The 4 Key Differences Between Thought Leadership and Content Marketing



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Thought leadership garners a lot of attention among entrepreneurs and those aiming to pick up more traction in their marketing to increase brand recognition. So does content marketing, which is often touted for its ability to create top-of-funnel and marketing-qualified leads.

Many, however, are unsure exactly what the differences between the two are. This is a pity, because there *are* clear differences — and they are worth underscoring. The best recent research into this space is from a 2019 Edelman and LinkedIn study, which is my main point of reference for this article.

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1. Content marketing is top-down; thought leadership is peer-to-peer

First, content marketing is typically a top-down communication method, irrespective of whether the authoring party is trying to sell business to business (B2B) or business to consumer (B2C).

Think about the last time you read a company blog that was clearly intended to sell you as a customer and ask yourself this: Was the company talking *with* you or *to* you?

In the vast majority of cases, content marketing's intended purpose is *not* to start a dialogue with its intended authorship. Rather, content marketing's central objective is to initiate a relationship with the reader that the company writing the content marketing wishes to exploit down the line in the form of sales activity. But the communication, in content marketing, is framed in a hierarchical manner.

Thought leadership, on the other hand, is more often a peer-to-peer marketing activity. In fact, Edelman and LinkedIn found that authors failing to understand that — and using an overly promotional tone to convey underpowered insights — was one of the main drives of dissatisfaction among readers. Typically, and when written appropriately, thought leadership aims to foster a direct connection with the reader. The objective is *not* to immediately exploit the value provided to sell but rather to leverage the quality of the thinking to begin, or further, a business relationship. The authoring party begins a dialogue to which the reading party — or the industry at large — is free to contribute.

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2. Content marketing's commodity is value; thought leadership's is quality of thinking

Both content marketing and thought leadership need a bait with which to hook the reader. The ultimate objective of both is to sell. But these two forms of marketing use slightly different lure to capture the attention of the reader.

Content marketing, as mentioned, is about providing value to the reader. Good content marketing (note: much content marketing is not) should be informative, engaging and useful. But its ultimate aim is to position the authoring party as the obvious vendor to choose from when the reader requires a good or service.

Let's say that David owns a wedding photography service and shares interesting content about how to take the best wedding photos. Sarah is getting married in six months and found David's blog while searching for keywords. When it comes time for Sarah to find a photographer for her wedding, David is likely to be top of mind. In fact, after reading his fascinating insights about wedding photography during the stressful lead-up to her wedding, Sarah might even subconsciously feel as if she *owes* David the business. This symbiotic relationship is the basic formula that makes content marketing tick.

Thought leadership, however, operates on a slightly different plane in the marketing stratosphere. And if David were an aspiring thought leader, then he'd better be prepared to have something truly groundbreaking to say about wedding photography. (Edelman and LinkedIn found that 28 percent of decision makers rated the caliber of thought leadership they read as "mediocre to very poor"; that poor thought leadership can have a detrimental impact upon brand perception; and

recommended avoiding being perceived as more white noise).

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Perhaps David is prepared to lend his imprimatur to a prediction that within five years all wedding photography will be done by drones and that, therefore, conventional wedding photography is doomed as an industry. Ideally, David also has some statistics – even better, original ones – to back this up. Strategically, this might make sense for David if he were quietly piloting a drone photography service (hence, there's a sales hook). But his objectives here would be a little more oblique than trying to get Sarah to book him as a photographer for her wedding.

David might be hoping to pique the interest of local and national media with his surprise prediction. Maybe he's hoping a drone manufacturer might read the piece and approach him about a partnership. If David's prediction were to resonate far enough, he might be able to transition from being notorious for this belief to being a thought leader about photography in general. This might mean that he could be booked for *thousands* of weddings or transition into something more lucrative entirely, perhaps as a wedding photography consultant. The quality he would be exploiting to do so would be the originality of his thought and the fact that – rather than just promote his business – what he said contributed to an important debate that may impact upon hundreds of thousands of livelihoods, including those to whom he wasn't trying to sell.

3. Thought leadership fits higher in the sales funnel

Relative to content marketing, thought leadership fits higher in the sales funnel. Thought leadership is often deployed by

large organizations that are selling high-ticket items in complex and long-lasting sales processes. More than 50 percent of those surveyed in the Edelman/LinkedIn study, for instance, worked at organizations with more than 200 employees.

The central objective when thought leadership is deployed in this context is to make an initial impression on the reader. Objectives can be tangible – half of respondents to the Edelman/LinkedIn study found that positive thought leadership resulted in sales opportunities, including RFP inclusions – or intangible. For instance, 89 percent of those surveyed said that effective thought leadership had lifted their perception of the authoring party – with respondents saying that the thought leadership had increased their respect for the author, boosted their trust in the organization and increased their perception of its capabilities.

Content marketing is used much more frequently in the B2C realm. Calls to action, and the content in general, can be much more directly pivoted toward comparatively short sales processes and closing here and now. In thought leadership, the focus could be on convincing a member of a purchasing committee that it might be worth setting up a meeting with a potential vendor at an upcoming industry trade show. In content marketing, however, the focus is usually on selling a product to a consumer as soon as possible. These divergent approaches call for differences in language and nuance.

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4. Content marketing is typically onsite; thought leadership is typically offsite

Thought leadership is focused on creating original insights

into important issues and leveraging the caliber of that thinking to realize top-of-funnel business opportunities for careful nurturing. Its promotional aspect, by necessity, is usually limited to the byline of the authoring party. Hence, thought leadership is an ideal medium for offsite placement and is commonly authored and placed by PR practitioners. Content marketing, by contrast, is often published on managed onsite resources such as blogs. Internal style guides rarely preclude the type of self-promotion that would be unacceptable for most thought leadership. The result of these differing constraints is two very different types of writing.

Two different tactics

Thought leadership, which predates content marketing, is not an empty buzzword. Nor is it a synonym for content marketing. Thought leadership and content marketing tend to differ in their target audience, objectives and internal mechanics. The good news for authors is that both are effective, and the two can be exploited in conjunction. For firms engaging in account-based management, a mixture of both assets can be used to particularly good effect.

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