source
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Big impact thought leadership:

How to ensure that senior executives read, remember and act on your content

JULY 2015

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* In this year's survey, we repeated some questions from 2014: this applies to figures 2, 18, 19 and 21.

Introduction

From working with the world's leading consulting firms, we know that thought leadership is viewed by most in these firms as a vital investment that has the power to change perceptions, to build relationships with new audiences, and to cement relationships with existing clients. However, we also know, through reviewing hundreds of pieces of thought leadership each year against our established criteria[1], that despite significant improvements overall, too much of the material that's out there isn't as good as it could be: it fails to deliver new insight on topics of interest to the target audience in an engaging and resilient way. This is the content that doesn't achieve the return on investment that it ought to: it isn't picked up, or when it is, it is quickly put down again and forgotten.

Over the years, we have used our interviews with senior executives around the globe to regularly test our own views on what makes for good thought leadership. Last year, we commenced an ongoing series of surveys to further explore the views of your target audience – enabling us to not only pressure-test our own hypotheses but to share the views of those who consume thought leadership directly with those who fund, originate, and create content. We believe that all of us can benefit from this additional research:

- For those seeking to make a business case for investment in thought leadership, we provide information on who reads it and what action they take after engaging with memorable content.

- For those originating thought leadership, we offer guidance on the issues and topics that are most likely to be appreciated by your target audience as well as information about their reading and viewing habits.

- For those creating thought leadership, we share users' views on what you absolutely need to get right.

Our hope is that this report will further accelerate the development of great thought leadership: thought leadership that addresses topics and issues that are relevant to senior executives, that engages them, that is built on robust research and experience, and that encourages them to take action. In short, we want to see more content that really does lead the thoughts of those leading organisations around the globe.
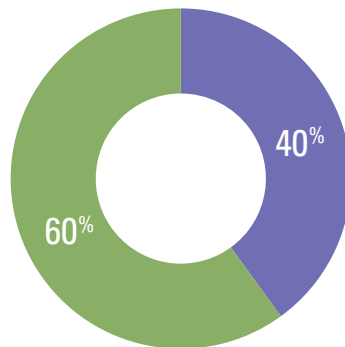
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[1] See appendix for a detailed description of the Source criteria for judging thought leadership.

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Figure 1   **Attributes of respondents**

Full sample (515)

Respondents actively engaging
with thought leadership (180)

**Number of people in
organisation in the US**

- 1,000 – 4,999
- 5,000 plus

Full sample: 40% / 60%

Respondents actively engaging: 44% / 56%
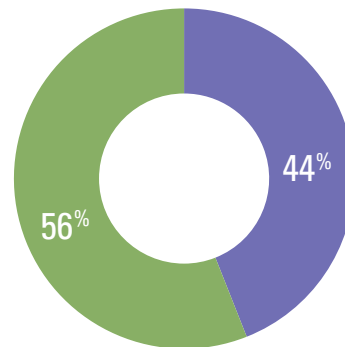
Function

- Corporate strategy
- Finance
- HR
- IT
- Operations
- Sales, marketing or
  business development
- Other

Full sample: 8% / 15% / 6% / 19% / 20% / 16% / 16%

Respondents actively engaging: 12% / 13% / 7% / 28% / 16% / 14% / 9%
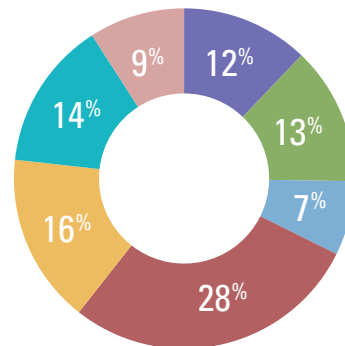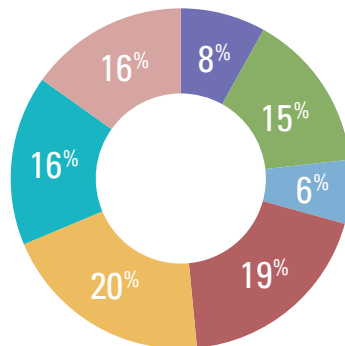
Sector

- Financial services
- Healthcare or life sciences /
  pharmaceuticals[2]
- Manufacturing (excluding
  pharmaceuticals)[3]
- Retail

Full sample: 23% / 30% / 20% / 27%

Respondents actively engaging: 28% / 27% / 22% / 24%
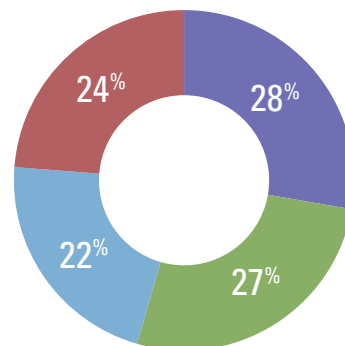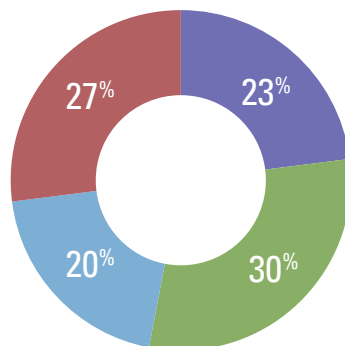
Level of seniority

- Chairman / Board Member
- CEO / President / C-level
- Executive Vice President /
  Managing Director
- Partner / Principal
- Senior Vice President /
  Director

Full sample: 1% / 12% / 17% / 3% / 68%

Respondents actively engaging: 1% / 13% / 22% / 3% / 61%
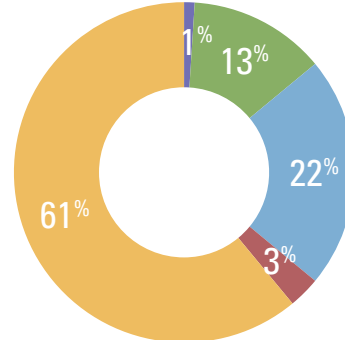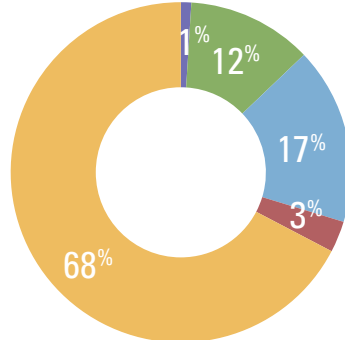
[2] We refer to this sector as 'Healthcare' throughout the report.

[3] We refer to this sector as 'Manufacturing' throughout the report.

Appendix one: Source's White Space quality criteria

Differentiation	Appeal	Resilience	Prompting Action
A. Is the subject topical? B. Is it different from what others are doing – either because of the topic or angle taken? C. Is the article revelatory and/or contrary to prevailing views?	A. Is the reader likely to continue past the first paragraph of writing? B. Does the report look good? C. Do the structure and writing style make it easy to read? D. Does the report do anything interesting to make the material stick in the reader's mind?	A. Is there any quantitative primary research? B. Is there any qualitative primary research? C. Is there any secondary research? D. How good is the analysis of either primary or secondary research? E. Are credible internal experts used effectively? F. Is the methodology clearly described?	A. Does the article clearly articulate action steps for the reader? B. Does the article give the reader a clear idea of how the consulting firm could help whilst avoiding being a thinly disguised sales pitch?
1 A. Subject is past its sell-by-date B. Has been written about extensively by other consulting firms for some time C. States the obvious	A. Introduction off-putting B. Presentation is poor and actively deters the audience from reading the document C. Writing style is very poor, often with too much jargon D. Nothing to make the material stick	A. No quantitative primary research B. No qualitative primary research C. No secondary research D. No analysis of the data E. No contributors named F. No description of research methodology, analysis or sources	A. No sense at all as to what the reader ought to take from the article B. Makes no reference to a firm's services OR standard boiler plate OR thinly disguised sales pitch
2 A. Subject has little long-term resonance and no immediate appeal B. Covers the same ground as some other consulting firms C. Some interesting points but in the main states the obvious	A. Introduction does nothing to encourage the reader to continue B. Presentation is weak C. Writing style is boring D. Hardly anything to make the material stick	A. Quantitative research carried out with fewer than ten organisations / people B. Qualitative research with one or two people or companies C. Very limited secondary research D. Poor / limited analysis of data E. Author or experts named but credentials unclear F. Score not available for this question	A. Hints at what the reader ought to do next B. Contains description of relevant practice
3 A. Subject has long-term resonance, but is not an immediate burning platform B. Subject has been written about before but angle is different C. Raises a number of interesting points	A. Introduction provides some encouragement to continue B. Presentation is professional C. Writing style is clear and jargon-free D. At least one compelling story, case study or analogy that is likely to stick in the reader's mind	A. Quantitative research carried out with 10-50 organisations / people B. Qualitative research with 3-5 people or companies C. Some secondary research D. Basic analysis of data E. Author or experts named and credibility established F. Basic description of research methodology, analysis or sources	A. Attempts to define the next steps but lacklustre B. Report gives an impression of the firm's relevant services
4 A. Links effectively to events in the past year B. Substantially different from what has gone before C. Challenges current thinking in some areas	A. Reader likely to continue after reading introduction B. Presentation is both professional and appealing C. Writing style is clear, jargon-free and engaging D. Reader is very likely to remember extremely compelling story, case study or analogy	A. Quantitative research carried out with 50-200 organisations/people B. Qualitative research with 5-10 people or companies C. Good secondary research D. Good level of analysis of data E. Main report contains opinionated commentary by credible internal expert F. Score not available for this question	A. Clear, actionable next steps for the reader B. It is very clear how the firm would help with this topic and what experience it has
5 A. Links effectively to events in the past six months B. Very different from what has gone before C. Presents a revelatory and challenging viewpoint	A. After reading the introduction, reader is compelled to continue B. Stunning presentation C. Writing style is best-in-class D. Would be almost impossible to forget	A. Quantitative research carried out with more than 200 organisations/people B. Qualitative research with more than 10 people or companies C. Extensive secondary research D. Outstanding analysis of data E. Main report contains opinionated commentary by multiple credible internal experts F. Clear (but not cumbersome) description of research methodology, analysis or sources	A. Clear, actionable next steps and the reader is compelled to take action B. Very clear how firm would help with this topic and what is unique about its approach

About Source

Source Information Services Limited (Source) is a leading provider of information about the market for management consulting. Set up in 2007 with offices in London and Dubai, Source serves both consulting firms and their clients with expert analysis, research and reporting. We draw not only on our extensive in-house experience, but also on the breadth of our relationships with both suppliers and buyers. All of our work is underpinned by our core values of intelligence, integrity, efficiency and transparency.

Source was founded by Fiona Czerniawska and Joy Burnford. Fiona is one of the world's leading experts on the consulting industry. She has written numerous books on the industry including: _The Intelligent Client_ and The Economist books, _Business Consulting: A Guide to How it Works and How to Make it Work_ and _Buying Professional Services_.

For further information please visit www.sourceforconsulting.com

About White Space

Please see www.sourceforconsulting.com/whitespace for further information.

Thought leadership is one of the most important marketing tools for a consulting firm. Studies have shown that it plays a vital role, from helping clients decide whether an issue or opportunity is worth pursuing in the first instance, to deciding which firms should be shortlisted for work. But the result is now a very crowded market. The first (printed) edition of White Space, based on the thought leadership published in 2002, listed just 636 publications. Today's online version links to more than 30,000 documents.

White Space was first developed ten years ago by Fiona Czerniawska, one of the world's leading commentators on the management consulting industry and co-founder of Source. It's the only service of its type in the world, and almost all the major consulting firms subscribe to it. Every month we update its content by using proprietary search engines to identify new thought leadership from 30 leading consulting firms. This material is classified by topic (service), sector and geography, allowing users to browse broad swathes of material from different sources very efficiently.

Since 2007, White Space has also rated the quality of thought leadership. Our methodology was originally based on watching how clients read material. We wanted answers to questions such as: Why is some work discarded without a second glance? What attracts people's attention – and what holds it? How deep does the research have to be to confer credibility? When, and to what degree, is it appropriate to make a reference to a firm's consulting services? That gave us the criteria by which we now assess quality. Today, subscribers can access half-yearly ratings reports, reflecting activity over the previous six months, with which they can benchmark their material.

Thought leadership is constantly evolving, and so is White Space.