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A practical guide to thought leadership for learning and talent brands

This guide has been created from a session on thought leadership facilitated by Martin Couzins, CEO, Insights Media, and Nahdia Khan, a senior talent and L&D professional with many years' experience of running thought leadership programmes

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This guide explores:

- What we mean by thought leadership
- Why it is important
- The importance of audience, action and value
- Internal buy-in
- How thought leadership supports the sales process
- The role of insight in thought leadership
- Case studies through the lens of thought leadership
- Award entries as thought leadership
- Personal branding
- Building a business case for thought leadership

What is thought leadership?

Thought leadership is a way to stand out in a crowded marketplace by sharing insights, innovative ideas, and valuable perspectives that influence others. For learning brands, it's about demonstrating expertise, foresight, and the ability to simplify complex concepts to inspire and guide others. True thought leaders take a clear position, addressing market challenges, pain points, and opportunities in a fresh, original way.

Key elements of thought leadership include



Expertise

Demonstrating deep knowledge in your domain. For example, if your brand focuses on developing managers, your thought leadership should reflect your expertise in that area.



Fresh insights

Offering perspectives that challenge conventional thinking and bring originality to often repetitive conversations.



Clarity and relevance

Simplifying complex topics and making them actionable for your audience.



Thought leadership is a way of positioning yourself and defining yourself in a slightly different way. It involves sharing insights, innovative ideas and valuable perspectives that influence others, and the thinking and decision making of your audience.

Nahdia Khan, senior talent and L&D professional

Why is thought leadership important?

Thought leadership builds credibility, trust, and authority. It's not an overnight process but requires consistent, high-quality contributions supported by evidence, such as data, results, or case studies. Over time, this credibility strengthens your brand's position in the market and attracts the right audience.

Edelman's 2024 B2B Thought Leadership Impact report reveals that 73% of decision-makers find an organisation's thought leadership content more trustworthy for assessing capabilities and competencies than marketing materials and product sheets.

Importance of audience, action and value

Effective thought leadership is audience-focused and actionable. It's not enough to highlight trends or insights; you need to guide your audience on what to do next.

For example, instead of simply presenting data, you could say, "Based on these findings, here are three steps to improve workplace learning outcomes." This approach creates value by connecting insights to clear actions.

Visibility is also key. High-quality research or content that isn't amplified through the right channels and platforms won't have the impact it deserves. Thought leadership must meet your audience where they are, using platforms they trust.

Importance of internal buy-in

Thought leadership cannot thrive as a siloed, marketing-driven effort. For it to succeed, it requires:

A shared vision

Aligning internally on what your organisation stands for and how you want to be recognised in the market.

Champions

Identifying team members willing to publicly represent your brand's voice and expertise.

Employee engagement

Thought leadership fosters purpose and pride internally, contributing to a stronger employer brand. Employees understand the "why" behind your organisation's work and feel connected to its mission.



How thought leadership supports the sales process



Today's buyers don't want generic sales pitches. They seek meaningful conversations with experts who understand their challenges. Thought leadership positions your organisation as a trusted partner by:

- providing the credibility needed for prospects to believe in your expertise.
- enabling sales teams to have deeper, insight-driven conversations that resonate with buyers.
- differentiating your brand from competitors offering similar solutions by focusing on unique, customer-focused narratives.

55% of decision makers say that during an economic downturn it is more important than ever for suppliers who do not offer products/services that are essential to operations to produce high-quality thought leadership if they want to win their business

(2024 B2B Thought Leadership Impact report, Edelman).



Understand how customers talk about your value and impact, what words they use and how they describe what you do. You can then feed that back into your brand voice through your thought leadership.

Martin Couzins, CEO, Insights Media



It's tricky to get good case studies, but investing the time in driving really strong evidence that you have made a difference to a customer and bringing that out through a thought leadership lens is an interesting way to do it.

Nahdia Khan, senior talent and L&D professional



The role of insight in thought leadership

Insight turns data into meaningful stories. While data tells you what is happening, insight explains why and offers solutions. Thought leadership isn't just about conducting primary research; it's also about:

Triangulating information

Combining your own insights with industry data and trends to create a compelling narrative.

Packaging information

Presenting it in a way that's accessible, relevant, and actionable for your audience. For example, instead of stating that leadership training isn't working, provide insights into why it isn't working and what actions can reverse the trend.

Case studies through a thought leadership lens

Case studies are powerful thought leadership tools. However, instead of using them as product endorsements, present them as learning opportunities for the broader community. Highlight:

- the challenge faced by the customer.
- how insights and solutions led to measurable results.
- broader lessons or trends others can learn from.

This approach builds trust and credibility while showcasing your impact without overtly selling.

Award entries as thought leadership

Award submissions are another way to build thought leadership. They require you to articulate your vision, impact, and results, creating a narrative that highlights your brand's value both internally and externally.

Personal branding

Thought leadership also boosts personal branding by allowing individuals within your organisation to:

- showcase their expertise and focus on niche areas.
- build networks and influence within and beyond your market.
- engage in meaningful conversations that lead to partnerships, speaking opportunities, or media features.

What execs value most highly about thought leadership content. The top criteria are:

- Credible research
- Clear and compelling narrative
- Unique insights
- Case studies that support claims
- New solutions to business challenges
- Concise content that clearly summarises the key points

Source: FT Longitude



Building a business case for thought leadership

Thought leadership needs stakeholder support to succeed. To build a business case:

- align it with strategic objectives, such as growing brand awareness, driving lead generation, or enhancing customer loyalty.
- highlight long-term benefits, such as market differentiation and stronger customer relationships.
- emphasise the need for investment and patience. Thought leadership takes time to deliver measurable outcomes but has lasting impact.

Final thoughts

For learning brands, thought leadership isn't just a marketing tactic—it's a way to define your value in a crowded market. The need to build a credible and trustworthy brand is becoming increasingly important in the corporate learning market.

By combining market data and trends, your expertise, actionable insights, and a clear audience focus, you can build trust, influence decision-making, and drive meaningful impact for your organisation and your customers.



Further reading

[2024 B2B Thought Leadership Impact report, Edelman](#)

[HR Strategies and Buying Decisions Report 2023-2024, PRinHR](#)

[Learning from Leaders - how to engage, inform and influence business leaders, FT Longitude](#)



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