

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thought Leadership in Practice 2026

SEPARATING STRATEGIC FROM SPORADIC



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.

For the past two years, iResearch Services has surveyed 1,000 thought leadership professionals around the world (see “About the Research”). Here are the key takeaways from our latest research on what it takes to produce thought leadership.

Budget ownership and the thought leadership maturity curve

The question of who actually runs thought leadership remains all over the place.

Ownership of budget and strategy is fragmented. On average, respondents report that three functions are involved in thought leadership within their organization. A majority (54%) say the budget is owned by one function and the strategy is owned by another.



Download the full report at
<http://iresearch.services/2026Report>.

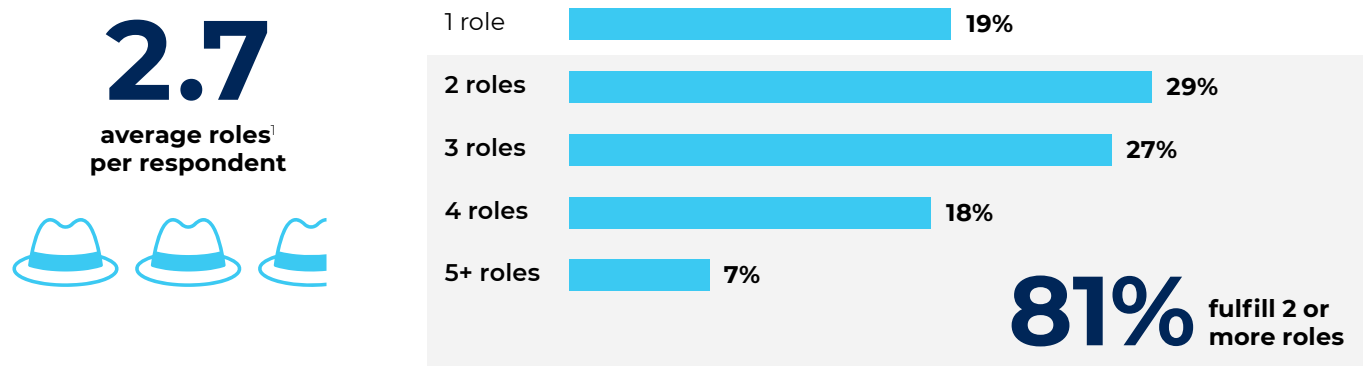
Lean teams, many hats. The average thought leadership function operates with roughly 15 people, with team size proportional to company size. The average professional fulfills 2.7 roles in their organization's thought leadership life cycle (Figure A).

Maturity is the exception, not the rule. Only 26% say their thought leadership organization has reached strategic maturity. Strategic organizations have more people involved in the thought leadership process, they use more forms of research, and they report more business outcomes from their thought leadership.

Figure A

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; Legal or compliance professional.

Notes: n = 1,000; multiselect response.

Source: iResearch Services Thought Leadership Survey, Q1 2026

Research, formats, AI, oh my!

The activities that once distinguished sophisticated teams from improvised ones have converged into something close to a baseline.

Research is table stakes. 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. Those conducting three or more research types report a higher number of measurable outcomes from their thought leadership.

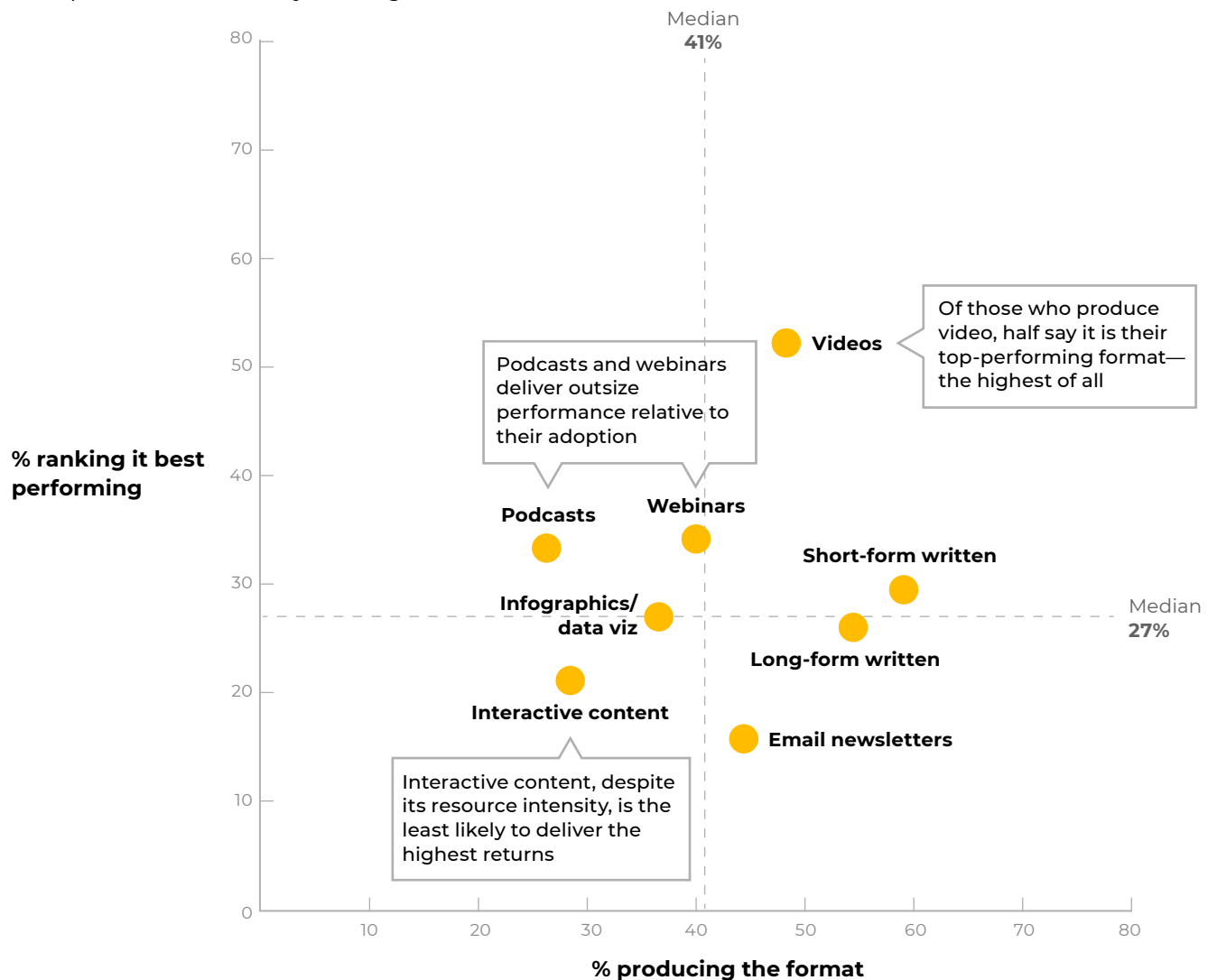
Video reigns supreme. Written content dominates thought leadership: 59% of respondents produce short-form pieces, and 53% produce long-form. But video (47%) has achieved near parity, and 50% of video producers say it's their best-performing format—the highest share of any content format (Figure B).

Figure B

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

AI's value peaks upstream. AI is now effectively universal—only 2% of respondents say they don't use it at all for thought leadership. Usage is front-loaded: 57% of respondents apply AI in pre-research/ideation, 53% in research, and 45% in editorial production—dropping to under 30% in distribution and measurement.

All things distribution and measurement

For the second year in a row, 97% of respondents report that their thought leadership delivers results.

Distribution is an afterthought. Only 33% of practitioners begin planning for distribution during ideation. Most wait until research or content development is already underway, and 13% only think about distribution after the content is complete.

Not all channels create equal value. Among those who use LinkedIn for thought leadership distribution, 45% say it delivers their best return—ahead of any other channel.

Thought leadership pays. On average, respondents report 3.2 business outcomes from their thought leadership. Brand visibility/reputation tops the list (56%), followed by new business growth (51%), industry influence (47%), and partnership opportunities (42%). 🌟

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 online in Feb–Mar 2026 by iResearch Services. The margin of error is +/- 3.1%. For the full methodology and respondent demographics, see the full report at <http://iresearch.services/2026Report>.



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