Inside the mind of the **CISO** 2021

The definitive study on what makes outstanding thought leadership in the cyber industry

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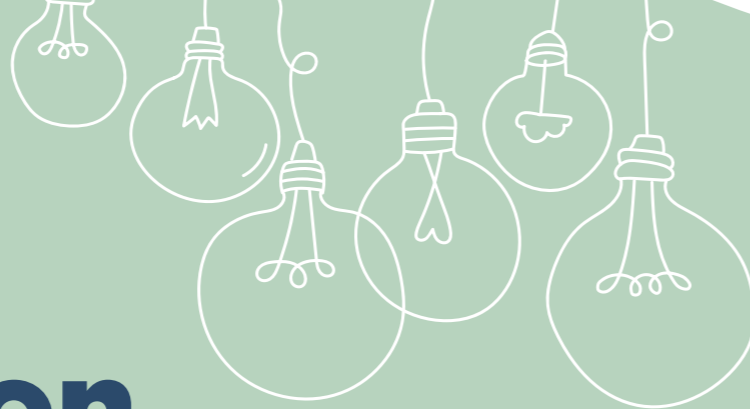Security PR Network

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Thought Leadership:

The activity of influencing other people with your ideas and opinions on a particular subject, especially in business.

Contents

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Introduction

Cyber marketing specialists face the constant challenge to contribute to the bottom line. Indeed, it is the reason for their existence.

Whether start-up, scale-up or enterprise marketing specialists have to develop a broad array of tactics, optimising budgets against each stage of the buying journey that we are involved with. Thought leadership is an established practice but by its nature it is not straightforward to attribute specific lead generation or sales, so proving its worth to sceptics can be a challenge.

Our research fills this knowledge gap, providing a strong evidence base for thought leadership's place – and budgets – in your marketing tool kit.

In compiling this report, we have uncovered how information security leaders use thought leadership content when procuring cybersecurity products and services.

We have also researched what sort of content they look for, what holds their interest and what sort of content they find to be the easiest to consume.

This is the first piece of global research that specifically looks at what cybersecurity specialists and practitioners think, and what they are looking for in thought leadership content.

The global nature of this report is particularly important as the world has been locked down due to the Covid pandemic, which has kept us away from the office, but also united us in communication and ways to keep in touch with peers via digital means. Our research has shown that lockdowns have created difficulties for information security leaders in making procurement decisions. Thought leadership is an important alternative to face-to-face meetings as a way for cybersecurity suppliers to establish their credibility and build trust in potential customers. We anticipate this trend to only accelerate in the future.

These are all factors which we will consider in this report, and just like thought leadership, we hope you will gain useful and practical advice.
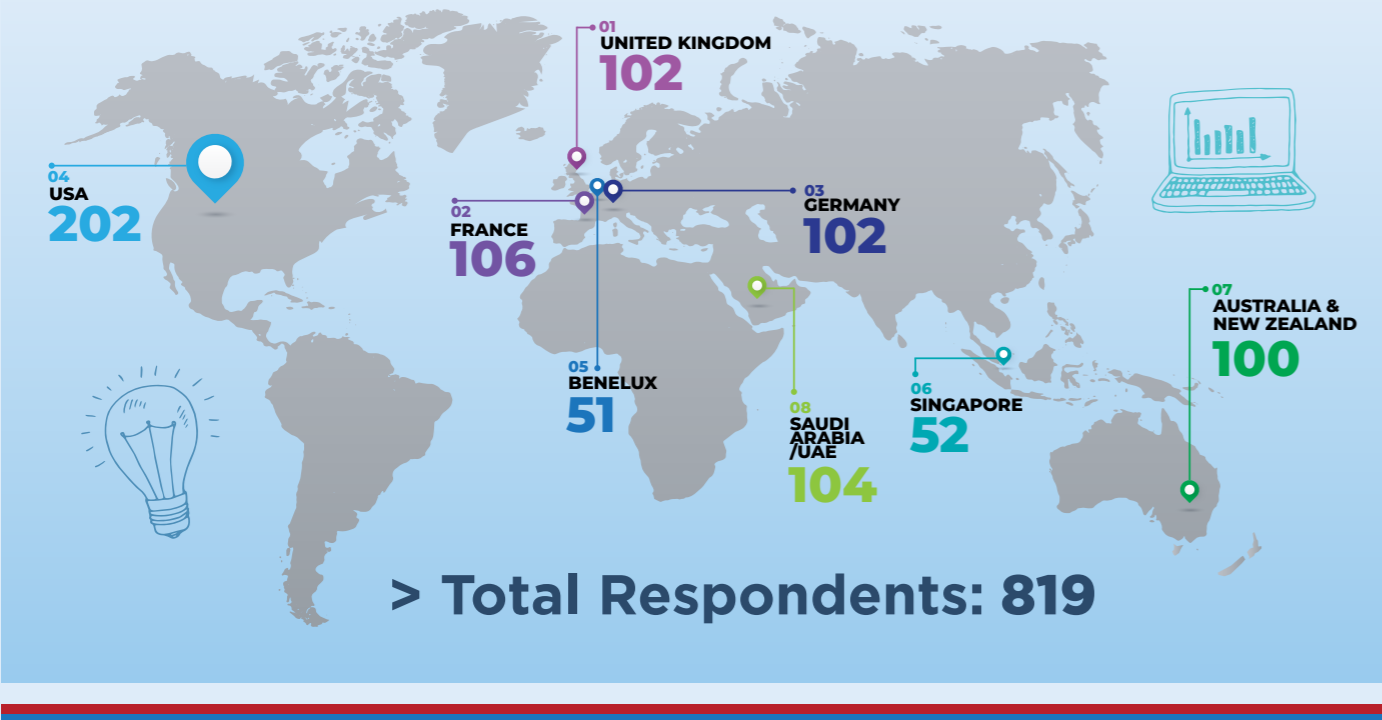
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Methodology

> Geographical Location:
Where did the repondents come from?

UK, France, Germany, US, Benelux, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, UAE

01
UNITED KINGDOM
102

04
USA
202

02
FRANCE
106

03
GERMANY
102

05
BENELUX
51

08
SAUDI ARABIA /UAE
104

06
SINGAPORE
52

07
AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND
100

> Total Respondents: 819

> Seniority of Decision Maker:
The percentage of those within each organisation

THE FINAL DECISION MAKER
52%

THE SENIOR INFLUENCER
38%

THE MINOR INFLUENCER
11%

I AM NOT INVOLVED
0%

> Size of Organisation:
The number of people working at respondents' organisations

20,000+ **11%**

1% Less than 100

3% 15000-20,000

28% 250-1,000

5% 10,001-15,000

14% 5,001-10,000

17% 2,001-5,000

21% 1,001-2,000

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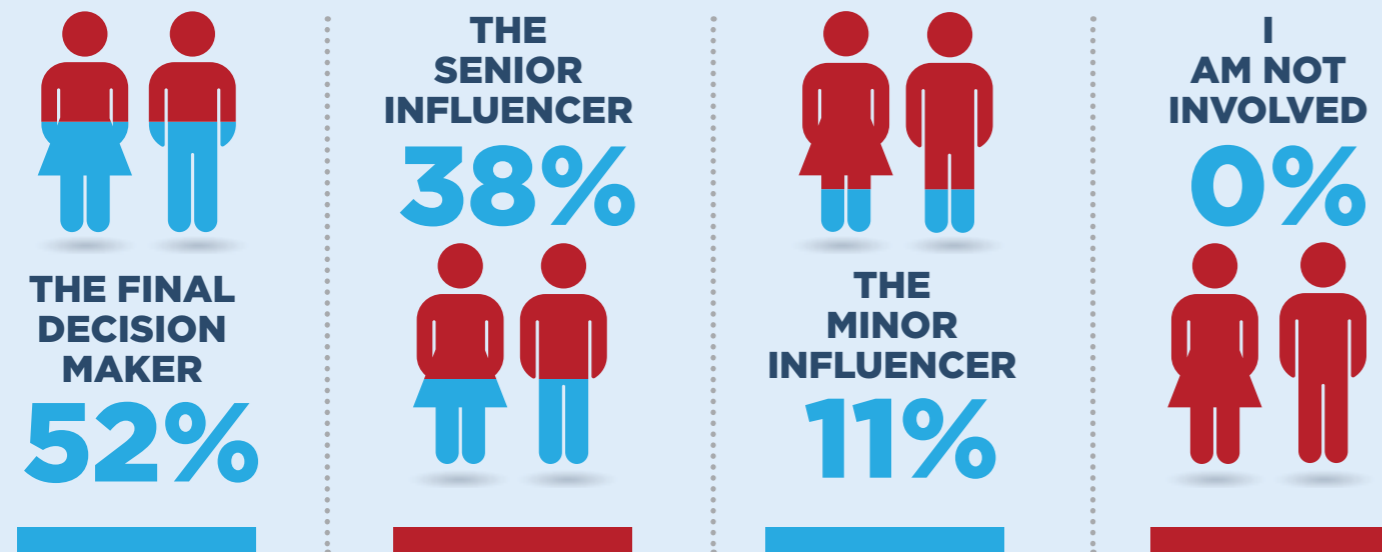
Eight things our research proves...

1

Cyber professionals devote significant time each week to **consuming thought leadership** content and value the knowledge that it provides.

2

Decision-makers use **thought leadership content** at every stage of the procurement process – from researching industry challenges and shortlisting suppliers, to making final choices in procurement.

3

Thought leadership powerfully raises the profile of newer and lesser-known cyber vendors and encourages CISOs to spend more with existing vendors.

4

Thought leadership is a significant marker of quality and builds the reputation of a cybersecurity supplier – that CISOs will pay a premium for.

5

Cyber professionals **source content from people and organisations** they trust over and above paid and promoted content.

6

Visual and 'live' content such as **videos and webinars** are highly popular forms of consuming **thought leadership** content, alongside the perennial trusted sources - IT and cyber trade media.

7

Precise information, with supporting evidence and the **voice of experienced and qualified experts as authors**, form the core ingredients in establishing credibility.
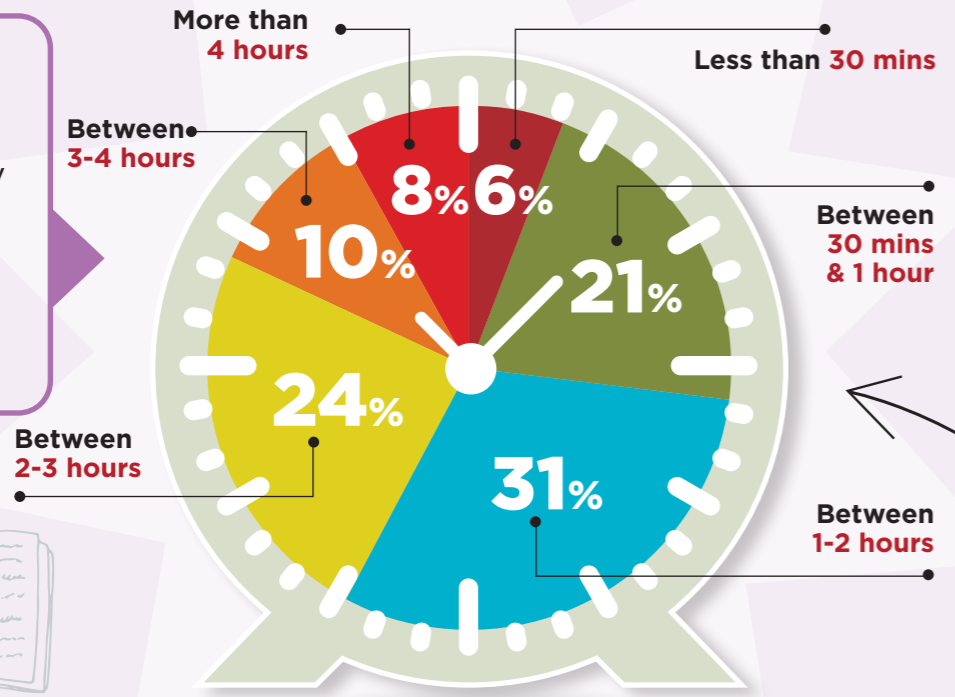
8

Cyber professionals are **most engaged by content** on relevant subjects that are easy to consume.
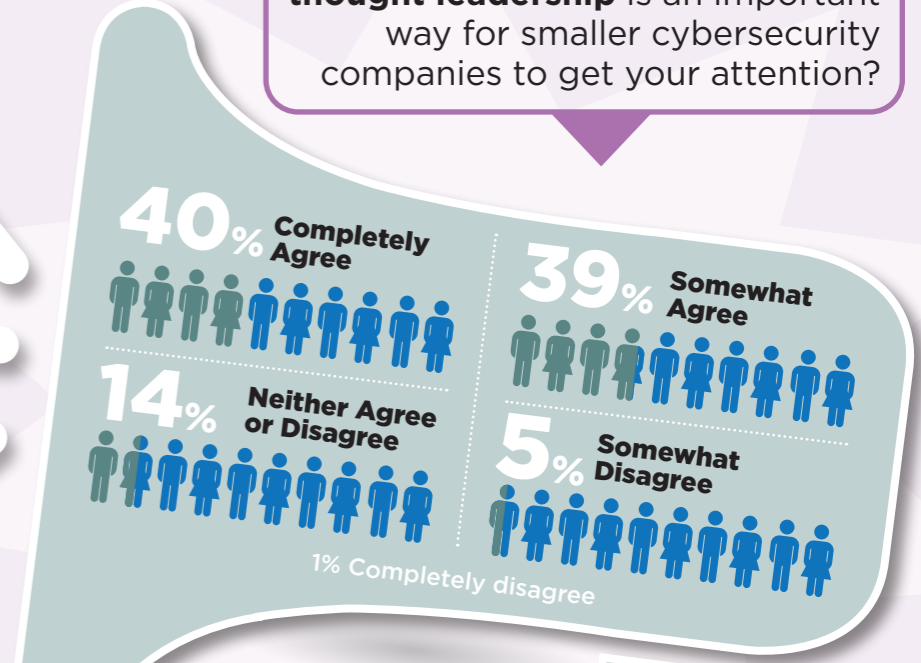
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Influencing procurement decisions

How much time do you spend every week consuming thought leadership content?

More than 4 hours — 8%
Between 3-4 hours — 10%
Between 2-3 hours — 24%
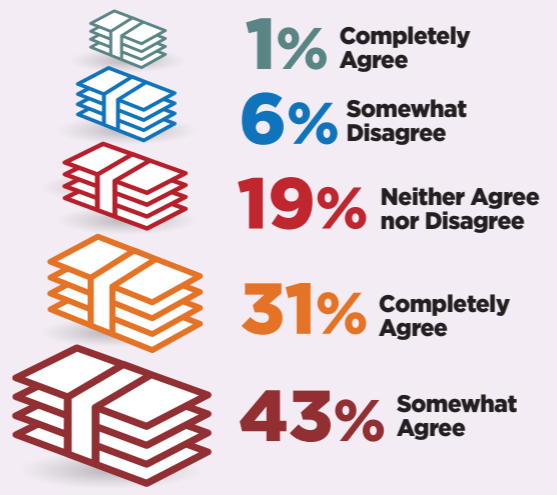Less than 30 mins — 6%
Between 30 mins & 1 hour — 21%
Between 1-2 hours — 31%

To what extent do you agree that thought leadership is an important way for smaller cybersecurity companies to get your attention?
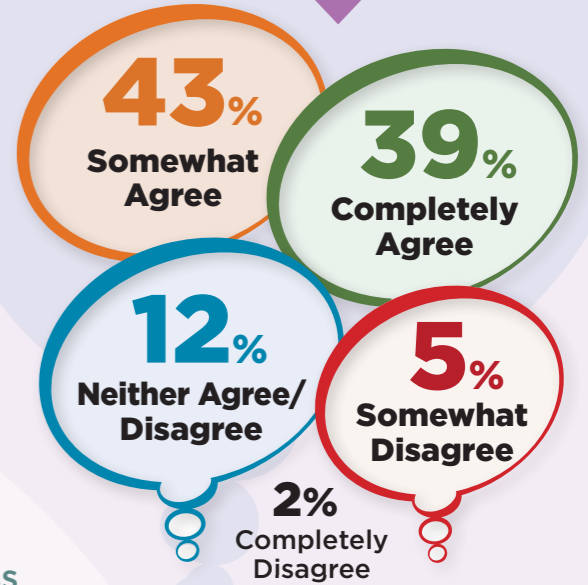
40% Completely Agree
39% Somewhat Agree
14% Neither Agree or Disagree
5% Somewhat Disagree
1% Completely disagree

Overall, how would you rate the quality of cybersecurity thought leadership content that you receive?

POOR 3%
EXCELLENT 17%
AVERAGE 30%
GOOD 50%
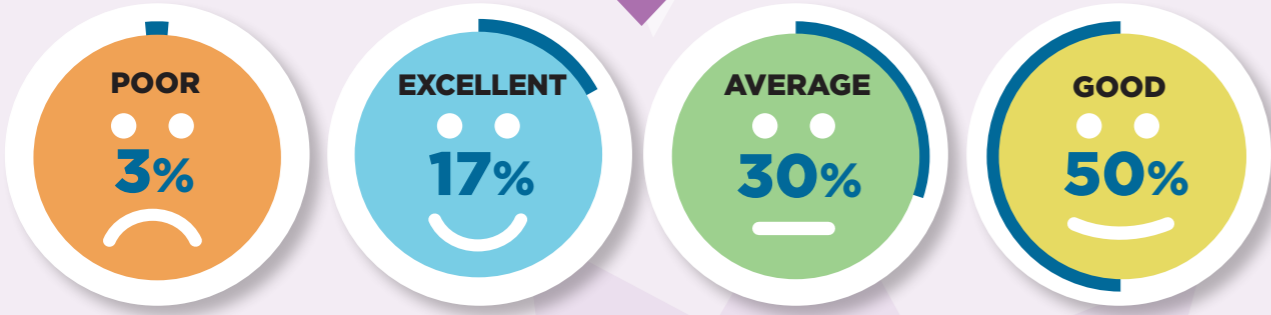
'We would be willing to pay a premium to work with a cybersecurity vendor' who is a thought leader in its market sector.

1% Completely Agree
6% Somewhat Disagree
19% Neither Agree nor Disagree
31% Completely Agree
43% Somewhat Agree

To what extent do you agree that thought leadership demonstrates deep thinking and shows whether the company genuinely understands the end user?

43% Somewhat Agree
39% Completely Agree
12% Neither Agree/Disagree
5% Somewhat Disagree
2% Completely Disagree

Thinking about the times that you have used thought leadership in the procurement process, where did it prove useful?

47% Gaining a better understanding of a particular cybersecurity issue and how it may affect your organisation.

43% Making a final decision to appoint a cybersecurity company.

40% Developing a business case for change to overcome cybersecurity issues.

34% Researching suppliers to invite to tender.

34% Recommending a potential supplier to someone.

34% Shortlisting suppliers at the later stage of the procurement process.

2% other

How has consuming thought leadership content influenced your behaviour towards a cybersecurity vendor?

35% Have increased their business with an existing supplier.

Influencing procurement decisions

The biggest question marketing people have to answer is how to align their campaign spend to ensure the greatest success. Our research helps to answer this question and sets out how information security professionals use thought leadership as they assess and choose cybersecurity vendors to work with.

Cybersecurity professionals devote significant time each week to consuming thought leadership content and they value the knowledge that it provides.

55%

"Spend 1-3 hours a week consuming thought leadership content".
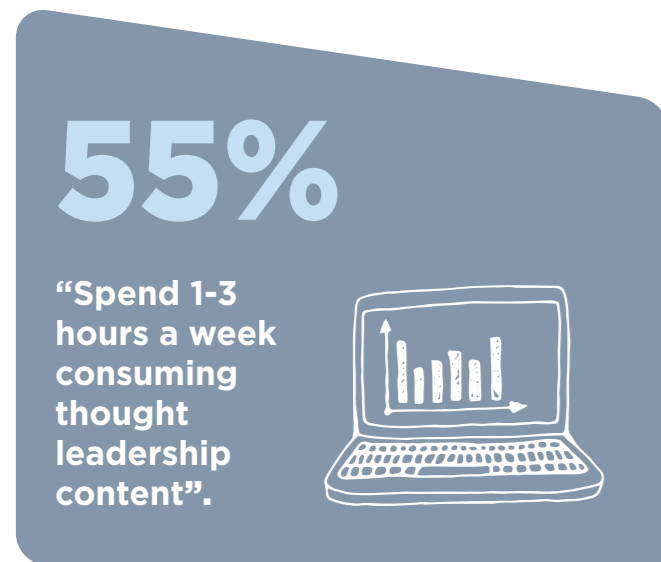
Our statistics show that our respondents usually spend between one and three hours every week consuming thought leadership. The largest percentage, 31%, spend between one and two hours, while 24% between two and three hours.

People do not spend this amount of time doing something unless they see a value in doing so. Indeed, 67% of respondents said that the quality of thought leadership content from cybersecurity vendors was either good or excellent. This is a solid performance, however there is room for improvement as a further 30% did say that they felt quality was only average.

This research shows marketing specialists that there is a clear – and substantial – window of time each week where their target audiences are exploring subjects related to their profession and industry. By not having thought leadership in their marketing armoury, cybersecurity companies surrender this time to their competitors. A key marketing mantra for many is to find ways to be useful to prospective customers. This thought leadership time is probably the most effective way vendors can be useful until they get into a deeper 1-2-1 contact with prospects.

Cybersecurity decision makers use thought leadership content at every stage of the procurement process – from researching industry challenges and shortlisting suppliers, to making final choices in procurement.

Nearly every person (97%) we surveyed said that they had used thought leadership content to support their procurement of a cybersecurity product or service.

Thinking about the times that you have used **Thought Leadership** in the procurement process, where did it prove useful?
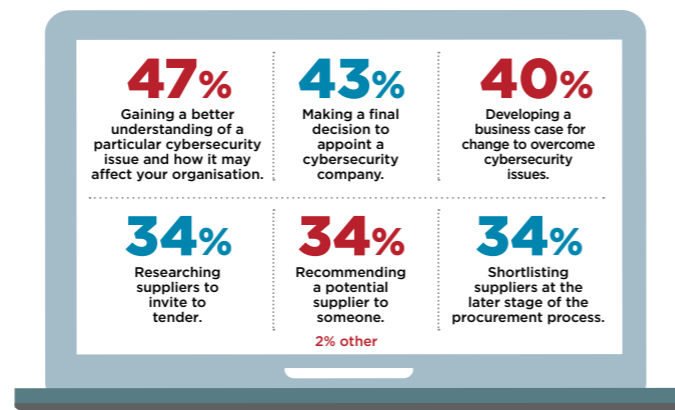
47% Gaining a better understanding of a particular cybersecurity issue and how it may affect your organisation.	**43%** Making a final decision to appoint a cybersecurity company.	**40%** Developing a business case for change to overcome cybersecurity issues.
34% Researching suppliers to invite to tender.	**34%** Recommending a potential supplier to someone.	**34%** Shortlisting suppliers at the later stage of the procurement process.

2% other

Within this figure, 52% said that they had 'sometimes' used this form of marketing and 37% said that they had used thought leadership 'often' in their procurement decision-making.

Thought leadership is often considered a 'top-of-funnel' exercise, but our research has shown that a more complex relationship exists between info security specialists and what content they consume. We also asked where in the procurement process thought leadership had proved useful. The answers were surprising and show that marketing specialists need to consider thought leadership as a 'whole-of-funnel' tool in their campaigns. Thought leadership features in every stage of the sales journey, from initially researching and understanding issues, developing a business case for change, researching and selecting an initial roster of potential suppliers, shortlisting and making a final decision on who to appoint.

A key question is how does thought leadership support people making procurement decisions at the later stages of the sales journey when there is usually a bigger focus on assessing the capability and appropriateness of a specific product or service? Our analysis is that thought leadership continues to be a point of reference for people making procurement decisions. There is often a review of potential suppliers against the initial problems and challenges identified to make sure the final selection is fit for purpose. Using thought leadership to get the fullest understanding of issues is an important part of this. Furthermore, a supplier that a CISO is zeroing in on in the final stages of procurement may tick all the boxes on the current problem. However, future proofing a relationship and assessing whether the supplier will be the right one in two, three or more years time requires an understanding of trends in the market and an examination of what technology is around the corner. Again, thought leadership is a vital component in making these considerations.

Thought leadership powerfully raises the profiles of newer and lesser-known cyber vendors and encourages CISOs to spend more with their existing vendors.

79%

"Agree that thought leadership content is an important way for smaller vendors to get their attention".

Cybersecurity companies have a nosebleed-high trajectory of innovation, often starting from obscurity to global expansion over an enviably short timeframe from the perspective of many more established industries. However, new companies face an initial barrier to get lift off as they lack a track-record of experience to give potential customers confidence. Thought leadership can play a critical function in providing evidence of expertise if not experience and helps companies to push through this period.

80% of respondents agreed that thought leadership is an important way for smaller cybersecurity companies to get noticed and 35% said that they had invited a cybersecurity vendor to bid for a piece of business after encountering

their thought leadership content. When you are new on the block or struggle with brand recognition, talking about the issues that matter is an effective way to push yourself into the minds of your target customers.

We also discovered that it is not just establishing new relationships where thought leadership can have an effect. Again, 35% of respondents stated that they had increased the amount of business they do with an existing supplier from consuming thought leadership content. We often encounter clients that we serve who focus thought leadership on building awareness in new prospects. Going back to an earlier point and the misconception that thought leadership is for the top of the marketing funnel 'awareness' stage, it may in fact be more critical sometimes to develop thought leadership campaigns specifically tailored for existing customers to deepen these relationships and turn them into advocates to take on new services. Such an approach should be integral to the work of account managers and relationship handlers in the business. These are the human relationships that your existing customers trust and marketing can play a big supporting role in this area.

Thought leadership is a significant marker of quality and builds the reputation of a cybersecurity supplier.

Establishing credibility and gaining the trust of potential and existing customers is a central purpose of thought leadership marketing and we wanted to test this in our research. A very high percentage (86%) agreed that thought leadership demonstrates deep thinking and shows whether a company genuinely understands the needs of end users. This use of thought leadership marketing to build trust and confidence has become a lot more important in the last year as people have been prevented from meeting due to the pandemic. Face-to-face is how

31%

"Strongly agree that they would be willing to pay a premium to work with a cybersecurity vendor who is a thought leader".

people comfort themselves that the people who they work with can be trusted and know what they are doing. Without this, marketers have to find other ways to build this connection.

But does thought leadership have a deeper financial impact with customers? Again, we found the answer was yes. We asked respondents whether they would be willing to pay a premium to work with a cybersecurity vendor that is a thought leader – 74% said that they would. This may be slightly surprising as CISOs are known for their 'pragmatic' approach to cost and to drill into the product or service in front of them rather than admit to being influenced by other factors. Being a thought leader, if you strip away the jargony feel of the term, is actually about having industry authority. It is about a demonstrable knowledge of the sector an organisation wishes to serve. So being an industry peer and demonstrating this through thought leadership is a critical path to adding premium to a cybersecurity company's value in the market.

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What makes excellent content

How do you usually source **thought leadership** content on cybersecurity issues

54%
46%
31%

I use key words to research particular subjects online
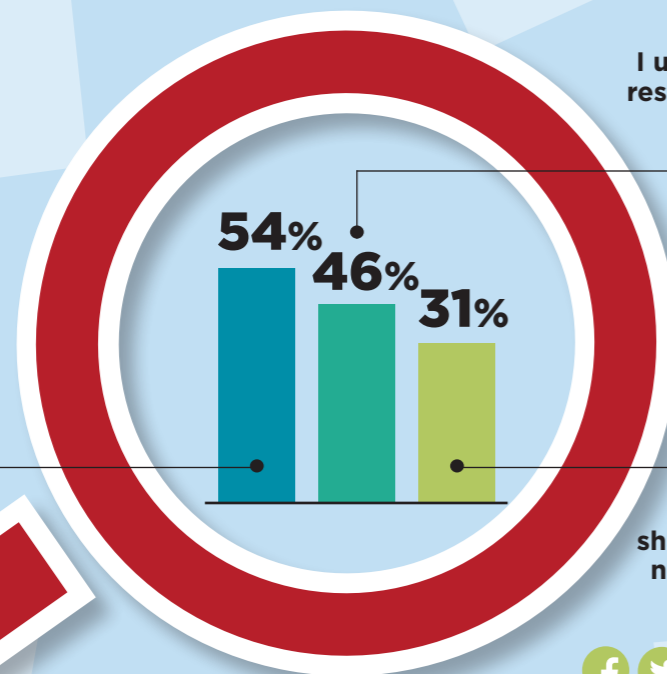
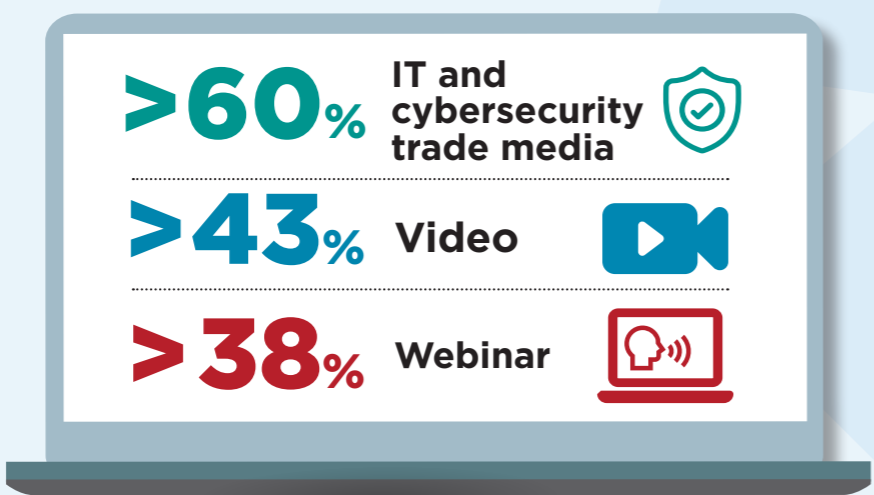I read cybersecurity and IT trade media publications

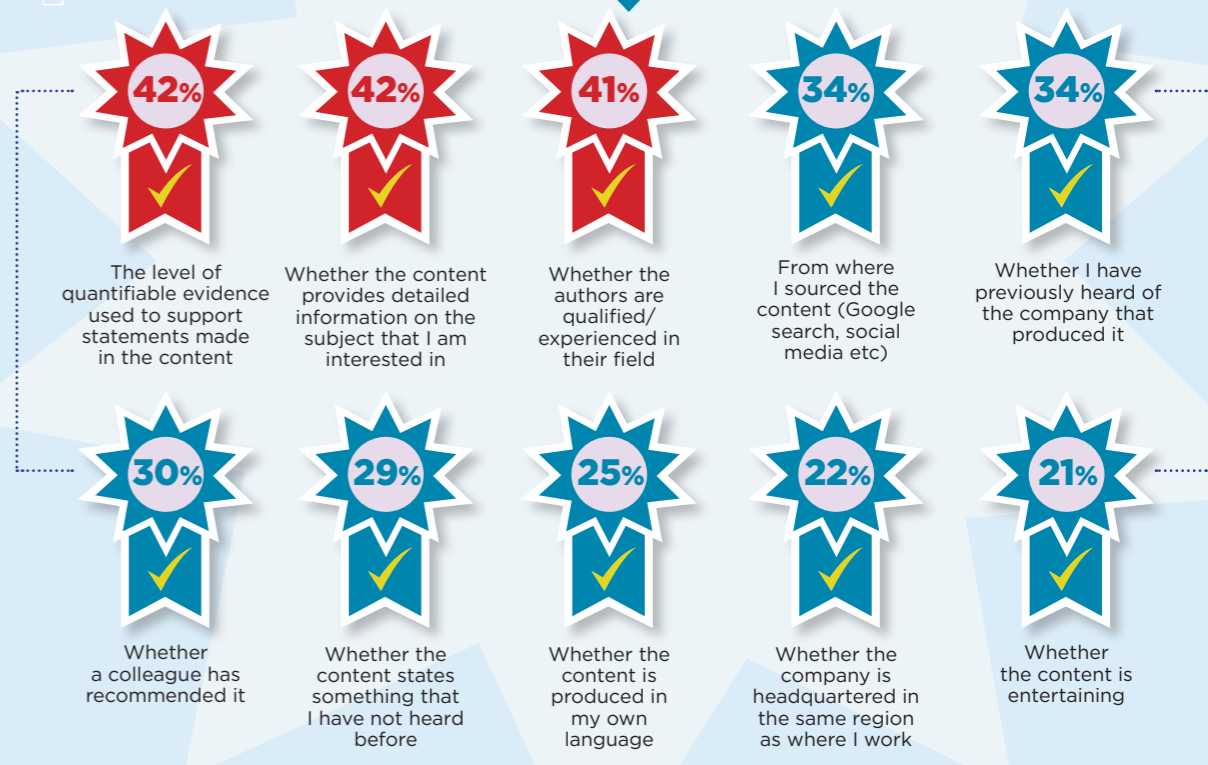Content that is shared by friends/ network contacts on social media

FURTHER STATISTICS

30% I read national newspapers

28% I click through to content that I am sent via mass email distribution

23% Content that is advertised/paid promoted on social media

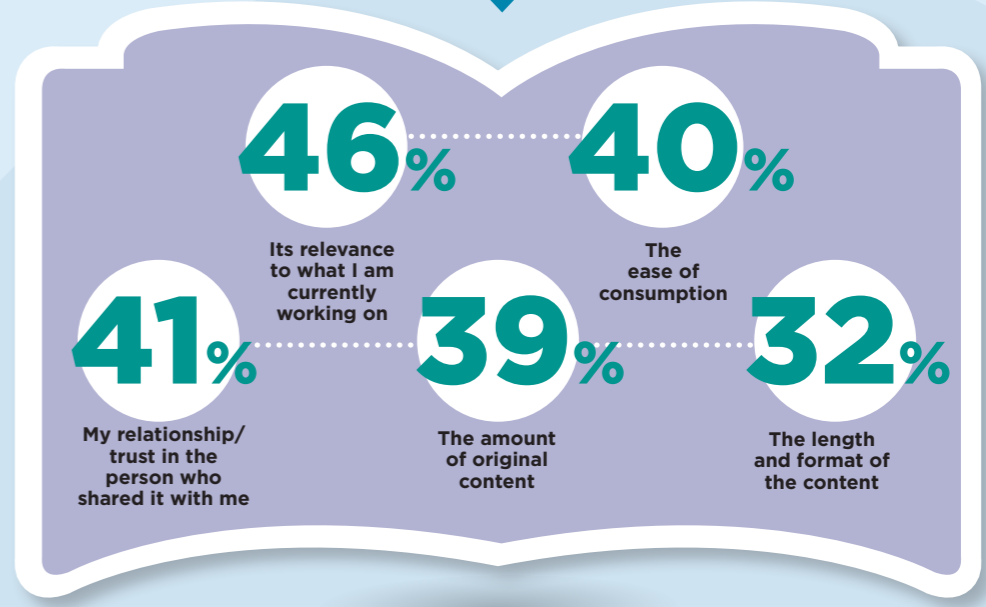**21%** I click on Ads that appear on internet search engine results

Select your top three preferred formats to consume **thought leadership** content on cybersecurity issues

>60% IT and cybersecurity trade media

>43% Video

>38% Webinar

How do you measure the credibility of the **thought leadership** that you consume?

42% The level of quantifiable evidence used to support statements made in the content

42% Whether the content provides detailed information on the subject that I am interested in

41% Whether the authors are qualified/ experienced in their field

34% From where I sourced the content (Google search, social media etc)

34% Whether I have previously heard of the company that produced it

30% Whether a colleague has recommended it

29% Whether the content states something that I have not heard before

25% Whether the content is produced in my own language

22% Whether the company is headquartered in the same region as where I work

21% Whether the content is entertaining

Thinking about the content itself, how important are these factors in determining your level of engagement with a piece of **thought leadership**?

46% Its relevance to what I am currently working on

40% The ease of consumption

41% My relationship/ trust in the person who shared it with me

39% The amount of original content

32% The length and format of the content

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What makes excellent content

Excellence comes from getting the right balance of 'ingredients' to build credibility when crafting content, as well as picking the right medium for when and where you are trying to connect with your audience. In this section of the report we explore the ideal recipe for cyber vendors.

54%

"Read cybersecurity trade publications".

Cyber professionals focus on people and organisations that they trust when sourcing content, over and above paid promoted content.

Our research shows that people go to who they trust when sourcing thought leadership content. These top sources are cybersecurity and IT trade publications (54%), their own key word searches online (46%), or content that is shared by a friend (31%). So, the combination of getting press attention, securing word-of-mouth, and having a good online net to catch people as they do their own research are where marketing specialists need to concentrate their efforts for greater success.

This is not to say that other areas of attracting attention are not important. 30% of respondents read national newspapers to learn professionally, 28% click through to content sent to them via mass email distribution, 23% click through on social media advertising and 22% on search engine advertising. However, to use these approaches alone leaves cybersecurity companies with an emaciated marketing effort.

Furthermore, 72% use social media in a professional capacity. These platforms are especially useful, not only for the network effect of shared content, which as we have shown is one of the most popular ways to source thought leadership, but also that people increasingly use these platforms as a search tool in their own research, and do not just turn to more traditional Google searches.
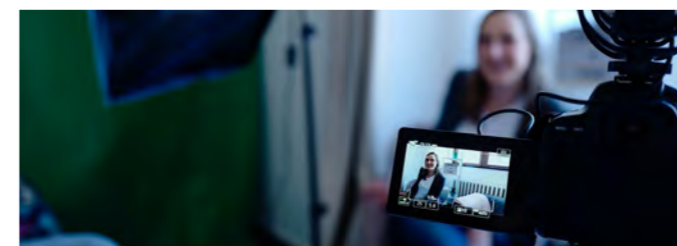
Visual and 'live' content such as videos and webinars are highly popular forms of consuming thought leadership content, alongside the perennial trusted format of written, IT and cyber trade media.

It is a cliché but no less true to state that it is 'hard to stand out from the crowd' due to the sheer volume of thought leadership content being produced in marketing. So much so that people may be surprised that 67% of people in our research rated the quality of what is coming from the cybersecurity industry as good or excellent. Our research demonstrates not only the best channels to use to cut through to audiences but also the most effective mediums.

Despite the explosion of digital marketing in the last 20 years, written media articles in the cybersecurity and IT trade media remain the most popular form of thought leadership content in our research, with 60% of respondents rating this in their top three preferred formats. However, this is followed up with a large preference for visual and live content in the form of videos (43%) and webinars (38%). The press are wise to

this trend and we have seen an increased use of visual content appearing in the media and we routinely advise marketing specialists to take a multimedia approach in any media relations campaign. eBooks/white papers (29%), blogs (28%) and podcasts (24%) were all reported to be far less popular – although still an important aspect. However, our research points clearly that with a limited budget, marketing specialists might be wise to lean into the visual and public relations activity as the core of their thought leadership work, over and above maintaining a meticulous corporate blog page.

However, the full range of content types play a significant role. As stated in our report, direct searches using key words forms one of the most significant ways that people find thought leadership content relevant to them and eBooks/white papers and blogs are fundamental in building SEO to have a net that can catch these people.

43%

"Rated video as one of their most preferred content formats".

Precise information, with supporting evidence and the voice of experienced and qualified experts as authors, form the core ingredients in establishing credibility.

The Top 3 ways to measure credibility:

42% Quantifiable Evidence

42% Contains Detailed Information

41% Qualification & Experience of the author

Credibility is such a core component of thought leadership: if you are not carrying a message that the audience believes and engages with, how can you actually know that they will even read, watch or listen to what you're saying?

Asked how they measure credibility, 42% of respondents marked both the level of quantifiable evidence used to support statements made in the content, and whether the content provides detailed information on the subject they are interested in as the most important factors. The experience and qualifications of the author was ranked next with 41%, while the reputation of the company and where the content was found were ranked with 34% of the responses.

As a marketing specialist it is vital that you secure these top three ingredients as best you can. It is not enough to put an eBook together that looks good but that is just full of unqualified opinion. Such an approach just does not work and will only contribute to the noise of marketing that we see all around us today. Take the time to get the budget for original research. Make sure that your organisation hires someone with industry clout and an existing, credible industry reputation. If you are a new company with no brand credibility, look for ways to attach yourself to more established entities so that you can capitalise on their credibility.

Cyber professionals are most engaged by content on relevant subjects that are easy to consume.

In our survey we asked several questions about how the respondents engaged with thought leadership, and which factors were more important when determining their level of engagement.
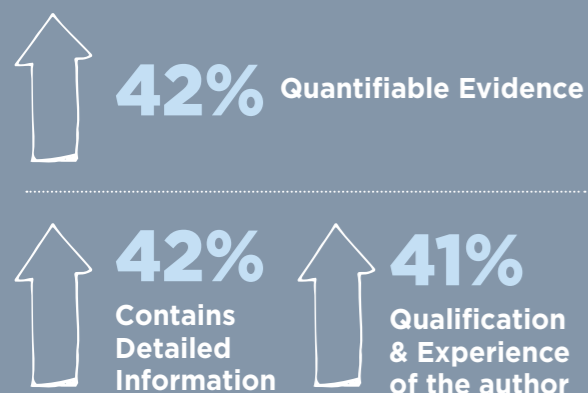
It may not come as a surprise that the content's relevance to what the respondent is working on was the most significant, with 46% stating this. However, the next most significant factor on determining the level of engagement with an item of thought leadership was their relationship and trust in the person who had shared it with them. If people believe that someone they trust and respect deems an item of content important, then people are more likely to stick with it, even if they question the value themselves. This reinforces the point that we made earlier that a successful marketing campaign must use trusted channels over and above other options. To help marketing specialists in identifying the most relevant subjects to the market at the moment we asked people to tell us what their top three areas of interest are. Network security was the most popular subject overall, with 23% naming that. Slightly less, 21%, opted for cloud security and cybersecurity software and services.
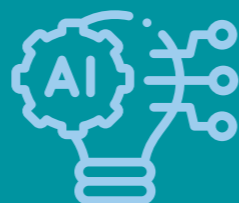
What cybersecurity thought leadership topics are most interesting to you?

21% Cloud Security

21% Cybersecurity software and services

18% Artificial intelligence – including machine learning

Ten steps to being an outstanding **thought leader guru**

1 Be an actual PERSON
Communicate as an individual, not as an organisational brand.

2 Try to Drop Self-promotion
No one likes a narcissist, **thought leadership** is always about what the audience values.

3 Find your NICHE
Thought leaders are specialists, not generalists.

4 Know your audience, and their limitations
Speak to their understanding, not your own to make sure you get your message across.

5 Speak with your own voice
Be yourself, and authentically human. Overrule 'corporate-speak'.

6 Don't be BORING
Speaking is pointless if you can't keep someone's attention.

7 Provide evidence as well as opinion
You need to back up what you say and prove why you are correct.

8 Your qualifications and experience matter
You need to convince people that you are the best person to they should listen to.

9 Get proper training
You may be an expert in your field but that does not automatically mean you are an expert at communication.

10 Have a good team around you
You can't do it alone - use your marketing team to back you as you become a guru.

It takes time, so you need to keep at it to get noticed.

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Growing into an industry guru

– what makes an outstanding thought leader?

It is not easy being a thought leader. It takes time, patience and constant refinement. Here are some of the elements that we think are the most important.

Be an actual person
A lot of marketing specialists make a mistake of positioning their company as a thought leader, rather than actual people in their organisation. An important component for thought leadership to resonate is that it is content that comes from an actual person. Think for a moment about your own interests, you are naturally more drawn to people who you can identify with and respect.

Drop self-promotion
While a thought leader should be an actual person, it isn't about you! Imagine a party where you meet someone who constantly injects 'I' into every conversation and turns it into something they have done or an opinion that they hold. They become pretty boring very quickly. Thought leadership needs to be about shining the light on others and their situations.

Find a niche
It is important to become known in a particular area of expertise. If you dance around too broad a range of subjects, then you will not gain familiarity or roots in the part of the industry in which you are really trying to engage. Think about every popular publication, they will have a clear niche and will be the go-to source for information and insight in a particular area. Your thought leadership programme should aim to achieve the same thing.

Know your audience, and their limitations
Audiences have all sorts of abilities and experience. So, once you have a clear niche, think about the audience who you wish to engage. How technical are they? What is of the most value to them and what action do you want them to do after they get to know you? A thought leader should always have their audience in their mind and develop around their needs – not what your organisation wants to push out.

Speak with your own voice
Original speakers are more attractive than polished corporate entities that have had their rough edges knocked off. We have all engaged with content that feels too anodyne. The corporate brand guidelines and key messaging have been used to alter the text. Any controversy or view outside what has already been said has been removed. You end up with many words that say very little.

Don't be boring
Similar to the above, you have to be original and unafraid to say things that stick out from the norm. Use of language is really important here. The more definite and bolder language you use the more you can create a sharper narrative in what you communicate.

Provide evidence as well as opinion
Thought leaders cannot just provide their opinion on issues and broadcast this out, especially in the cybersecurity field. Thought leaders are of value because they open up audiences to new ideas and concepts and help people to overcome their professional challenges. Opinion can be useful to unlock mindsets, but it is only partially useful. It's important go beyond describing challenges and offering commentary, to offering guidance, practical advice and your own insights on how to address the challenges. Too much thought leadership content is describing the problem and then promoting the vendors own technology as the solution. The reader will see through this thinly-veiled approach to selling. Try instead sharing your own learnings, based on your actual experience and back it up with hard evidence of what results you should expect.

Even repeating hard-earned lessons of what to avoid will hit home, as this has the ring of truth about it.

Your qualifications and experience matter
There is a lot of noise out there. Your audience will be assessing your piece of content alongside the many others that are available to them. Showing your experience is a powerful way to build early trust and put you out in front.

Get proper training
If you think this sounds difficult – yes it can be. It can take time to develop the right skills to be a thought leader. So, invest in the proper training.

Have a good team around you
The best industry gurus that have a strong profile will not be doing it alone. An effective thought leadership campaign in the cyber sector will have a small number of experts as the focus, and a marketing team around them helping to develop the best content to communicate to audiences.

Its takes time, so you need to keep at it to get noticed
Becoming an industry guru is a long-term project. It takes time and it may feel like you are talking to an empty auditorium at times. Keep at it. Practice. Slowly you will shape your following and reach guru status!

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Covid and the future of thought leadership

The difficulties of Covid has been universal in both our working lives and for many also an intensely personal challenge.

From a thought leadership perspective, there has been no end to content that has been produced on the ways to do jobs better whilst working from home, or on the various types of cyber attacks associated to the pandemic and how to avoid them hitting you and your business.

So, we wanted to elevate our research a little and look at the future. What are the long-term implications for the way that we do marketing? Will things just go back to how they always were before, or will what we do and how we do it never be the same again?

Marketing has never been a static activity and new ways of working have always been part of the industry before we had ever heard of a new virus, so in some ways the above question is irrelevant. Marketing is always changing so this is nothing new. However, what has changed in the last year is the behaviours of target audiences and the speed at which this has occurred.

Our research first looked to establish what, if any, impact there had been on CISOs and how they were interacting with suppliers. 68% of information security professionals stated that Covid restrictions have made it harder to assess potential suppliers of cybersecurity services. Furthermore, 96% agreed that this difficulty had resulted in some form of delay in making procurement decisions.

41% have delayed a procurement decision by one to three months and a further 48% reported delaying decisions by between three and six months. Covid has clearly created significant friction for many in the industry and the reasons are varied. In our discussions with CISOs, reasons for delays include budget uncertainty in the early stages of the pandemic as company leaders took a cautious approach to expenditure. The virus also upended priorities causing many to focus on different cyber products and services than they were expecting at the start of 2020. A further challenge has also been gaining physical access to both potential suppliers and also the equipment for testing and assessment.

We should also consider how technologies and vendors are identified. There was a massive reduction in the number of in-person events and conferences, meaning if you wanted to try and identify one solution, you had to go to a number of webinars, read analyst reports or visit websites to do what you could have done in a few hours at a conference or exhibition. Of course, without the in-person contact too, developing trust and understanding between supplier and customer can become a harder challenge.

Our research confirmed that cybersecurity professionals have leaned in more heavily to thought leadership content since the start of the pandemic. When asked whether Covid restrictions had made thought leadership more or less significant in making their procurement decisions, 71% said that this type of content had become more significant to some extent.

Our analysis is that the physical meeting between suppliers and customers will continue to be restricted to some level for the next few years as Covid ebbs and flows and new variants develop. Inevitably, those researching suppliers will therefore become more adept at researching potential suppliers and using thought leadership content as part of their exploration. This trend on increased use of thought leadership has been going on for a while. Covid has accelerated this trend and made using the marketing approach more important than ever.
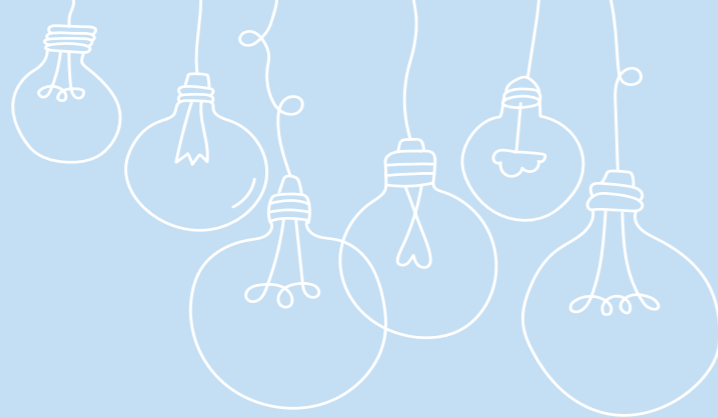
The CISO perspective on thought leadership

Interview with Lee Barney, former head of information security for M&S, Debenhams and Conde Nast.

Do you actively look for thought leadership on a specific subject if you need to learn more about it?

What I look for is a balance of price point and functionality. The product will be tested and irrespective of what the vendor says that it does, we test it and get a red team or pen tester to see if it works.

Some thought leadership I do look at, but it is not about the technology, and more on how security should function. However, if it doesn't hold my interest for two minutes I'll look away. It needs to flow, be humorous and keep my attention.

What do you think of the standard of thought leadership (be it articles, blogs, webinars, podcasts, white papers) in general, is it good enough?

I rarely find what I am looking for, and too much is caught behind login pages. These methods are old fashioned and the new and modern way is YouTube and TikTok, and that is a format to engage, and companies should look at to deliver content.

The vlog format is very interesting, as you will get better engagement from your board from a two-minute video than from a whitepaper, so use that format to promote your company. People who are successful on YouTube are those who sell a boring concept to a big audience - so why not hire those people, give them the topics you want to feature and go forth.

Is there a subject you usually look for, or does it depend on what you need or are interested in?

It depends on what I need. Say we are faced with a type of attack and cannot figure it out, we could ask a consultancy to do it and Google the attack to determine if it is a big or little problem. We will get thought leadership from the consultancy – they are people who have walked and talked the problem they are dealing with.

Which is the most important factor in thought leadership - ease of consumption, length/format of it, or how much of it is original content?

I'd say ease of consumption first, and then length and format, and I'd be prepared to give any media a try if it attracted me. Easiest is the video format with subtitles. In terms of length, I'll give it more time if it is a complex subject, but it has to be easily digestible.

Would you rely on thought leadership when it comes to purchasing? Would you look more favourably on a company who has delivered something you found interesting? Would you pay more if that product came from that vendor?

A CISO will come up with a strategy, sometimes using thought leadership as part of their research, and bring the technology to the security architects. This is how a CISO comes into contact with new technology, and my peers do the same thing, An architect will build up a list of suppliers, so they are the ones who will often get more into the whitepapers and other content on the product for those options. So, a lot of thought leadership engagement is the job of the architect and not so much the CISO.

The marketing specialist's perspective on thought leadership

Interview with Suela Vahdat, EMEA Marketing Director at IronNet Cybersecurity.

What are the challenges in getting content like thought leadership placed with the media?

From the vendor perspective, the challenge is to produce the right content, because the media are looking for meaningful content that is contributing to a line of thought or argument rather than an advertorial or a promotional piece.

As marketers, we need to balance between building thought leadership around meaningful lines of debates on cyber risks and attacks, as well as equipping our sales team with content pieces that help them to sell better and faster. The Catch 22 here is that it is hard to sell when no one knows about you, so thought leadership allows you to emerge from obscurity in a crowded market and find your unique voice. We use share of voice and other engagement metrics to measure the success of our content, but the real satisfaction comes when media channels proactively seek you out for comments and opinions on breaking news and other topics.

What are the greatest challenges for cybersecurity marketing specialists in the industry today?

Information overload. More and more, I see Infosec professionals pushing vendors for hard news, backed up by data points. As a result, many vendors are responding to that by hiring ex-Infosec specialists or forming their own threat intelligence departments. From a comms perspective, we marketers are slicing and dicing our internal research into various forms of digestible content pieces (infographics, long form reports, blogs, webinars, videos, etc) and using multiple platforms to get the message out. When thought leadership is done well, customers get value from the content, but in the process, we have created in our industry information overload on the latest threats and trends. To be successful we have to go back to some of the core issues explored in this report.

What is your mindset and hot tips when you're producing thought leadership?

I would advise that thought leadership is built with the customer in mind. Ask yourself: do I want to write about this because I believe it is important, or that my customer thinks that it is important. And try not to 'assume' but ask your customers about their pains and challenges instead.

My last tip would be around 'subject matter experts'. One important lesson I've learnt through my career is that media and Infosec Professionals, CISOs, don't want to just hear from our polished speakers and ex NSA people. They want and appreciate hearing from the techies of your company, those individuals who may not be as fluid in their expression but can explain a problem that you're solving with high levels of credibility. So don't be afraid to showcase your talent and try matching the spokesperson to the problem.

What about multimedia content like video, webinars and podcasts – are these more important now that personal interactions are more limited?

If nothing else, latest world events have shown how resilient we are as people but also as businesses. Marketers, vendors and Infosec professionals moved our interactions online – on various platforms – full time. In 2020 we saw a spike on the number of webinars and podcasts delivered daily. Most events also moved to a virtual platform.