2020

B2B THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IMPACT STUDY

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An Annual Report on B2B Thought Leadership by Edelman Business Marketing and LinkedIn
US REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SEIZING THE UNTAPPED BUSINESS POTENTIAL OF THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Over the past three years, Edelman has collaborated with LinkedIn to investigate the power and impact inherent in publishing quality Thought Leadership content. This year's study confirms that B2B Decision-Makers are spending meaningful time consuming Thought Leadership content and, when that content is done well, that it has the potential to significantly influence brand perception and buying behaviors.

However, even though a sizeable amount of this content is being created, the Decision-Makers reading it continue to be disappointed in its overall quality, which poses real risks to the reputation and sales of the B2B companies publishing it.

This year's survey results show that while more than half of the Decision-Makers we surveyed spend more than one hour every week consuming Thought Leadership, only 17% of them rate the quality of most of what they read as very good or excellent. This situation becomes even more concerning when you know that 88% of Decision-Makers surveyed say that Thought Leadership can be effective in enhancing their perceptions of an organization.

In addition, most marketers are missing the opportunity to connect Thought Leadership efforts to measurable business impact, including high-priority KPIs such as account lift, MQL, SQL and other measures of how content is driving positive customer behavior. This year's survey found that only 23% of marketers can tie the Thought Leadership they produce to sales and business wins.

This disconnect is perpetuating a negative cycle of inadequate investment, poor quality content and an underestimation of Thought Leadership's impact — both positive and negative.

This data makes the bottom line very clear – producing Thought Leadership is an excellent way to gain the attention of the people who make B2B decisions, but if your organization is not committed to doing it well over the long-term, your efforts can move the needle in the wrong direction.

KEY LEARNINGS

1. Three years of data make it clear – Thought Leadership is a powerful way to connect with B2B Decision-Makers.

2. Most Thought Leadership producers are unable to measure its impact on business opportunities – signaling a missed opportunity and potential risk.

3. Brands that cultivate a culture of Thought Leadership reap greater reputation and sales impact than those that do not.

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TERMINOLOGY

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Free deliverables organizations or individuals produce on a topic they know a lot about and feel others can benefit from having their perspective on. Thought Leadership, in this context, does not include content primarily focused on describing an organization's products or services.

AUDIENCES IN THE REPORT...

PURCHASE DECISION-MAKERS
Consumers of Thought Leadership who are involved in vetting, recommending and/or making final decisions on their company's choice of professional service providers or products.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PRODUCERS
Consumers of Thought Leadership who also work in an organization that produces freely available Thought Leadership.

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ABOUT THE STUDY

SURVEY RESPONDENTS & METHODOLOGY

To help B2B companies understand the impact of Thought Leadership, Edelman and LinkedIn surveyed **1,164 U.S. business executives** across a wide range of industries and company sizes.

SENIORITY LEVEL

Manager	30%
Director	36%
VP	17%
CXO	10%
Partner	2%
Owner	5%

COMPANY SIZE

1-200	48%
201-1,000	16%
1,001-10,000	16%
10,001+	20%

DECISION-MAKERS VETTING ROLES

Give input	51%
Manage the process	25%
Final decision marker	24%

DATA COLLECTION	Online, using the LinkedIn platform to survey LinkedIn members
FIELDING DATES	September – October 2019
SURVEY LENGTH	10-15 minutes
MARGIN OF ERROR	Total Sample +/- 2.8% Decision-Makers +/- 3.4% Producers of Thought Leadership +/- 3.7%

ADDITIONAL SEGMENTS

Works for organization that produces Thought Leadership	32%
Works in the **finance** industry	15%
Works in the **high-tech** industry	13%
Works in the **medical** industry	12%

AT–A–GLANCE | THOUGHT LEADERSHIP TRENDS, 2017-2019

KEY DIMENSIONS	DESCRIPTION	2017	2018	2019
Engagement	% of Decision-Makers who spend an hour or more per week engaging with Thought Leadership	51%	54%	53%
Quality	% of Decision-Makers who rate the quality of most of the Thought Leadership they read as very good or excellent	14%	16%	17%
Value	% of Decision-Makers who say they gain valuable insights more than half the time they consume Thought Leadership	n/a	39%	32% ▽
Brand Impact	How effective Decision-Makers say Thought Leadership is in enhancing their perceptions of an organization	86%	88%	88%
Sales Impact	How effective Decision-Makers say Thought Leadership is at influencing their purchasing decisions	n/a	50%	48%
Attribution	% of Producers who can tie their Thought Leadership efforts to sales leads or business wins	n/a	26%	23%

OVERARCHING THREE-YEAR TRENDS
- Most Decision-Makers who engage with Thought Leadership spend at least an hour a week
- There is relatively little high-quality content being produced
- When done well, Thought Leadership positively impacts brand perception and sales
- Producers are not investing in doing it well and developing processes to measure its ROI

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01
Thought Leadership's
Proven Impact

02
Keys Attributes of Strong
Thought Leadership

03
The Crucial Importance
of a Thought
Leadership Culture

04
How to Win:
The Edelman Thought
Leadership Flywheel

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01

AFTER 3 YEARS, DECISION-MAKERS CONFIRM THOUGHT LEADERSHIP'S IMPACT – BUT ARE DISAPPOINTED IN THE QUALITY

DECISION-MAKERS
SPEND MEANINGFUL TIME
CONSUMING THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

1/2+

Of Decision-Makers spend **one hour or more** reading Thought Leadership per week

ENGAGEMENT

Time Decision-Makers spend per week reading Thought Leadership.

	2017	2018	2019
Meaningful Engagement (1+ hours)	51%	54%	**53%**
1-3 Hours	38%	38%	**33%**
4+ Hours	13%	16%	**20%**

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A MUST WHEN IT COMES TO
EARNING TRUST
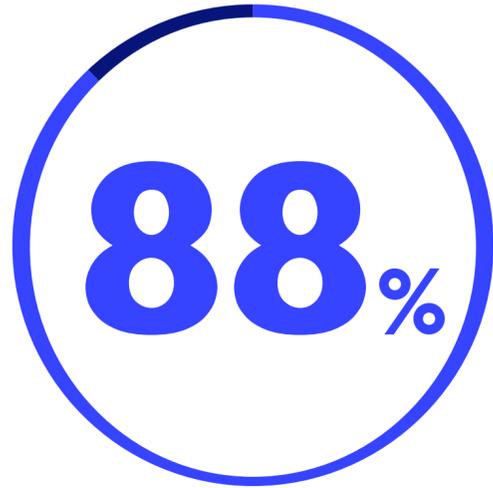
88%

Of Decision-Makers say that Thought Leadership can be effective in *enhancing their perceptions of an organization*

BRAND PERCEPTION IMPACT INDEX

Brand Perception Impact Index is the average percentage of Decision-Makers who say the following occur sometimes or more frequently after they have engaged with a piece of Thought Leadership:

- Their **respect for the organization responsible increased**
- Their **perception of the organization's capabilities increased**
- Their **trust in an organization increased**

BRAND IMPACT

A measure of how effective Decision-Makers say Thought Leadership is in enhancing their perceptions of an organization.

	2017	2018	2019
Average of Inputs	86%	88%	**88%**
Respect Increase	88%	91%	**90%**
Perception of Capabilities	87%	88%	**88%**
Trust	82%	85%	**86%**

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DECISION-MAKERS USE
THOUGHT LEADERSHIP TO
VET A COMPANY'S CAPABILITIES

59%

OF DECISION-MAKERS

Agree an organization's Thought Leadership is **a more trustworthy basis for assessing its capabilities** and competencies than its marketing materials and product sheets

71% OF DECISION-MAKERS

Agree reading Thought Leadership is one of the best ways to get a sense of the type and caliber of an organization's thinking

60% OF DECISION-MAKERS

Who are willing to pay a premium say it's because Thought Leadership demonstrates deep thinking and other virtues important to them

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COMPELLING CONTENT
INFLUENCES B2B SALES

48%
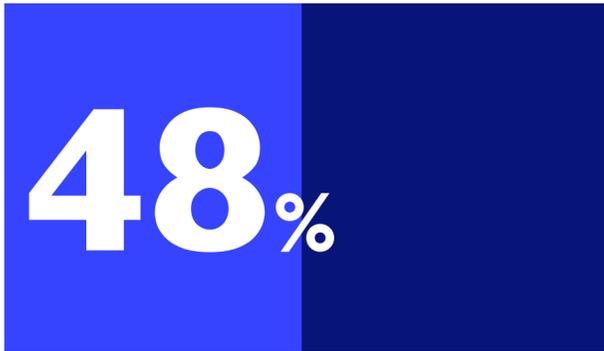
Of Decision-Makers say that Thought Leadership can be effective in *influencing their purchasing decisions*

SALES IMPACT INDEX

The Sales Impact Index is the average percentage of Decision-Makers who say the following occur sometimes or more frequently after they have engaged with a piece of Thought Leadership:

- They invited the organization (which was not in their original consideration set) to **bid on a project**
- They **awarded business** to the organization responsible
- They decided to **increase the amount of business** they did with the organization
- They **purchased a new product or service** from the organization that they had not previously considered buying

SALES IMPACT

A measure of how effective Decision-Makers say Thought Leadership is in influencing their purchasing decisions.

	2017	2018	2019
Average of Inputs	n/a	50%	**48%**
Consideration - Generated RFP invitations	37%	41%	**39%**
Purchase - Led to awarding a business	45%	51%	**49%**
Upsell - led to increasing the amount of business you do	n/a	51%	**52%**
Cross-Sell - led to purchase of new product/service	n/a	56%	**51%**

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THOUGHT LEADERSHIP CAN HELP
COMMAND A PREMIUM

41%

OF DECISION-MAKERS

Agree they are more **willing to pay a premium** to work with an organization that produces Thought Leadership versus those that do not
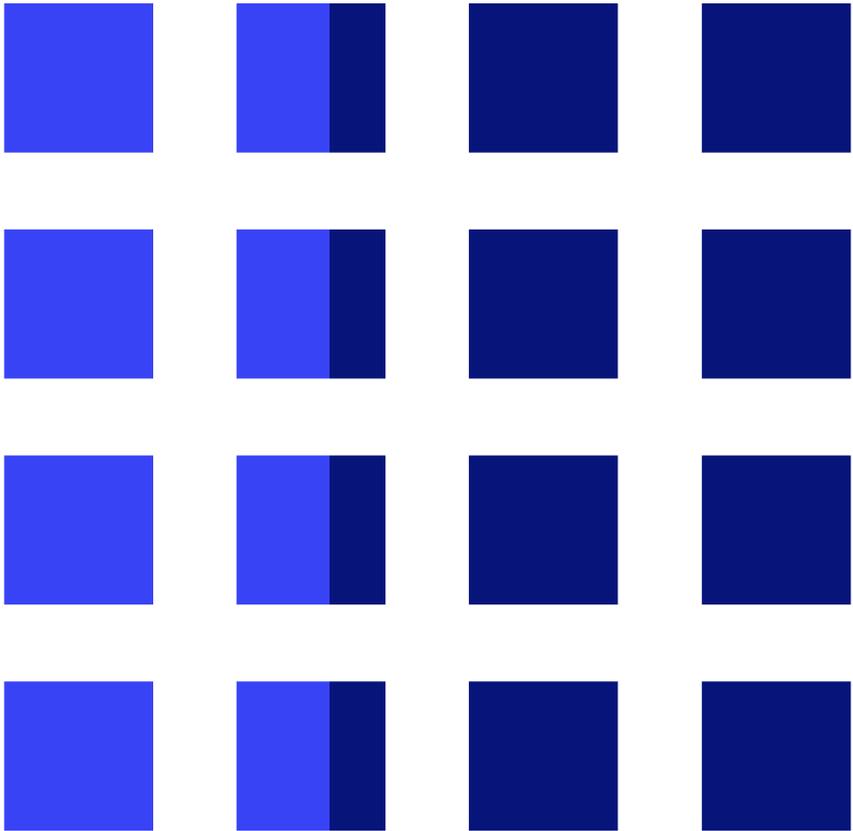
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DECISION-MAKERS ARE MOSTLY **DISAPPOINTED IN THE QUALITY OF THOUGHT LEADERSHIP CONTENT**

17%
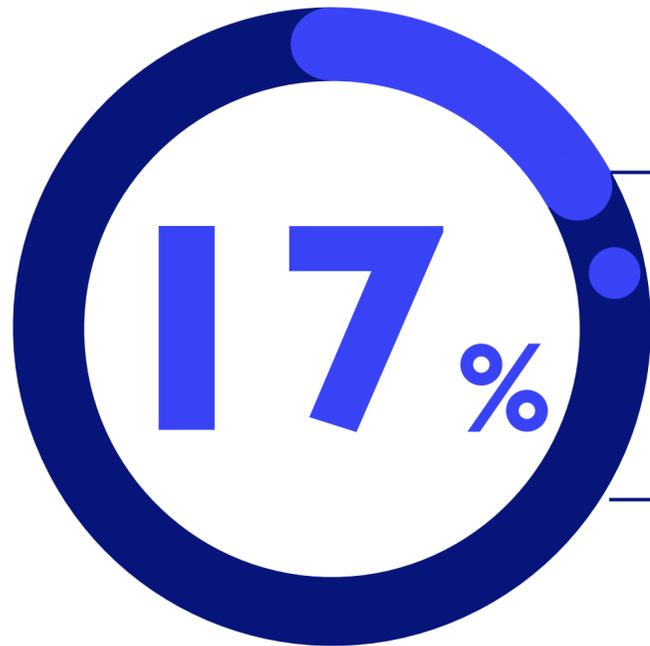
Of Decision-Makers said most of the Thought Leadership they read is **Very Good or Excellent**

QUALITY

How Decision-Makers rate the overall quality of most of the Thought Leadership they are reading.

	2017	2018	2019
Very Good to Excellent	14%	16%	**17%**
Good	60%	57%	**54%**
Mediocre to Very Poor	26%	26%	**29%**

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DECISION-MAKERS
CRAVE MORE VALUE

32%

Of Decision-Makers gain *valuable insights* more than half the time from the Thought Leadership they read

VALUE

The % of Decision-Makers who say they gain valuable insights more than half the time from the Thought Leadership they consume.

	2017	2018	2019
Reliably derive value	n/a	39%	**32%**

Source: 2020 Edelman-LinkedIn B2B Thought Leadership Impact Study. Q4 INSIGHT GAIN: What percentage of the time do you gain insights from the thought leadership you are exposed to that helps you do your job better or move your business forward? Select one response. Data: % who responded 51% or more of the time among U.S. decision-makers

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LOW QUALITY CONTENT IS A
RISK TO REPUTATION AND SALES

38%

of Decision-Makers say that sometimes after reading its Thought Leadership their **respect and admiration for an organization has decreased**

25%

of Decision-Makers say that sometimes reading its Thought Leadership has directly led them **not to award business to an organization**

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A GLARING
ATTRIBUTION GAP

77%
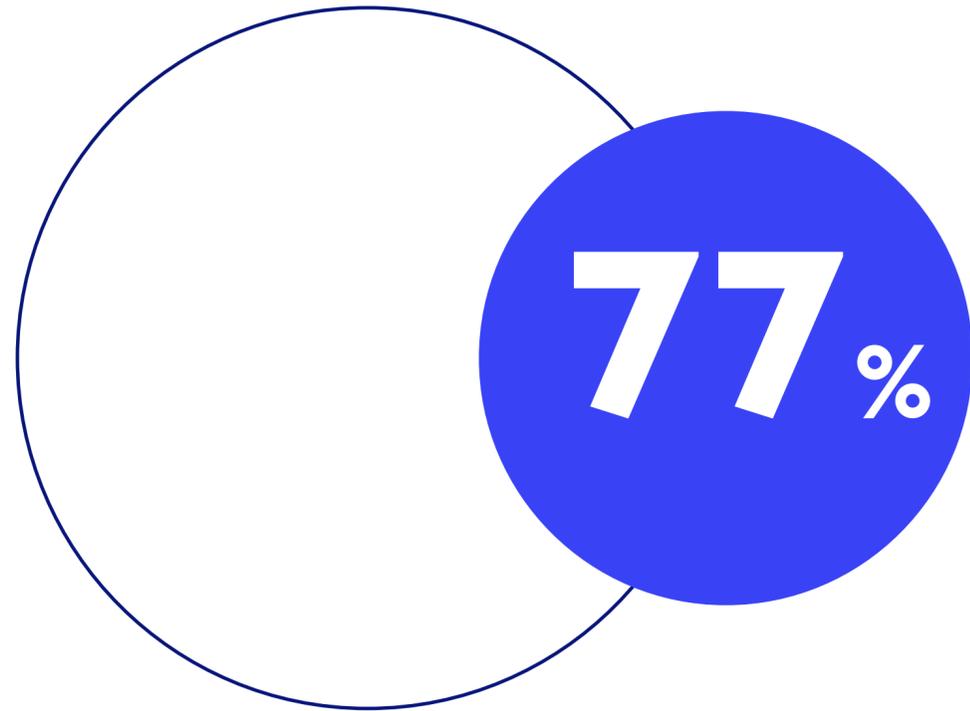
of Thought Leadership Producers
have no way *to link sales or wins*
to their Thought Leadership

ATTRIBUTION

% of Producers who can link their Thought Leadership to sales leads and business wins.

	2017	2018	2019
Net of Inputs	n/a	26%	**23%**
Can link sales leads to Thought Leadership	n/a	17%	**15%**
Can link wins to Thought Leadership	n/a	19%	**15%**

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KEY ATTRIBUTES OF SUCCESSFUL THOUGHT LEADERSHIP
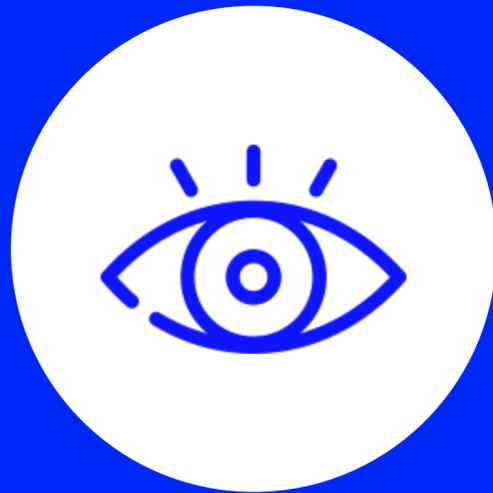
NEW PERSPECTIVES ARE HIGHLY VALUED
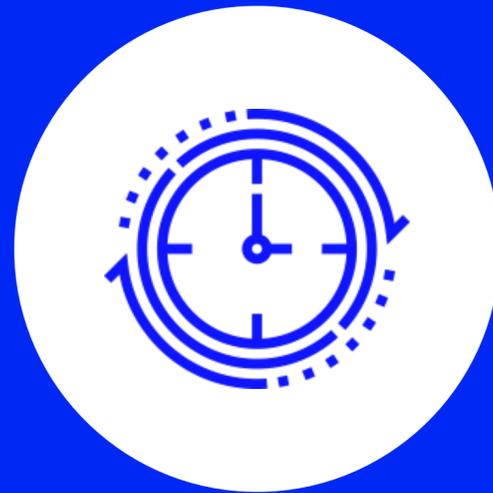
TIMELINESS AND BREVITY ARE KEY TO ENGAGEMENT
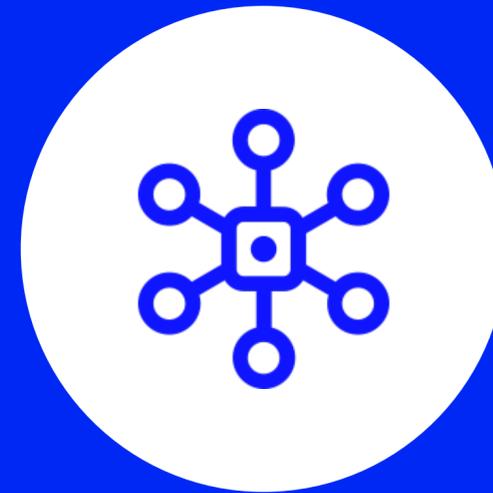
EFFECTIVE DISTRIBUTION A MUST

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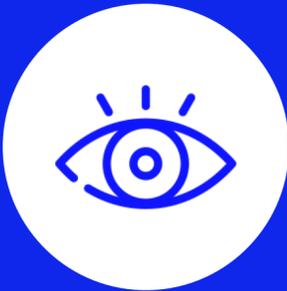
NEW PERSPECTIVES ARE HIGHLY VALUED

The top characteristics of **high-value** Thought Leadership content, according to Decision-Makers

DO CREATE SOMETHING SUBSTANTIVE
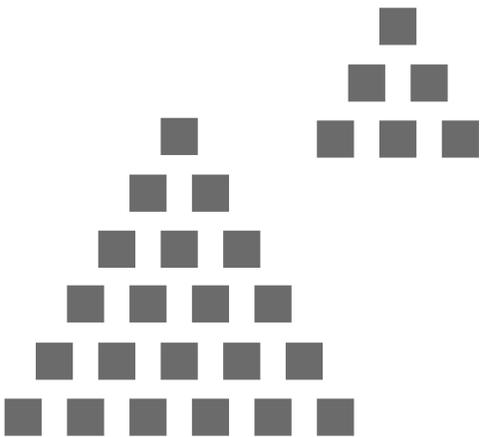
- Explores potential challenges or new opportunities I had not considered before
- Points out things that I had overlooked in thinking or strategizing
- Includes guidance on how to respond to the issues raised

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NEW PERSPECTIVES ARE HIGHLY VALUED

The top characteristics of **low-value** Thought Leadership content, according to Decision-Makers

DON'T BE MORE WHITE NOISE

- Merely repeats what everyone else is saying
- Insights are too elementary and superficial
- Emphasizes selling something instead of imparting valuable insights

Source: 2020 Edelman-LinkedIn B2B Thought Leadership Impact Study. Q7 LOW QUALITY: Think about the last piece of thought leadership that you consumed that you felt delivered little or no value to you even though is was on a topic of interest to you. Specifically, why did it fail to deliver value? Select all that apply. Data: List of content-related items that were selected by the highest % of decision makers among U.S. decision makers

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TIMELINESS AND BREVITY ARE KEY TO ENGAGEMENT

| TIMELY | **90%** |

| BRIEF | **72%** |

Of Decision-Makers say that being **short and easy to absorb makes Thought Leadership very compelling**

Of Decision-Makers say that Thought Leadership addressing a **topic they are currently working on or thinking about makes it very compelling**

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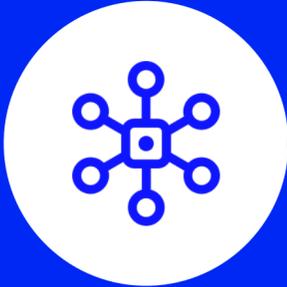
EFFECTIVE DISTRIBUTION A MUST

How did the last piece of Thought Leadership you consumed come to your attention?

2%

DON'T KNOW

AMPLIFIED
The Decision-Maker saw the Thought Leadership promoted on paid or earned channels

19%

47%
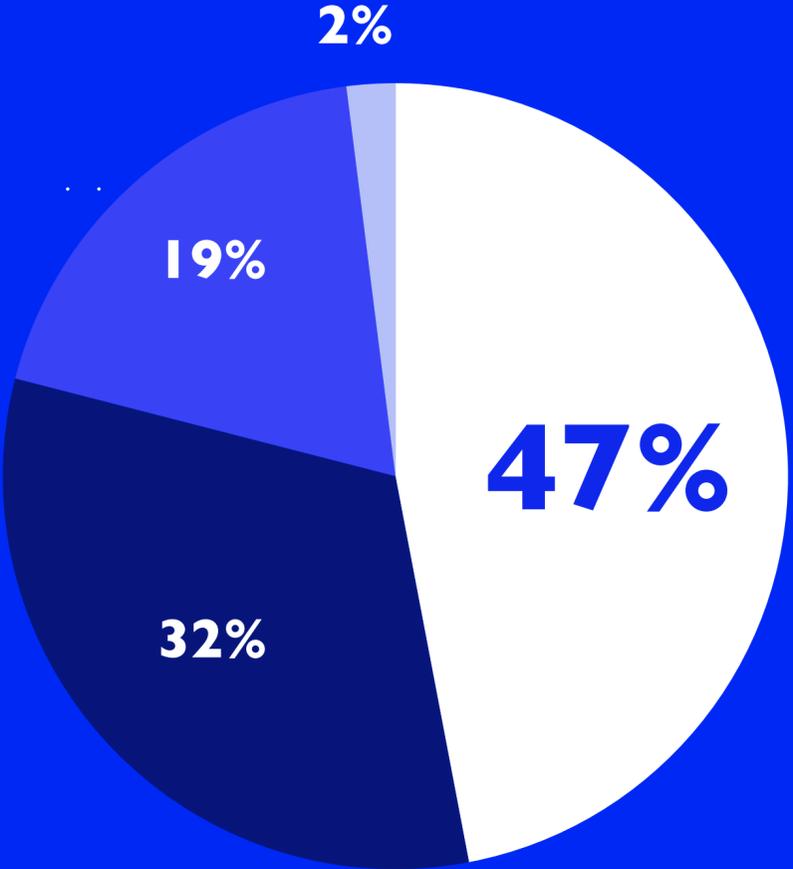
DISCOVERED
The Decision-Maker was researching a specific topic or came across it in their day-to-day

32%

PUSHED
The Decision-Maker received it directly from someone else

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03

ENDURING SUCCESS REQUIRES A CULTURE OF THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

DEEP THINKING AND INTELLECTUAL RIGOR

73%
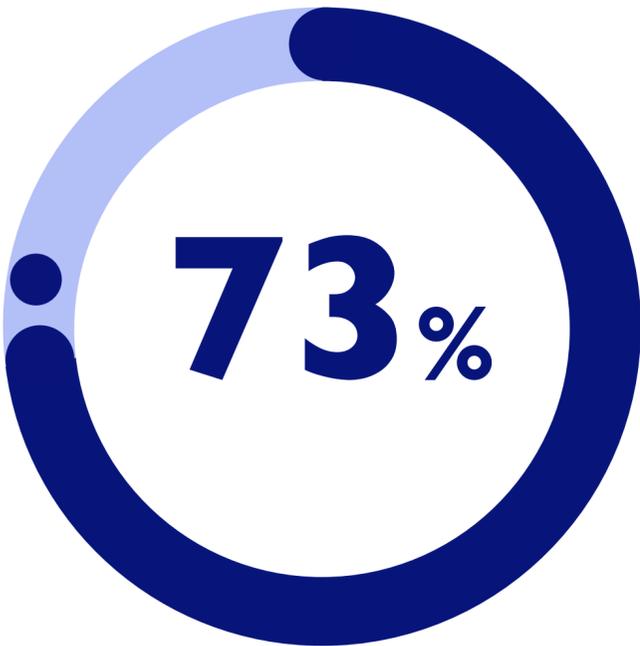
Of Producers credited **deep thinking and intellectual rigor** among the most important drivers of their last exceptional Thought Leadership success

CHARACTERISTIC 1: DEEP THINKING AND INTELLECTUAL RIGOR

Net of:

- 36% It came out just as there was a lot of emerging interest in the topic

- 31% It was based on rigorous, high-quality research

- 30% We said something new, substantial and potentially game changing on the topic

- 32% It laid out a clear set of actions that organizations should take in response to the challenges or opportunities the piece identified and discussed

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# SUPPORT FROM LEADERSHIP AND ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION

64%
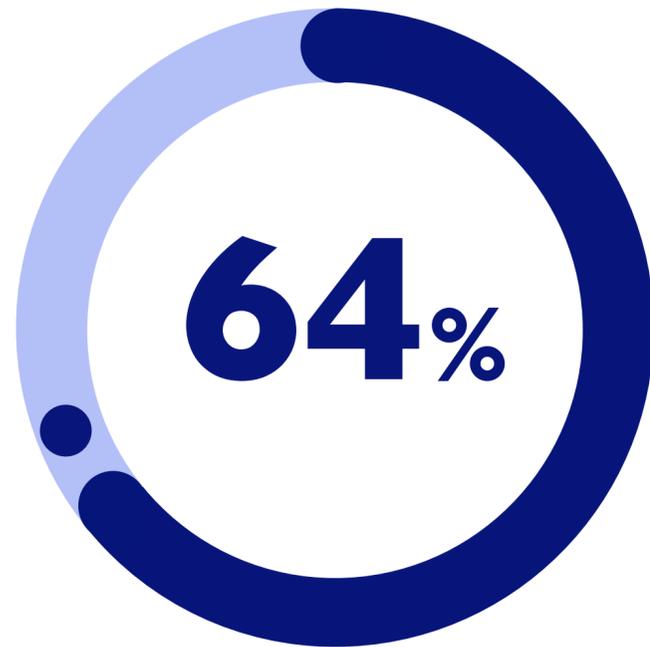
Of Producers credited **support from leadership and across the organization** among the most important drivers of their last exceptional Thought Leadership success

CHARACTERISTIC 2: SUPPORT FROM LEADERSHIP AND ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION

Net of:

- 36% senior executives championed and were highly visible around its release

- 32% our best thinkers and top executives were involved in producing it

- 28% our organization as a whole worked in a coordinated fashion to foster its success

- 23% We thoroughly trained our leadership and business development team in how to understand and effectively communicate the big ideas presented in the piece

PROMOTIONAL FOLLOW THROUGH AND SUPPORT FOR DISTRIBUTION

62%
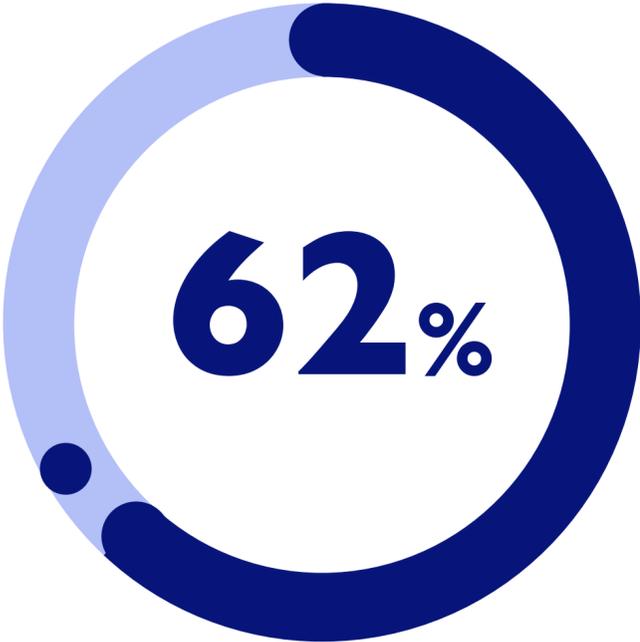
Of Producers credited **promotional follow through and support for distribution** among the most important drivers of their last exceptional Thought Leadership success

CHARACTERISTIC 3: PROMOTIONAL FOLLOW THROUGH AND SUPPORT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Net of:

- 43% we distributed it broadly and effectively
- 30% we effectively engaged our employees in its amplification
- 13% we supported it with paid promotion

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HIGHER-QUALITY THOUGHT LEADERSHIP GENERATES

GREATER BRAND IMPACT

A significant gap exists between organizations that produce high-quality versus lower-quality Thought Leadership in achieving brand impact.

Producers of High-Quality Thought Leadership

Producers of Low-Quality Thought Leadership

	INCREASES BRAND RECOGNITION	INCREASES BRAND REPUTATION	BROADENS PERCEPTION OF CAPABILITIES	BUILDS TRUST
High-Quality	67	68	61	66
Low-Quality	51	48	44	44
Gap	16pt	20pt	17pt	22pt

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HIGHER-QUALITY THOUGHT LEADERSHIP GENERATES

ENHANCED SALES IMPACT

A significant gap exists between organizations that produce high-quality versus lower-quality Thought Leadership in achieving sales impact.

● Producers of High-Quality Thought Leadership

● Producers of Low-Quality Thought Leadership

	GENERATES RFPS	WINS BUSINESS	ENABLES CROSS-SELLING	MAKES IT EASIER TO GET THE NEXT SALE
High-Quality	24	30	41	51
Low-Quality	14	18	27	41
Gap	10pt	12pt	14pt	10pt

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COMMITMENT TO A CULTURE OF THOUGHT LEADERSHIP
YIELDS GREATER REWARDS OVER TIME

34%

of Producers say the Thought Leadership their organization creates is of **very good or excellent quality**

51% of Producers creating Thought Leadership for **21+ years** say the Thought Leadership their organization creates is of very good or excellent quality

32% of Producers creating Thought Leadership for **6-20 years** say the Thought Leadership their organization creates is of very good or excellent quality

28% of Producers creating Thought Leadership for **0-5 years** say the Thought Leadership their organization creates is of very good or excellent quality

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04

BEST PRACTICES: THE EDELMAN THOUGHT LEADERSHIP FLYWHEEL

BEST PRACTICES:

THE EDELMAN THOUGHT LEADERSHIP FLYWHEEL

WHITE SPACE

RELEVANCE

ATTRIBUTION

VISION

BREVITY

TRUST

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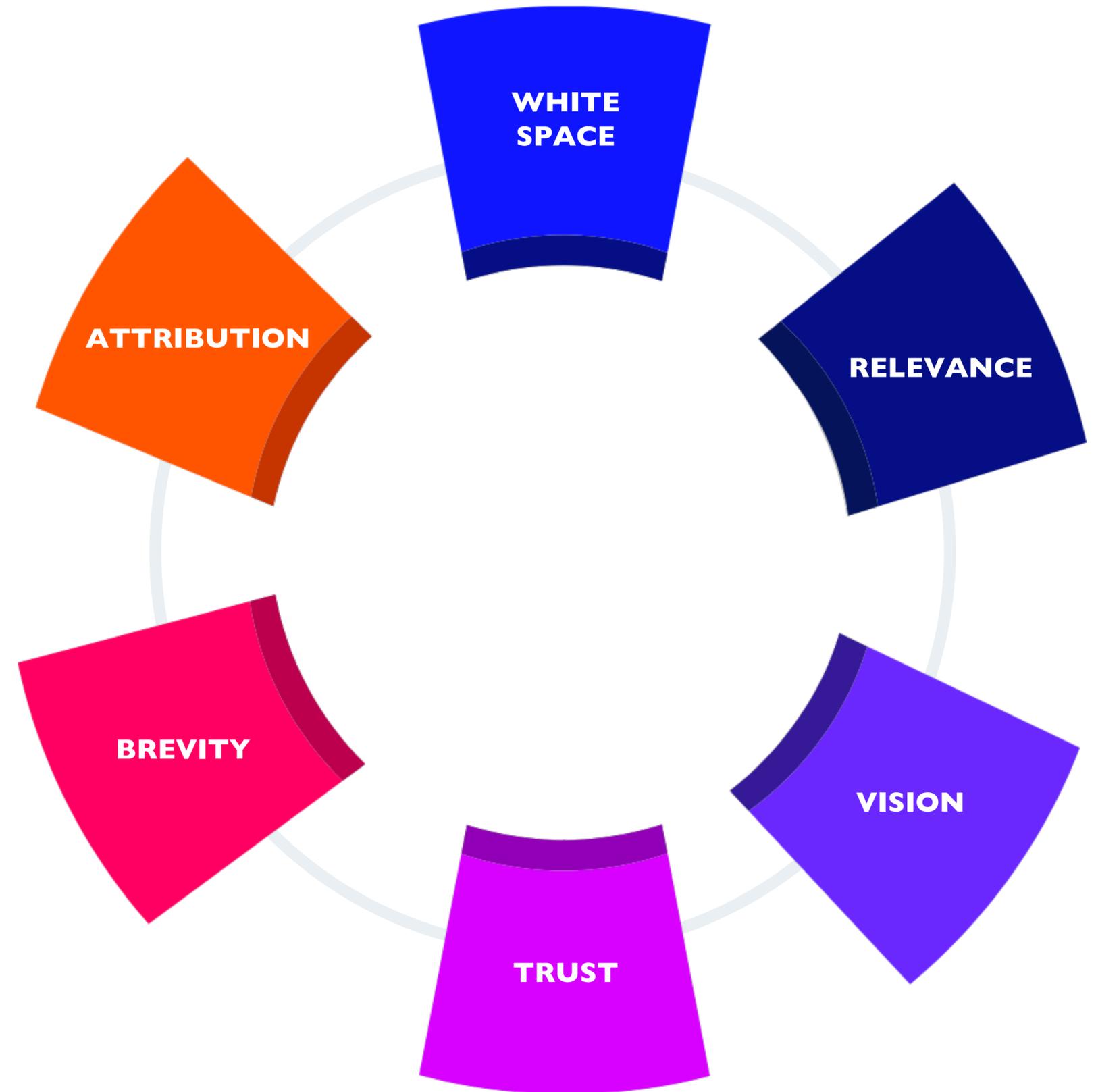
CAPITALIZE ON WHITE SPACE

FIND OPPORTUNITIES WHERE YOUR BRAND CAN OWN AND LEAD TIMELY CONVERSATIONS

Seek out timely topics that pose challenges for your customers
Explore Thought Leadership topics at the intersections between timely industry trends, customer pain points and your company's growth priorities.

Play the contrarian or unexpected angle
Conduct a media analysis to uncover opportunities to say something novel, especially around crowded topics. Seek out new angles and a counterintuitive POV.

Be bold and imaginative in your storytelling
B2B Thought Leadership need not be limited to whitepapers. Even for well-covered topics, find creative and unexpected ways of delivering your story to create whitespace and distinguish you from competitors.

WHITE SPACE

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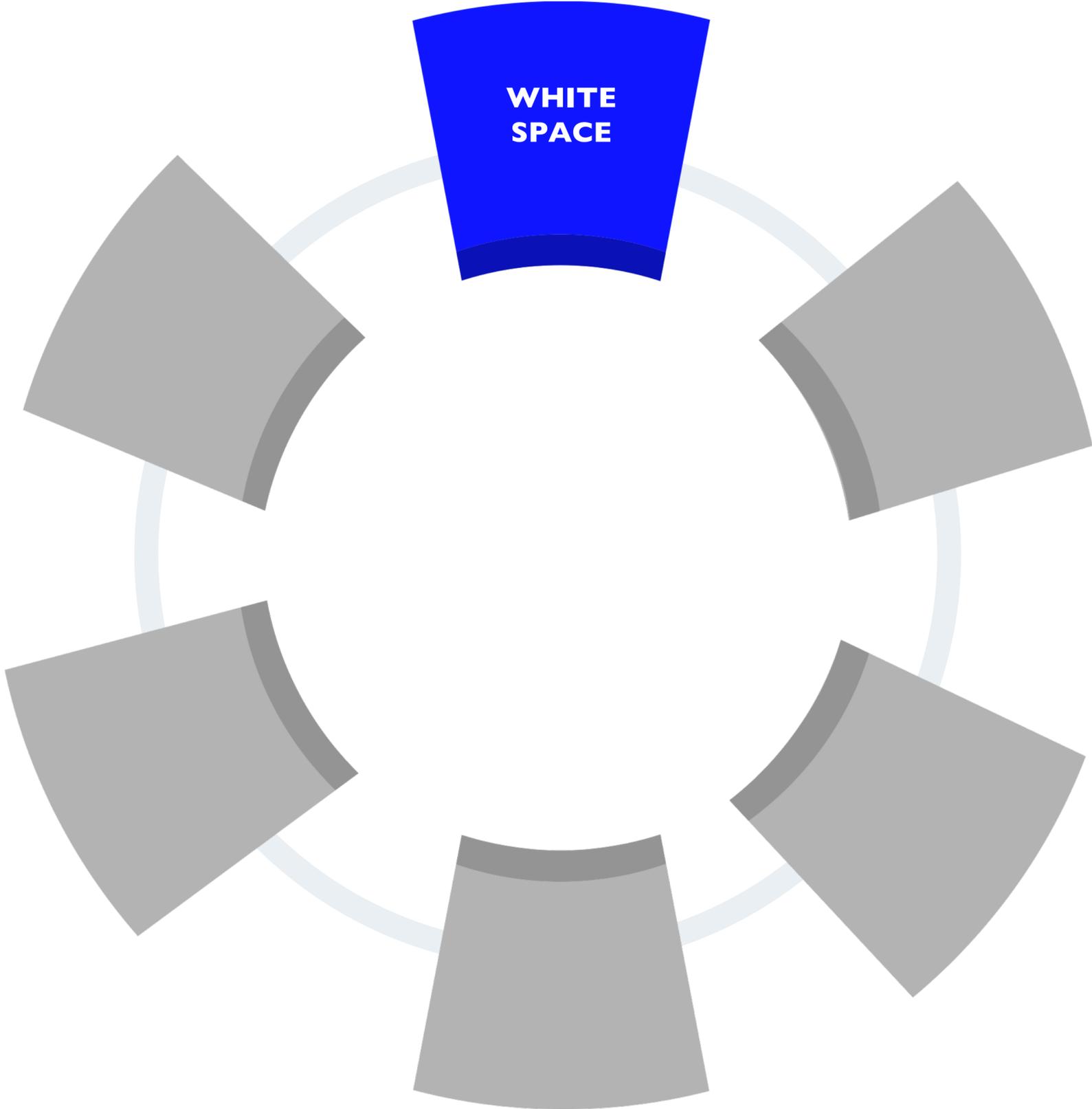
BE RELEVANT

STRONG THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IS CLOSELY MAPPED TO CUSTOMER NEEDS

Avoid the "everything to everyone" trap
Narrow the target audience for Thought Leadership to a set of companies, a particular industry or key function within the buyer committee. The more specific your target, the more tailored your communications can and should be.

Find customer insights in the trenches
Engage frontline sales and customer relationship managers early in the Thought Leadership development process to uncover what topics most concern current customers and prospects on a day-to-day basis.

Embrace martech that fuels creative editorial content
Instead of a one-to-many editorial approach, embrace publishing technologies that enable granular personalization and tailored content experiences to niche audiences (e.g., website personalization, progressive profiling, account-based marketing).

RELEVANCE
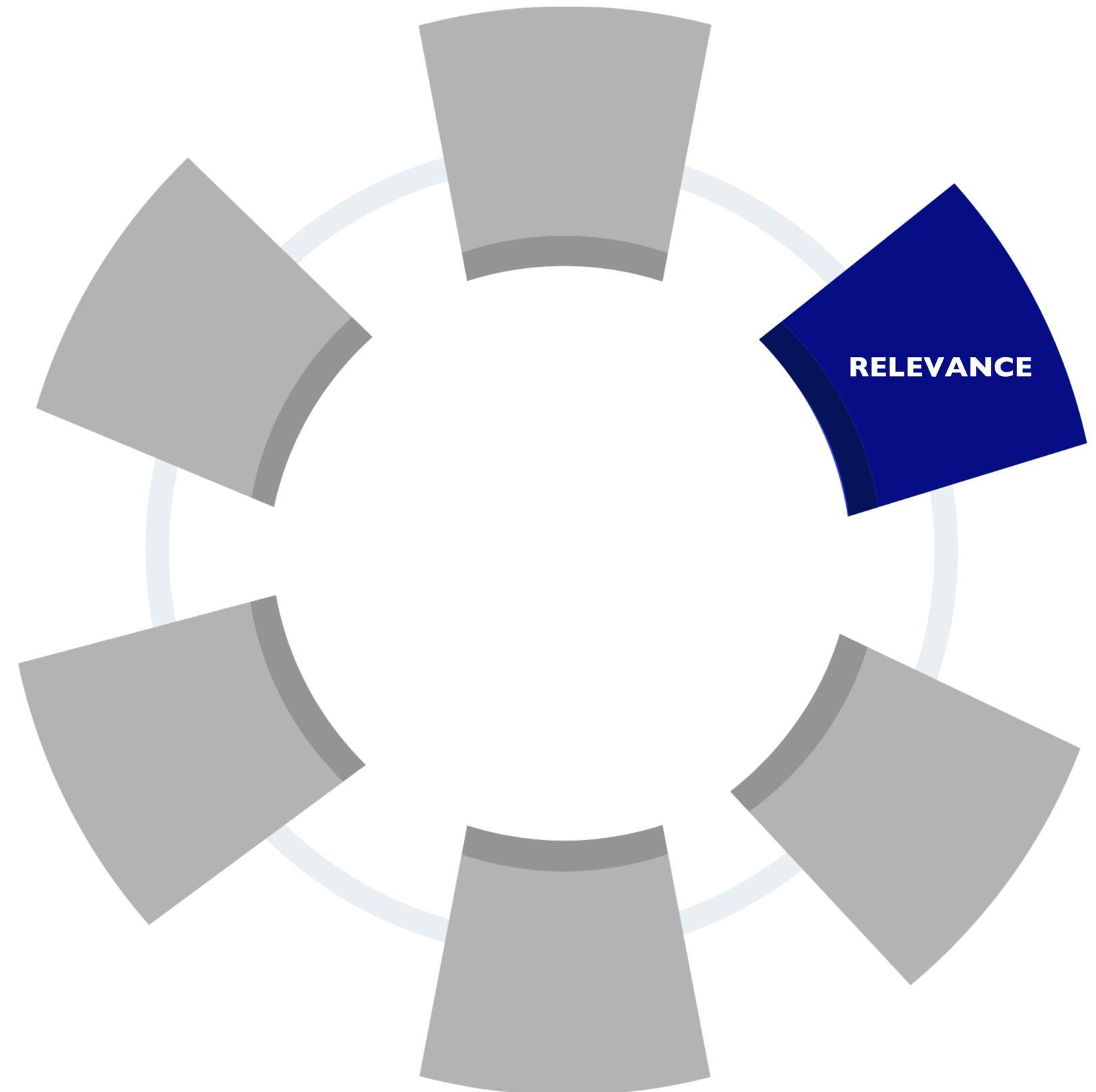
SET A VISION

## Explain not just "what" but "why"

Don't just identify trends – demonstrate an understanding of why things are happening in a way that nobody else can. Especially for senior Decision-Makers, seek to explain the underlying causes of trends that map back to their key business challenges.

Uncover what's next for your customers

Inspire customers by looking around corners to find new opportunities that will benefit them. Spend less time on the features/benefits your company offers, and more time explaining how your customers can gain a competitive advantage in the future.

Use big picture thinking to condition the selling environment

Many companies focus on chasing down leads for product purchases. Fewer invest the effort to earn credibility in the minds of customers and create an environment that stimulates demand. Visionary ideas are more likely to resonate with senior decision-makers, especially those who think about their own business in holistic terms.
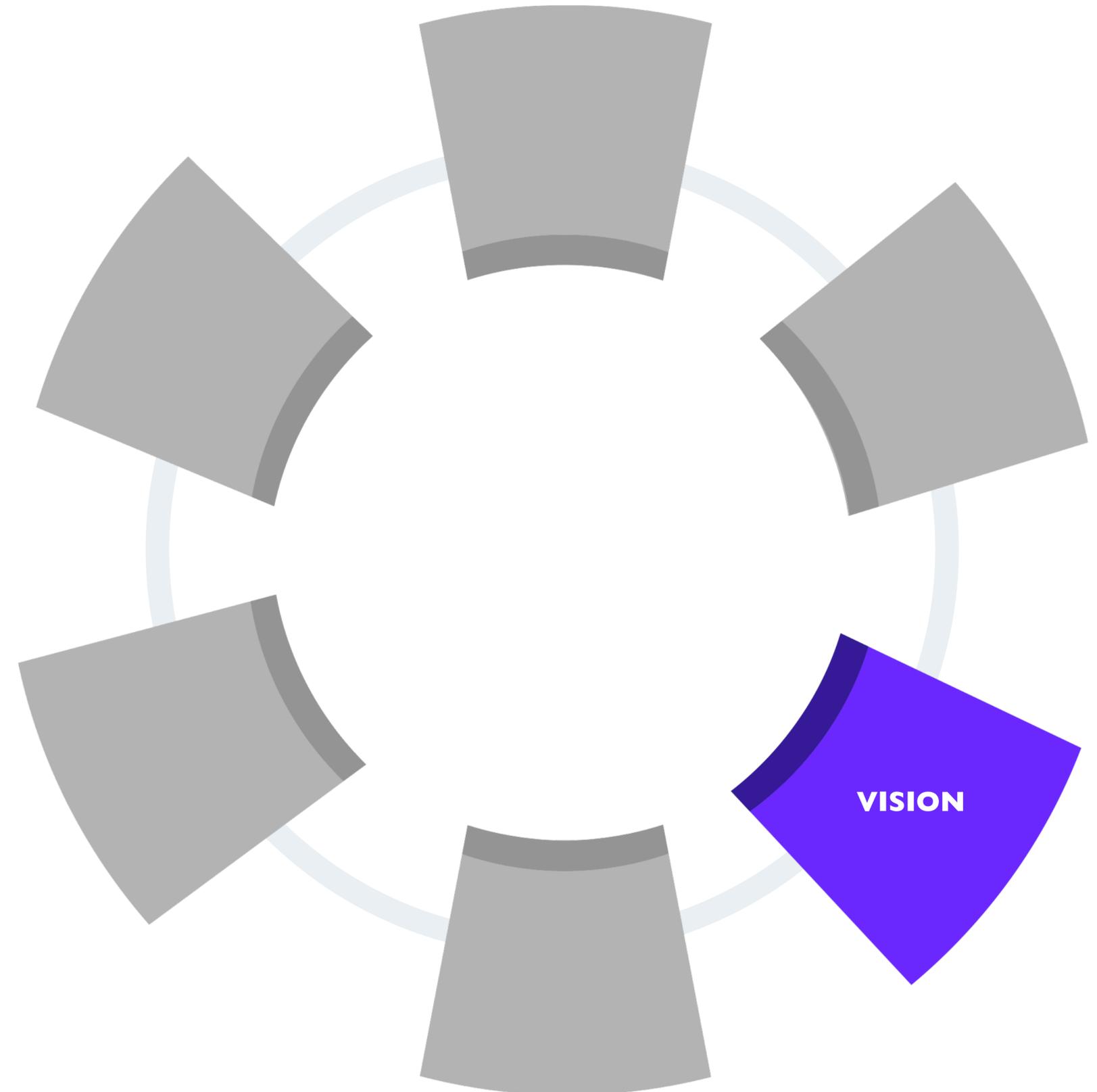
VISION

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EARN TRUST

Showcase your people to earn credibility
Harness the power of your people – senior executives, deep subject matter experts and employee "amplifiers" – to convey your Thought Leadership in a more personal and authentic style.

**"Pay it forward" by teaching customers how to solve a problem**
Invest in journalistic-quality content and ideas that go beyond products and services to educate customers and provide genuine value and knowledge they can use. Generosity pays dividends.

Aspire to consistency and longevity
Explore how your Thought Leadership can be an ongoing franchise rather than a one-off event in order to generate goodwill over time. Increased followers, opt-in subscribers and ultimately, a captive audience, are the rewards.

Align with trusted, recognizable voices outside of your company
Enhance credibility through partnerships with industry influencers, academia, media publishers and other sources of information that your target audiences already know and trust.

TRUST

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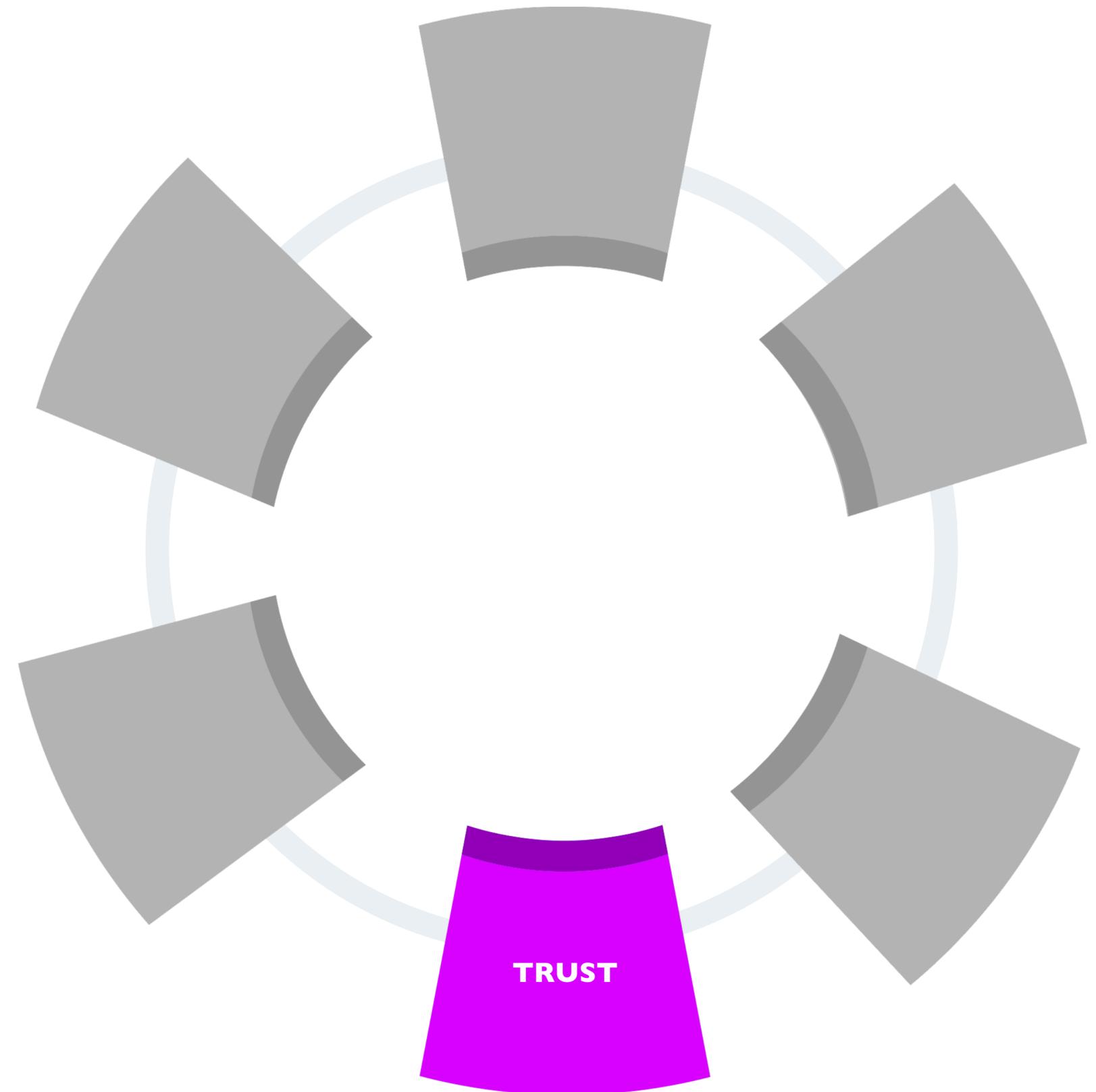
BE CONCISE

Think in terms of headlines
Imagine how a journalist would write a story about your Thought Leadership. Anticipate the key messages and insights that people would want to pass along to others. Craft your story around the most memorable and quick-hitting ideas.

Entice readers along a journey
Create short, snackable media such as infographics and rich media that capture attention, provide immediate value and motivate readers to continue on to consume longer-from content. Break down content into smaller chunks that can be easily consumed via social media, email newsletters, etc.

Simplify complex stories with a human touch.
Consider video and audio as storytelling aids to quickly deliver hard-to-digest information in a personable format that people want to spend time consuming.

BREVITY

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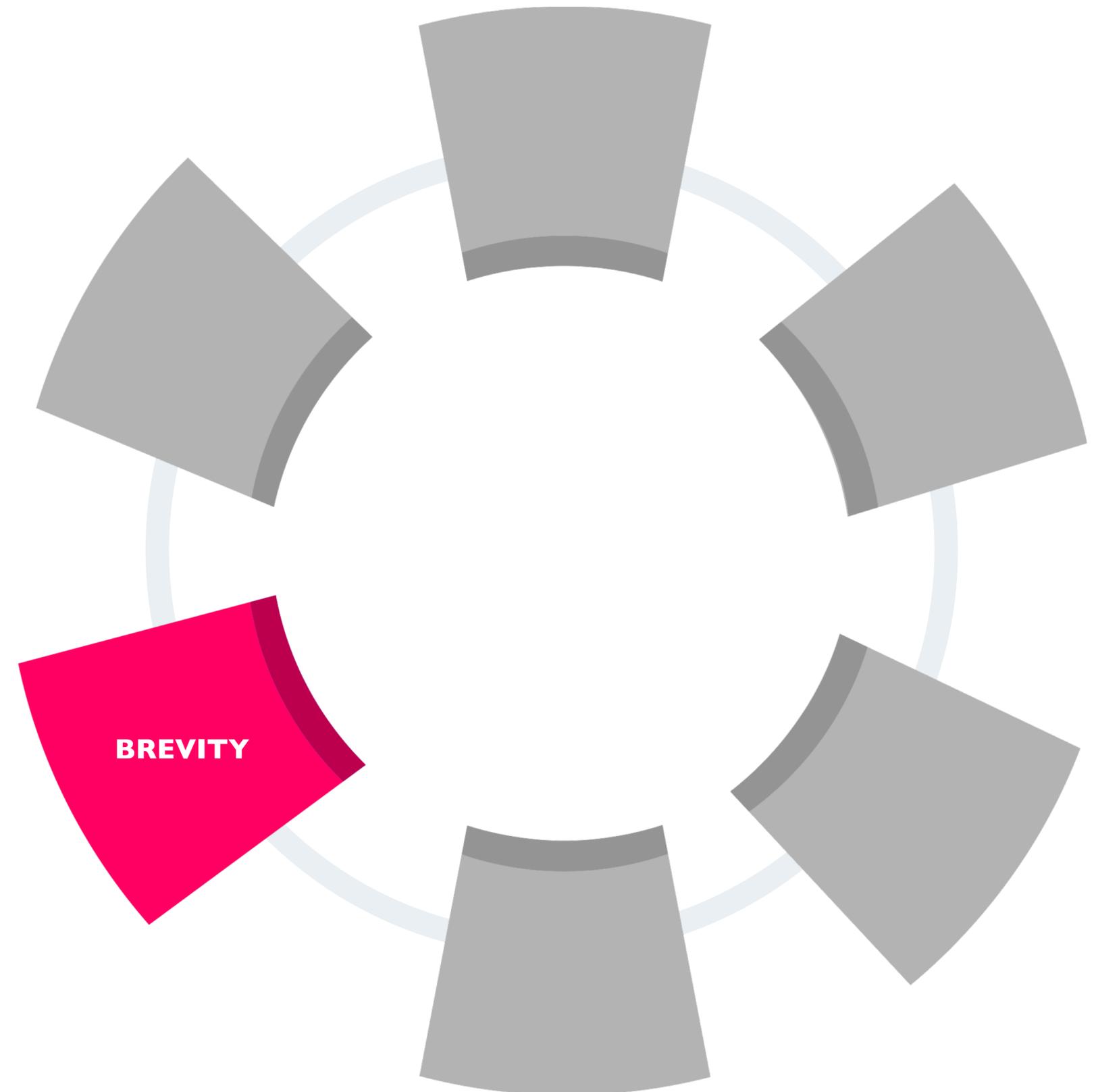
MEASURE PROGRESS

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP CANNOT BE APPROPRIATELY VALUED WITHOUT ATTRIBUTION

Begin at the end
Before executing Thought Leadership campaigns, identify what company leadership and the broader organization will consider success, and how it will be measured.

Engage with sales early
Align sales and marketing on high-priority KPIs such as account lift, MQL, SQL and other measures of how content is driving positive customer behavior.

Adopt measurement tools aligned with your priorities
Ensure you have the right tech and data in place to understand content performance from awareness through purchase – especially site-side analytics that track customer actions after they have consumed Thought Leadership.

Beyond "how many," focus on "who"
Look beyond the large numbers typically tied to outbound tactics such as impressions and anonymous clicks; dig deeper to verify the identity and quality of the audience, and what kinds of interactions thought leadership is driving.

ATTRIBUTION

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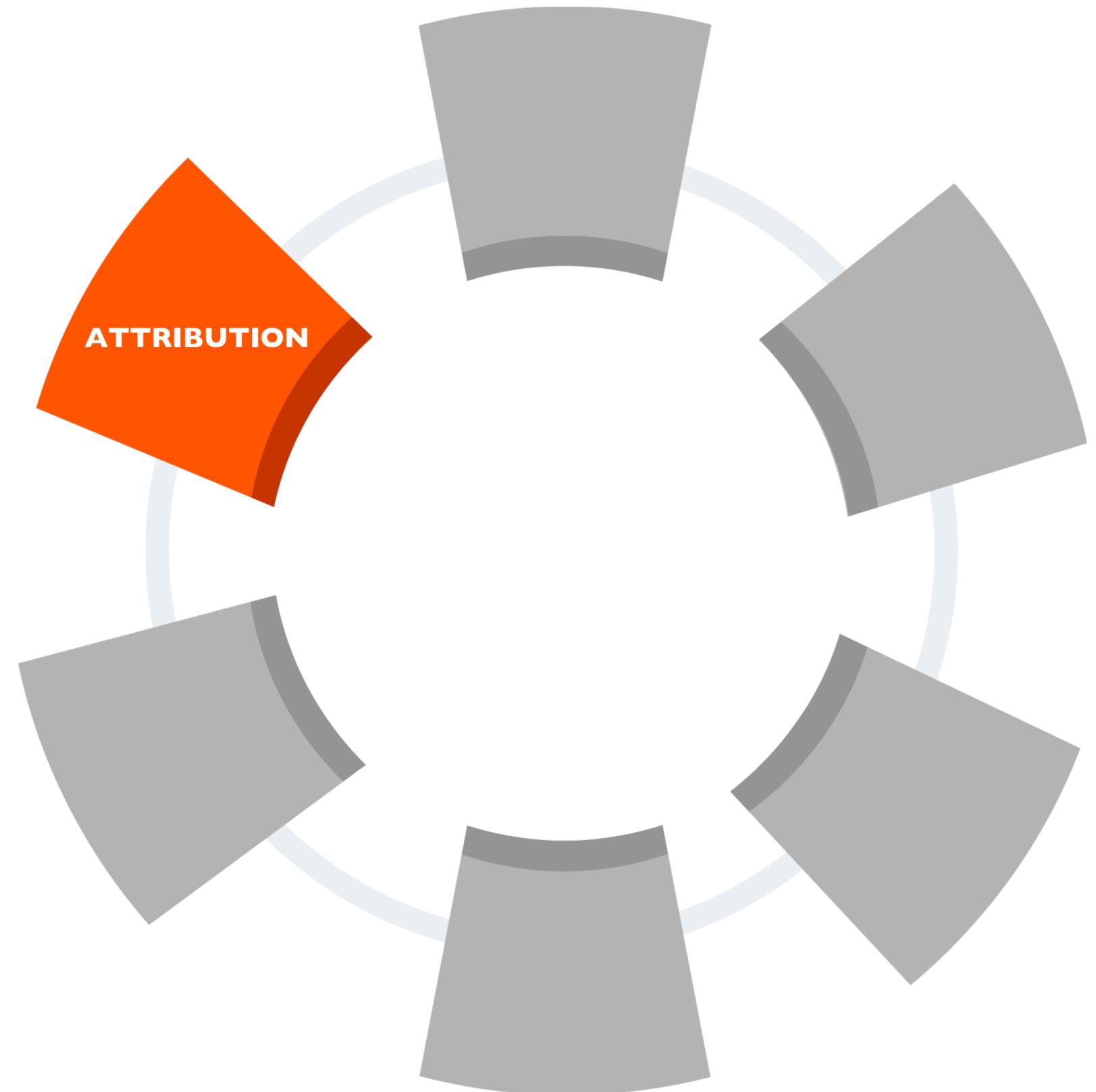
2020

B2B THOUGHT LEADERSHIP
IMPACT STUDY

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