

# Thought Leadership: The Next Battleground for Professional Services

Thought leadership is the most effective form of marketing for professional services firms, and the trickiest to get right. Ironically for a sector built on knowledge, original thought has become a rare commodity and firms are failing to match increasing demand for thought leadership marketing with the commitment and collaboration required to make it work.

Man Bites Dog set out to investigate the particular thought leadership challenges faced by professional services marketers for a forthcoming report on the sector. We interviewed 100 CMOs, marketing directors and communications directors at top 25 legal, accountancy and management consultancy firms. This article gives an exclusive preview of some of our key findings.

## Thought leadership spend has tripled

### Thought Leadership Tops The Marketing Agenda

Our research places thought leadership firmly at the top of the marketing agenda for the professional services sector over the next five years. The vast majority of marketing directors see thought leadership as important to their firm today (97%) and becoming increasingly important in the future (97%).

Nearly ninety percent of marketing leaders (87%) cite thought leadership as the most effective way their firm can demonstrate expertise and the same number believe that thought leaders are more likely to become market leaders.

Significantly, more than nine in ten (91%) CMOs believe that thought leadership is now "the key battleground" for their industry, reflecting the growing need for professional services firms to differentiate to prosper.

The significance of thought leadership to professional services firms is reflected in a marketing assault on the boardroom with nearly two-thirds (64%) of firms now having a member of marketing on the executive board, and more than two-thirds (69%) of firms having a dedicated Head of Thought Leadership.

## 91% of CMOs believe thought leadership is the key battleground for professional services firms

The proportion of marketers' time spent on thought leadership has increased significantly over the last two years, from just 7% two years ago to a fifth (21%) today. Thought leadership-related marketing activity now represents nearly a quarter (23%) of the marketing budget, with nine in ten (87%) CMOs planning to increase their investment in thought leadership further.

While demand for thought leadership comes from a number of quarters including senior leadership (66%), helping the firm to win new business (73%) and the need to differentiate in an increasingly commoditised sector (75%), the greatest single driver for thought leadership is clients' expectation that firms will be thought leaders and produce insightful content as a matter of course (82%).

## 87% of CMOs believe thought leadership is the most effective way professional services firms can demonstrate expertise

### Thought Followership Is Contagious

Despite the growing importance of thought leadership, our research reveals an epidemic of “thought followership” amongst professional services firms.

Professional services marketers are frustrated by aspects of the culture and structure of professional services firms which work against marketing effectiveness.

Four-fifths (79%) of marketers believe that innovative ideas help them cut through competitor noise, and three-quarters (75%) state that ideas are the greatest source of differentiation for their firm. But while marketers can see the benefits of a big idea in theory, thinking big is challenging in practice.

## 74% of CMOs admit that their firm tends to “jump on the bandwagon” rather than set the agenda

Nearly three-quarters (71%) of CMOs admit that they are too close to the coalface to spot emerging issues and macro-economic trends. Four in five (81%) marketing leaders confess that their firm struggles to generate any genuinely unique insights or points of view.

Dreaming up a big idea is just the beginning. Almost three-quarters (73%) of marketing leaders complain that professional services firms don't provide a nurturing environment for new ideas, with the majority (58%) complaining that their firm struggles to preserve the integrity of an idea: “things get diluted”. More than a quarter (29%) complain that initiatives are “frequently cancelled” by partners before they see the light of day.

Three-quarters of CMOs complain that their firm tends to “jump on the bandwagon” rather than set the agenda (74%, rising to 76% in legal firms). A staggering nine in ten marketing leaders complain that partners and directors push them to cover the same topics as competitors (91% overall, rising to 94% in legal and 96% in accountancy firms). Three-quarters (75%) of marketing leaders also believe their firm is too concerned about being seen to be negative or critical to say anything meaningful.

Interviews were conducted on behalf of Man Bites Dog by leading independent research firm Coleman Parkes.

A significant half (48%) of firms remain reluctant to share their intellectual property.

When asked to classify their own marketing communications content output as thought leadership (genuinely new and valuable insight), or thought followership (reactive content previously covered by competitors), marketing leaders consider nearly two-thirds (62%) of their content to be thought followership.

The partnership structure and matrix nature of many professional services firms present additional hurdles for thought leadership, fragmenting objectives, audiences and resources across the firm. The vast majority of marketing leaders complain that good ideas are corrupted by too many competing voices internally (90%) or diluted by trying to reach too many audiences (85%). Diverging goals within firms have a dramatic impact on the quality of output with more than three-quarters (79%) of CMOs complaining that diverse fee earner priorities make it difficult to drive new campaign ideas through the business.

Despite marketing's ascent within professional services firms, nearly two-thirds (60%) of marketing leaders believe they still do not have the power and autonomy to drive innovative programmes through. Marketers see themselves as the solution to lead professional services firms out of the thought followership trap, with more than three-quarters (79%) of CMOs believing they could have more impact if they had autonomy to make the right decisions.

## 91% of CMOs complain that partners push them to cover the same topics as everyone else

### Delivering A Return On Ideas

Our research highlights the increasing importance of thought leadership to professional services firms. Despite the myriad difficulties marketers face in bringing innovation to risk-averse cultures, the rewards are potentially game-changing. If CMOs are right, the thought leaders of today will be the market leaders of tomorrow.

# Thought Leadership The William Morris Way

**As firms emerge from recession and seek to capture elusive growth and competitive advantage, thought leadership is the new marketing battleground.**

For the professional services sector in particular, ideas are the only true source of differentiation and content the essential foundation for business development. But what makes the difference between the bland and the exceptional?

Marketers could do worse than William Morris's golden rule: nothing in your communications strategy should be considered if it isn't both beautiful and useful.

## Beauty

The beauty of your thought leadership comes from the simple elegance of your ideas.

A big idea has the power to align disparate practice areas, sectors and target audiences, enabling the firm to be greater than the sum of its parts. A central concept is the critical ingredient required to focus an organisation and its stakeholders on a compelling and differentiating goal.

Like beauty, thought leadership is in the eye of the beholder – it's an outcome not a tactic. You can't simply declare yourself a thought leader, the audience decides.

To achieve it marketers must overcome significant internal

pressures to stay true to a vision which must weave together the threads of the firm as a structured and logical whole.

## Usefulness

Usefulness is about being bold enough to share genuinely new, actionable insight. The most useful thought leadership starts outside-in, anticipating the macro issues that move markets and transform industries.

**"If you want a golden rule that will fit everything, this is it: have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful."**

It is a major challenge for professional services firms to think outside their day-to-day practice, take in the wider environment and make connections. Under pressure to think big, it's tempting to jump on the bandwagon of today's hot topics, which is why professional services thinking clusters around the same old themes. Here more than ever, there is an opportunity to differentiate from group-think by focusing on emerging issues, the pre-topical themes around which a true leadership position can be carved out.

Consider first what will have most critical impact for clients, the economy and society at large, only then consider how it aligns with your firm's offer. Marketers who are able to resist bland, 'me too' content and plough new furrows can transcend their firms' sales proposition and create a true connection with stakeholders.

Useful thought leadership gives you a call to action; promoting the problem your firm solves and helping you recruit others to solve it. It is never just about awareness, but about mobilising, persuading and truly engaging audiences.

## Ideas Worth Following

Professional services marketers face significant challenges in designing thought leadership that rises above the intricate tapestry of their firms. Complex organisations, partners' diverse objectives and a risk-averse culture can compromise the elegance of an idea and dilute its effectiveness.

To make thought leadership count, firms need to engage their knowledge capital. They must create beautiful, useful thought leadership that galvanises the firm and truly makes prospects sit up and take notice. To be a leader you must have the courage to propagate ideas worth following.

**Man Bites Dog** specialises in strategy and communications for the knowledge economy. We work with the world's smartest organisations to establish their authority as thought leaders.

We turn intangible expertise into Man Bites Dog stories: ideas that generate profitable conversations.

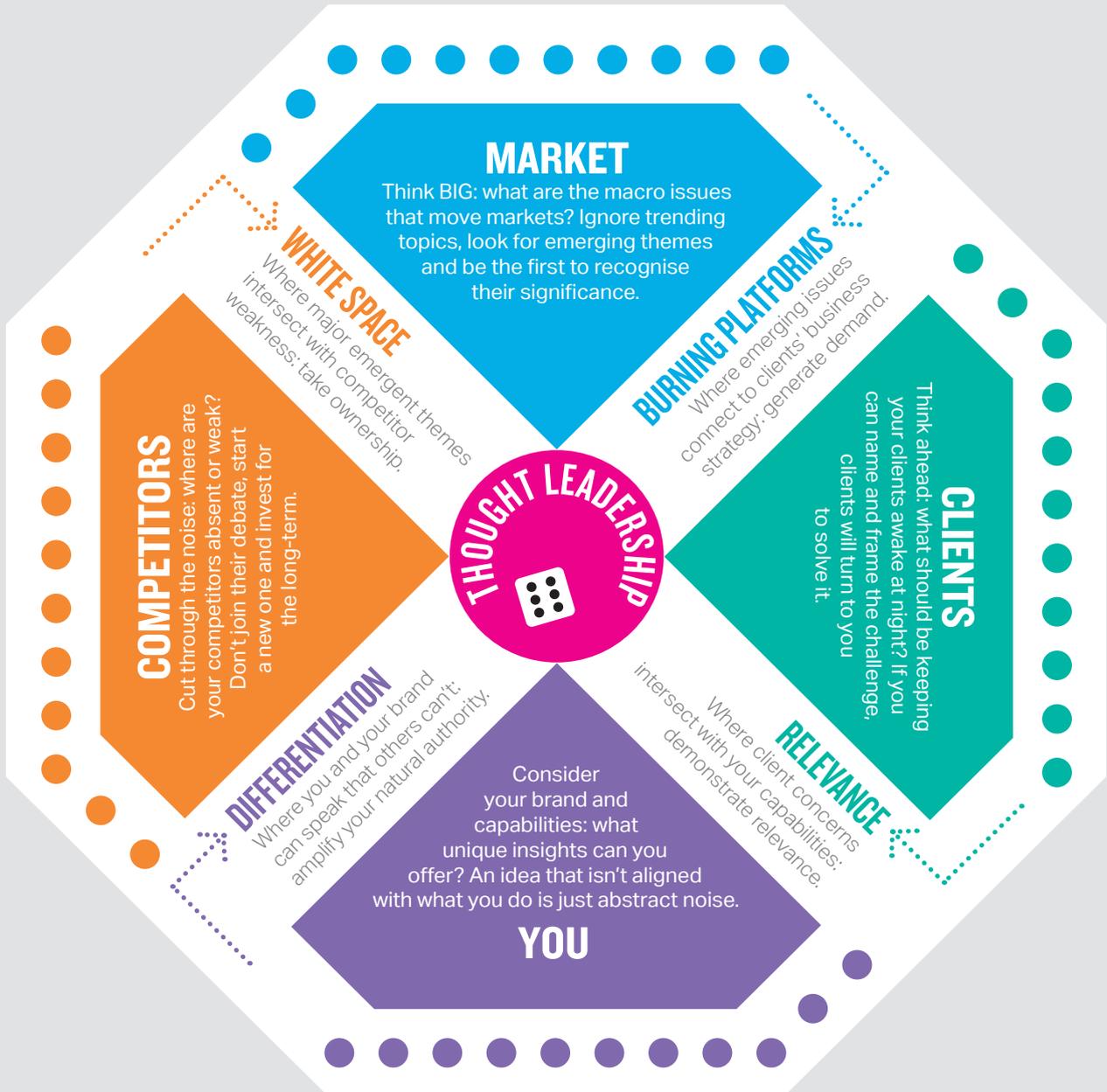
Get in touch or sign up for a full copy of our forthcoming thought leadership report by emailing:

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**WHEN DOG BITES  
MAN  
THAT'S NOT NEWS. WHEN  
MAN BITES THAT'S  
DOG, NEWS.**

# The Rules Of Game-Changing Thought Leadership

Thought leadership isn't a tactic – it's an outcome. The audience decides who wins. So before you play dice with your communications, stress test your ideas against our 4D thought leadership model to ensure you generate ideas worth following.



## Is it a Man Bites Dog story?

Is it genuinely new insight that starts or significantly furthers debate?  
Ideas worth following are self-propagating – would you pass it on?

## Does it have a clear direction?

Thought leadership should robustly evidence a clear hypothesis: is it based on facts, not just opinion; does it share insight, not just data?

## Is it aligned with your brand and capability?

Does the theme intersect with your area of natural authority and can it act as an umbrella to join-up disparate markets, practice areas and geographies?

## Can you move from content to conversation?

How can you harness a variety of channels to move your big idea through reputation and relationships to revenue?