

5 Success Factors of Effective Thought Leadership Marketing

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Thought leadership marketing can differentiate and establish credibility in competitive markets, yet there is confusion about what it really is. Product marketers can use these five critical success factors to evaluate readiness for, and execute on, a TLM program.

Overview

Key Challenges

- Many marketers and opinion leaders regard all their content marketing as “thought leadership,” leading to material that doesn’t provide a unique viewpoint or establish a differentiated customer-centric position with buyers.
- Implementing a thought leadership strategy requires long-term commitment and investment to be successful, yet technology and service providers (TSPs) focus on one-off pieces of thought-leading content that achieve only short-term marketing goals.
- Because TSPs mistakenly interchange thought leadership marketing (TLM) and content marketing, they outsource the function to agencies and/or consultancies, limiting its effectiveness.

Recommendations

To improve promotion and awareness, product marketers should:

- Work backward from what is critical to their customers’ success to build a TLM program that demonstrates how they are leading in that given field of thought or endeavor.
- Establish long-term goals for their TLM program, including alignment with their wider go-to-market strategy and product strategy.
- Outsource tactical execution, but identify key leaders responsible for cross-functional sponsorship of the TLM program and developing the unique point of view (POV).

Introduction

Thought leadership marketing, if done well, can build trust by showcasing an understanding and vision for the future of the market you serve, differentiate you from your competition and lead to increased awareness.

TLM is your differentiation, and it is intellectual property (IP) made tangible and applied to your ideal customer's future. It's insight that leads your target audience into new fields of thinking or directions in a given domain.

TLM communicates your unique POV, introducing your organization to an audience as a market visionary in a particular segment and, ultimately, paving the way for more specific buying interactions. It is the systematic delivery of your IP that can provide differentiation, establishing you as a preeminent expert in a given field to customers for whom your products and services are an ideal fit (see [“The Enterprise Persona – Defining Your Ideal Customer Profile”](#)).

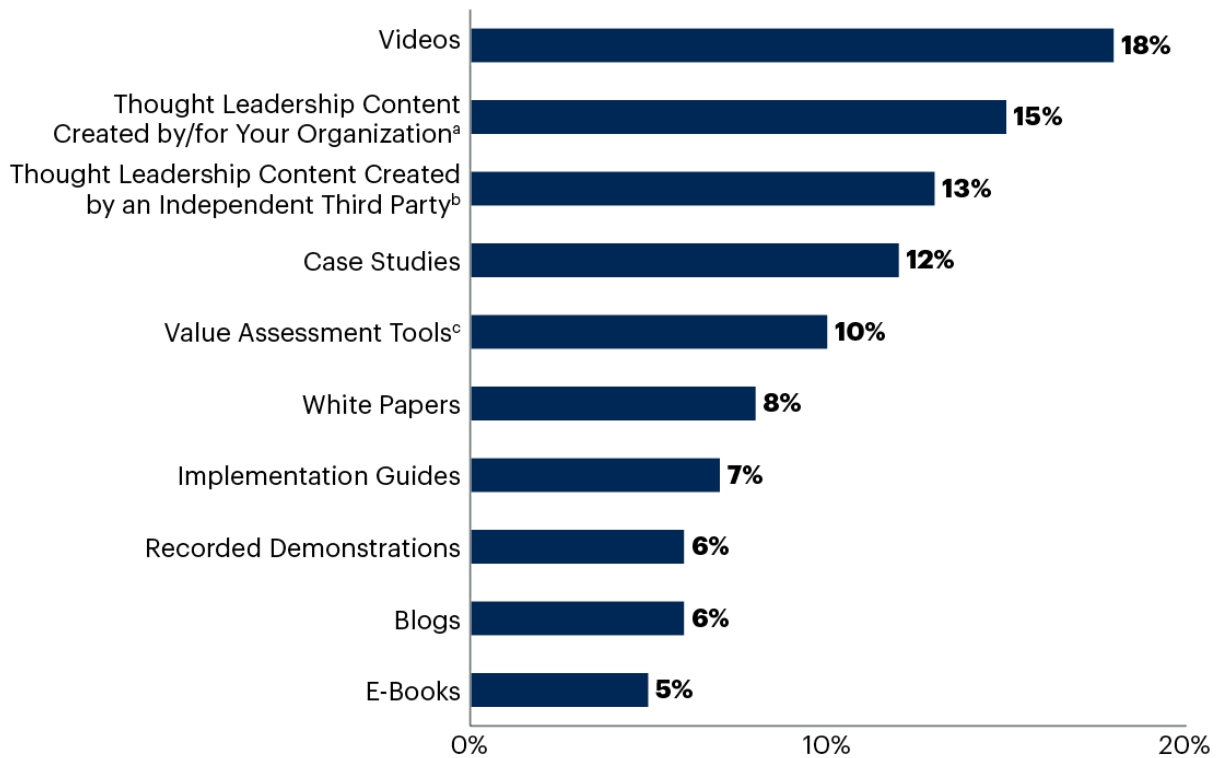
A truly effective TLM program is not a finite project owned by a tactical team in relative isolation. Instead, it is a long-term initiative involving considerable investment and cross-functional orchestration.

Analysis

Thirty-seven percent of Gartner-surveyed technology buyers cited receiving thought leadership content from a solution provider as a most preferred approach to learning about new technology solutions from a vendor. ¹ In addition, 15% of Gartner-surveyed TSPs with over \$50 million in revenue indicated that this content is the single highest driver of marketing-qualified leads (MQLs) into the top of the marketing funnel, as shown in Figure 1. ²

Figure 1: Highest-Performing Content Types (MQL Volume)

Highest-Performing Content Types (MQL Volume)
 Percentage of Respondents; Multiple Responses Allowed



n = 371

Base: Respondents in organizations with at least \$50 million in revenue, excluding “not sure”

Q: Which is the best-performing content type; i.e., which generates the largest number of MQLs?

^a Primary research or other data-driven content

^b Trade or industry association, publication, media or analysts

^c ROI calculators or TCO calculators

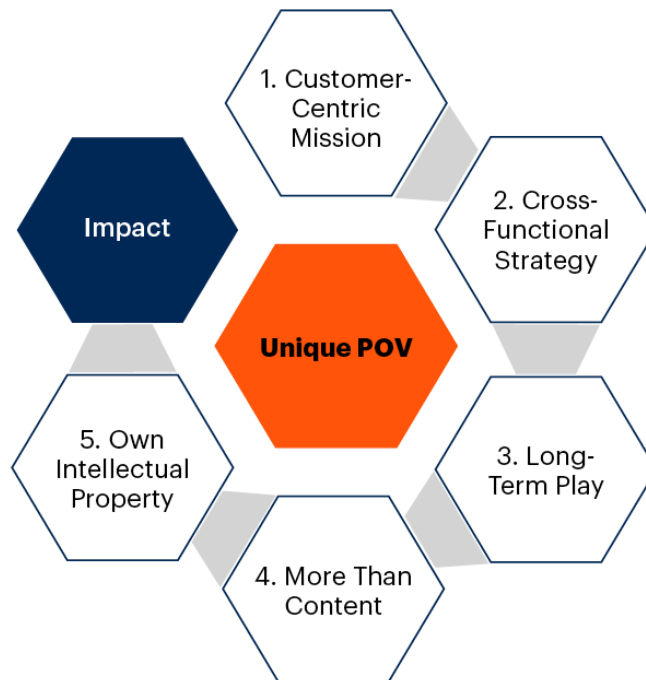
Source: 2019 Gartner Product Marketing Benchmarks Survey

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Technology marketers that are considering the development of a TLM program should weigh their situation against the five success factors (see Figure 2) that Gartner has identified for an effective TLM program and presented in this research.

Figure 2: Five Success Factors of Thought Leadership Marketing

Five Success Factors of Thought Leadership Marketing



Source: Gartner
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These five critical success factors drive an effective TLM program:

1. The program must be built on a customer-centric mission and be connected to your offering in the market.
2. TLM is a cross-functional strategy. It must be incorporated into your wider go-to-market strategy and be amplified in your product design and management, marketing and sales interactions, and eventually, your services and alliances.
3. TLM is a long-term, ongoing program that you should regularly evaluate for relevance and refresh as appropriate. A differentiated thought leadership position can become superseded or undifferentiated and lose value over time if not refreshed.
4. TLM is more than content. Authentic thought leadership needs to come from competency and an expert knowledge base that your organization has built over time.
5. The program cannot be outsourced. It must be directly related to your core IP and the value you deliver to your customers.

Evaluate Readiness for, and Execute on, a TLM Program

A lack of thought leadership isn't generally something that first comes to mind when a buyer either decides not to proceed with a purchase, or disqualifies a provider from consideration. It may be

why a buyer doesn't engage earlier in the buyer's journey with the organization, or doesn't buy, but the feedback may sound like, "You didn't understand my business problem."

However, we do know that more buyers place importance on the trustworthiness of the organization during the buying cycle than any other consideration. Thought leadership marketing:

- Extends your permission to play to earlier in the buyer's journey and with key buyer personas, especially with new prospects in a segment or buyers with high authority in their organizations.
- Establishes your reputation and credibility as an expert in your field.
- Differentiates you from your competitors and alternatives.
- Educates your ideal customer base about the future direction of technology and prepares customers for the way forward.
- Helps you retain customers by establishing yourself as a credible provider that will continue to evolve, and that the buyer will want to align with and do business with for the longer term.

Factor 1: Customer-Centric Mission

Ensure Your TLM Program Is Directly Relevant to Your Target Audience

TLM, as with all marketing, has goals of:

- Establishing a vision for the future to clearly position your company in the market
- Building domain expertise that leads to increasing credibility for your company
- Raising awareness of your brand and thus attracting prospective buyers to your offerings

Therefore, your TLM program **first** needs to be directly relevant to your target audience and, ultimately, either offer them advice that they can (or must) act on, or change their views – even if in the longer term. **Second**, your TLM must be directly relevant to what you do in the market and present a focused, unique POV that aligns back to your buyers. While TLM should not include product content, it should provide guidance that buyers will find valuable and should take whether or not they buy from you. But, if done well, the position should lead to your offering. Your thought leadership must be applied and emerge from the work you do to further your customers' customer-centric mission.

To ensure you are maximizing the potential of your TLM program, as the product marketer, you should consider:

- Who are your ideal customers? Describe the market segment you are serving, including firmographic attributes and business dynamics.

- What is your most highly differentiated source of customer value to these customers? What about your offering makes that possible?
- How will you protect that differentiated stance in the longer term? For example, you might develop a maturity curve in which the thought leadership requirements are aspirational for most of the industry. Then, articulate a path for each prospect to travel to get to that ideal state.

Thought leadership must be applied to your customers' situation. It must be tied to a problem or complexity they face, but don't know how to solve.

Thought leadership should provide a unique POV, something your customers don't already know.

Factor 2: Cross-Functional Strategy

Promote Your Differentiated Expertise and Vision by Securing Executive Leadership Commitment and Sponsorship of the TLM Program

True thought leadership drives the need for collaboration between product, marketing and sales, and may even include partners. Organizational coordination plays a huge part in credibility, amplification and time to market.

An effective TLM program, while managed and directed by product marketing in its execution, has its roots in the source of your differentiated expertise and vision, and will draw heavily on those resources. Therefore, having executive leadership commitment and sponsorship of the program is a critical success factor for any TLM program.

Ultimately, TLM supports all stages of the customer life cycle. However, if you stake out a thought leadership position through marketing, but do not carry it through to your sales and customer success interactions, it is, at best, a tactical marketing campaign. TLM offers great opportunities for salespeople and customer success managers to drive engagement; however, they must be able to use it appropriately. Successful TLM requires training and enabling the sales team – and anyone who talks to the customer during the buying and owning cycles – to be able to articulate the thought leadership messages and stories. This strategy must be part of the technology marketer's core responsibilities.

Factor 3: Long-Term Play

Develop a Unique POV and Remain Ahead of Your Target Buyers by Evolving Your TLM Program Over Time

Establishing your company as a provider that can meet today's needs and has a vision for the future – whether it is presenting an alternative or a completely new way of thinking about a topic – is a long-term endeavor. Consequently, to sustain an active TLM program, your company must have an intellectual curiosity that encompasses fact-based research, and encourages open debate

and a culture focused on delivering customer value. It requires commitment, investment and consistency.

To that end, a senior executive should champion the overall program. In most cases, a separate steering committee would own and drive the thought leadership topics, and assign professionals to research, create the content and be the public spokesperson(s) for this POV.

To identify these key spokespeople, the committee should consider:

1. **Domain expertise on the topic** — Ensure that the individuals are able to be heavily involved in development of the story to ensure consistency of the POV.
2. **Public speaking skills and persuasiveness** — Spokespersons need to be articulate, professional and able to engage an audience including media representatives, analysts, customers, partners and shareholders/investors.
3. **External recognition/influence** — They should be able to leverage their existing personal brand or be willing to build a personal brand leading to name recognition. This includes having an active social media presence. At a minimum, they should be comfortable with someone else managing their personal brand profile.

TLM must evolve over time. Discrete pieces of research or content creation efforts do not constitute thought leadership. You are aiming to develop a unique POV and remain ahead of your target buyers. Identify the most innovative companies that align to your offering, and ensure that you can support their requirements. This will enable you to vet your products/services, and should parlay into a thought leadership case study/reference.

TLM should be systematic in:

- Reinforcing the importance of external influencers in establishing credibility
- Providing access to your thought leaders
- Anchoring in your positioning and brand

Factor 4: More Than Content

Create Thought Leadership Content That Presents a Unique Perspective in Which a Particular Use Case May Apply

Initiating a TLM program is different from initiating thought leadership assets, and the marketing program can proceed only when thought leadership already exists in your organization. You can build a strong content marketing strategy. However, authentic thought leadership needs to come from competency and an expert knowledge base that your organization has built over time.

Competency and expertise may arise from a provider's participation in development of a breakthrough technology or service framework. However, for it to be the basis for a TLM program,

your organization needs to identify a long-term roadmap for how it will impact your market and your buyers to showcase why they should care about these issues or market opportunities.

Establishing a unique POV is integral to your offering, and it will inform your sales interactions, marketing activities and service engagement across the customer life cycle. This includes participation in events or relevant stakeholder groups (such as industry or standards bodies, academia or research organizations, and panels you choose to sponsor), and how you can get your ideas credited in independent external forums. The more independent the sources are perceived to be, the better.

Be mindful: If you think of TLM as a subset of content marketing, you will not succeed. However, it must meet the requirements of all good content and engage audiences by unfolding a compelling story (see [“Embrace Storytelling Techniques to Communicate Value Across the B2B Customer Life Cycle”](#)). Content marketing is important to meet the varying needs of the numerous participants in technology buying decisions at the multiple stages in those decisions. Yet, however important content marketing may be, it is not by itself TLM. And, there is observable confusion in the market between content marketing and TLM – among both customers and providers.

There are many types of important content required throughout the customer life cycle that are not thought leadership, as shown in Table 1. However, so much of the content launched into the “communosphere” is undifferentiated, purposeless and just noise. Over time, this makes it harder for buyers to distinguish content that is really valuable for them and shortens the window of opportunity to engage with buyers.

Table 1: Content Marketing Versus Thought Leadership Marketing

Content Marketing	Thought Leadership Marketing
Content focuses on presenting the specific use case of a solution, or associating a use case with a solution.	Thought leadership content presents a whole new way of looking at the world in which a particular use case might sit.
Content demonstrates the business impact to existing business models.	Thought leadership solutions present a vision for the future state of those business models, or lead to breakthrough solutions that “rise the tide,” resulting in strategic, hard-to-get business benefits.

Source: Gartner (March 2020)

Factor 5: Own Intellectual Property

Do Not Outsource Your TLM Program – It Must Be Directly Related to Your Core IP and the Value You Deliver to Your Customers

Thought leadership is IP externalized as a story to customers and prospects through your marketing and communications, and in interactions with your employees and partners. You cannot

outsource the creation of your ideas or source your research and insights; otherwise, essentially, it is not your thought leadership.

What you *can* outsource are elements of the marketing execution. For example:

- You can use writers on contract (for example, freelance journalists) to help the practitioners turn their insights into readily readable papers through interviews with subject matter experts, or for draft editing and writing support. This also includes editing and proofreading.
- You should consider utilizing designers or illustrators to create graphical representations of your ideas. Thought leadership can be about incredibly complex issues, with dozens of moving parts. A good design agency will enable you to simplify the complexities of your solution, along with the myriad business benefits that it addresses.
- You may consider using the same design firm to craft compelling, engaging visual stories and presentations for use with analysts and the media, in customer meetings and in speaking opportunities with prospects.
- You can use market researchers and fact-checkers to support your research needs.
- You should leverage an external PR agency with media network connections to support promotion of your TLM to journalists and influencers.
- You might consider collaboration with an academic or research firm to develop original research to support your POV.

Summary

A TLM program is a powerful strategy for organizations that have originality and vision in both the fiscal and behavioral senses. However, it is a long-term investment that is a substantial proportion of your go-to-market budget, and it requires sponsorship from executive leaders. These programs require a customer-centric vision for your unique POV, along with a comprehensive strategy to build supporting research and a promotional, marketing strategy. In addition, cross-functional teams must be willing to leverage this POV in go-to-market and product strategy.

Evidence

¹ Results presented are based on the 2019 Gartner End-User Buying Behavior Survey conducted to further understand the buying process for enterprise technology. The research was conducted online from February through April 2019 among respondents located in the U.S., Canada, the U.K. and Germany. Respondents in organizations with more than 100 employees and \$50 million in revenue were surveyed. The 1,464 respondents were involved in large-scale technology purchases* in one of the following seven categories: application software (on-premises or cloud), infrastructure software (on-premises or cloud), data center hardware, security (hardware, software or services), IT outsourcing/managed services, professional services (related to technology

strategy or implementation), or communications services. Respondents were asked about the purchase process, including general awareness generation and what factors impact purchase decisions.

* For the purposes of this survey, “large-scale technology purchases” were defined as follows:

- For organizations with less than \$1 billion in revenue, the minimum contract value of the purchase needed to be \$25,000 (or the local-currency equivalent).
- For organizations with \$1 billion or more in revenue, the minimum contract value of the purchase needed to be \$50,000 (or the local-currency equivalent).

Driver analyses have been conducted on this survey data using logistic regression methodology by transforming the survey questions into binary (or two-level) variables. The model-building process looks at interactions between different explanatory variables to assess their impact on a specific outcome or dependent variable. This is presented as an odds ratio where an odds ratio of, say, 2x would mean that a successful outcome becomes twice as likely due to the impact of the explanatory variable. Results could also be interpreted as percentages by subtracting 1 from the odds ratio, so an odds ratio of 2.5x can also be interpreted as that the successful outcome is 150% (converting 2.5 - 1 into a percentage) more likely due to the impact of the explanatory variable.

The results of this study are representative of the respondent base and not necessarily the market as a whole.

² The results presented are based on the 2019 Gartner Product Marketing Benchmarks Survey, conducted online from August through November 2019 among 506 respondents in the U.S. and Canada (n = 378) and the U.K. (n = 128). Participating organizations were TSPs with annual revenue of \$10 million or more and primary product offerings for software, services and (for the U.S. only) hardware. This note references the 375 respondents working in organizations with annual revenue of at least \$50 million.

Respondents were required to have one of the following primary job functions/roles:

- CEO/president/founder
- Demand/lead generation
- Marketing leadership
- Sales leadership
- Web/digital social marketing
- Marketing operations/analytics

They were also required to have knowledge of the marketing budget and spend for the company or business unit and knowledge of the marketing campaign/programs. At the country level, quotas were established to guarantee a good distribution in terms of product offering and company size (revenue).

The survey was developed collaboratively by a team of Gartner analysts and was reviewed, tested and administered by Gartner's Research Data and Analytics team.

Document Revision History

[5 Success Factors of Effective Thought Leadership Marketing - 24 September 2018](#)

Recommended by the Authors

[Tech Go-to-Market: Develop a More Comprehensive Content Strategy to Meet the Needs of Business Buyers](#)

[Developing Content That Drives Conversion Throughout the Buying Journey](#)

[External Influencer Marketing Is Critical for Success in Technology Markets](#)

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[Assess Channels and Agencies When Marketing Budgets Are Lower Than Competitors'](#)

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