2ND ANNUAL

Thought Leadership in Practice 2026

SEPARATING STRATEGIC FROM SPORADIC

iResearch®
research to relationships

Contents

Introduction

In 2026, research is near-universal, AI is already embedded into day-to-day production, and organizations report measurable business outcomes as a result of their thought leadership. By most measures, thought leadership is maturing.

But the headline obscures a more complicated picture: Gains are not evenly distributed. A gap has opened between the organizations that have built genuine infrastructure for effective thought leadership—clear governance, rigorous research, disciplined distribution—and those still running it as an ad hoc side project.

The former are pulling ahead not necessarily because they have bigger teams or larger budgets, but because they have made deliberate choices about governance, research, distribution, and where they invest their resources.

This report is about what those choices are, and what it takes to execute them in practice.

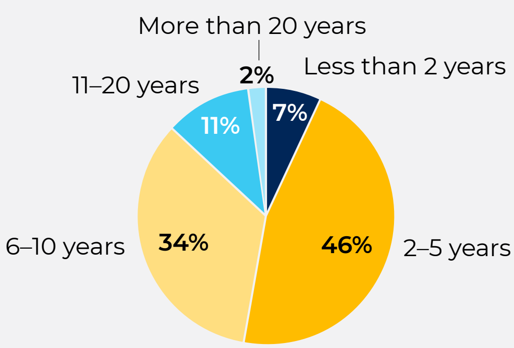
About the research

This report is based on a comprehensive survey of 1,000 professionals directly involved in their organization's B2B thought leadership. The research was fielded in Feb–Mar 2026 by iResearch Services.

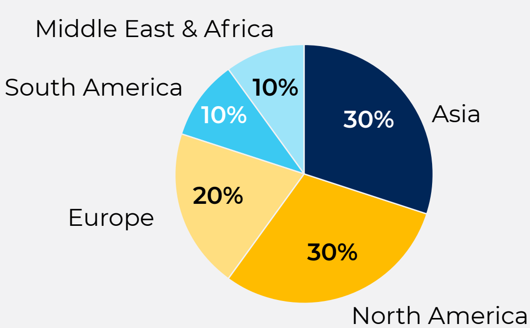
Survey respondents were provided with the following context: *For the purposes of this survey, "thought leadership" refers to authoritative, insight-driven content intended to influence industry, build credibility, and inform decision-makers. It includes, but is not limited to, research reports, whitepapers, expert articles, and opinion pieces. In some organizations, it may be considered content marketing, corporate communications, or public affairs. Where it is not managed by a dedicated thought leadership officer, it may fall under the remit of content directors, marketing or communications teams, research leads, or industry analysts.*

Data collection	Margin of error
Online	+/- 3.1% (95% confidence level)

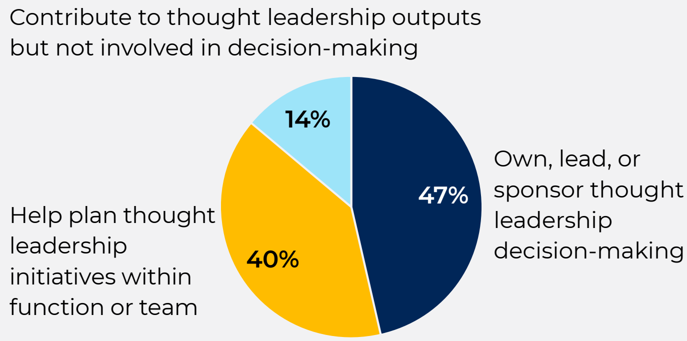
Tenure



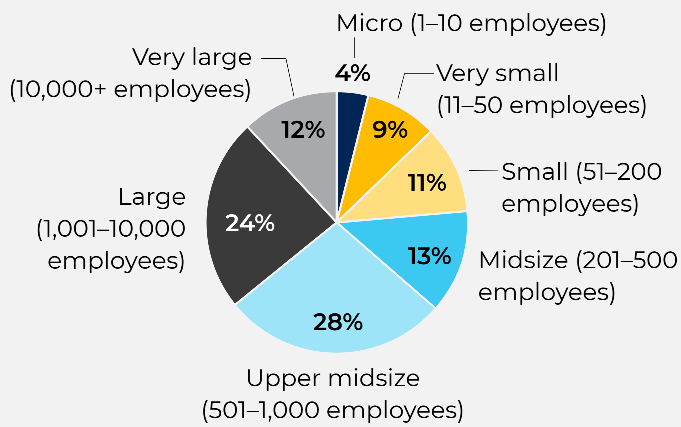
Geography



Decision authority



Company size



Throughout this report, we may refer to company sizes (by number of employees) using the groupings above.

Industries

- Automotive
- Banking & financial services
- Biotechnology & pharmaceuticals
- Construction & engineering
- Consumer goods & retail
- Education & research
- Energy & utilities
- Government & public sector
- Healthcare & medical services
- Hospitality & tourism
- Information technology & software
- Insurance
- Legal services
- Manufacturing
- Media & entertainment
- Non-profit & NGOs
- Professional services (consulting, accounting, etc.)
- Real estate & property management
- Telecommunications
- Transportation & logistics

CHAPTER 1

Who’s in charge

Budget ownership and the thought leadership maturity curve

Last year,* we diagnosed fragmentation in corporate ownership of thought leadership, with a majority of respondents reporting multiple functions involved in the process—including Marketing, Sales, and Strategy. A year on, the question of who actually runs thought leadership remains all over the place.

The lack of a consistent functional home speaks to the multidisciplinary nature of thought leadership. Successful programs need coordination across teams, including both client-facing and support employees.

*

Read the inaugural *Thought Leadership in Practice* report, published June 2025, at iresearchservices.com/report/thought-leadership-in-practice-the-2025-report.

No function dominates

Thought leadership continues to live in the seams between functions: on average, three functions are involved per organization.

Marketing (62%) and Sales (52%) remain the most common functions involved, which is unsurprising given thought leadership's communications origins and commercial importance. More telling is only a third (36%) of 1,000 respondents report having a dedicated thought leadership team. So, for most organizations, thought leadership is a shared responsibility rather than an owned function.

54%

of organizations split thought leadership ownership of the budget and the strategy into two separate functions.

But the composition of that collaboration may be shifting. Strategy & Innovation involvement climbed six percentage points year over year to 44%, while Marketing's share dropped by the same margin. The reshuffle is small in absolute terms, but the direction matters: more organizations are treating thought leadership not as a marketing subfunction but a strategic capability that belongs in the room where the business is being shaped.

Ownership of budget and strategy is fragmented

Involvement is one thing. Ownership is another. And when we asked who actually owns the budget versus who owns the strategy, a far messier picture emerged.

A majority of thought leadership practitioners (54%) report that budget ownership for thought leadership sits in one function and strategy ownership sits in another. Whether that reflects a deliberate separation of responsibilities or simply an organizational accident is difficult to tell from the data alone.

Figure 1 maps function involvement against ownership of each budget and strategy. A notable discrepancy: while 36% of respondents report having a dedicated thought leadership team involved in the process, just 14% say that team owns the strategy and 14% say it owns the budget. Even when a thought leadership team exists, it's more likely to play a supporting role than a governing one, by helping to execute programs that are ultimately directed or funded elsewhere in the organization.

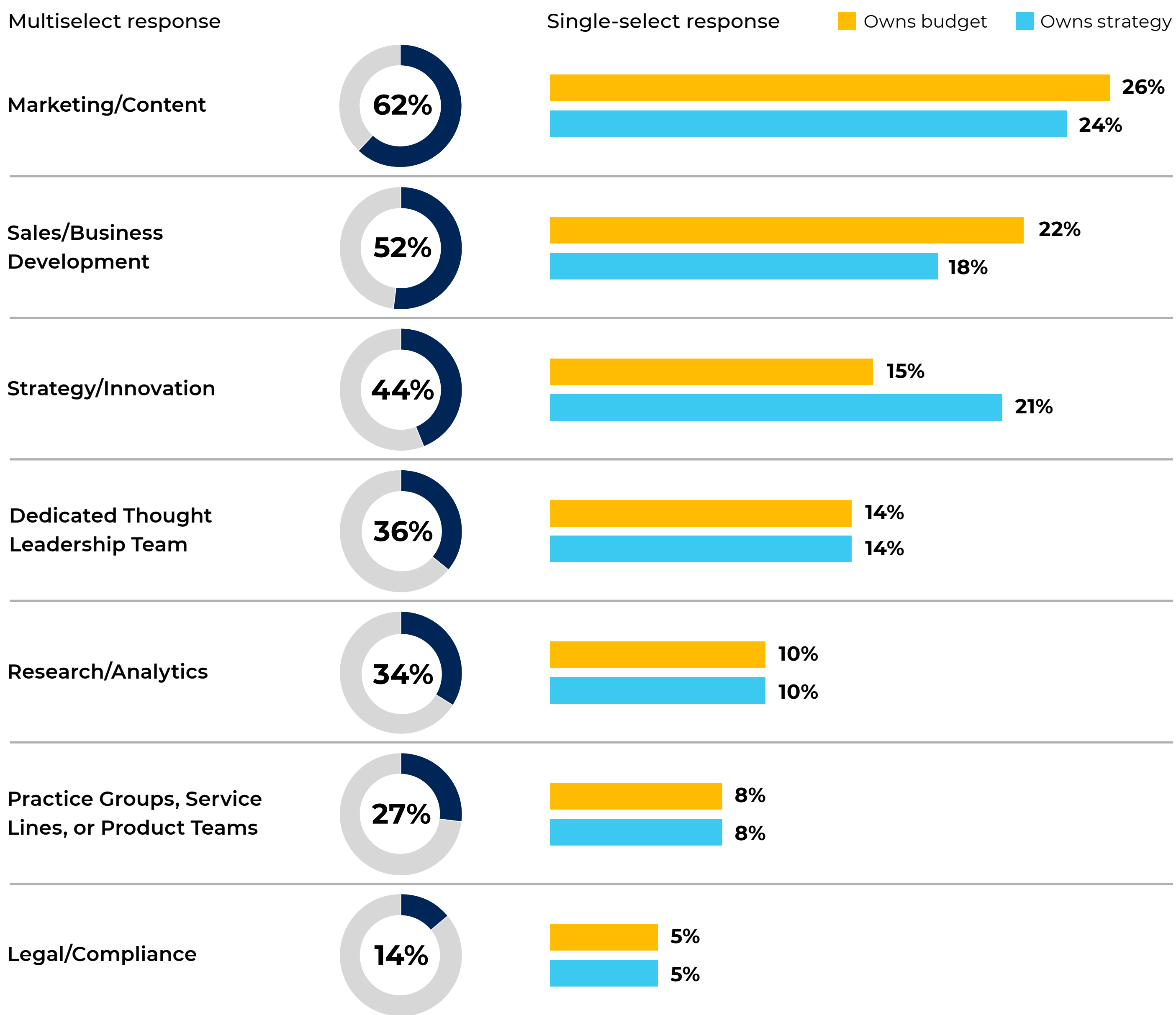
Figure 1

MARKETING LEADS—BUT NOT BY MUCH

Which business functions are typically involved in thought leadership development at your organization?

Which function primarily owns the thought leadership budget in your organization?

Which function primarily owns the thought leadership strategy in your organization?



Notes: n = 1,000.

Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

Lean teams, stable headcount

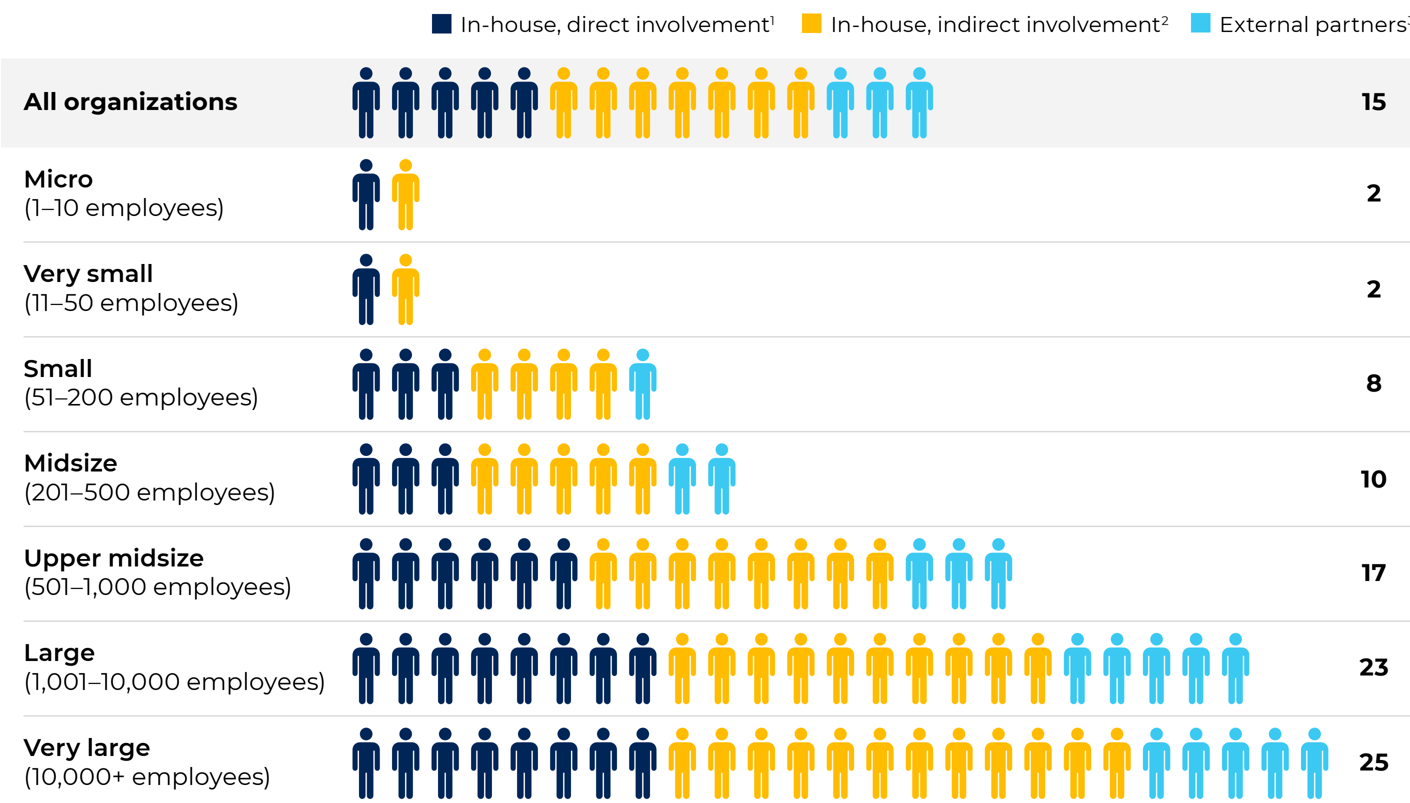
For the second year in a row, we asked respondents how many individuals are involved in thought leadership ideation and production at their organization. Little has changed in the past year: the average thought leadership function still operates with roughly 15 people, and team size is generally proportional to company size (Figure 2).

Very large organizations are the notable exception. Over the past year, they added an average of four team members, growing to 25 in headcount, from 21. The largest organizations are scaling up; the rest are holding steady.

Figure 2

ON AVERAGE, THOUGHT LEADERSHIP INVOLVES MORE THAN A DOZEN PEOPLE

How many people are actively involved in thought leadership ideation and production in your organization?



[1] Includes those involved in ideation, research, writing, production, editorial sign-off.
[2] Includes executive sponsors, SMEs, reviewers.
[3] Includes agencies, research firms, freelancers, vendors.

Notes: n = 1,000.

Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

But holding steady does not necessarily mean steady workloads. Thought leadership is typically produced by small teams expected to manage a wide range of responsibilities—and that pressure shows up in the data.

A quarter (25%) of respondents cite a lack of internal capabilities as their thought leadership team’s primary challenge, and another 21% point to time constraints.

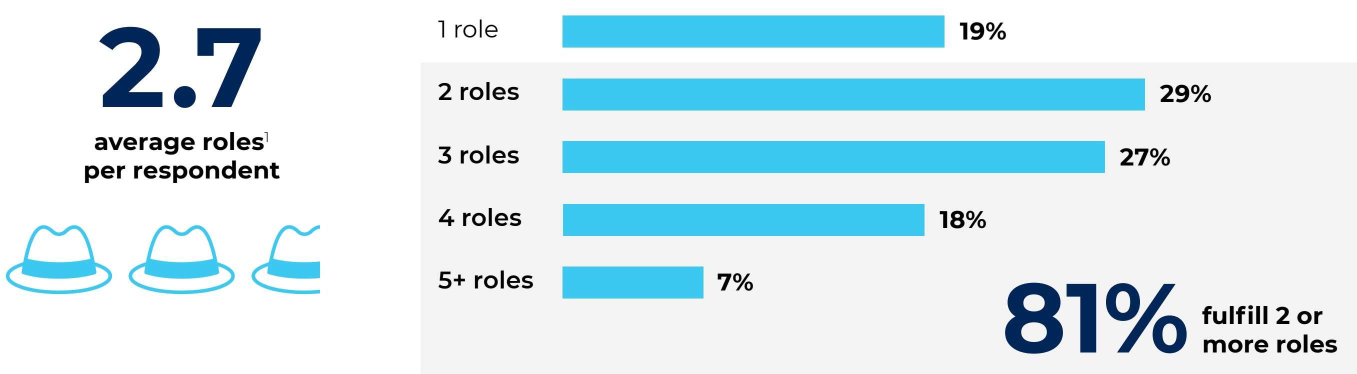
> **One in four**
>
> **respondents cite a lack of internal capabilities as their primary challenge.**

Perhaps these professionals feel stretched because, on average, they report playing 2.7 roles spanning ideation, execution, and coordination (Figure 3). Only 19% of respondents fulfill a single role, while 25% fulfill four or more.

Figure 3

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PROFESSIONALS WEAR MULTIPLE HATS

Which of the following roles do you currently fulfill in your organization's thought leadership efforts?



[1] Role types: Thought leadership executive; Thought leadership sponsor; Subject matter expert/SME; Researcher/analyst; Writer/editor; Marketing/communications professional; Program manager; Legal or compliance professional.

Notes: n = 1,000; multiselect response.

Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

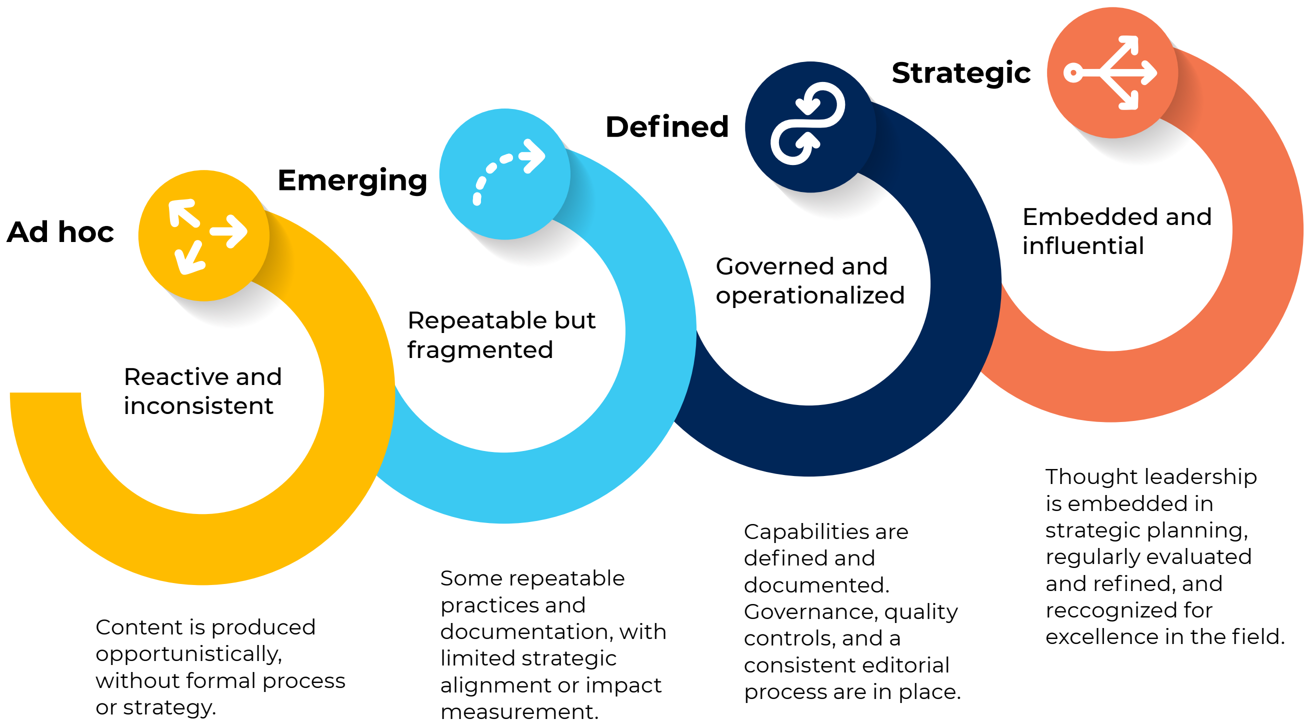
Gauging thought leadership maturity

In addition to asking who’s in charge, we asked respondents to evaluate their organization’s thought leadership maturity based on the four-stage framework created by the Global Thought Leadership Institute (Figure 4).[i] Throughout this report, we refer to these four segments—ad hoc, emerging, defined, and strategic—and examine how self-reported maturity maps against organization size, research breadth, and commercial outcomes.

Figure 4

THE MATURITY JOURNEY

Organizations progress through four stages of maturity.



Source: Global Thought Leadership Institute

The distribution of our 1,000 respondents across the four tiers is revealing (Figure 5). Only 26% say their thought leadership organization has reached strategic maturity; 29% are defined, 37% emerging, and 8% ad hoc. Maturity, by this measure, remains the exception rather than the rule.

Size helps, but only to a point. Strategic maturity is almost nonexistent in organizations with fewer than 50 employees (Figure 6). But beyond that threshold, strategic maturity is well within reach: 28% of practitioners at small organizations (51–200 employees) describe their thought leadership maturity as strategic. At the other end of the spectrum, maturity plateaus at the 1,000-employee threshold and above.

In other words, scale alone doesn't guarantee maturity—and sophisticated thought leadership practices are not confined to the largest enterprises.

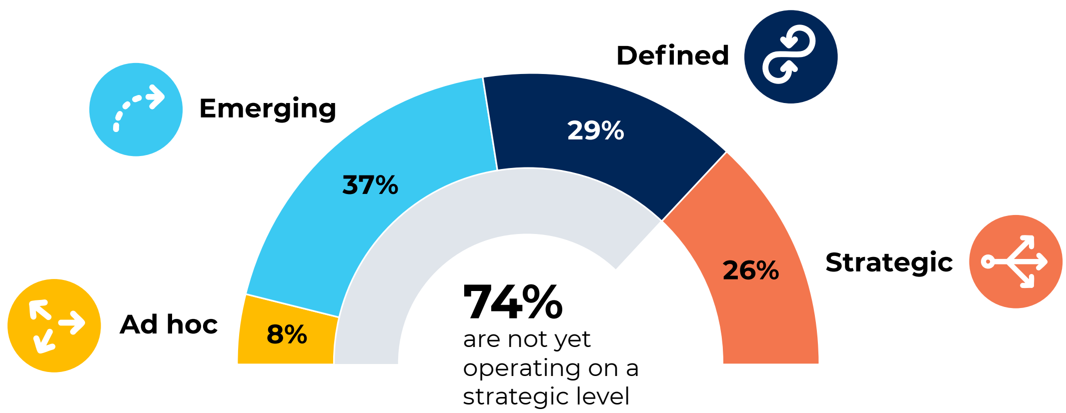
28%

of practitioners at small organizations describe their thought leadership maturity as strategic.

Figure 5

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP MATURITY

Based on the following descriptions, which best characterizes your organization's thought leadership practice?



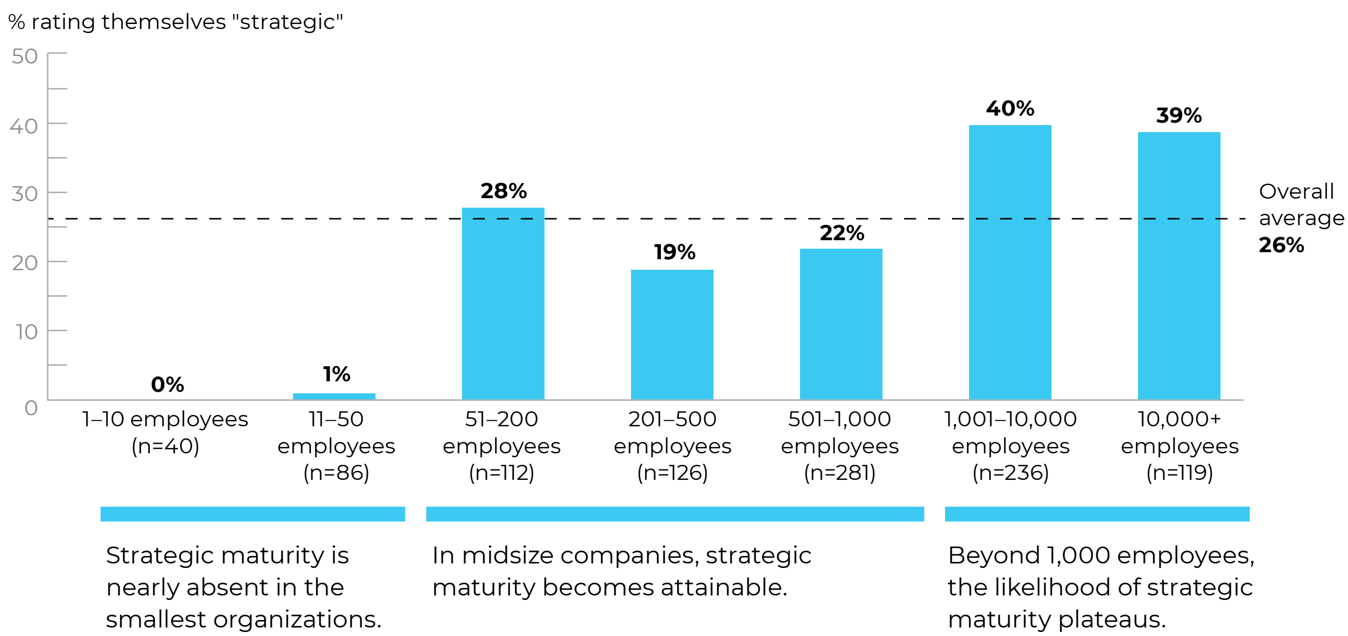
Notes: n = 1,000; single-select response. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

Figure 6

STRATEGIC MATURITY GENERALLY TRACKS WITH COMPANY SIZE

Based on the following descriptions, which best characterizes your organization's thought leadership practice?



Notes: n = 1,000; single-select response. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

What this means for your thought leadership

For thought leadership functions past the earliest stages of maturity, the limiting factor is rarely money or headcount. It is the quality of the structural choices underneath the work.

1 Audit whether your ownership structure is intentional.

For most thought leadership practitioners (54%), budget and strategy sit in different functions. That may be a deliberate separation—commercial sponsorship on one side, editorial direction on the other—or it may simply be the result of how the pieces fell over time.

This distinction matters. Split ownership can work well when responsibilities and coordination are clearly defined as part of the operating model; it falls apart when accountability is ambiguous or assumed rather than explicitly defined.

The goal is not necessarily to consolidate ownership by default, but to determine whether the current arrangement is the one you would intentionally build today. If it isn't, the next question is who has the authority to redesign it.

2 Treat thought leadership as a people capability.

The top challenges practitioners name are capability gaps (25%) and time constraints (21%). Neither can be solved by better software or a new brief format. These are fundamentally people and process challenges.

Organizations with mature thought leadership functions treat thought leadership as a people-led capability. They build the infrastructure for cross-team collaboration, establish clear editorial and governance models, and develop talent and relationships that allow the work to move efficiently through complex environments.

3 Don't wait for scale to pursue maturity.

Maturity is a function of operational choices rather than organizational size—and is achievable at almost any scale. Small organizations (51–200 employees) report strategic maturity at higher rates than midsize ones, while the very largest organizations are no more likely to be mature than those a tenth their size.

Scale may create more resources and visibility, but it does not automatically produce strong governance, clear ownership, or disciplined operating practices. If your organization is waiting to "get bigger" before investing in governance and process, survey says that's the wrong approach.

CHAPTER 2

What we make

Research, formats, AI, oh my!

The activities that once distinguished sophisticated teams from improvised ones have converged into something close to a baseline: almost every organization that publishes thought leadership conducts proprietary research, produces multiple content formats, and integrates AI into their work.

What now separates organizations is the discipline behind each of those activities: what types of research they're doing, in what combinations; which formats are chosen, and why; and how exactly AI is used, and by whom.

Research is now table stakes—breadth is the differentiator

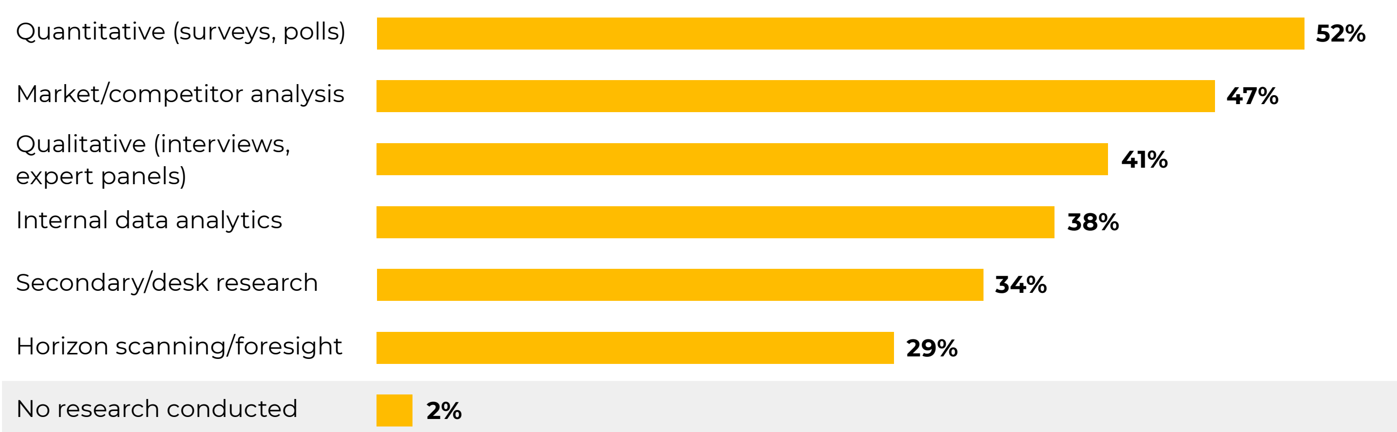
Research on its own is no longer what separates strong thought leadership from the weak. Nearly all practitioners (98%) conduct some form of proprietary research for use in thought leadership, and most (85%) are satisfied with how it's being used.

The methods sit in familiar order: quantitative research is most common (52%), followed by market and competitor analysis (47%) and qualitative research (41%) (Figure 7). The question is no longer whether thought leadership is grounded in data; it's how many kinds of data it draws on.

Figure 7

MOST COMMON RESEARCH METHODS

What types of research does your organization conduct for use in its thought leadership?



Notes: n = 1,000; multiselect response. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.
Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

Research breadth scales with maturity (Figure 8). Strategic organizations average 2.6 types of research, compared with 2.0 for ad hoc organizations—a small difference in absolute terms, but one that compounds. Those conducting three or more research types report a higher number of measurable outcomes from their thought leadership (3.6 vs 2.8, on average) and are more likely to report stronger business growth than those that rely on a single research type (55% vs 41%).

Strategic organizations average

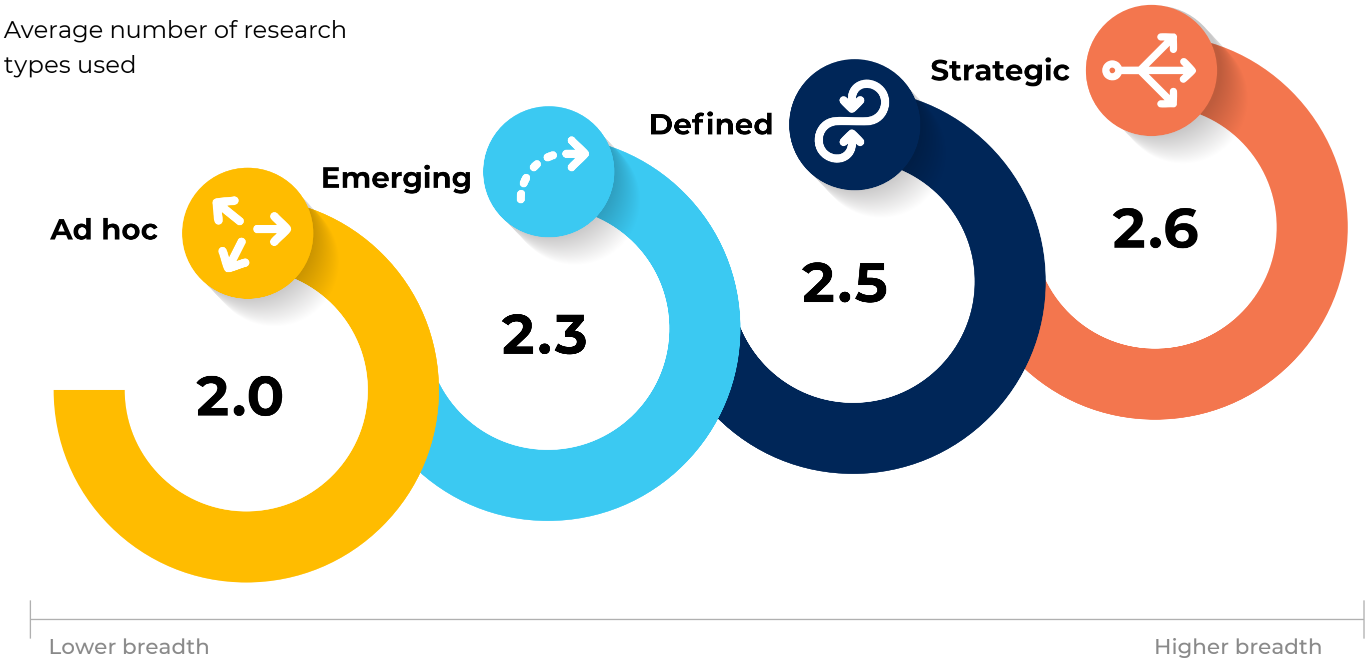
2.6 types

of research

Figure 8

RESEARCH BREADTH INCREASES WITH MATURITY

What types of research does your organization conduct for use in its thought leadership?



Notes: n = 1,000; multiselect response.
Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

Practitioners seem to know this. Asked to rank the capabilities most important for producing successful thought leadership, 56% placed research in their top three—ahead of distribution (53%), data analysis (48%), and subject matter expertise (46%).

The format mix is diversifying, but video still reigns supreme

Organizations produce an average of three content types (from a list of eight options). Written content still dominates thought leadership: 59% of organizations produce short-form pieces, and 53% produce long-form.[ii] But video (47%) and email newsletters (44%) have achieved near parity.

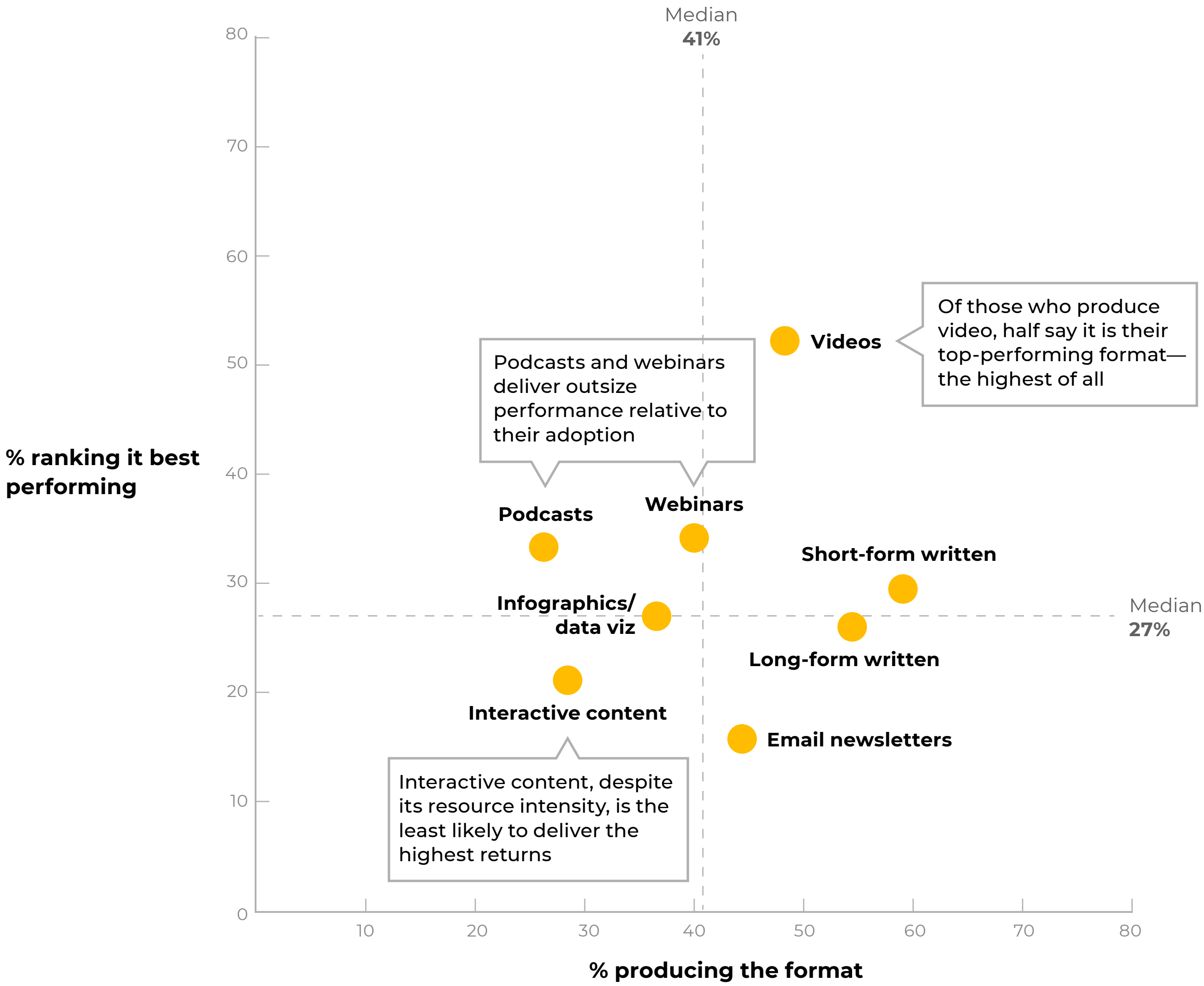
Video is the most consequential part of that shift. Last year, we noted that many teams were investing in video despite its resource intensity. This year, we know why: 50% of video producers say it's their best-performing format (Figure 9)—well above podcasts (32%) and webinars (31%).

Figure 9

WIDELY USED FORMATS ARE NOT ALWAYS THE TOP PERFORMERS

What content types has your organization produced in the past 12 months?

Of the content types your organization has produced in the past 12 months, which has gotten the best performance with your target audience?



Notes: n = 1,000; multiselect and single-select response.

Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

Video's position as the most-cited best performer among all content types represents a striking reversal from the decade in which the whitepaper was the default deliverable and everything else was a promotional wrapper around it. (For more on two of the most-discussed formats this year, see sidebars "The dominance of video" and "The glut of podcasts.")

The dominance of video

Key takeaway: The winning format is a smart person talking for about 10 minutes.

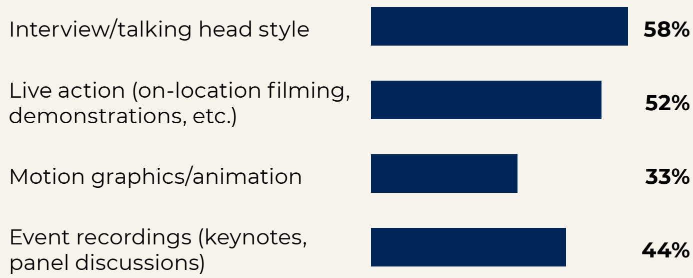
MTV claimed video killed the radio star. Now it's coming after the whitepaper.

Half (47%) of survey respondents said their organization produces video. It is, after short- and long-form written content, the most-produced format. And video's prevalence in the thought leadership mix climbs as organizations move from ad hoc (40% produce video) to strategic (56% produce video).

So—are we talking selfie videos on LinkedIn? Full-production studio shoots? Survey says it's a bit of both. The business classic—interview/talking head—remains the favorite, followed closely by live action (on-location filming, demonstrations, etc.). Both of these formats put real people on screen, which is what audiences actually want from thought leadership. Event recordings are often long, context-dependent, and feel like leftovers rather than purpose-built content. Motion graphics can feel corporate and depersonalized, which is fine for explainers but weaker for building authority or trust.

You indicated your organization produces videos. Please tell us more about the format(s) you typically use.

n = 473; multiselect response



The typical length of these videos surprised our team—we guessed the majority would report short (<5 minutes) videos, built for social media consumption. In reality, just 7% of video-producing respondents report the typical length of their videos is under 5 minutes. Half (47%) say 5–15 minutes, and a third say 15–30 minutes.

Are organizations calibrating for social-media attention, long-form viewing, or both? Whatever it is, it must be working—because for the second year in a row, and with even more evidence this year, video is a dominant thought leadership format.

AI is embedded in workflows, but its value peaks upstream

AI is now effectively universal in thought leadership—only 2% of respondents say they don't use it at all for this work. But the sophistication of that use varies, and the governance around it is still catching up.

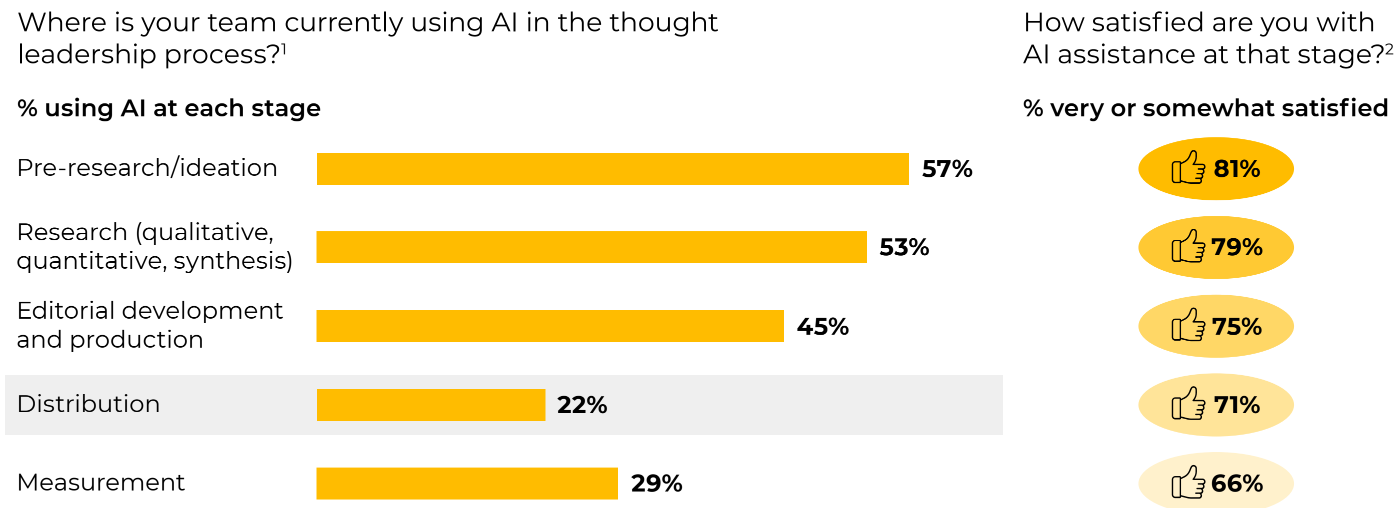
Nearly two-thirds of thought leadership professionals (64%) report having a formal policy that governs the use of AI in thought leadership. Such formal AI governance tracks with maturity: 76% of strategic organizations have a formal policy, compared with 58% of ad hoc organizations.

Where AI is used—and how well it's working—is not evenly distributed across the pipeline. Usage is front-loaded: 57% of respondents apply AI in pre-research/ideation, 53% in research, and 45% in editorial production (Figure 10). That share drops sharply once content leaves the editing queue: only 22% use AI for distribution and just 29% in measurement. Satisfaction follows a similar curve, peaking at ideation and falling at every subsequent stage of the pipeline.

Ubiquity isn't the same as utility. But the pressure to deploy AI anywhere and everywhere is clear, and every leader from research to marketing is searching for the use case that will save X hours per week or result in Y cost savings. The good news, if you're in the business of thought leadership: there has rarely been a more obvious moment for credible, evidence-backed work to help business leaders navigate their AI journey.

Figure 10

AI USAGE AND SATISFACTION BOTH DECLINE DOWNSTREAM



[1] Multiselect response.
[2] 5-point Likert scale.
Notes: n = 1,000.
Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

AI confidence is concentric: Closer in, more confident

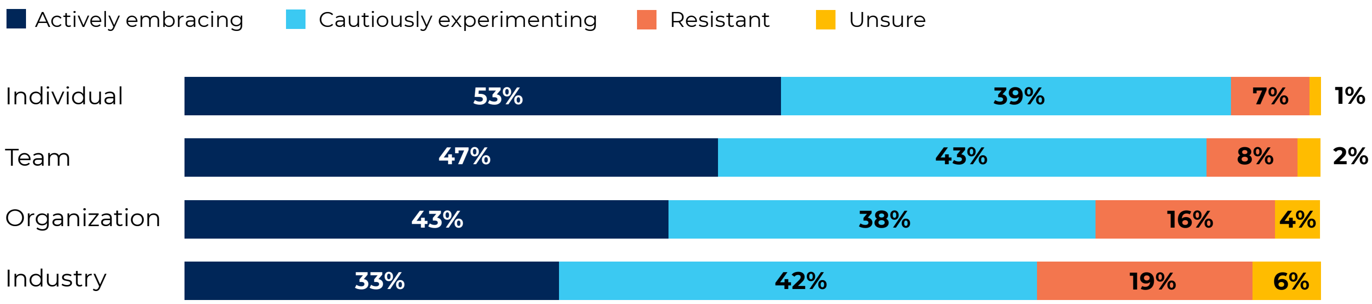
There's another pattern in the AI data, and it tells the most useful story for anyone trying to lead an organization through this technology transition. Half (53%) of respondents say they personally are actively embracing AI (Figure 11). When asked to assess the receptiveness of those around them, smiles falter; 47% of their teams are actively embracing AI, 43% of their organizations, and just 33% of their industry—a full 20 percentage points behind their own enthusiasm.

The result is a curious gap: a growing force of people quietly embracing AI while believing they are surrounded by colleagues who are not.

Figure 11

AI RECEPTIVITY ACROSS STAKEHOLDER LEVELS

How receptive is each of the following to using AI tools in thought leadership work?



Notes: n = 1,000; single-select response per category.

The glut of podcasts

Key takeaway: Organizations are building podcasts for viewing as much as listening, and for a finite window rather than a long drive.

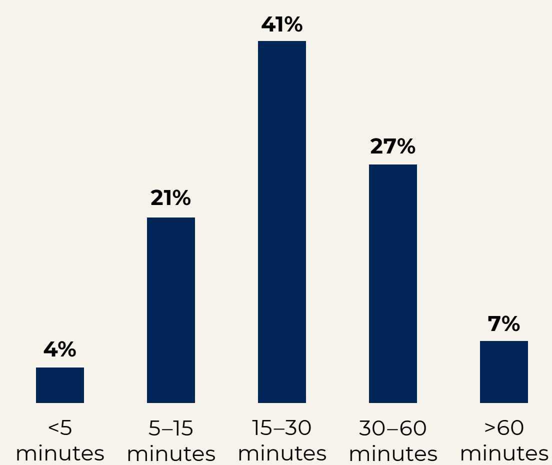
Turns out the radio star is safe and sound in the form of podcaster—though those with a face for radio may be dismayed to see the format overrun by video.

One-quarter of survey respondents (27%) produce podcasts as part of their thought leadership. From Apple to YouTube to Spotify, the listening options are many. One May 2026 estimate suggests there's a new podcast episode published every 0.9 seconds.[1]

Speaking of YouTube: Of those who produce podcasts, 80% said they publish video podcasts, while less than half (46%) said they produce audio-only podcasts. (Many do both.) The more strategically mature the organization, the more likely they are to produce video rather than audio podcasts. The dominant podcast length is 15 to 30 minutes—the natural shape of a focused conversation and a reasonable commute.

What is the typical length of your podcasts?

n = 265; single-select response



Experienced podcasters know they live and die by cadence: audience builds slowly, and only with consistent output. For thought leadership teams strapped for time, resources, or both, that's where the format tends to falter—especially when the topic area and target audience are too narrow to build real momentum.

[1] "Podcast creation," Podcast Business Journal, updated and accessed May 13, 2026, podcastbusinessjournal.com/data/podcast-creation.

What this means for your thought leadership

Today's thought leadership teams are more often mounting multimodal research efforts, publishing in many different formats, and wielding AI in a quickly changing workscape.

1 Treat research as a portfolio.

More research types correlates with stronger outcomes and stronger business growth. If your organization is still running its thought leadership on a single research lens—typically an annual survey—the upgrade path is not necessarily a bigger survey. It could be adding more methods, like qualitative interviews to contextualize quantitative findings and market analysis to position them. It could also involve running more focused surveys rapidly, like a quarterly pulse, to tap into faster-moving topics. The goal is to add nuance and context to answering your hypotheses more thoroughly.

2 Interrogate your format mix against actual performance.

Half of video producers say video is their best-performing format. But "best-performing" means something different to every organization, and the format that succeeds for a firm selling to CFOs is not necessarily the one for selling to engineering leaders. Before reallocating resources, define what "best-performing" means in your context—whether that's pipeline generation, share of voice, executive audience capture, or something else—and run the analysis against your own content.

3 Close the AI governance gap before it closes on you.

Nearly a third of organizations are using AI across their thought leadership workflow without a formal policy to guide it. That exposure grows every month the absence persists—in brand risk, in legal risk, in the quiet accumulation of inconsistent practices across a team.

Closing the gap doesn't require a 40-page policy document. It does require a few clear answers to questions a practitioner will face this week: Which AI tools are approved, and which aren't? What data—client names, unpublished research, proprietary frameworks, draft executive quotes—are safe to paste into a public model? When does AI-assisted work need to be disclosed to readers, to clients, or to a managing editor? And who is accountable if the tool gets something wrong?

CHAPTER 3

From reach to results

All things distribution and measurement

Distribution and measurement may take place after thought leadership is developed, but that does not mean they should be treated as afterthoughts. Organizations that plan for distribution earlier report more business outcomes from their thought leadership. Yet distribution remains the weakest operational capability in thought leadership, even among mature organizations.

At the same time, the returns are real and consistent. Like last year, 97% of respondents report that their thought leadership delivers results.

Distribution is the weakest link

For many thought leadership practitioners, the hardest part of thought leadership begins after the content is completed. Nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents identify distribution as their organization's biggest capability gap, while just 6% call it their greatest strength—the lowest figure of any practice measured.

The pattern holds across maturity tiers. Distribution is the top-ranked capability gap for ad hoc organizations (30%), emerging (24%), and defined (25%). Only at strategic maturity does another challenge overtake distribution, with content strategy narrowly edging out distribution (25% vs distribution at 20%). Even the most mature organizations are still working on mastering distribution.

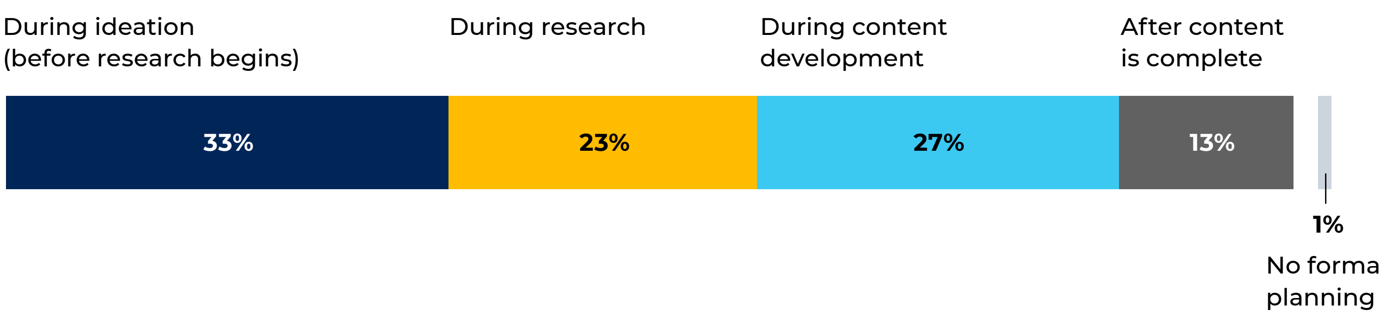
One reason is that, for most organizations, distribution is an afterthought. Only 33% of organizations begin planning for distribution during ideation (Figure 12). Most wait until research or content development is already underway, and 13% only think about distribution after the content is complete. In other words, for two-thirds of organizations, distribution is treated as a logistics problem to figure out once the work is in progress—rather than a strategic input shaping the work itself.

That sequence has consequences. Organizations that begin planning distribution during ideation report more measurable business outcomes than those that wait until content is complete: they are 16 percentage points more likely to report higher brand visibility (61% vs 45%) and 8 percentage points more likely to report new business growth (57% vs 49%). The teams that think about audience and channel strategy earliest are also the ones most likely to see their thought leadership break through.

Figure 12

WHEN DISTRIBUTION PLANNING BEGINS

At what stage does your team typically begin planning how thought leadership content will be distributed?



Notes: n = 1,000; single-select response; 3% responded "It varies too much to generalize."

Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

Not all channels create equal value

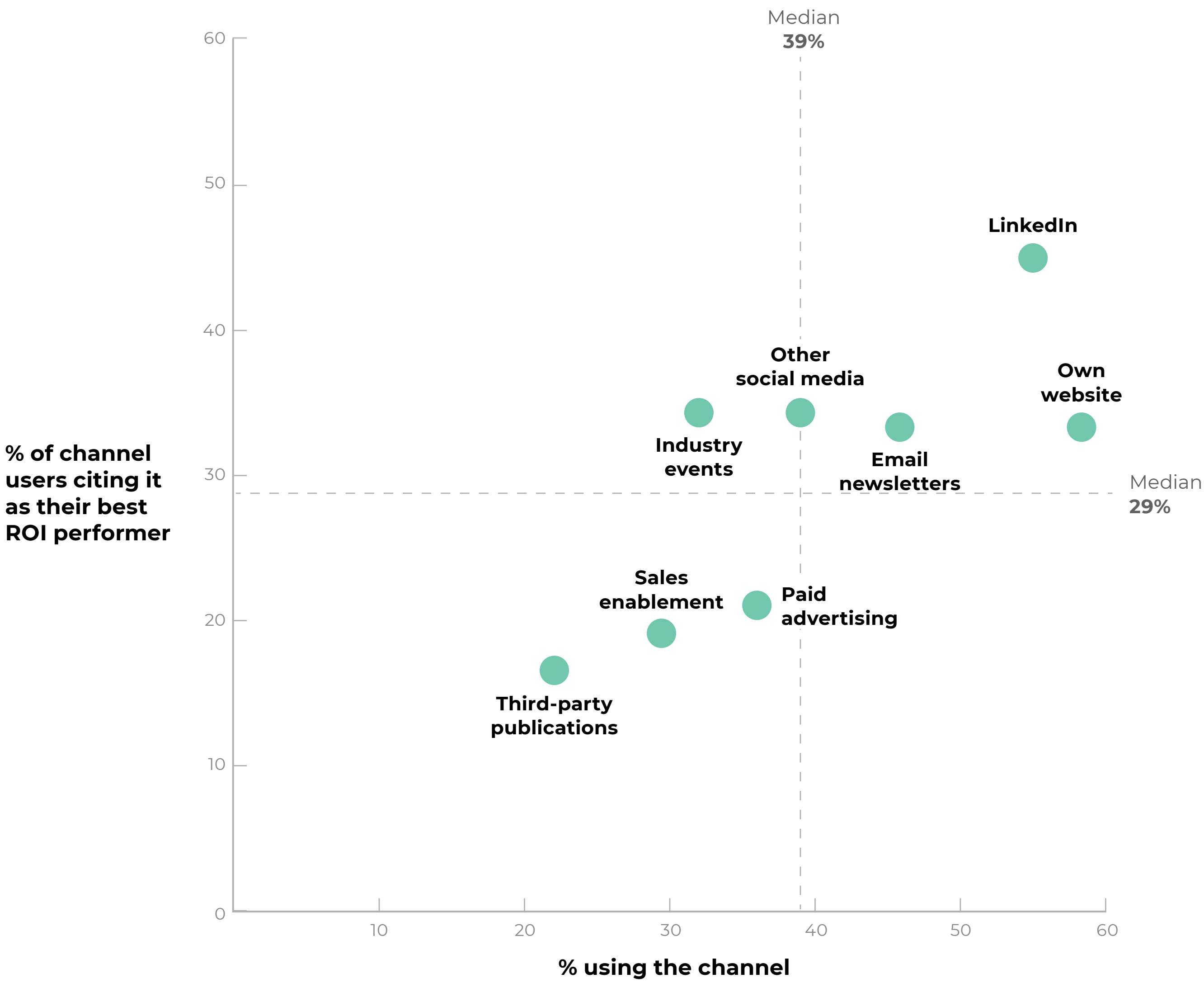
Most organizations rely on a relatively small set of distribution channels—3.2, on average. Three dominate the mix: own websites (59%), LinkedIn (55%), and email newsletters (46%) (Figure 13).

Figure 13

THE MOST-USED CHANNELS ARE NOT ALWAYS THE STRONGEST ROI PERFORMERS

Which channels has your organization used to distribute thought leadership content in the past 12 months?

Which distribution channel has delivered the best return on investment in the past 12 months?



Notes: n = 1,000; multiselect and single-select response.

Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

But channel adoption and channel performance aren't the same thing. Only one-third (33%) of respondents say their organization's website delivers the strongest returns, even though it is the channel with the widest adoption. The runner-up in adoption, LinkedIn, is the runaway leader in ROI: among those who use the platform for distribution, 45% say it delivers their best return—well ahead of any other channel.

LinkedIn has a reported 1.3 billion users, with 310 million active daily.[iii] It's a standard part of the B2B marketing toolkit: of course there's the final PDF report to email to clients, but there's also a set of LinkedIn carousels and text snippets to share with senior leaders. For anyone aspiring to be a thought leader, a LinkedIn profile is socially mandatory.

And it makes sense, right? Thought leadership is about connecting 'idea people' with those in need of ideas. The rise of business social media since the early 2010s has created a distribution channel for individual voices alongside corporate ones. Research suggests people often find individual human voices more credible than organizational voices, especially when the message feels personal, authentic, or comes from a peer or customer rather than a company representative.[iv] (For a no-nonsense take on distribution best practices, see sidebar, "A Q&A with iResearch Services SVP of Marketing Madelaine Oppert.")

To gate or not to gate?

Today, nearly half (48%) of respondents say their organization takes a mixed approach to gating—that is, requiring contact information to access—their thought leadership content (Figure 14). The 34% of respondents that don't gate their content are likely prioritizing brand awareness and reach, while the 13% that gate all their content are likely using thought leadership primarily for lead generation. The mixed-model majority is doing both: selectively gating the assets built to convert, and leaving the rest to travel.

48%

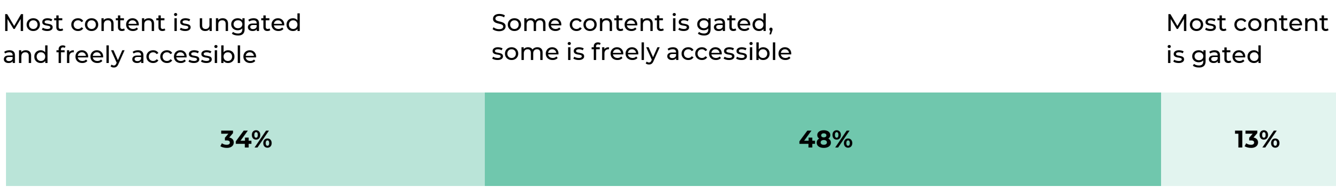
of respondents say their organization takes a mixed approach to gating their thought leadership content.

Maturity, again, shows up in the texture. Ad hoc thought leadership organizations are the most likely to leave most of their content ungated (52%)—a defensible choice when the priority is reach. Strategic organizations, by contrast, are two to three times more likely to say their gating approach varies by situation (10% versus 3–5% at other maturity levels). For mature programs, gating appears to be less of a fixed doctrine and more a strategic decision that varies based on asset, audience, or campaign objective.

Figure 14

HALF SAY "IT DEPENDS"

What is your organization's typical approach to gating thought leadership content (i.e., requiring contact information to access)?



Notes: n = 1,000; single-select response; 5% responded "It varies too much to generalize."

Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

A Q&A with iResearch Services SVP of Marketing Madelaine Oppert

Q: What do people often get wrong about distribution?

A: People make assumptions about how consumers consume. And a lot of people distributing thought leadership—and marketing content in general—assume that people consume insights and data and content the same way they do. Or the same way their C-suite does, or their board does. It goes back to not knowing your audience well enough.

A lot of distribution challenges would be solved if organizations focused more on creating content that genuinely lands with the audience and making sure it shows up in the places that fit their daily habits naturally. If you know your audience well enough to say, 90% of my audience travels to work and is likely to look at LinkedIn on public transport, make sure your social media is posted before 7am so it shows up on their feed when they are on the train.

Q: According to our data, LinkedIn crushes the other distribution channels in ROI. Why do you think that is?

A: When you're on LinkedIn, people are in the mindset. They're looking for business content. Nobody goes to LinkedIn to find out how somebody's doing. That's Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat. You go into LinkedIn to find who's talking about what, what news is there? So, if your thought leadership is showing up in their feed, they're far more likely to click on it.

Q: How do you make the most of thought leadership?

A: Thought leadership is not a lead generator. It's a trust builder. It's a reputation builder. It's an awareness builder. You have to consistently show up. You need consistent short-term performance to build long-term reputation. The two are connected.

Read the full interview at https://iresearch.services/oppertqa

Thought leadership pays

Nearly every thought leadership practitioner (97%) reports measurable business impact from thought leadership, a figure unchanged from last year.

On average, respondents report 3.2 business outcomes from their thought leadership. Brand visibility/reputation tops the list at 56%, followed by new business growth (51%), industry influence (47%), and partnership opportunities (42%). In other words, the value of storytelling is both commercial and reputational.

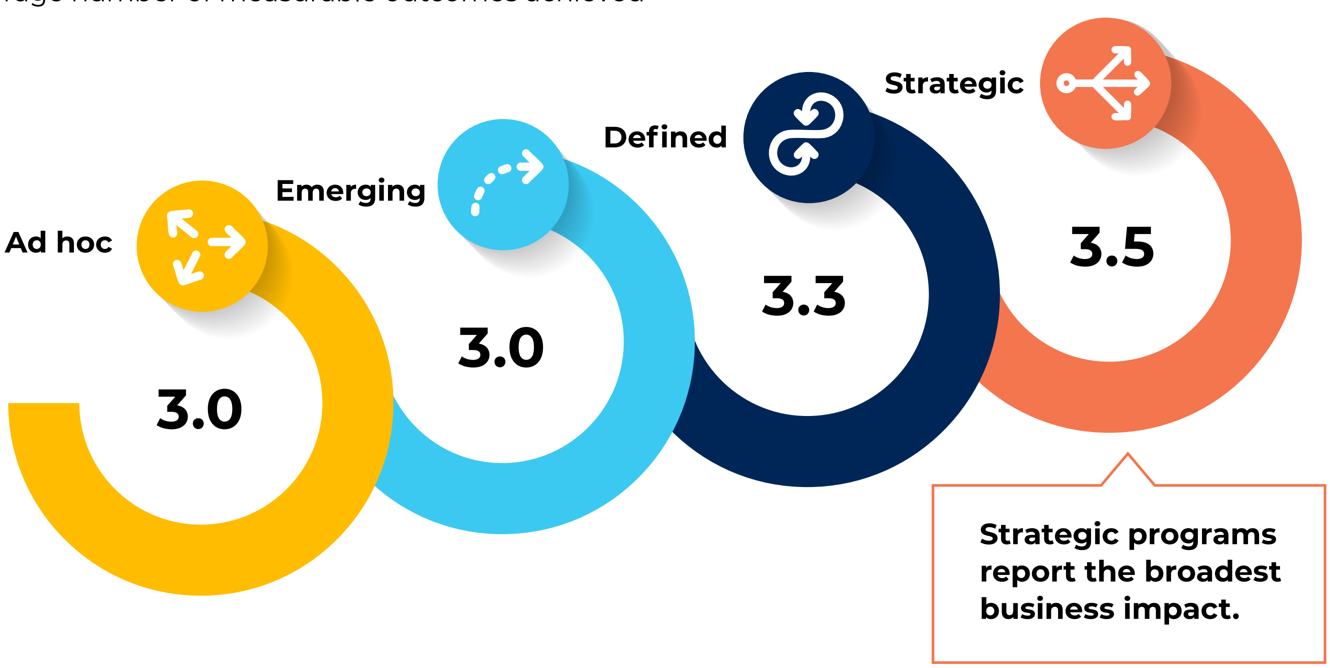
More mature thought leadership programs report more types of business impact (Figure 15). This holds across both commercial and reputational outcomes, with a few exceptions; e.g., ad hoc companies are most likely to report their thought leadership commands premium pricing power (a commercial outcome) and existing customer retention (a reputational one) (Figure 16).

While we asked whether outcomes were achieved, we did not collect data about their magnitude. A practitioner at a small organization reporting new business registers identically in our findings to one at a large firm closing dozens of enterprise deals. Still, the directional signal is clear: thought leadership pays, and in more than one form of currency.

Figure 15

MATURITY BEGETS MORE MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

Average number of measurable outcomes achieved



Notes: n = 1,000; single-select response.

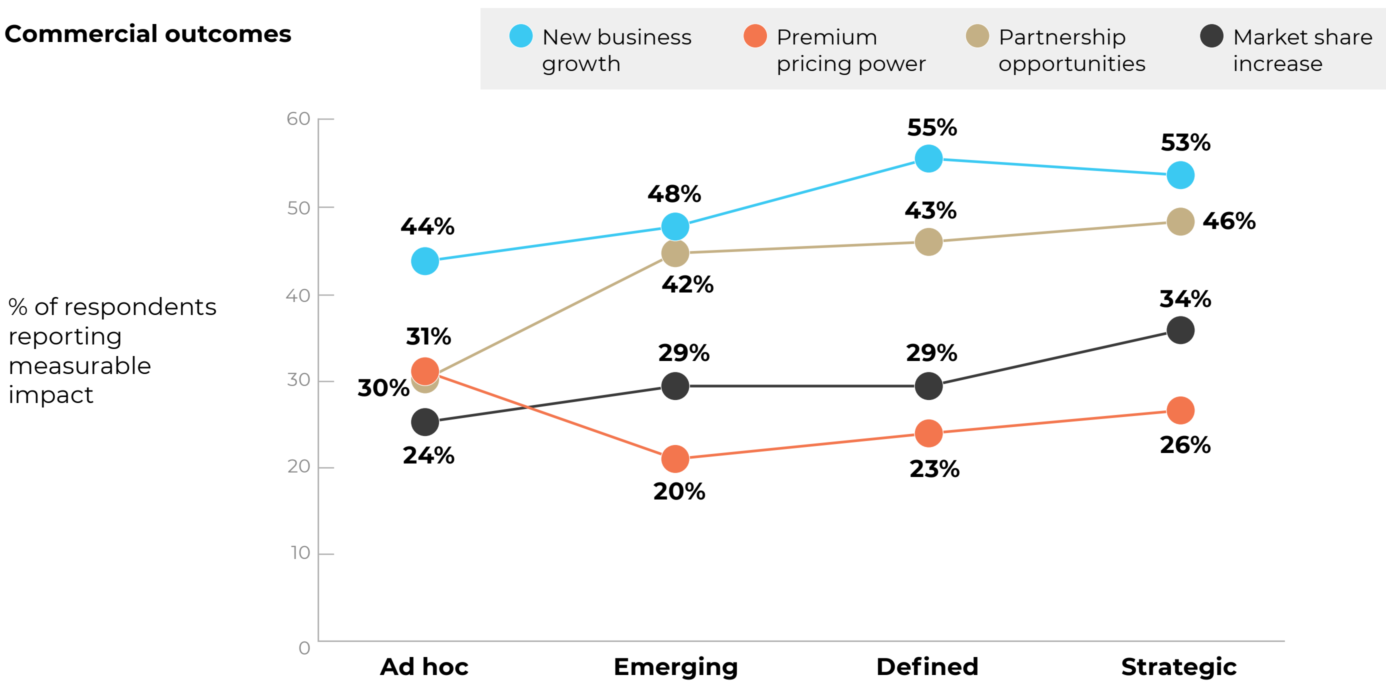
Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

Figure 16

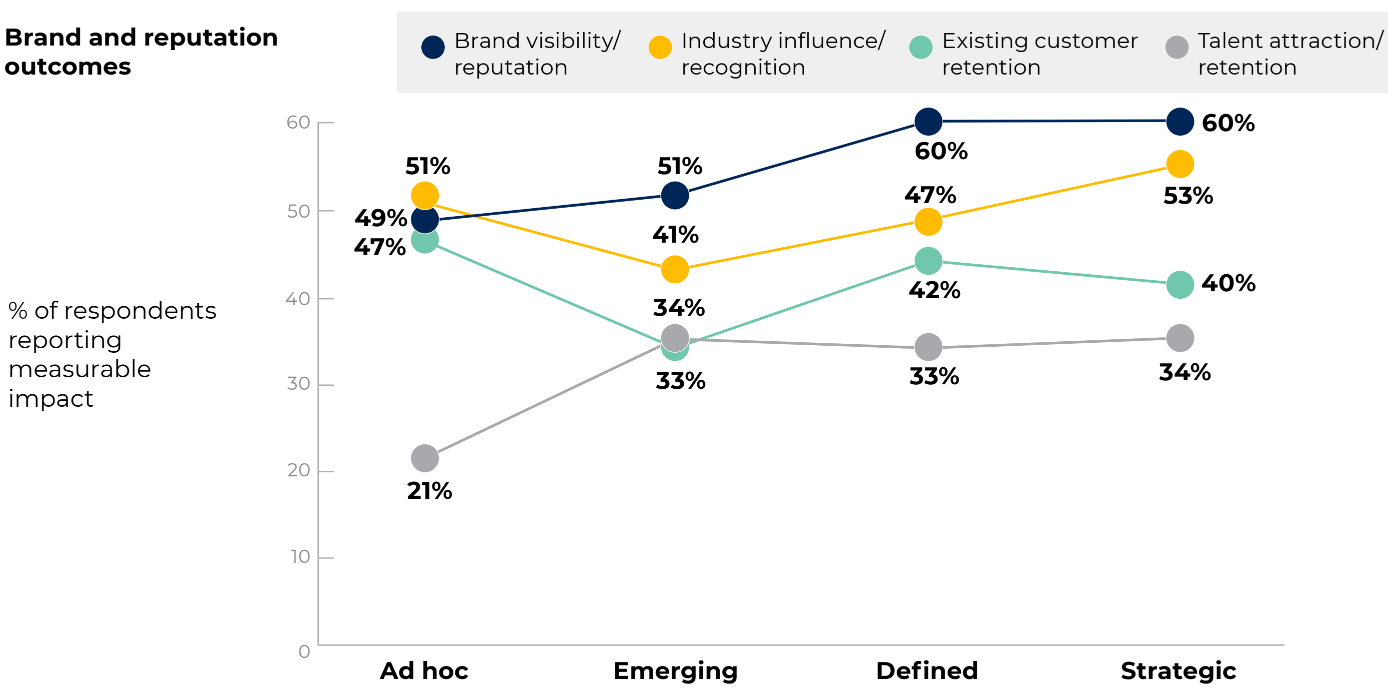
MATURE THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS REPORT BROADER BUSINESS IMPACT

What business outcomes has your organization measurably achieved through thought leadership?

Commercial outcomes



Brand and reputation outcomes



Notes: n = 1,000; single-select response.

Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

What this means for your thought leadership

Thought leadership does not automatically create impact. The organizations reporting the most business outcomes are not necessarily producing more content—they are making intentional decisions about how that content reaches audiences, what role it is expected to play, and how they will ultimately measure success.

1 Move distribution planning to the starting line.

Only a third of programs plan distribution at ideation, but those that do report more business outcomes. When distribution is part of the brief, the work gets shaped around the channels, audiences, and objectives it needs to serve. When it's bolted on afterward, teams are left to retrofit a finished asset into a channel and format that it was never designed for. It can be as simple as asking "where will this land?" in the same conversation that sets the research question.

2 Treat distribution as a portfolio, not a checklist.

Our research shows organizations rely on a small set of channels—three, on average—and the same handful of owned and social channels retain the top spots. But those channels serve different purposes. LinkedIn amplifies visibility and professional influence. Owned websites are where the work lives permanently and gets found later. Newsletters reinforce existing audiences. Events create depth beyond a screen.

Experienced thought leadership professionals adapt content formats, messaging, and access models to the role each channel needs to play.

3 Quantify the value of your thought leadership.

According to *The ROI of Thought Leadership* by Cindy Anderson and Anthony Marshall, the typical ROI of a thought leadership program is 156%—16 times the typical marketing campaign's effectiveness. The authors also quantify the size of the total thought leadership revenue opportunity at $100 billion in the United States and $265 billion globally.[v] And yet almost every gathering of thought leadership practitioners involves a conversation about fighting for the resources to do groundbreaking research and publishing work.

A better handle on your organization's thought leadership ROI—and the specific business outcomes the work supports—can help. Be clear upfront about what each major piece of work is actually for. Commercial outcome, reputational outcome, or both? Programs that can articulate the goal before the work begins are the ones best positioned to recognize the return when it shows up.

Conclusion

So what separates sporadic from strategic thought leadership? We can see some clear patterns: strategic organizations are more likely to have a dedicated thought leadership team, they have more people involved in the process, and they use more forms of research. They also report more business outcomes from their thought leadership.

But questions mount faster than available answers. Is the choice to split ownership of budget and strategy between two functions deliberate or accidental? Why does interactive content struggle to gain traction? Will LinkedIn retain its dominance through algorithm changes?

These questions will get resolved over the course of the budget meetings, content briefs, and channel reviews that fill practitioners' calendars over the next year. If a guiding takeaway can help our readers widen their lead in the year to come, we offer the following:

What separates strategic from sporadic is clear intent.

Endnotes

i For more, see “Thought Leadership Capability Maturity Model, Competency Framework, and Practice Standard,” Global Thought Leadership Institute, accessed May 2026, gtli.org/thought-leadership-standard.

ii Short-form written content includes executive summaries, blogs, and case studies. Long-form written content includes whitepapers and reports.

iii Naveen Kumar, “47 LinkedIn Statistics 2026 (Users & Demographics Data),” Demandsage, April 23, 2026, demandsage.com/linkedin-statistics.

iv Kate Moran, “The Impact of Tone of Voice on Users’ Brand Perception, NN Group, updated January 30, 2024, www.nngroup.com/articles/tone-voice-users; Pauline A. Howes and Lynne M. Sallot, “Company spokesperson vs. customer testimonial: Investigating quoted spokesperson credibility and impact in business-to-business communication,” *Public Relations Review* Vol. 39 (3), September 2013, pp. 207–12, doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.04.002.

v Cindy Anderson and Anthony Marshall, *The ROI of Thought Leadership: Calculating the Value that Sets Organizations Apart*, Wiley, 2025.

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