and another 33% aren't but plan to by 2027. (See Exhibit 57.) That was surprising: Almost twice as many IT services firms are using generative AI to *write* prose than to *edit* prose (33%). In four other areas, at least 40% of IT services are using generative AI:

- Conducting and synthesizing secondary research (47%)
- Creating visuals and graphics (47%)
- Structure narratives/outline for articles, reports, etc. (45%)
- Creating new insights that internal experts did not identify (42%)

Less than 40% of IT services firms are using generative AI today in four other areas: producing multimedia content; summarizing insights of internal experts; editing text; and identifying topics to research.

Exhibit 57:

AI is Used Frequently in Thought Leadership



By the way, these aren't the only ways to use generative AI in thought leadership research. In our conversations with heads of thought leadership (conducted after we fielded our online survey), they told us about other inventive ways they're the technology. For example, Capgemini's Buvat said his firm uses an AI to assess the quality of its research on five criteria, on a zero to 20 scale. The tool then provides specific recommendations on how to improve it. "This is very helpful, and it saves us a lot of review time," he said.

The Best IT Services Firms at Thought Leadership Use Generative AI Less Than Followers

Are the best IT services firms at generating revenue from thought leadership (firms we designate as Leaders) using generative AI more aggressively than Followers? In most cases, it's the opposite: Followers are more often using generative AI than are Leaders – in eight of the nine areas we asked them about. The only area in which Leaders are leading here is using generative AI to conduct secondary research and synthesize the findings.

The four biggest gaps between Leaders and Followers in using generative AI today are these (Exhibit 58):

- Identifying topics: 49% of Followers are using generative AI here vs. 31% of Leaders (an 18 percentage-point difference)
- Writing prose: 47% of Followers vs. only 31% of Leaders (16-point difference)
- Creating multimedia content: 32% of Followers vs. only 19% of Leaders (13-point difference)
- Structuring narratives: 40% of Followers vs. 28% of Leaders (12-point difference)

Exhibit 58:

Leaders are More Judicious About Using GenAI in Thought Leadership Research

Research Task	Leaders	Followers
Identifying topics	31%	49%
Summarizing subject experts' insights	31%	43%
Producing new insights	31%	32%
Conducting and synthesizing secondary research	47%	40%
Structuring narratives	28%	40%
Writing prose	31%	47%
Editing prose	22%	30%
Creating visuals and graphics	28%	34%
Creating multimedia content	19%	32%

How can this be explained? First, the data shows that some Leaders are using generative AI today in creating thought leadership content. And by 2027, the majority said they would be using the technology here. However, right now, Leaders are more cautious about where and how they use it. Here's our take on why:

- Nearly half (47%) of Leaders use it today to conduct secondary research and summarize the findings. All Leaders plan to do this in two years. Generative AI has proven to be an unprecedented tool in collecting data from the Web - studies, white papers, case examples and more (from the media, books, academic research data bases, and more). Leaders recognize generative AI's value as a secondary research tool.
- Less than a third (31%) of Leaders use generative AI today to write prose, and 28% use it to write outlines. In contrast, nearly half (47%) the Followers use the technology to write prose, and 40% to write outlines. Leaders are less willing to outsource sense-making - coming up with insights, structuring an argument, and codifying it with text - than are Followers. **Leaders want their thought leaders to do the firm's thinking, not outsource it to an AI tool.**

To be fair, only 32% of Followers use generative AI today to generate new insights from their thought leadership research – i.e., insights that their internal experts hadn’t uncovered. That’s about the same percentage as the Leaders (31%).

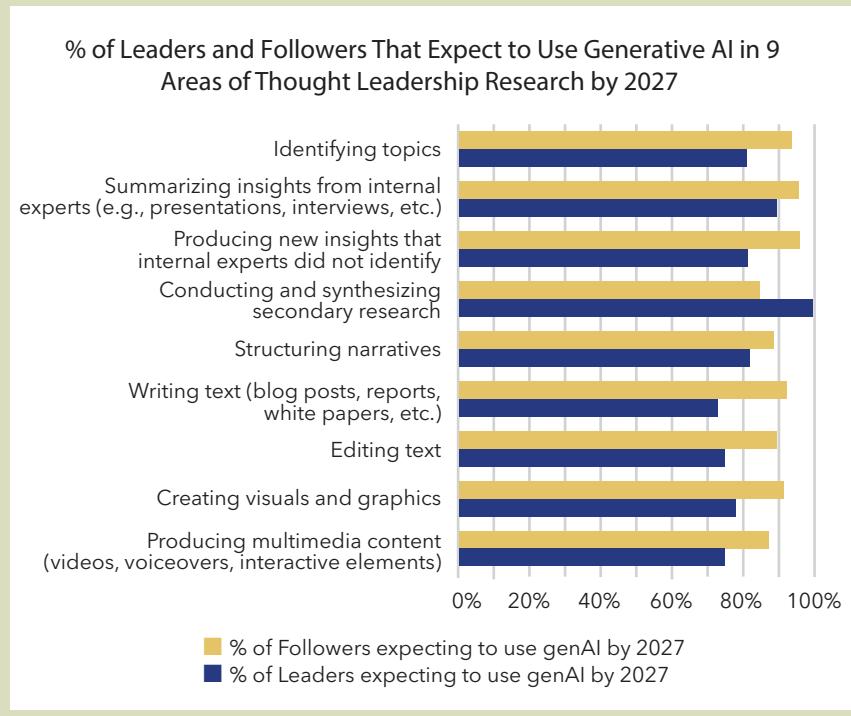
Yet by 2027, a higher percentage of Followers than Leaders expect to use generative AI in thought leadership in eight of nine areas. To be sure, Leaders are bullish on the technology, but not nearly as much as Followers – other than using it to conduct and synthesize secondary research. (See Exhibit 59.)

It’s clear to us that generative AI is here to stay in thought leadership research. It remains to be seen whether it will be a game-changer in helping IT services gather data on digital practices in the marketplace, determine what separates the best from the rest, and explain it compellingly.

Nonetheless, we believe IT services firms should be experimenting heavily with generative AI tools to automate key pieces of what for decades has been a tedious manual process.

Exhibit 59:

More Followers Than Leaders are Bullish on Using Generative AI by 2027



Quality Case Studies: The Underpinnings of a Strong, Customer-Focused Thought Leadership Program

Ask any business leader what they prioritize in the thought leadership content created by IT services firms, and they'll tell you that timely, relevant, and detailed case studies are exceptionally important to picking potential partners. In fact, 43% of our thought leadership consumer respondents said case study evidence was the quality they valued most. Digging deeper, case study evidence was rated the third most valuable attribute of quality content by tech services business leaders who consume thought leadership, after relevance (1) and statistical evidence (2).

To Micah Freedman, the chief transformation officer at hospitality services firm Edyn (and a former IT services, software and strategy executive), primary research findings are critical to setting context for understanding a tech services firms' take on important business challenges -- and their approach to solving them. "And then it's the experience of solving problems -- that's done in a case example form - (that's) where you can see qualitatively how the problem was solved, (and) what the outcome was."

Not surprisingly case study evidence was cited as the top attribute of quality thought leadership content by all IT services firms that we surveyed. And laggards rated it more highly than leaders. (Perhaps they see case studies as an important means for burnishing their credibility?). Given the near unanimity on the importance of quality case study content, why do they get short shrift from tech services firms across the space? We endeavored to learn why by evaluating the "success stories" sections of the websites. This, we believe, indicates how comfortable they are sharing relevant case examples in their marquee thought leadership materials.



We evaluated 19 of the top tech services companies in the field using a scale of 1-5 (where 1 was worst and 5 the best) on a variety of criteria:

- The number of case studies published on the landing page of their “success stories” web page during the preceding 18 months.
- The percentage of case studies featuring named clients vs. those that skated by with disguised identities.
- Whether these case studies revealed the customer’s core challenges.
- Details of the tech service firm’s unique problem-solving thinking and capabilities.
- Articulation of hard, quantitative results achieved or envisioned -- beyond soft, fuzzy qualitative business outcomes achieved (i.e., unsubstantiated reduced cost, improved productivity, accelerated time to market claims, etc.).
- Next steps in extending the client relationship.
- Whether or not the case study transcends static storytelling (i.e., pdf/HTML text) by incorporating audio, video and data/concept visualizations, etc.

Admittedly, our methodology is part art, part science. Yet our findings were revealing:

- **IT services firms publish a good deal of case studies, but much of it is lackluster and comes off as a checklist activity.** As we noted, decision makers who consume thought leadership content truly value case studies. They seek real-world evidence that their potential partners have solved the business challenges they are dealing with. IT services companies realize this and fill up their “success stories” section with content, much of it self-congratulatory and bereft of detail. Many case stories seem like they’re written by business development staff who are far removed from the project or by development teams more comfortable with the technology deployed than the results achieved. The case studies we reviewed barely scraped the surface in outlining the business-technology challenge the client faced, nor did they substantiate the IT services firm’s unique expertise in solving the challenge.

Mean score: 3.11.

- **The overwhelming majority of IT services firms had more disguised vs. named clients in their case studies.** In many instances, anonymous case studies outnumbered client-named ones by average of two or three to one. In extreme cases, the ratio is seven or nine to one. In a few cases, firms didn’t offer any named case studies. We know how difficult it can be to get clients to participate in deep-dive case studies without a good amount of arm

twisting to make it a win-win proposition. In our experience, it's worth the effort for one simple reason: named case studies carry greater clout than unnamed ones (i.e., they are more credible in the eyes of clients and prospects, as well as the media, intermediary and analyst communities). **Mean score: 2.32.**

- **IT services firms do a reasonably good job of highlighting their clients' core problems in their case studies.** One reason could be that operating primarily under a shield of anonymity allows them to be somewhat transparent in surfacing a client's challenges. Another could be that they are much more adept at observing the problem rather than articulating how they solved it. Lastly, most tech services firms are more comfortable discussing the technical elements of the problem (i.e., latency in processing, limited network bandwidth, hard-coded software that is inaccessible to modern open tools, etc.). **Mean score: 3.26.**
- **Tech services firms are adept at promoting their proprietary solutions, frameworks, and methodologies but do not explain how they are different. They also tend not to dive deeply into the business gains their clients attained.** Most gloss over the outcomes by issuing platitudes on significant business improvements without detailing specific, measurable outcomes. One reason could be that they see themselves merely as implementors, not strategic thinkers and actors, leaving a wide-open lane for white-glove management consultants like Bain, Boston Consulting, and McKinsey. **Mean scores: unique expertise, 3.05; business benefits, 3.42.**
- **Regarding next steps, many of the companies fell flat.** They typically paid lip service to follow-up work that typically shores up business gains achieved by clients -- either operationally or technologically. Such post-engagement activities signal that the client featured is happy and willing to expand the partnership. **Mean score: 2.84.**
- **Most IT services firms publish static case studies in either PDF or HTML formats.** While that may have worked earlier this millennium, it's not good enough in today's transmedia age. Not all clients and prospects are created equally. Some still prefer textual presentations, true. Others, however, prefer their case studies in more stimulating formats - videos, audio, data or concept visualizations and e-books built in dynamic HTML. Leading tech services companies (i.e., faster-growing companies which often have greater budgets and latitude to entice clients to participate in rich case study presentations) seem to understand this. Our evaluation revealed they tend to present more case studies in a variety of transmedia formats, blending straight text with more dynamic content displays on a single HTML page. **Mean score: 2.42.**

Research Method

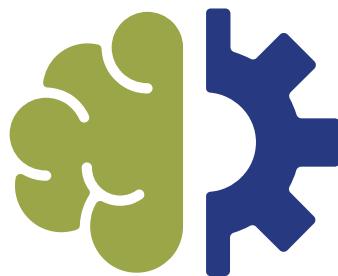
We designed our study at the beginning of 2025, starting with the following overarching question: What separates the best IT services firms from the rest at generating revenue from thought leadership, and does that thought leadership influence the way their clients make decisions on which firm to use?

We constructed two surveys:

- A 32-question online survey for thought leadership professionals at IT services firms around the world. In this survey, we included a question to determine "Leaders" (the best at thought leadership in driving revenue) from the "Followers" (those who said thought leadership did not drive revenue).
- A 14-question online survey for executives in 11 industries (not including IT services) who decide on which IT services firms to use.

Our research partner, Curious Insights, fielded both surveys this spring and generated 300 complete responses from IT services firms (sellers of IT services) and 200 complete responses from 11 other industries (buyers of IT services).

Concurrently, we spoke with 18 executives who have extensive knowledge about IT services firms – from both the "sell" and "buy" sides. Their interviews helped illuminate what the best IT services firms at thought leadership do differently than the rest.



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Endnotes

- 1 Gartner press release, Oct.20, 2020. <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-10-20-gartner-says-worldwide-it-spending-to-grow-4-percent-in-2021>
- 2 The data in Exhibits 1 and 2 came from gathering data Gartner has made publicly available in press releases since 2015 on its annual worldwide IT spending reports.
- 3 Gartner press release, July 15, 2025, disclosing its annual forecast of worldwide IT spending. <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2025-07-15-gartner-forecasts-worldwide-it-spending-to-grow-7-point-9-percent-in-2025>
- 4 U.S. Census Bureau data from 2002 and 2022 (latest available). 2002 data: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2002/econ/susb/2002-susb-annual.html> 2022 data: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2022/econ/susb/2022-susb-annual.html>
- 5 *Economic Times* article, Feb. 24, 2025. It covered a 2025 Nasscom report that the Indian IT services sector had grown to \$137 billion in revenue. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/information-tech/indias-it-industry-to-hit-300-billion-revenue-mark-in-fy26-nasscom-report/articleshow/118531334.cms?utm_source=chatgpt.com&from=mdr
- 6 The number of IT services members of NASSCOM were estimated by our inquiry in ChatGPT.
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- 8 MomentumITSMA survey, "The Value of B2B Thought Leadership Survey 2023." MomentumITSMA was purchased by Accenture in September 2025. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/648e303aaaf1c8276ec33291/t/64a80171400f512f6265f94/1688732019084/Grist+-+Value+of+B2B+thought+leadership+2023+vM.pdf>
- 9 Buday TLP, Phronesis Partners and Rattleback 2022 study "Rethinking Thought Leadership." <https://budaytlp.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Buday-TLP-et-al-Thought-Leadership-Research-Report.pdf>
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- 11 The CMO Survey report in 2024, sponsored by Deloitte, Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, and the American Marketing Association. https://cmosurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/The_CMO_Survey-Highlights_and_Insights_Report-Fall_2024.pdf
- 12 Edyn revenue, from its 2024 annual report.
- 13 See the book "The ROI of Thought Leadership," by Cindy Anderson and Anthony Marshall, of the IBM Institute for Business Value. <https://www.amazon.com/ROI-Thought-Leadership-Calculating-Organizations/dp/1394308914>
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- 15 Bain's Net Promoter Score system website. <https://www.netpromotersystem.com/about/>
- 16 Klein joined the Cognizant board in 1998, was its chair for 15 years, and retired as a board member in 2020, culminating a 53-year career in the IT industry with IBM, Digital Equipment Corp. and MDIS; <https://news.cognizant.com/2018-09-24-Cognizant-Board-Elects-Michael-Patsalos-Fox-as-Chairman> and <https://unitedagainstpoverty.org/employee/john-klein/>

Section 4: Taking Thought Leadership to a Higher Level

- 17 Babson College webpage, April 6, 2023. Weissman was chairman and CEO of Dun & Bradstreet in the 1990s, and divested Cognizant Corp. three years later. At that time, Cognizant, run by Weissman, included IMS, Nielsen Media Research and Gartner Group. In 1998, he spun off Cognizant Technology Solutions and was CEO of IMS until 2001. Weissman died in 2023. <https://entrepreneurship.babson.edu/remembering-bob-weissman/>
- 18 Accenture revenue and market cap data from Companiesmarketcap.com. <https://companiesmarketcap.com/accenture/revenue/>
- 19 Companiesmarketcap.com <https://companiesmarketcap.com/dxc-technology/revenue/>
- 20 "The Framemaking Sale" (2025, Basic Books) by Brent Adamson and Karl Schmidt. Adamson co-authored "The Challenger Sale." <https://www.theframemakingsale.com>
- 21 Note: Bob Buday made this argument in his 2022 book, "Competing on Thought Leadership." <https://www.amazon.com/Competing-Thought-Leadership-Robert-Buday/dp/1646871006/>
- 22 From "Competing on Thought Leadership," by Robert Buday, p. 40.

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