

THE GUIDE
TO AGENCY GROWTH
THROUGH THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

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Thought leadership...

is one of the most effective ways for creative agencies to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to gain the attention of potential clients.

You may have outstanding creative and client-facing talent, but so do your competitors. You may have worked hard to carve out a niche and can evidence it with strong case studies, but so can your competitors. In today's ultra-competitive agency market, neither will provide genuine stand-out – increasingly it is only thought leadership that will do that.

A DBA award win is the perfect catalyst for a thought leadership campaign. It provides an opportunity to look more closely at the project and draw out what your agency did that merited the award. The fact of the award adds credibility to the thought leadership piece, indicating

to the reader that this project and this agency have something objectively worthwhile to say.

The best thought leadership taps into issues faced by clients and so gets their attention. It showcases the agency's work, expertise and capacity for original thinking. It raises awareness of an agency and establishes it in people's minds as experts, as a go-to agency. This is why there is so much of it out there. It is why, according to eMarketer, organisations are now spending more than \$100 billion annually on thought leadership. It fills pages and pages of agency websites, industry publications, and social media feeds.

Thought followership

Despite the volume of thought leadership that is created, not all of it delivers as it should do. A recent survey by ThoughtWorks360 found that less than a third of organisations who invest in thought leadership successfully generate leads and close business from it.

This is not because thought leadership does not work. Done well, thought leadership can be highly effective, but it must be done well. Much of what presents itself as thought leadership is uninspired, “me-too” thinking. It is bland “content” that fills space but offers little genuine insight, much less leadership. In so doing it can do more harm than good to an agency’s reputation.

Why does this happen? After all, this is the creative industry. Day in, day out we conceive and implement brilliant ideas that transform clients’ business – thought leadership ought to be second nature to us. To some extent the issue is that agencies are so devoted to client delivery

that we lack time and attention for our own self-promotion.

Yet the issue is about more than mere lack of resource; it is also about skills. There is a subtle but critical difference between creating thought leadership for clients, and creating it for ourselves.

Whilst we are typically experts in our clients’ businesses and issues we tend to lack the broader industry perspective required to conceive the right topics. It also requires production skills – typically editorial writing – that we lack. Whilst we may be accomplished at crafting on-pack copy or compelling ad copy we tend to lack the editorial writing skills that are needed for thought leadership.

Finally, B2B content distribution is a skill little in demand at most creative agencies, but is essential if any potential clients are going to see our carefully conceived and crafted thought leadership.

Many agencies choose to bring in experts to help them conceive, create and distribute thought leadership. Yet, it can be done in-house. The skills can be learnt. In this white paper we aim to begin that process, looking at those three key stages - conception, creation, distribution – that will result in distinctive, ownable material that will contribute to your reputation as a genuine thought leader and so help grow your agency.

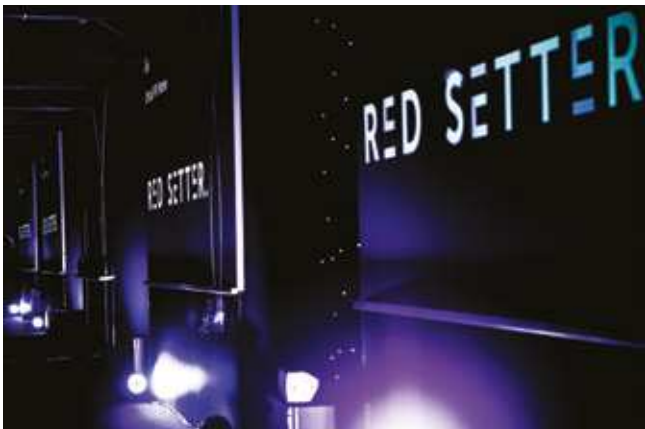


dba

DBA Design Effectiveness
Awards

STAGE 1 | Conception

The topic you choose must fulfil three criteria. Firstly it must matter to your audience. Begin with the readers, and keep them in mind throughout. Who do you want to speak to with this article? So if you have won a DBA award for your work on a major brand, you might want to speak to brand directors at other major brands. If you've won with a multinational, you might want to reach CEOs of FTSE100 companies. Or if you've won with a challenger brand you might be targeting entrepreneurs looking to gain supermarket listings.



Whoever it is you want to speak to, fix them clearly in your mind, and start thinking deeply about them. What issues concern them? What opportunities do they want to exploit? What problems do they have to solve? What is it that keeps them up at night?

Secondly the topic must be one on which you have demonstrable authority. Is it covering a sector, a market discipline, or a business challenge where you have significant experience? Are you able to illustrate your theory with a directly relevant case study? Or can you back up your theory with impartial research? This may be commissioned by you or be taken from another source. Are you able to bring in quotes from external authorities?

This is important not only because it gives your reader confidence that you are worth listening to on this topic, but also because it reinforces the perception of you as an expert – a thought leader – in this area. Bear in mind, you do not want to labour your expertise in what

you create. You want this to be impartial editorial, not marketing copy, but the expertise should exist and tangibly underpin the piece.

Thirdly, the topic must contribute something fresh to the conversation. In Q3 2016 thought leadership consultancy Grist interviewed more than 200 C-suite executives at FTSE350 companies. This research revealed that 63% of respondents were turned off thought leadership when it was too generic, and 58% when it lacked original insight or ideas. More than anything, they wanted thought leadership that delivered fresh thinking, exploring issues or challenges from new and different perspectives.

So, research any topic you conceive. If others have already covered it, think about the distinctive perspective you could offer. For example, everyone knows that universities are facing a more competitive environment so are investing in marketing - can you talk about the importance of visual identity?

Everyone knows that social media is an important part of the marketing mix – can you highlight how property developers are using Pinterest?

Another way to be distinctive is to offer some future gazing. Instead of delivering another report telling us that the retail sector is being shaken up by the rise of online, paint us a vision of the future of retail. Or, take an edgy, counterintuitive, angle. What sounds more interesting: 'Trends in Robotics' or 'Preparing Your Business for a Post-Human Future'?

These three principles are easy to understand, but far harder to fulfil. Any topic must meet all three or your thought leadership will not lead. So, resist the temptation to cut corners here. Invest time in understanding your audience, in searching for topics that fit precisely in that space between your expertise and their challenges, and in finding angles that will spark their interest. Get this stage right and the second and third stages become far easier.

STAGE 2 | Creation

The vast majority of agency thought leadership emerges in the form of a written report. While that is by no means the only viable format, and videos, podcasts, dummy briefs and creative solutions, and so on are increasingly popular and effective techniques, the written word is likely to remain the most popular medium simply because it gives us the most scope to lay out and share our ideas. For that reason we concentrate on written thought leadership here, but the principles below apply equally to any other format.

With any form of writing, the research and the editing are at least as important as the writing itself. However much time you have for this creation phase, divide it into three equal parts for each of those three elements. Research as widely and deeply as you can so you come to your writing with a mastery of your topic, an excess of material to choose from, and a battery of facts and statistics to support your argument. So much woolly writing results not from poor writing skills but from a lack of research and the consequent need to fill blank space on a page.

You should aim to develop a distinctive tone of voice, if not for your agency as whole then at least for yourself as an individual. You probably want to be authoritative, but think about where you want to sit on the formal-informality spectrum. Do you write in the first, second or third person? Do you deliver this in a colloquial, collaborative way or should you be drier, more academic? How prescriptive are you in your advice? How contrarian in your opinions? How elevated in your language? Can you point to a publication that matches the tone of voice you want? Are you more Monocle or FT?

Grab the readers' attention with a concise striking introduction. Tell them what this piece will give them and build excitement. A popular approach is to set up a challenge – one that your

readers identify with – and then to offer an actionable solution. The survey from ThoughtWorks360 found that of the firms who were getting results from their thought leadership programmes, 93% were offering actionable insights and valuable foresights to help clients make decisions.

Highlight your expertise, perhaps pointing to your DBA award-winning work, and showing how the thinking and craft behind this work speaks to a broader issue. When you describe the

work describe what happened, resisting the temptation to become mired in the details of the process. Focus on outcomes, as that is what potential clients care about, but make it clear what you did that was particularly innovative, interesting or successful.

Beware the temptation, however, to make this too self-promotional. Consider balancing your own examples with those of others you admire. Or pull the work into the background and focus more on the theory. Above all make sure any examples you reference are relevant to the topic in hand and genuinely useful to the reader.

Use data, but use it sparingly. Ensure it supports the narrative rather than obscuring or swamping it. Find a title that is short, explanatory and makes the reader want to read more. Finally, remember to edit your writing. Eliminate spelling mistakes, errors of punctuation or grammar, and factual inaccuracies. Avoid jargon and use clear, direct language. Reduce unnecessary words.



STAGE 3 | Distribution

There are many ways to get your thought leadership in front of potential clients. One is to deliver it directly via email or in person. So, create a well-designed PDF, including high resolution, striking imagery. Use a high quality print version as a leave-behind in client or new business meetings. It will make more of an impression than yet another agency brochure or memory stick with case studies. Email it to potential clients, using a covering email that briefly indicates why it might be interesting to them. If possible send these emails individually – when was the last time you opened a broadcast email?

The Grist survey found that the most popular length for content was short articles of around 800 words. Apparently, 63% favour this, compared to only 28% who would like white papers of 3000-4000 words. So, consider breaking up your longer pieces into a series that you can deliver one after the other to build interest whilst keeping individual instalments brief. Think too about when you send it: 66% seek out thought leadership on a Monday, compared to about 40% in mid-week and only 20% at the weekend. The most

popular time of day is between 12pm and 2pm.

Post it to your website and track who downloads it. Then set to work publicising it through social media. Publish in its entirety on LinkedIn. Pull out key facts, insights, examples and so on, and use them as tweets and posts to drive interest. Contribute to relevant conversations across platforms and, where useful, point people to your paper. Consider drawing in readers by setting up polls around the topic in question.

Your thought leadership is a valuable media relations tool. There are publications that will take these pieces from subject experts in their entirety. Ensure you are properly credited. There are also many publications that will take letters, comments, quotes and so on from experts. Think how you can use all the content you have crafted, chopping it up and using it in these ways to make a wider audience aware of your ideas and expertise.



Finally, think of ways you can bring your thought leadership off the page. Can you publish it as a podcast? Can you use it as the basis for a video or as the text for a speaking opportunity?





Agency transformation

Thought leadership is not a short cut to agency growth. It is hard work and it requires skills that are rarely found in agencies. Yet, done well it is powerful. We have seen its potential firsthand, as we have helped many DBA members conceive, create and distribute thought leadership that wins new business.

One was a top five agency that presented a fresh view of the future of the spirits market in an article in a drinks industry publication and then emailed it as a PDF to potential new clients. It got them in front of one of the main global drinks players and they picked up the brief to create a more contemporary visual identity for one of the world's most famous spirits brands

Another was a small regional agency that we worked with for months researching the UK's further education market. Our resulting thought leadership article was used by the Times Educational Supplement as a cover story, and led to an event attended by dozens of education marketers and addressed by our client. The agency picked up significant new business as a result.

Those are just two examples, highlighting the short term returns that are possible from high quality thought leadership. Perhaps more important is the longer-term shifts that ongoing thought leadership creates in the way agencies are viewed by clients, employees, and peers, as well as by future employees and clients.

Finally, if the potential of thought leadership seems enticing, but the time required seems intimidating or inconceivable, consider instead how you can create an agency of thought leaders. The agencies that do this most successfully, do not rely on just one person. They instil a culture where everyone is involved in the ongoing conception, creation and distribution of thought leadership. The agencies that today begin this process will be tomorrow's industry success stories.



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