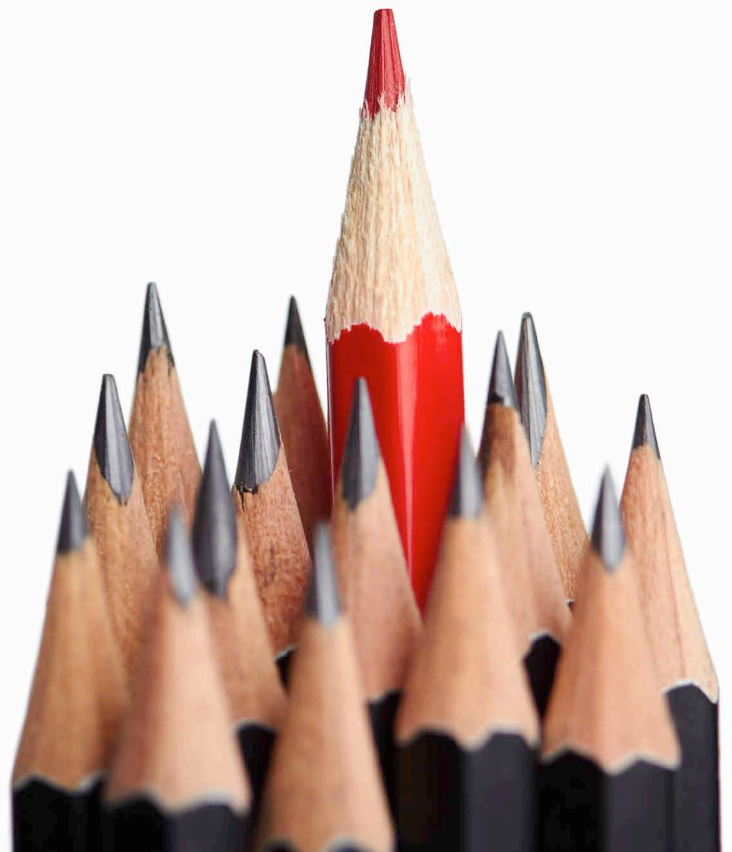


September 2019

Quality Ratings of Thought Leadership for the First Half of 2019

White Space



— The long and short of it

We've sensed a touch of scepticism creeping into the conversations about the role of thought leadership that we've had with marketers recently. "What exactly is its role?" they ask. "Does it actually work?"

Tying thought leadership to revenue has always been a challenging business, but time and again research—everybody's, not just ours—suggests that good content plays an important role in the buying journey and that the answer to the critical question is very probably yes: Thought leadership does work.

Note, though, the insertion of the word "good" there. As our rankings for the first half of 2019 reveal, no firm outside the top five has an average score higher than 10 (out of a possible 20) for the quality of its thought leadership. It's worth conceding that a score of 20 would describe a perfect piece of content, but nevertheless, most firms aren't even halfway there.

Their response, though, is intriguing: Faced with a range of choices—the most obvious of which is surely to stop publishing weak content and put their trust in, and weight behind, what is usually still a considerable oeuvre of above-average content—most firms round on the closely-related questions of format and length. The way to fix the problem of poor-quality content, they appear to reason, is to change its length. Overwhelmingly this results in content being made shorter: In fact, as Figures 1 and 2 show, for the first time since we've started analysing it, short articles have overtaken long reports as the dominant form of published content.

Methodology

Our definition of thought leadership

We include material that is intended to say something new about business, technology, or the economy and is positioned by the firm as such (e.g., as thought leadership, insight, or research).

We do not include material that:

- is primarily and obviously designed to sell a particular consulting service or solution or is clearly straightforward marketing material
- describes a single case study, except in cases where a firm is doing so to illustrate a broader point it is making about a subject
- outlines the results of a survey with minimal analysis, or
- provides factual operational guidance on legislative or accounting changes.

However, what seems perfectly clear on paper can at times be less clear when applied in practice. The first challenging boundary to manage is material around guidance on legislative or accounting changes. On this one, we do our utmost to separate factual guidance (which shouldn't be included) from material that brings the firm's experience and perspective to add value to the reader (and so should be added to our list).

A second challenge is generated by firms themselves when they decree some material to be "thought leadership" and other material (although it fits our criteria) as "something other than thought leadership".

In order to be fair to all firms, we take the intelligent reader's perspective: If they would view this in the same light as other "thought leadership", then we do too.

The third and final area we often find ourselves debating is around material produced in conjunction with outside bodies. On this one, if the intelligent reader would assume the consulting firm is the key driving force behind the piece, then we do too, and we add it to the list.

Formats

We include material that the reader would perceive as thought leadership—this may be a traditional PDF, an online report, or material presented through an interactive site. In order to compare like with like, we exclude blogs and blog-like material as well as stand-alone videos.

Where content is presented in multiple ways, we always aim to score the optimum format or mix of formats.

Sampling

We review a random sample of each consulting firm's thought leadership based on a minimum of 20% of output or 10 pieces, whichever is the greater. For those firms producing more than 150 pieces of thought leadership in the six-month period, we cap our reviews at 30.

Firms included

The primary driver for inclusion in our list is size of firm. However, some large firms produce little thought leadership and some smaller firms produce a significant amount of high-quality content. The former we exclude from our process (although we keep a close eye on output), and the latter we consider including if we see a persistent commitment to thought leadership.

The following firms have appeared in our rankings at some point but have been previously excluded and not reinstated due to a scarcity of relevant content: Aon (formerly Aon Hewitt) (last appeared 2016 H1), BearingPoint (2018 H1) Booz Allen (2015 H2), CSC (2015 H1), Infosys (2016 H2), Mercer (2015 H2), North Highland (2018 H2), PA Consulting (2018 H2), Roland Berger (2018 H2) and TCS (2018 H2).

Historically, we reviewed content from Hay Group and then Korn Ferry Hay Group from 2016 H1. This firm now appears as Korn Ferry.

Please do let us know of any firms that we are not analysing which you believe merit inclusion.

Our quality criteria

Our criteria are based on research with senior executives in large organisations and assess the factors that drive individuals to pick up a piece of content; to read past the first paragraph and beyond; to have confidence in what they have read; and to take action based on what they have absorbed.

Each piece is rated individually against a series of 15 questions. For each criterion, the piece of content receives a score between 1 and 5; this generates a total score for each piece of between 4 and 20.

Full details, including information about how each question is scored, can be found on [White Space: Our quality ratings methodology](#).

Would you like to explore the findings of this report in more detail?

We can help you consider what our findings mean specifically for your firm. We run webinars and small group discussions based on in-depth analysis of our quality ratings and our knowledge and experience of thought leadership. Questions we often help our clients answer include:

- Are we maximising returns on our thought leadership investment?
- Where are the biggest opportunities for increasing the impact of our thought leadership?
- What can we learn from the best—and the worst—of our content?
- What can we learn from our competitors' content?
- Where and how can we innovate effectively?
- What do the results suggest about our ways of working on thought leadership?

Can we help you assess the quality of individual publications?

Underpinned by our quality criteria and benchmarking data, we provide feedback on individual pieces of content. This can be carried out pre-publication, in which case we will also make suggestions about what can be improved before your deadline. Clients use our post-publication feedback to train creators of thought leadership, to identify opportunities, and to track progress.

To find out more, or simply to request a quote, please contact hayley.urquhart@sourceglobalresearch.com.



Programme schedule for 2019

Reports 2019	Market Data and Analysis	Client and Brand Insights	Emerging Trends
January	Forecasts for 2019		
February	UK	UK Nordics GCC	
March	GCC Benelux Nordics	France Germany US	The Future of Pricing
April	France DACH Southern Europe	Energy & Resources Financial Services Healthcare Technology, Media & Telecoms	
May	US Eastern Europe & Russia		The Value Problem
June	Canada		
July	South America Australia	Perceptions of Audit Firms Perceptions of Risk Firms Perceptions of Tax Firms	
August	Africa Risk		The Make-Buy Decision
September	India Energy & Resources Planning for Growth in 2020	Talent Attractiveness in 2019	
October	Financial Services China South East Asia		
November	Japan Healthcare Technology, Media & Telecoms		The Future of Delivery
December	Tax		

White Space

A powerful research tool that allows subscribers to keep up to date with the latest content being produced and maximise their return on investment. A series of reports that analyse the quality and effectiveness of thought leadership are published throughout the year.

Our custom work

We provide advice and custom research services to the world's most successful professional services firms, helping them to identify, and develop strategic responses to, their most pressing opportunities and challenges.

Among other things, our work includes:

- Deep market and competitor analysis
- Acquisition strategy
- Proposition strategy and development
- Brand and client sentiment analysis
- Thought leadership strategy, development, and review

For more information about any of these, please visit our website or get in touch.

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