



BEYOND A BUZZWORD: THOUGHT LEADERSHIP EVOLVES.

LINSTOCK COMMUNICATIONS

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THOUGHT LEADERSHIP: A DYNAMIC CONCEPT

Thought leadership is no longer the new kid on the block. Research earlier this year found nearly half a million people worldwide have 'thought leadership' in their job title. As communications professionals strive to meet business goals, the purpose and application of thought leadership is evolving.

We asked senior figures at 80 leading organisations what they want to achieve through thought leadership now and in five-ten years' time. The findings, summarised in the word clouds to the right, reveal a telling shift. Today, thought leadership is seen primarily as a way to drive brand awareness. Over the next few years, the main purpose of thought leadership will be to provide a fresh perspective, shape new thinking and lead the agenda. People also plan to take a longer-term perspective. Both now and in the future, it's clear that thought leadership is more than just a buzzword. It is increasingly front and centre of campaigns focused on achieving tangible business outcomes.



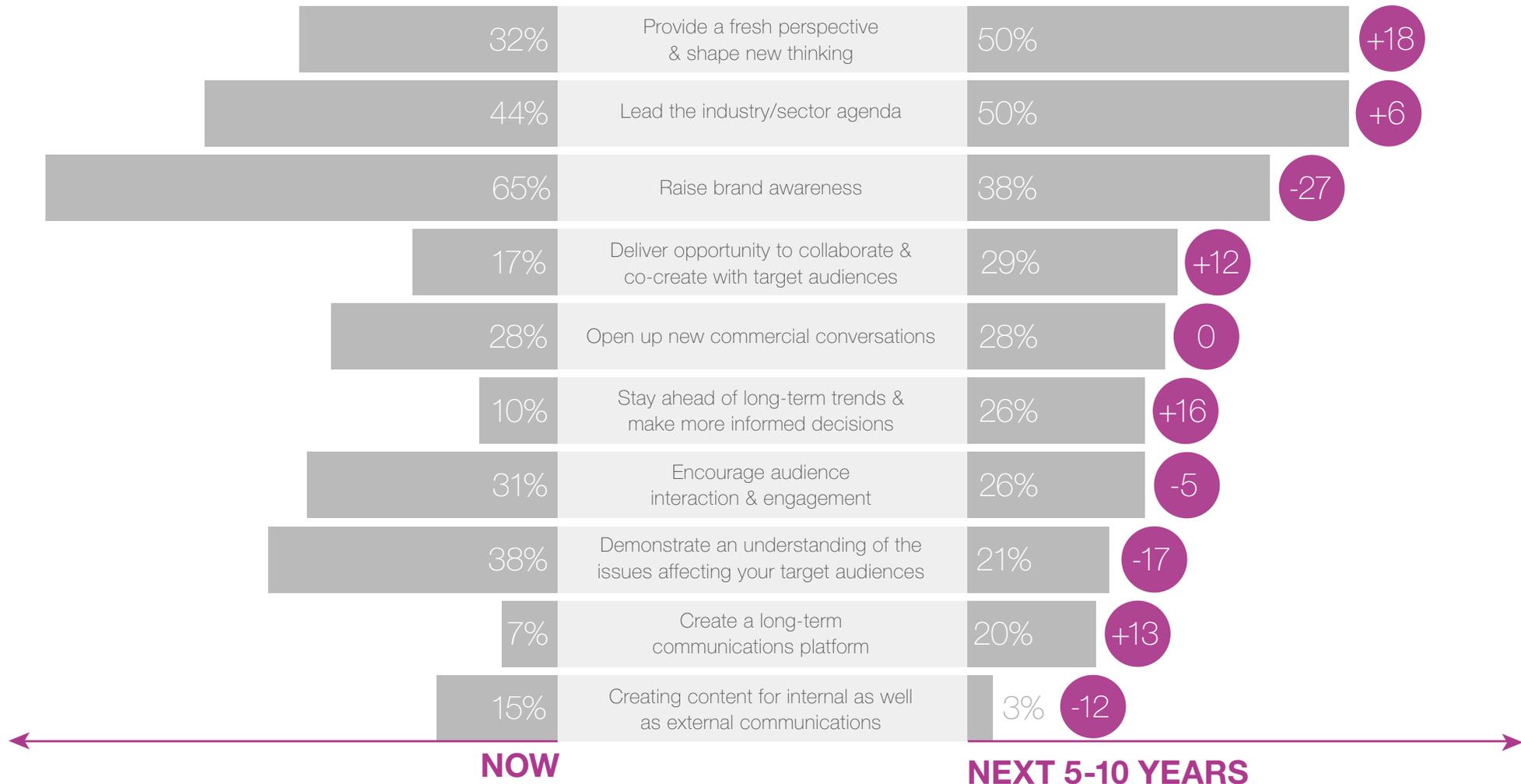
Key: Word size denotes popularity of response

In 5-10 years, **50% believe 'providing a fresh perspective and shaping new thinking' will be one of the three most important reasons for undertaking thought leadership**
 – a dramatic jump from 32% today

The need for thought leadership to **raise brand awareness will drop to 38% in the future**, from 65% today

People see opportunities to **'collaborate and co-create with target audiences'** (from 17% to 29%) and **'create a long-term communications platform'** (from 7% to 20%) growing in importance

This table shows the percentage of people who listed each factor as one of their top 3 most important reasons for doing thought leadership



THE PURPOSE OF THOUGHT LEADERSHIP TODAY

We asked people responsible for company communications why they currently do thought leadership. Top of the list is brand awareness, cited by nearly two thirds of respondents (65%) as one of their top three reasons for taking a thought leadership approach.

The next most popular reasons for doing thought leadership today are 'the ability to lead the agenda' (44%) and to 'demonstrate an understanding of the issues affecting target audiences' (38%). Both are encouraging signs. Rather than talking about themselves and saying what they want to say, brands are beginning to understand the need to promote their insights in a way that resonates with what audiences want to hear.

On the other hand, at the bottom of the list are 'helping you and your target audiences stay ahead of long-term trends and make more informed decisions' (10%) and 'creating

a long-term communications platform' (7%). This reflects an historical trend in PR and communications; the main focus tends to be on what campaigns can deliver today rather than years down the line.

Interestingly, many more men than women think the need to create a long-term communications platform is one of the least important factors to consider. 47% of men believe it is one of the three least important reasons for doing thought leadership, compared to 25% of women. Does this difference affect the way men and women consume, and even create, thought leadership campaigns?



The focus on brand awareness today suggests that organisations still see thought leadership primarily as a vehicle to deliver what traditional PR delivers – promotion, coverage and exposure.”

TODAY:

65%

take a thought leadership approach to **raise brand awareness**

44%

take a thought leadership approach to **lead the agenda**

38%

take a thought leadership approach to **demonstrate an understanding of issues** affecting target audiences

THE PURPOSE OF THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IN THE FUTURE

IN FUTURE:

50%

Will take a thought leadership approach to provide a fresh perspective and shape new thinking

29%

Will take a thought leadership approach to collaborate and co-create with target audiences

26%

Will take a thought leadership approach to help audiences stay ahead of long-term trends

20%

Will take a thought leadership approach to create a long-term communications platform

When we asked organisations to think about the purpose of their thought leadership over the next 5-10 years, the findings throw up some telling differences.

Most dramatically, 'raising brand awareness' almost halves in importance – from 65% to 38%. Elsewhere, factors growing in status include 'providing a fresh perspective and shaping new thinking' (from 32% to 50%), 'helping audiences stay ahead of long-term trends' (from 10% to 26%) and 'creating a long-term communications platform' (from 7% to 20%).

The proportion of respondents who want thought leadership to offer opportunities to collaborate and co-create with target audiences will increase to 29% over the next decade, compared to 17% today. This swing points to one of the unique benefits thought leadership offers: working with target audiences to shape content and develop key issues. It is increasingly recognised as a prime way to achieve future success, as end users become loyal advocates.

“As campaigns mature over the coming years, organisations recognise thought leadership will - and should – deliver much more for the business as a whole.”

However, brand awareness remains a primary purpose for boards. 69% of board members judge it as one of the three most important elements in the future, compared to 32% of non-board respondents. Those with day-to-day responsibility for communications (among whom brand awareness **does** drop in importance) could have to work harder to make the case for thought leadership's wider benefits, in front of senior executives who may see things differently.

THREE WAYS TO EVOLVE YOUR THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

We believe every organisation holds good ideas, carved from the unique experiences and expertise of its people. By unearthing and sharing them, not only can ideas make you famous, they can help you meet your corporate objectives.

This research reveals that the application of thought leadership, and expectations of it, are still developing. As the discipline matures, organisations expect its purpose and importance to evolve in tandem.

Here are three steps you can take to make the most of thought leadership's potential.



1) Make the business case.

Don't consider communications objectives in isolation. Combining business with communications objectives will help sell the concept of thought leadership, and make the case for budget easier.



2) Look for ways to collaborate.

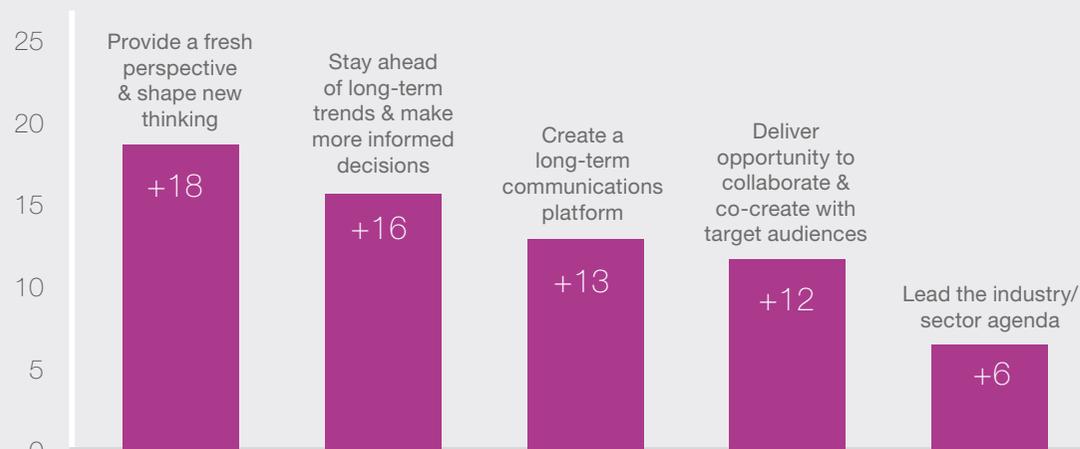
You can achieve a key thought leadership objective, and create a powerful cohort of advocates for the final content, by involving clients and prospects in the research or content creation process.

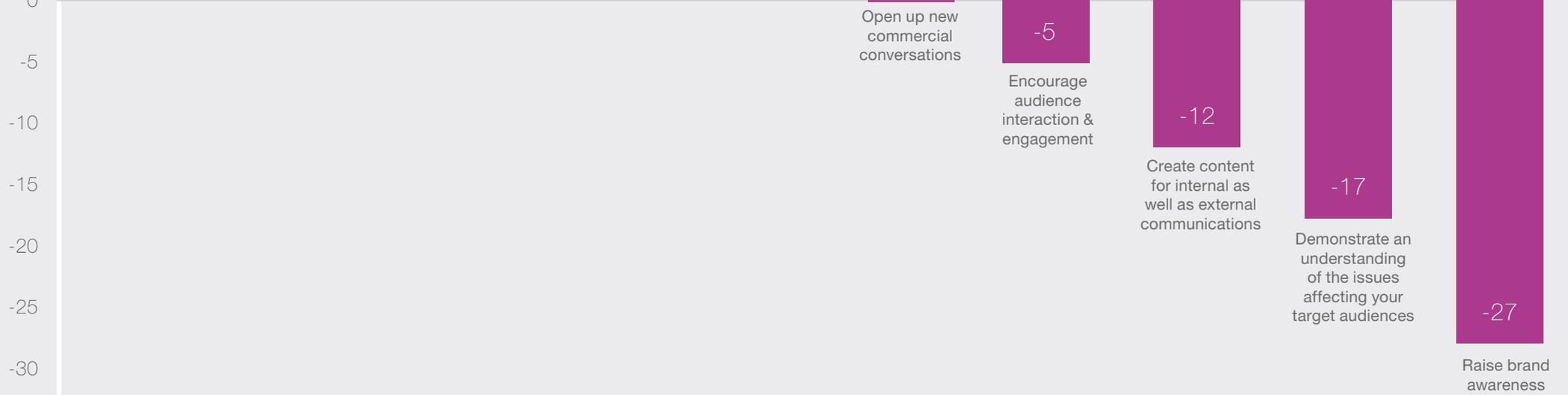


3) Aim for influence, not outputs.

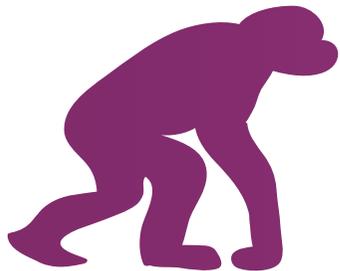
Set indicators for gauging the ability of your campaigns to influence audiences and change behaviours, rather than simply measuring exposure and awareness.

CHANGE IN PURPOSE OF THOUGHT LEADERSHIP OVER THE NEXT DECADE



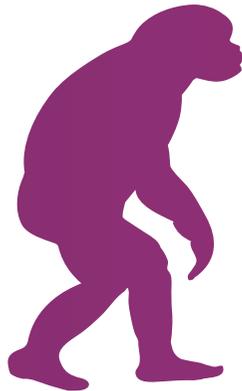


THE EVOLUTION OF COMMUNICATIONS



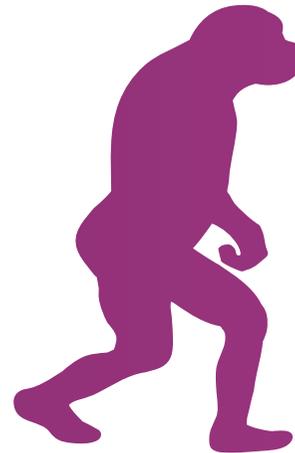
1980s: Selling goods and services

The term "thought leadership" emerges
1G Networks
Fax



1990s: Building brand reputation

Trailblazing firms adopt thought leadership
2G Networks
Email



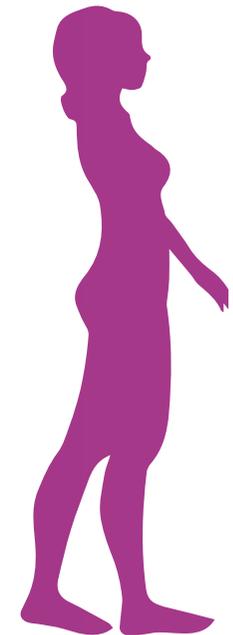
2000s: Running multi-channel marketing campaigns

Thought leadership spreads across financial and professional services
3G Networks
Mobile



2010s: Devising content marketing campaigns

Thought leadership used to drive awareness and lead agenda
4G Networks
Apps



2020s: Co-creating content with customers and audiences

Thought leadership driving co-creation, with a more tailored voice
5G networks
Artificial intelligence

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Linstock surveyed 80 Board members, plus Communications and PR Heads, Directors and Practitioners, during May and June 2017. Respondents came from sectors including financial & professional services, third sector, higher education and the public sector. Responses were captured online. Responses were also analysed by gender and seniority – this was completed by Professor John Maule, Linstock Associate and Emeritus Professor in Human Decision Making at Leeds University Business School.

ABOUT LINSTOCK

You can learn more about Linstock's approach by downloading our **thought leadership white paper**, signing up to our **monthly newsletter**, or sharing your experiences at one of our regular thought leadership seminars. Visit www.linstockcommunications.com for more details.

For any enquiries about this research or about Linstock's thought leadership approach, please contact:

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