ANSWER ENGINE

The State of
B2B Thought Leadership
in 2026

TopRank MARKETING

Ascend2
RESEARCH-BASED MARKETING

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Survey Methodology

This research was conducted by Ascend2 in partnership with TopRank Marketing to better understand the evolving role of original research, content marketing and influencer collaboration with thought leadership as a platform for B2B brands.

Audience

The survey was fielded to a panel of 797 senior-level marketing leaders from B2B companies located in the United States and the United Kingdom. Respondents represented a cross-section of industries. All participants were directly involved in marketing strategy, content, or demand generation within their organizations.
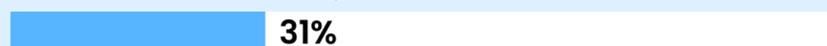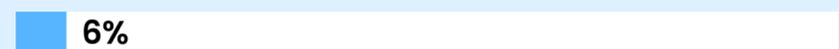
Role in your organization

CMO
38%

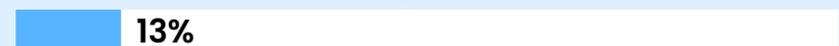Head of Demand Generation
6%

VP of Marketing
12%

Other primary marketing decision-maker
13%

Director of Marketing
31%

Company primary industry

Technology / Software (SaaS, cloud services, cybersecurity)
31%

Healthcare & Life Sciences (medical devices, pharma, diagnostics)
5%

Manufacturing (components, machinery, industrial goods)
12%

Marketing & Advertising (agencies, martech platforms)
7%

Professional Services (consulting, legal, accounting)
8%

Construction & Real Estate (commercial building, facility services)
9%

Wholesale / Distribution (bulk goods, logistics support)
5%

Energy & Utilities (B2B solar, industrial power solutions)
4%

Financial Services (B2B banking, insurance, investment firms)
13%

Telecommunications (enterprise connectivity, infrastructure)
2%

Survey Design & Fielding

The survey instrument was developed collaboratively by Ascend2 and TopRank Marketing to align with key research objectives and industry trends. Questions were designed to yield actionable insights and to support insights around thought leadership for B2B brands.

Data was collected via an online survey in July, 2025, distributed to a curated research panel.

Data Processing & Analysis

Responses were tabulated, validated, and segmented by Ascend2's research team. Comparative analyses were conducted to identify differences between high-ROI vs. lower-ROI marketers, frequent vs. infrequent influencer collaborators, and other key segments.

The Answer Engine of B2B Thought Leadership

Competition for attention amongst B2B companies is more intense than ever while AI is rewriting the rules of how content is discovered and trusted. Experience shows us that today's buyers are hungry for trustworthy, useful content that stands out at every step of their journey. For many marketers, these changes have created challenges, but also a new opportunity: to become the best answer when it matters most.

That's why we partnered with Ascend2 on this research. We wanted to understand how leading B2B marketers are adapting their strategies to deliver thought leadership that goes beyond generating clicks to build lasting trust and drive measurable business outcomes. The findings reveal sharp contrasts between top performers and the rest of the field in how they use research, collaborate with influencers, and integrate their strategies across the customer lifecycle.

The data confirms what I think many of us already sense: authority-driven strategies are rising for AI discovery systems as well as for people, and success depends on combining credibility with creativity, distribution with data. Top performers are pulling away by investing in original insights, elevating trusted voices, and aligning their efforts to customer needs across multiple channels.

Our goal with this report is simple: to give you a clear, evidence-based view of what works, what doesn't, and what's next. We hope it helps you navigate the complexity of today's environment and guide you to a more confident path forward as you build your own Answer Engine for growth.

Lee Odden
CEO, TopRank Marketing

Introduction

Engines are built for motion. They take raw fuel, channel it through a system, and convert it into forward momentum.

In B2B marketing, an Answer Engine follows a similar path — channeling data, insight, and creativity into engaging content experiences that build trust and the confidence to take action.

In an overwhelming and noisy digital marketplace, buyers are searching for answers they can trust. That need elevates thought leadership to a success strategy for companies that want to strengthen their brand, grow demand, and drive revenue growth.

At the same time, new technologies are reshaping the very fuel, channels, and momentum that marketers use to drive that growth. AI is rewriting the rules of discovery. ROI pressure is tightening budgets. Trust is harder to earn and easier to lose.

> B2B marketers in 2026 need engines that build trust, visibility, and results — engines designed to perform with the speed of change in technology and buyer behaviors. **Original research is one of the most reliable fuels, providing the credibility that AI tools, shifting budgets, and skeptical buyers alike demand.**

To understand what works and what doesn't, we asked 797 B2B marketers across the US and UK how they approach thought leadership today, and where they're headed tomorrow. The data reveals what separates answer engines from noise machines — and underscores the role of original research in keeping your marketing system running at peak performance.

Key Findings

Our research found overwhelming support for thought leadership built on original research and amplified through industry influencers as key drivers of business outcomes, alongside the rising influence of AI.

97% **of B2B marketers say thought leadership is critical to full-funnel success,** and yet only 43% extend it beyond acquisition to engage and retain customers post-sale. Research based thought leadership can serve as an engine that drives content across the entire customer lifecycle.

93% **of B2B marketers using original research based content feel that it is effective at driving engagement and leads.** 48% feel it is very effective. Original research is an essential part of effective content for marketing that builds trust across the buyer journey.

74% **who frequently collaborate with influencers report their research-based content** as very effective vs. just 29% of everyone else. Partnering with industry experts adds credibility and distribution to thought leadership content and doing so on an ongoing basis can compound the impact.

78% **of B2B marketers surveyed say interactive and experiential content increases repeat engagement,** but only 33% regularly build it into their campaigns. This disconnect between belief and action creates an opportunity for B2B brands to elevate reach, engagement and impact with content as an experience, not just information.

32% **of professionals now discover thought leadership through GenAI tools.** Discovery habits are adapting to new technologies, and AI search is reshaping how buyers find and engage with expertise.
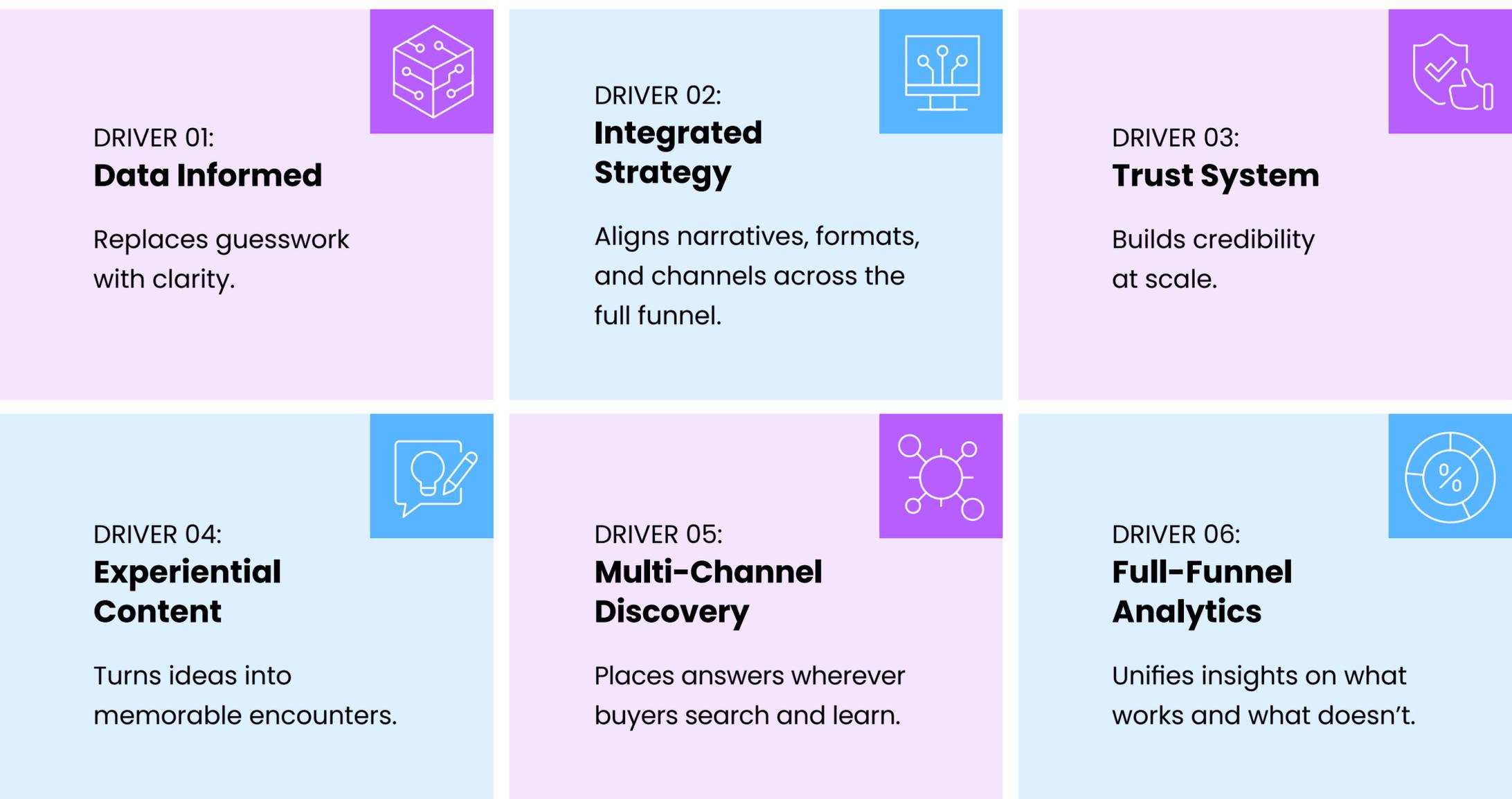
The Six Drivers of the Answer Engine

The research reveals key insights about how B2B marketers are performing across a framework for driving credibility, engagement and growth.

Engines create power through a system of components working in precise alignment. Each driver of the Answer Engine provides stability on its own, **yet real strength comes when they operate in harmony.**

These six drivers are designed to remove the barriers that stall brand credibility and cause buyer decision paralysis. They address the pains marketers face every day: lack of clarity, status quo strategy, weak trust signals, forgettable content, shrinking visibility, and disparate measurement. Unified, they form a framework that transforms scattered efforts into a repeatable system for building the kind of industry credibility with customers that drives business impact.

DRIVER 01:
Data Informed

Replaces guesswork with clarity.

DRIVER 02:
Integrated Strategy

Aligns narratives, formats, and channels across the full funnel.

DRIVER 03:
Trust System

Builds credibility at scale.

DRIVER 04:
Experiential Content

Turns ideas into memorable encounters.

DRIVER 05:
Multi-Channel Discovery

Places answers wherever buyers search and learn.

DRIVER 06:
Full-Funnel Analytics

Unifies insights on what works and what doesn't.

B2B marketers face increasing challenges with over-reliance on poorly performing channels, shifting discovery driven by AI, and content that too often misses audience needs. This report shares a framework for exploring how leading organizations are responding, highlighting the role of data, original research, influencer collaboration, and thought leadership in building integrated content strategies that strengthen trust, enhance experience, and deliver measurable results across the customer journey.
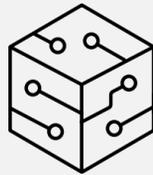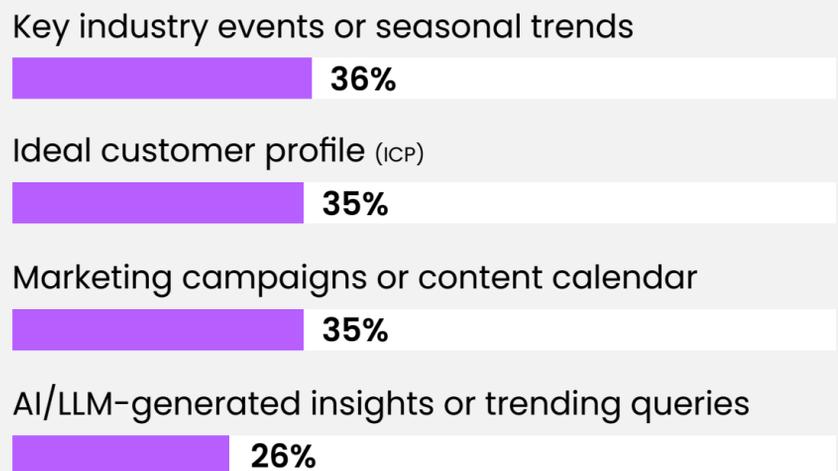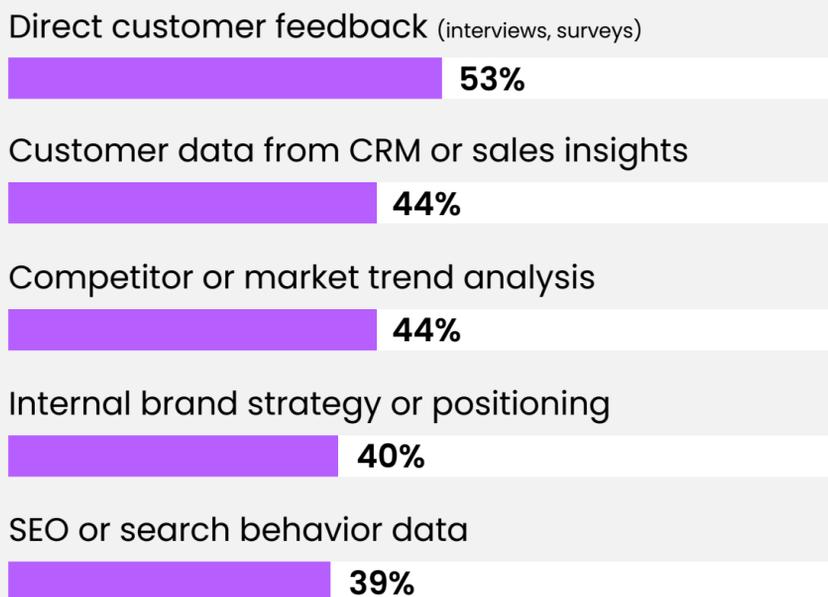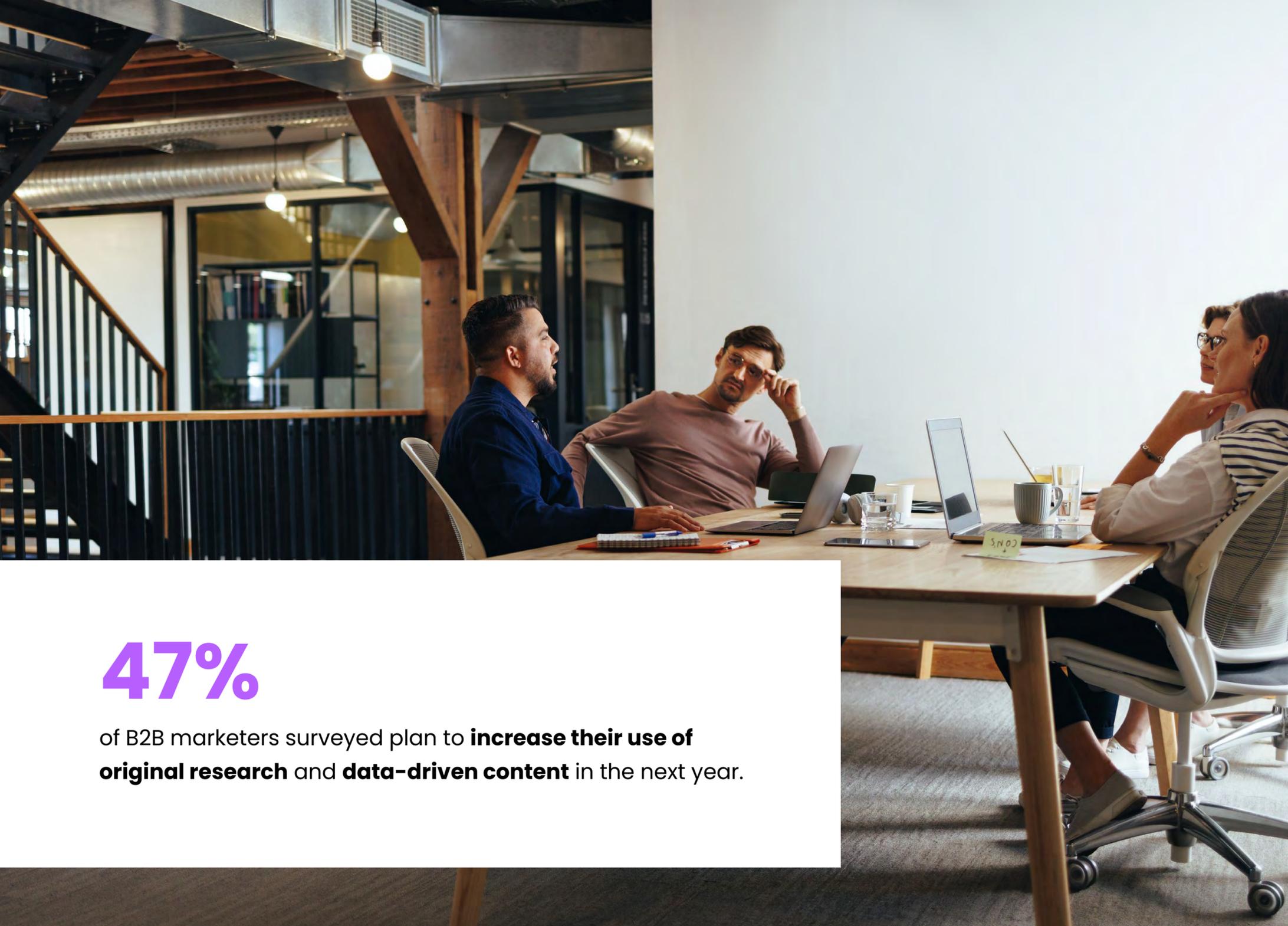
Data Informed
Fueling impact with evidence

Data is the high-octane input that powers credibility, helping marketers understand what questions buyers actually have and how to deliver the answers.

While most B2B marketers have no shortage of data, many are simply not harvesting the right kinds of insights to inform meaningful research driven thought leadership and marketing strategies. Too often, "data-driven" translates to a limited sample to justify preferences vs. what customers really want. "Data-informed" means using the right mix of insights to shape strategy and messaging from the outset.

Sources that most influence the topics you choose for research-based thought leadership

Direct customer feedback (interviews, surveys)
53%

Customer data from CRM or sales insights
44%

Competitor or market trend analysis
44%

Internal brand strategy or positioning
40%

SEO or search behavior data
39%

Key industry events or seasonal trends
36%

Ideal customer profile (ICP)
35%

Marketing campaigns or content calendar
35%

AI/LLM-generated insights or trending queries
26%

47%

of B2B marketers surveyed plan to **increase their use of original research** and **data-driven content** in the next year.

Our research found that **53% of B2B marketers rated direct customer feedback** as the top influence for choosing research topics, followed by **44% citing CRM data and market trend analysis.** A data-informed approach ensures thought leadership speaks directly to buyer questions, including those from hidden stakeholders that are rarely voiced.

> The paradox many teams face is being overwhelmed by data, yet starving for impactful insights. Marketers who shift from chasing superficial metrics to building data-informed clarity gain the visibility needed to differentiate their thought leadership content and guide full-funnel decisions.

Cindy Anderson

CMO, IBM Institute for Business Value and co-author of *The ROI of Thought Leadership*.

"Thought leadership requires data. It requires research. Some sort of independent or second or third-party research forms the basis of the perspective. That research gives you the evidence for your point of view and ensures it's relevant to your audience. Without that foundation, you're just publishing opinion.

Effective thought leadership combines credible data, analytical insight, and subject matter expertise to help decision-makers make better choices.

If we can help executives make a better business decision using the data and insight while being independent of a product or service, that generates trust, authority and credibility, which lends itself to a future sale."

What success looks like

From the playbook: High-performing marketers use research as a foundation across the entire customer journey, from brand awareness to demand generation to loyalty programs. This versatility sets leaders apart from those who limit data to the top of the funnel.

93%

of B2B marketers using research-based content say it is effective at driving engagement and leads and nearly half call it very effective.
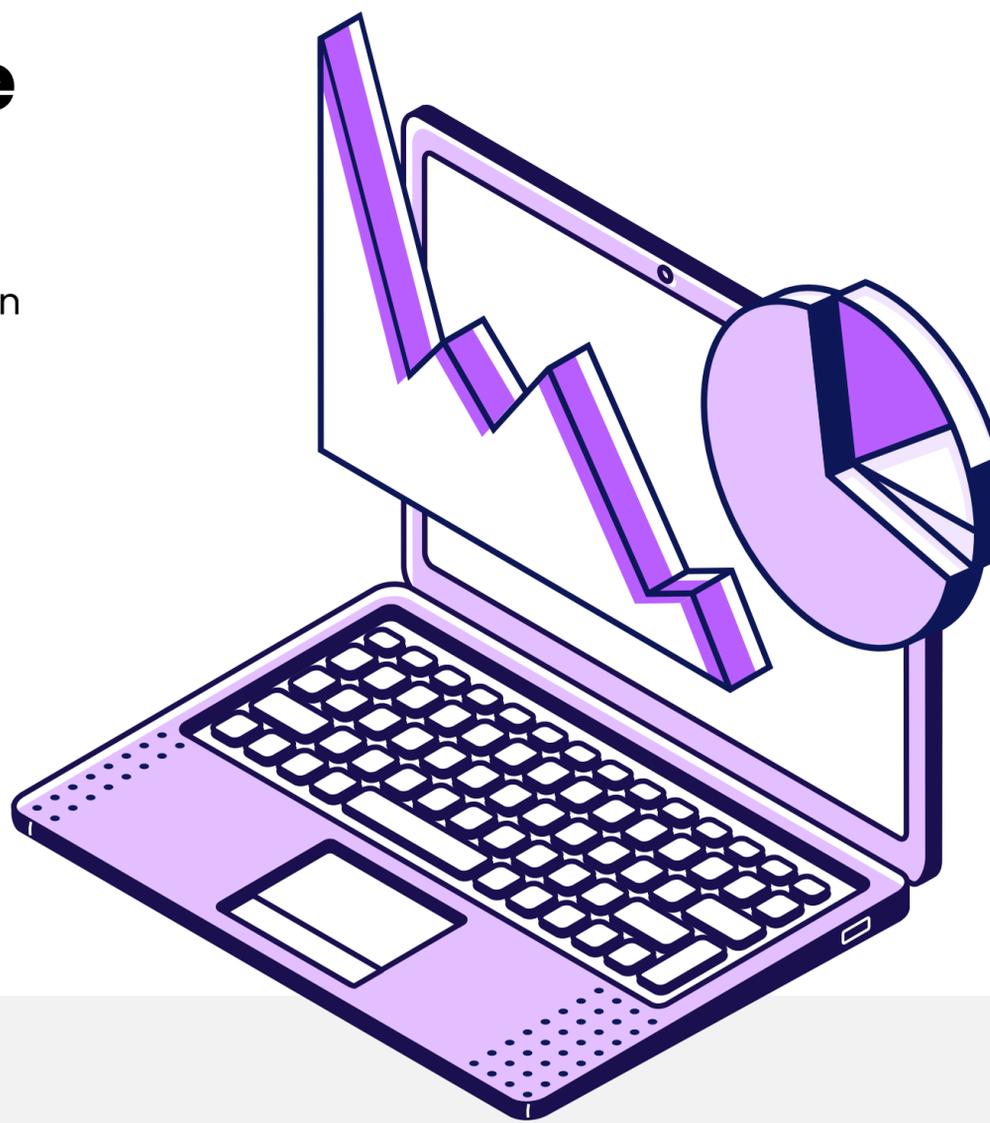
" In B2B, you're building credibility with audiences who need evidence to make decisions. That's why data matters. It grounds your perspective in reality and gives your insights weight. But data alone isn't enough. The real skill is taking complex research and distilling it into frameworks people can actually use. When you combine evidence with clear, memorable ideas, you create thought leadership that doesn't just get noticed, it gets applied. That's how you build authority that lasts."

Ty Heath
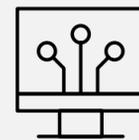Director, Market Engagement,
at The B2B Institute,
LinkedIn
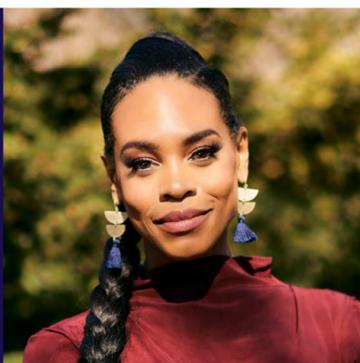
Integrated Strategy
Smart connections. Smarter outcomes.

Strategy is about intention: creating the right content for the right moment, not simply creating more information. An integrated approach to building an Answer Engine uses research driven thought leadership as a platform and ensures every flywheel asset has a role in the buyer journey, connecting brand storytelling with demand-driving execution.

B2B marketing teams often feel pressure to produce more: more campaigns, more content, more messages. But the result is often fragmented and doesn't add up to a story that resonates. Our research shows that **one-third of marketers cite poor visibility into funnel performance and another third point to over-reliance on just a few channels or tactics as their top barriers.** This disconnect highlights the need for strategies that are integrated. Connecting brand positioning, buyer insights, and channel orchestration with thought leadership as a platform enables marketers to make better use of limited resources while building content experiences that resonate and deliver answers across the customer journey.

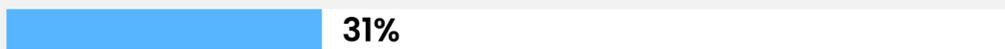## Which of the following challenges are most limiting your ability to drive full-funnel marketing success?

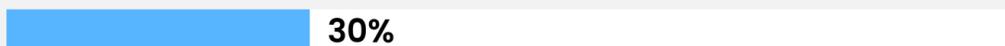Limited visibility into funnel performance or attribution
34%
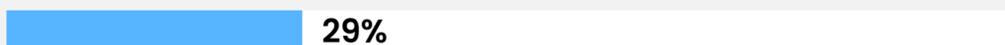
Too much reliance on a few channels or tactics
33%

Difficulty generating qualified top-of-funnel leads
31%

Difficulty scaling programs with current team or budget
30%

Ineffective or inconsistent lead nurturing
29%

Misalignment with sales on lead quality or follow-up
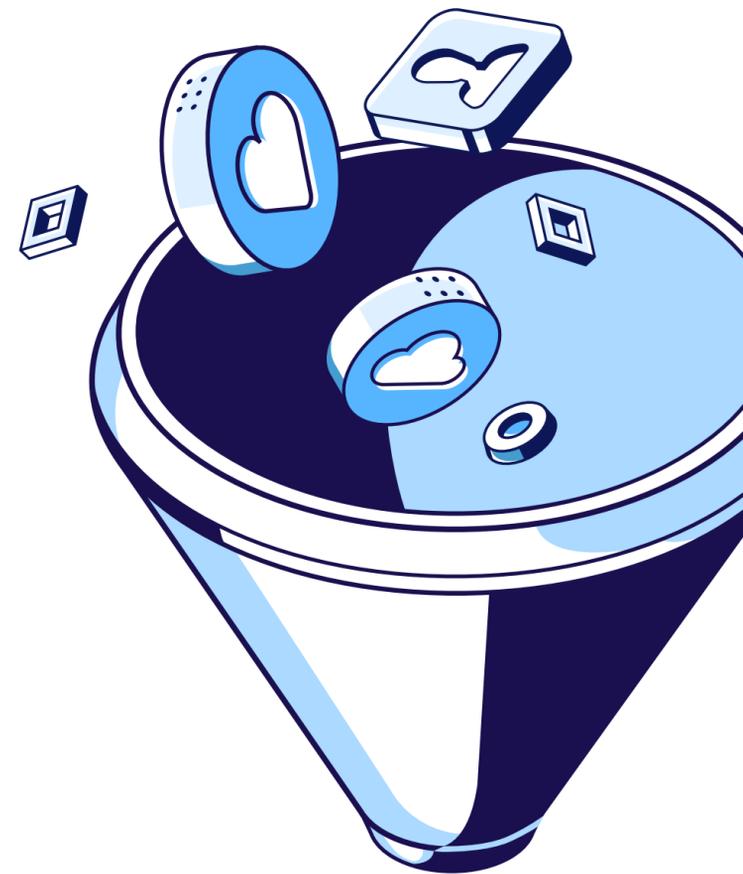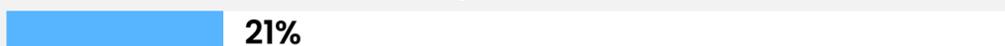**27%**

Insufficient content to support each stage of the buyer journey
26%

Low brand awareness/visibility in target markets
25%

Poor conversion rates through the funnel
21%

41%

of marketers rank brand awareness as their top success driver, while 24% prioritize differentiation. At the same time, 35% of B2Bs are reassessing their entire content strategy in the next year.

The discipline of working smarter with orchestration is what elevates today's B2B marketing strategy. Every piece of content becomes more intentional, more connected, and more capable of delivering credible answers across a long buying cycle.

What success looks like

From the playbook: High-performing B2B marketers unify their thought leadership platform with brand and demand strategies, ensuring the flywheel of content ladders up to a clear narrative. They prioritize depth over breadth and extend them across formats, regions, and channels. This creates consistency, credibility, and relevance across the entire customer lifecycle.

Top performers are more diversified across the funnel and use original research, influencer programs, and thought leadership at consideration, decision, and post-sale stages. In fact,

47%

of top performers use thought leadership content post-sale vs just 28% of others.

> " With increased competition and pressure to do more with less, many marketing teams are chasing outputs hoping that greater volume will yield greater outcomes. But quantity without alignment can dilute impact. The most effective leaders connect the dots to align brand strategy, buyer intelligence, and channel execution around a unified narrative. When thought leadership becomes the platform that ties it all together, every asset works harder. My advice: integrate. Plan content initiatives that deliver consistent experiences across the customer journey. Do that-and you'll see stronger engagement, performance, and better use of every marketing dollar."

Janine Wegner
Global Integrated Thought Leadership Strategist, Dell Technologies

Trust System
The currency of credibility

Buyers want credible information they can believe in. In a market crowded with competing voices and endless content, trust has become the ultimate differentiator. Research-backed thought leadership, validated and amplified by credible industry voices and respected publications, provides the authority buyers rely on to make confident decisions.

Yet credibility doesn't happen by accident. Many organizations lean on making every piece of content a sales tactic which dilutes authority instead of strengthening it. Building a true system of trust through thought leadership means committing to authenticity, unique insights and validation by trusted sources and voices. It means showing, not telling, why your brand is worth listening to.

The discipline of working smarter with orchestration is what elevates today's B2B marketing strategy. Every piece of content becomes more intentional, more connected, and more capable of delivering credible answers across a long buying cycle.

97% of B2B marketers agree that thought leadership is critical to full-funnel success, and **35%** say original research is significantly more valuable than AI-generated content for building trust and authority; another **32%** say it is more impactful overall.
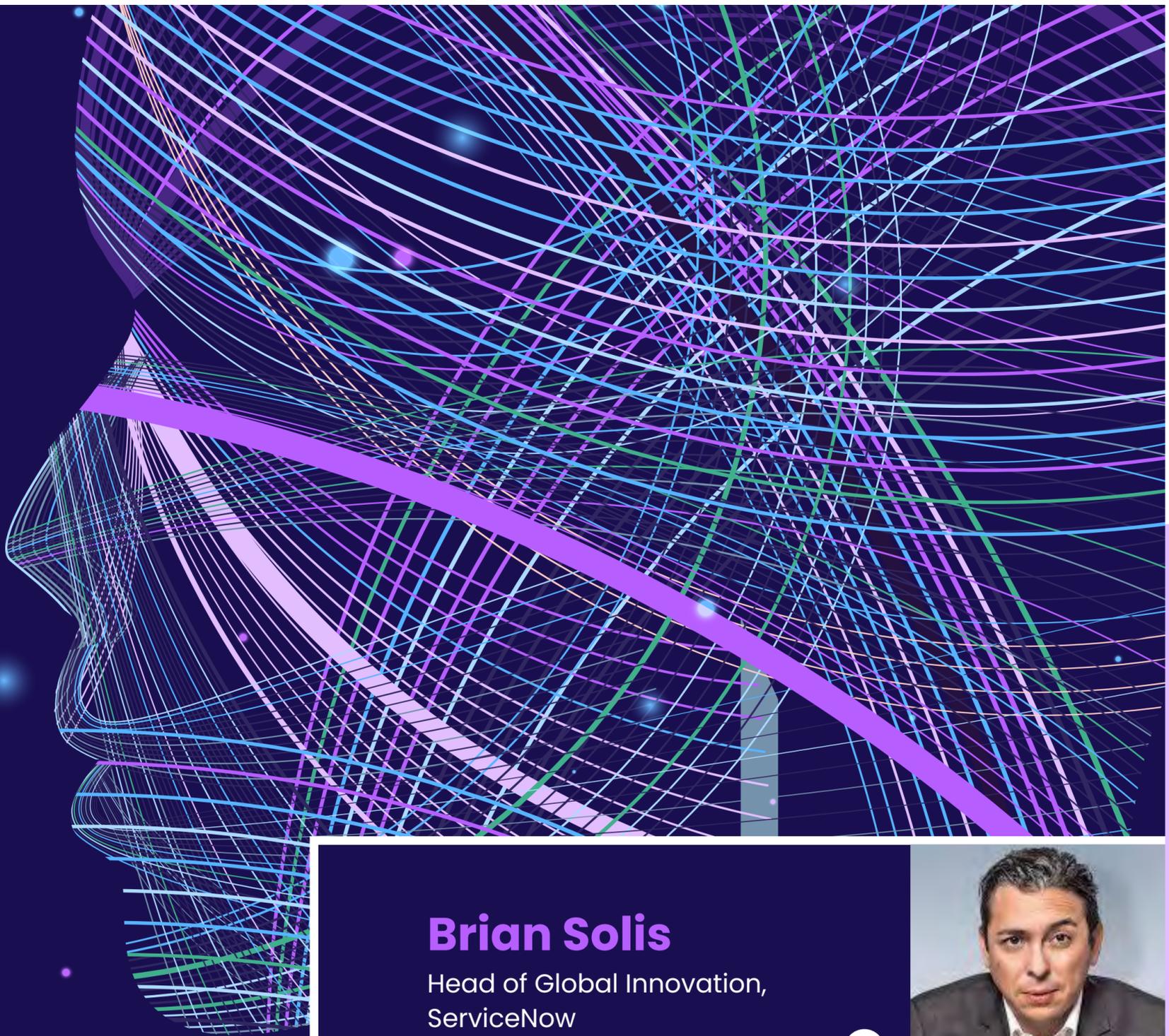
Brian Solis

Head of Global Innovation, ServiceNow

> "People can tell when content was written by a person who cares versus content that was engineered to rank. People can also tell when people give their voice to AI. We're surrounded by sameness right now, so when a real human voice comes through, when there's empathy, curiosity, even vulnerability, that's what cuts through. Thought leadership isn't just data or expertise; it's emotion with integrity attached to vision and direction. It's showing people there's a human on the other side who actually gives a damn."

What success looks like

From the playbook: High-performing B2B marketers treat trust as a compounding asset. They build a steady drumbeat of research-based content, validated by partners, influencers, and experts who carry credibility into new audiences. This combination of authority and authentic amplification establishes leadership and drives meaningful business outcomes.

72%

of B2B marketers who frequently collaborate with influencers report their research content is very effective, compared to just 29% of everyone else.

" The most trusted thought leadership comes from people and brands that show up consistently with fact-based insights that help readers think differently. Rather than being focused on a single post or campaign, it's about a steady relationship built over time. When a brand or leader communicates regularly, stands behind their content, and focuses on educating rather than selling, that earns trust. Executives like myself value proof, perspective, and consistency and I try to bring that same mindset to my own work: transparency first, education always, backed by research from credible sources."

Jeanne Hopkins
Vice President,
Marketing XTIUM

in

Experiential Content
Creating content worth staying for

Today's buyers are inundated with information, yet few experiences stand out. Experiential content in combination with the credibility of research and trusted industry voices, transforms passive consumption into active engagement, giving audiences a reason to lean in, spend more time, and return for more. In B2B marketing, this can mean interactive tools, video-focused storytelling, or live and virtual experiences that put the buyer at the center.

Which of the following would make your thought leadership content more impactful?

Video content (interviews, explainers)
48%

Live/virtual events (webinars, panels, roundtables)
48%

Interactive experiences (assessments, data visualizations)
48%

Featuring industry influencers or experts
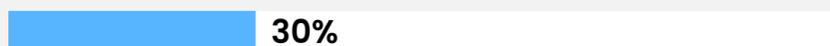**45%**

Featuring customer or executive stories
39%

Optimizing for search and GenAI platforms
39%

Launching a complementary podcast
33%

Distributing through targeted newsletters
30%

The real work of experiential content is making it both memorable and meaningful — something buyers remember and something that motivates them to take action. When done well and powered by the trust system, content experiences earn attention and belief by providing value buyers can see and feel.

Great experiences linger. They invite participation, inspire discovery, and build relationships that outlast the moment.

78%

of B2B marketers say interactive and experiential content increases repeat engagement, yet only one-third regularly build it into their campaigns.

What success looks like

From the playbook: High-performing B2B marketers create thought leadership content experiences that live across formats, from video sizzle reels to interactive research hubs to hybrid events. These immersive touchpoints strengthen brand perception and drive deeper buyer connections.

For research reports,

53%

of B2B marketers find **interactive formats most effective for engagement**, tied with **explainer videos (53%)** and closely followed by **infographics (51%)**
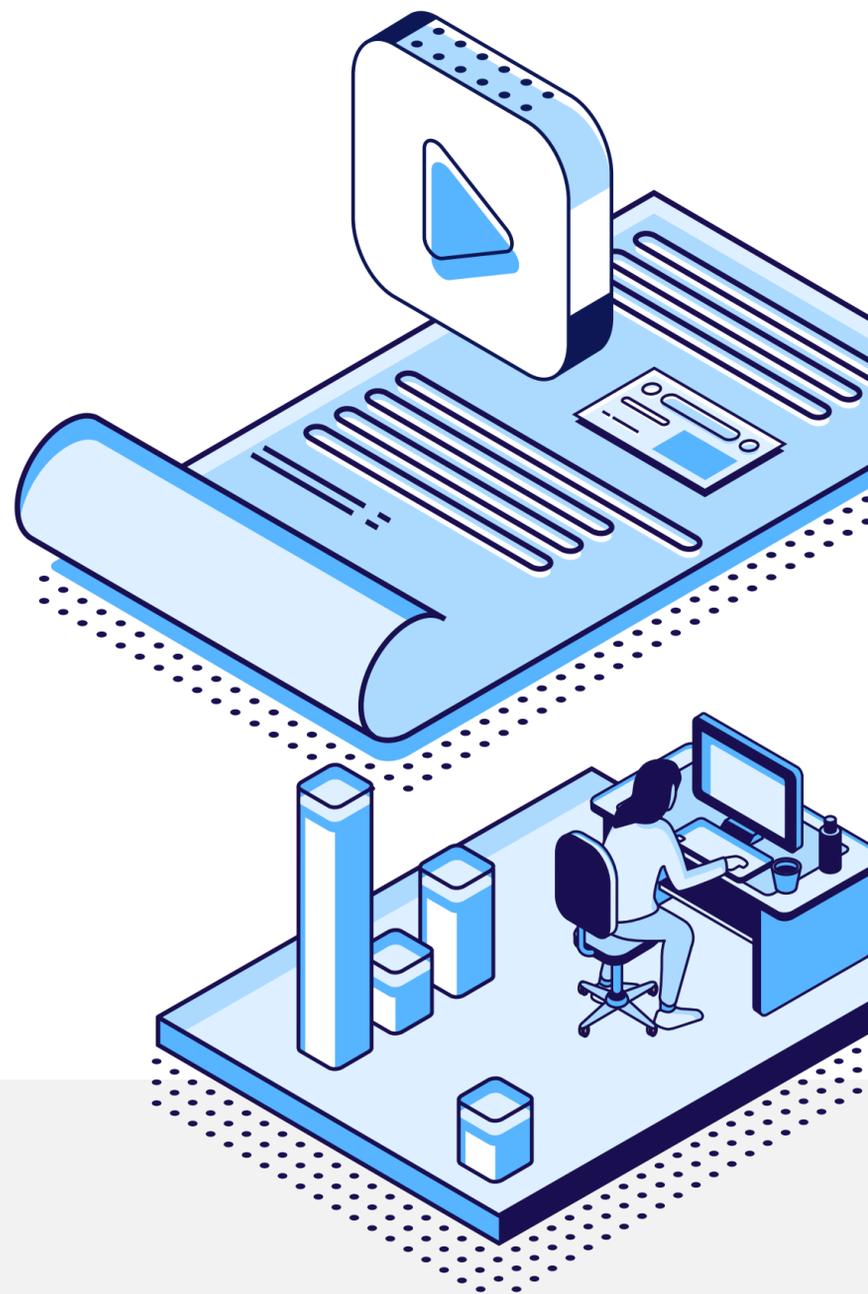
> " It's telling that nearly half of marketers cite video, events, and interactive formats as the most effective vehicles for thought leadership. Experiential content brings ideas to life in a way that written formats alone cannot. It engages multiple senses, creates emotional connection, and drives stronger recall. Whether it's a short video, an interactive data story, or a live event, experiential content builds trust and credibility in ways that a whitepaper never could. It's what turns insight into influence."

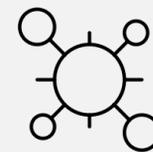**Tequia Burt**
Founder,
The Influence Lab

Multi-Channel Discovery
Answering buyers where they ask

The journey for business customers rarely follows a straight line. Buyers are more multimodal in how they search today, turning to AI tools, Google, and other sources to source and validate decisions. Reaching these audiences requires multi-channel discovery, ensuring your brand is present and relevant wherever they look.

■ Use LinkedIn
■ Consumption

■ Use YouTube
■ Consumption

■ Use webinars
■ Consumption

LinkedIn is used by **54% of marketers**, but only **38% of professionals** say they consume thought leadership there most often.

YouTube is used by **50% of marketers**, but only **34% of professionals** consume there.

Webinars are used by **48% of marketers**, but only **34% consume there.**

32% **of buyers report using GenAI tools** (ChatGPT, Perplexity, Claude, etc.) to discover thought leadership-a channel that wasn't even included in marketer distribution lists

2x

Top performers are nearly twice as likely to diversify thought leadership distribution across emerging channels with 55% leveraging YouTube, 41% podcasts, and 28% peer communities.

Expecting customers to come only to your website is becoming less effective. B2B content now needs to meet audiences where they are. Thought leadership can serve as a platform for creating a steady flow of content experiences that build visibility. A discovery-first mindset means activating content across search engines, answer engines, social networks, influencer partnerships, ads, and trusted communities.

> Being findable is being credible. Multi-channel discovery ensures that wherever buyers turn, your brand is part of the conversation.

What success looks like

From the playbook: High-performing B2B marketers build integrated, multi-channel discovery strategies. With an understanding of where buyers are, they weave SEO, ads, influencers, media, email and social into cohesive campaigns that make it easy for buyers to find, trust and engage.

The top channels for distributing thought leadership are

54% LinkedIn, in-person events

51% YouTube/video

32% GenAI tools

"Unique thought leadership demands significant time, budget, and resources. At Intuit Mailchimp we're redefining our brand as an expert in advanced marketing strategies. To do that, we anchor our activation around a core report, then build a vast content ecosystem to drive traffic and showcase insights. This demands a coordinated push across owned, earned, paid, and sales channels to maximize our investment, encompassing everything from zero-click social content to webinars, podcasts, executive bylines, and outbound sales plays. Strong thought leadership provides an insight-driven framework that fuels channels well beyond launch."

Jillian Ryan
Senior Manager,
Content Marketing Strategy
Intuit Mailchimp

Full-Funnel Analytics
Turning clarity into confidence

With B2B buyer journeys getting longer, more complex, and involving more decision makers, full-funnel analytics gives B2B marketers implementing multi-channel thought leadership content the visibility to see where engagement happens and how it contributes to outcomes.

In the way many B2B marketing tactics are siloed, so too are analytics: Brand teams measure impressions, demand teams track leads, and sales teams chase pipeline. Without a unified view,, the story stays fragmented. Full-funnel analytics unifies these perspectives for multi-channel thought leadership content, making it possible to prove impact and invest where it matters most.

Clarity across the customer journey builds confidence in every decision. With a full-funnel, unified view of analytics, B2B marketers move beyond reporting activity to surfacing the insights they need to optimize and drive performance .

41%
of B2B marketers cite difficulty measuring performance as the top cause of underperforming content.

What success looks like

From the playbook: High-performing B2B marketers build analytics frameworks that span the customer journey. They connect brand metrics with demand outcomes, link campaigns to revenue, and use those insights to continuously refine strategy. The result is thought leadership content that earns greater trust, both from buyers and from the C-suite.

High ROI marketers are more likely to use thought leadership across all funnel stages:

69% vs. 56%
awareness

## 64% vs. 48%
decision

47% vs. 28%
post-sale engagement

> " Measuring the influence of thought leadership on marketing outcomes means understanding how it advances buyers through the journey and impacts the KPIs that track their progression. The most mature thought leadership strategies are integrated and multichannel, reaching audiences through original research, collaborative videos, roundtables and interviews, media coverage, digital and in-person interactions. Each format and channel produces data points framed around metrics that each tell part of the larger story.
>
> To prove the value of thought leadership and to surface insights for optimizations, two things are crucial: unified analytics and a measurement model that translates multiple signals into a cohesive view."

Jane Bartel
Director, Search &
Content Marketing,
TopRank Marketing
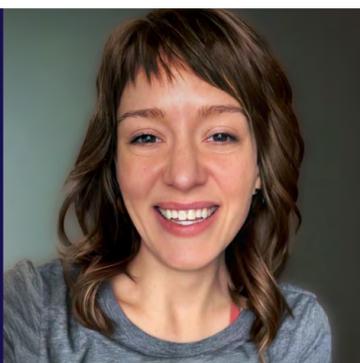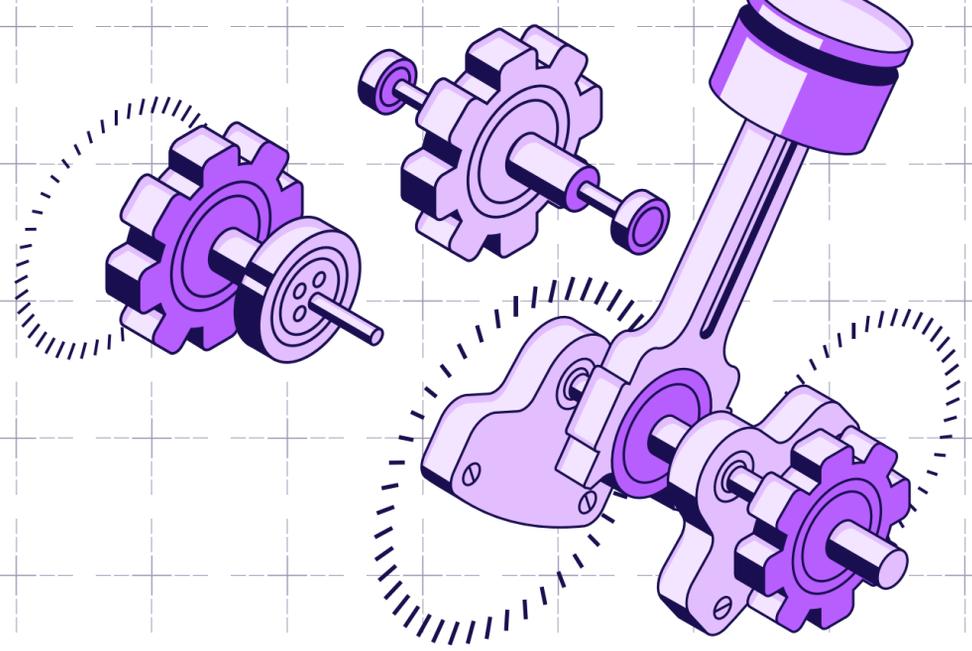
A Blueprint to Build Your Answer Engine

The message from this research is clear: the gap is widening between B2B brands creating high performing thought leadership content and those creating content that blends in with the noise.

Top performing B2B marketers have advanced to become the best answer for their customers with thought leadership content that is trusted, experiential, multi-channel and that drives full funnel impact.

The six drivers shared in this report are the framework for a system to help B2B brands become the best answer for their customers. With this system, marketers can replace guesswork with clarity, design strategies that connect, and deliver experiences that buyers will remember. This Best Answer Marketing system shows what true industry leadership looks like: trust earned through evidence, creativity applied with intention, and unified analytics that reveal impact across the entire customer journey.

By receiving the PDF version of the *Answer Engine: The State of B2B Thought Leadership in 2026,* you'll also receive a copy of the **Best Answer Marketing Playbook.**

With this research and the BAM playbook, you have a blueprint to build your brand's answer engine with confidence.

The Best Answer Marketing Playbook provides:

• Six pillar framework for Best Answer Marketing

• Full funnel thought leadership case studies powered by original research

• Action Plan for implementation

By applying these six drivers with intention, B2B marketers can transform thought leadership from isolated tactics into a connected system of trust, visibility, and growth that powers visibility everywhere buyers are looking. From traditional search and social media to generative engine search and alternative media, the opportunity to make your brand the most visible, trusted resource is here.

TOP THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PROS

Allen Webb
Managing Director and Insights Leader, Global Thought Leadership, PwC

Anthony Marshall
Chair of the Board of Advisors, Global Thought Leadership Institute, Senior Research Director, Thought Leadership, IBM Institute for Business Value

David Dankwa
Thought Leadership Senior Manager, Protiviti

Francis Hintermann
Global Research Executive Director, Accenture

Karen Feldman
SVP, Chief Marketing Officer, Iron Mountain

Kate Houston
Head of Global Marketing | Executive Thought Leadership Programs, Amazon Web Services

Kevin Kailath

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TopRank
MARKETING

TopRank Marketing is a strategic B2B marketing agency that helps enterprise brands drive full-funnel outcomes from brand to demand to lead generation. By integrating content, influence, and SEO/GEO, our Best Answer Marketing framework delivers data-informed, creative, multi-channel content experiences wherever buyers are influenced.

Ascend2
RESEARCH-BASED MARKETING

Ascend2 specializes in creating custom research studies that empower businesses to drive demand and elevate their marketing efforts. From survey design and conceptualization to comprehensive report creation, Ascend2 delivers end-to-end research solutions tailored to your goals.

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