

How to be an effective thought leader in 2015.

An asabell opinion paper.





Why we're here.

Thought leadership is a term that's bandied around to cover all sorts of material and all manner of thinking. We believe it's time to take stock of what's really involved so that, if you want to set becoming a thought leader as a goal for your organisation, you have a clear understanding of what's involved and how to start.

Welcome to our opinions on thought leadership.

What do we mean by thought leadership?

Thought leadership is a term used by many, but has an elusive definition. It first popped up in 1994 as a tag for businesses, and a way to flag up leaders who had outstanding ideas that were worth the notice of their industry.

Since then, it's evolved and expanded. In 2012, for example, Forbes opted to wrap internal strategy and corporate culture into the definition. Others, however, are more constrained in their concept.

At asabell our definition is simple. Thought leadership is:

‘A person or organisation viewed as an expert in their field; one who has gained an authoritative voice in the industry’.

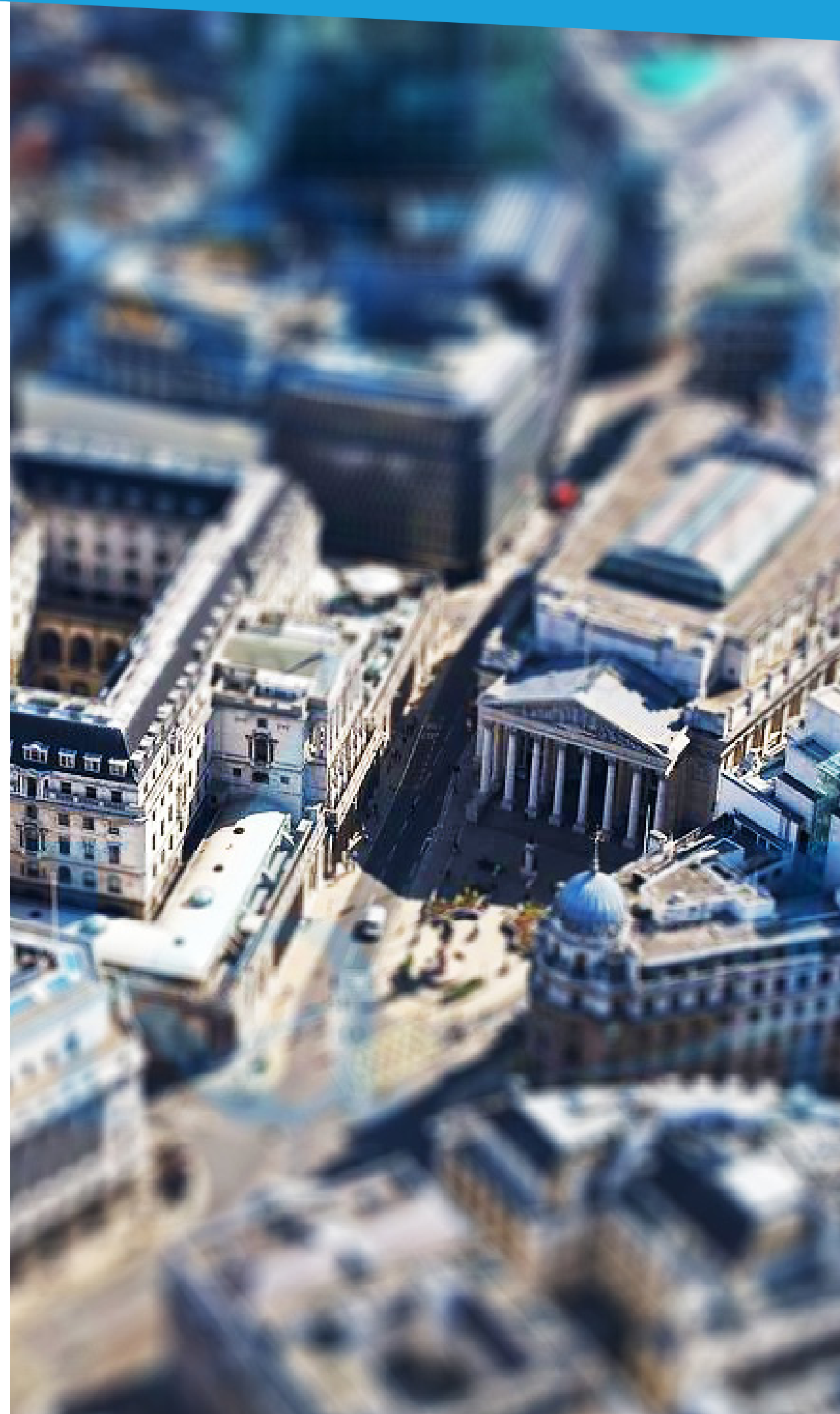
And with the right strategy, you can achieve this vision of thought leadership.

Why you should be a B2B thought leader.

Clearly, not everybody can be a thought leader. So is it worth your while to try and stand apart from the pack? We say: “definitely”.

1. It's the most effective tool of the moment.

It's a focus that the B2B marketing industry believes is now more important than building strong relationships with customers. In 2014, for the first time, thought leadership overtook deepening customer relationships as the priority, increasing in importance by 13 percentage points since the previous year (Tesseract, 2014). This is because, as the decision-making process gets more complex and more people within an organisation are involved in it, there's an increasing role for a trusted friend or knowledgeable advisor (a thought leader) to add value by guiding a business or individual through the minefield of making a choice (B2B Marketing, 2014). Certainly 92 per cent of marketing leaders believe that thought leadership is the best way to stand out from the competition and 82 per cent of clients want to see firms producing insightful content as the norm (Man Bites Dog, 2014).



2. It has the power to boost sales.

Thought leadership influences sales by creating a market position for you that generates leads: if your name and voice are out there in the buying environment you can reach out to your target audience earlier in the process, bypassing the trend that sees buyers 90 per cent into the buying cycle before they contact suppliers to make their final decision (Forrester, 2012). And it seems that thought leadership status has a direct relationship with likelihood to buy: 72 per cent of UK businesses are more likely to buy from thought leaders (MindMetre Research, 2013). What's more, it looks as though thought leadership is an extremely cost effective way of winning sales: stacked up against traditional marketing it generates three times as many leads (Demand Metric, n.d).

3. Just the attempt will boost the efficacy of your marketing.

Thought leadership cannot be guaranteed, but the effort to achieve the status alone will bring improvements to your marketing that will deliver benefits for your business.

Thought leadership is largely about content.

You've got your opinions together; now it's time to get them out there and that's all about creating content.

You say 'content', we say...

- White papers.
- Blogs.
- Research.
- Articles.
- Social media posts.
- Event speaking.
- Seminars.
- Video.
- Webcasts.
- Round tables.
- How-to-guides.

But it's also about people.

It's important to remember that, although thought leadership is often seen in terms of outputs, it's also about people embodying the leadership spirit of your thought leadership. As an organisation, embodying leadership status is about leading the way for others. Running workshops, giving presentations, hosting parties, mentoring others, leading societies and joining standards bodies are all good ways of showing good leadership (Rasmus, 2012). Look for individuals within your organisation who can take on this role and make sure they're incorporated in your thought leadership programme.



Writing your own thought leadership formula.

Source your ideas.

Becoming an effective thought leader is not a box-ticking exercise. There are, however, pointers that will get you a great deal of the way there.

1. Be unafraid to stand apart from the pack.

Remember thought leadership is about differentiation and this involves stepping outside the norms.

2. Base your stance on solid knowledge and genuine expertise.

What you say must have credibility. Anyone can create an amazing vision; not everyone can back that up with credible substance.

3. Make the most of your resources.

Draw on the collective resources of your organisation. It'll put a wider pool of knowledge and expertise at your disposal and maximise your chances of success.

4. Always link your thought leadership with your marketing strategy.

Thought leadership is intended to boost your sales opportunities so make sure it's aligned with your other marketing activity so that the link between the two isn't lost.

5. Offer thought that's insightful, relevant and interesting.

Keep your audience in mind so that your end result is likely to attract and hold their attention.

6. Remember: useful ideas are good; unique ideas are better.

There are two main strands of thought leadership: output that is of practical help to the user and output that's thought-provoking (and helpful in a different sense). Combining the two is marketing gold.



The process of creating thought leadership material.

1. Determine your ideas.

Start by tapping into all your resources to formulate your point of view. Use your employees' knowledge of your company and their unique perspective of the work they do. Consider bringing or buying in external expertise such as industry analysis or leaders in other sectors whose knowledge could cross-pollinate into your area.

2. Design your content to be seen.

The content you create needs to stand out. When 27,000,000 pieces of content are shared each day you want yours to work as hard as it can (Marketeer, 2014). Quality is key. It's important to take the time to look into what is missing from your industry, and find a new and exciting angle to lead conversation in a new direction. Originality and quality are key: if you can demonstrate knowledge and new insights to areas 'that have suffered from decades of conventional thinking' you can stand out at the forefront of your industry (Forbes, 2014).



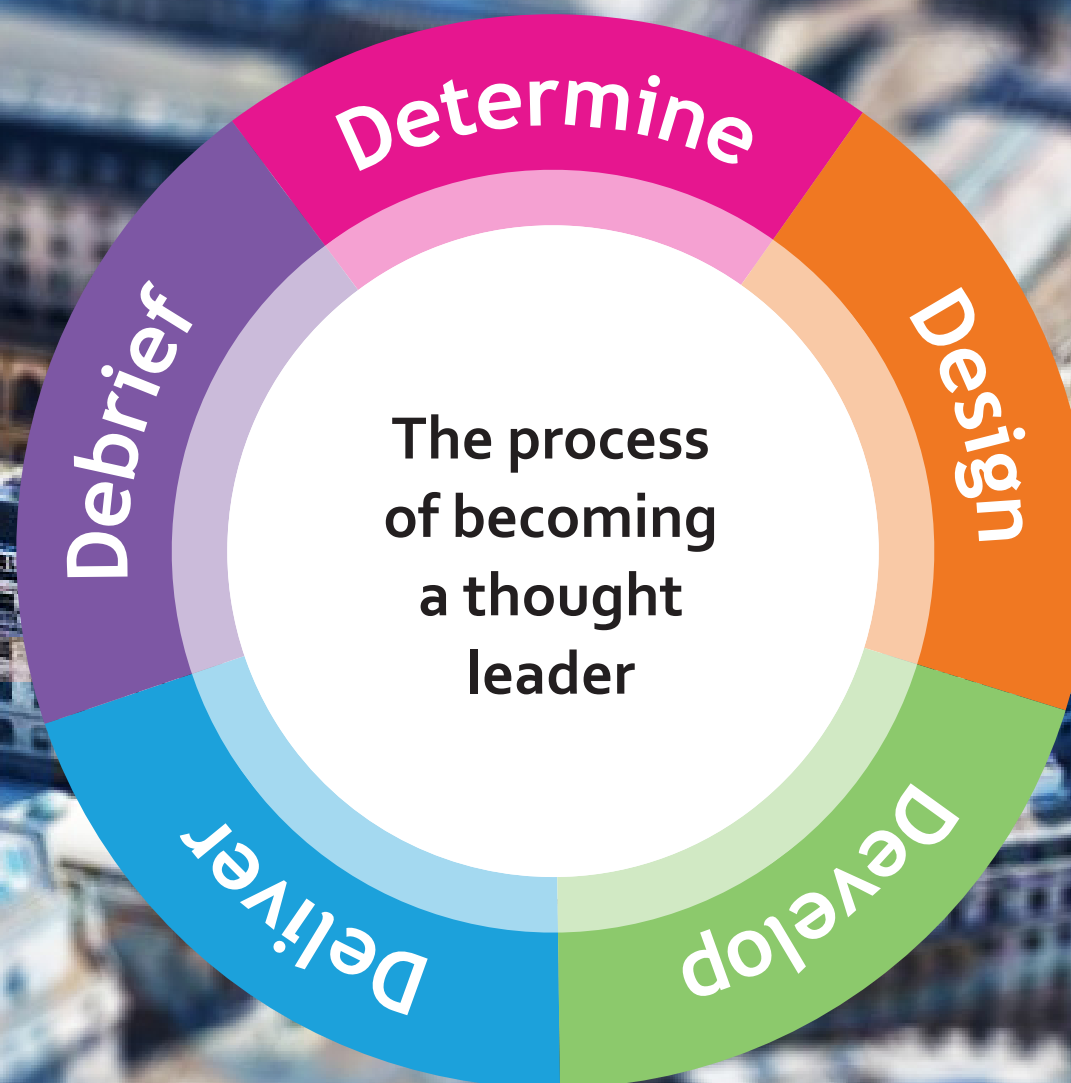
3. Develop your strategy for sharing.

Thought leadership requires consistency: once you start having a voice you need to ‘speak’ regularly so that people begin to look out for your content and you will be the one they turn to when they need the services you offer (O’Connell, 2014).

Create sustainable content by putting a comprehensive publishing calendar in place, and most crucially, stick to it. Think about what your customers are talking about, and look to support the top monthly conversations and searches that attract your audience best (Wright, 2014).

4. Deliver in the most effective ways.

Having gone to the trouble of creating useful and/or unique content you need to make sure it’s seen by your target audience. This is all about putting it out there in the places your targets ‘inhabit’ and also making sure it comes high in search rankings. Remember Google has changed the way SEO works: it now chooses the best written, most helpful and most popular website for a given search (Bailyn, 2014) so the only way to come top of the rankings is to create unique industry-leading content that says something new in a thoughtful and interesting way.



What successful thought leadership looks like.

Everything you do as a thought leader is entrenched in integrity and comprehensively planned. You have clear ideas that, from the start, sit in line with your overall strategy. And you create content that:

- gives genuine insight into what is happening in your market
- brings customers the knowledge they want, before they know they want it
- stands apart as new, exciting and interesting.

“Thought leadership isn’t about making a quick sale, it’s about fostering ideas and using them to bolster your brand, making you a true leader and visionary in your field. Be bold and open, and be unafraid to say something different. Because, as the market gets increasingly saturated, striving for thought leadership status will become an essential, not the exception. So start now and get ahead of the pack.”

Darren Green, Managing Director, asabell

References.

B2B Marketing. (2013). Research news: Businesses ‘more likely to buy from thought leaders’. Available: <http://www.b2bmarketing.net/news/archive/research-news-businesses-more-likely-buy-thought-leaders>. Last accessed 28 November 2014.

B2B Marketing. (2013). Research news: Three-quarters of ‘thought leadership’ content is ‘unoriginal’. Available: <http://www.b2bmarketing.net/news/archive/research-news-three-quarters-thought-leadership-content-unoriginal>. Last accessed 28 November 2014.

B2B Marketing (2012). Thought Leadership: A B2B Marketing Best Practice Guide. [Online]: B2B Marketing. 19-20, 56.

Bailyn, E. (2014). Why Thought Leadership is the New SEO. Available: <http://firstpagesage.com/seo-blog/seo-basics/why-thought-leadership-is-the-new-seo/>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Circle Research. (2014). Research-Led Thought Leadership. Available: <http://www.circle-research.com/wp-content/uploads/Research-led-thought-leadership.pdf>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Demand Metric. (N.d.). Content Marketing Infographic. Available: <http://www.demandmetric.com/content/content-marketing-infographic>. Last accessed 23 October 2014.

Forbes. (2013). What is Thought Leadership. Available: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/sap/2013/01/30/what-is-thought-leadership-5-steps-to-get-it-right/>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Kanter, B. (2014). How your organisations CEO can use social media for thought leadership. Available: <http://www.bethkanter.org/thought-leadership/>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Man Bites Dog Ltd. (2014). Follow the leader: Where next for thought leadership in professional services?. Available: <http://www.manbitesdog.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Follow-The-Leader-Full-Report.pdf>. Last accessed 23 October 2014.

Marketo. (2014). The Definitive Guide to Engaging Content Marketing. Available: <http://www.marketo.com/definitive-guides/definitive-guide-to-engaging-content-marketing/>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Meyer, K. (2014). How Thought Leadership Beats Content Overload. Available: <http://marketeer.kapost.com/thought-leadership-beats-content-overload/#ixzz3JPzVJ9yf>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Meyer, S. (2014). 8 steps to thought leadership through content marketing. Available: <http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hub/313892/file-383407049-pdf/Downloads/8StepstoThoughtLeadershipthroughContentMarketing.WhitePaper.Influenceandco.pdf?t=1416288184851>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Miller, J. (2014). Ask the Expert: Ekaterina Walter on Thought Leadership Strategy. Available: <http://marketing.linkedin.com/blog/ask-the-expert-ekaterina-walter-on-thought-leadership-strategy/>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

O’Connell. (2014). the Lifetime ROI of Thought Leadership. Available: http://blog.influenceandco.com/the-lifetime-roi-of-thought-leadership?utm_campaign=Kapost%20-%20Why%20Thought%20Leadership%20Should%20Drive%20Your%20Content%20Strategy&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=l. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Prince, R. (2012). What is a Thought Leader? Available: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/russprince/2012/03/16/what-is-a-thought-leader/>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Prince, R. (2014). The Future Of Thought Leadership. Available: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/russalanprince/2014/06/17/the-future-of-thought-leadership/>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Rasmus, D. (2012). The golden rules for creating thoughtful thought leadership. Available: <http://www.fastcompany.com/3003897/golden-rules-creating-thoughtful-thought-leadership>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Szydlowski, M. (2014). 4 Ways Managers Can Motivate Employees to Contribute Blog Content. Available: <http://blog.influenceandco.com/4-ways-managers-can-motivate-employees-to-contribute-blog-content>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Tesseract, L. “How B2B Marketers Wised Up To The Web” Marketing Week 9 October 2014: 24-25. Print.

Tunguz, T. (2014). The Compounding Returns Of Content Marketing: The Data Behind Why Persistence Pays Off In Blogging. Available: <http://tomtunguz.com/compounding-blogging/>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.

Wright, M. (2014). The 5 S’s of Content Marketing. Available: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/article/20141006174251-49707511-the-5-s-s-of-content-marketing>. Last accessed 18 November 2014.





Follow us on:



asabell: helping you to connect with customers and prospects.

w: www.asabell.co.uk
e: hello@asabell.co.uk
t: 01454 326 498

© asabell limited.