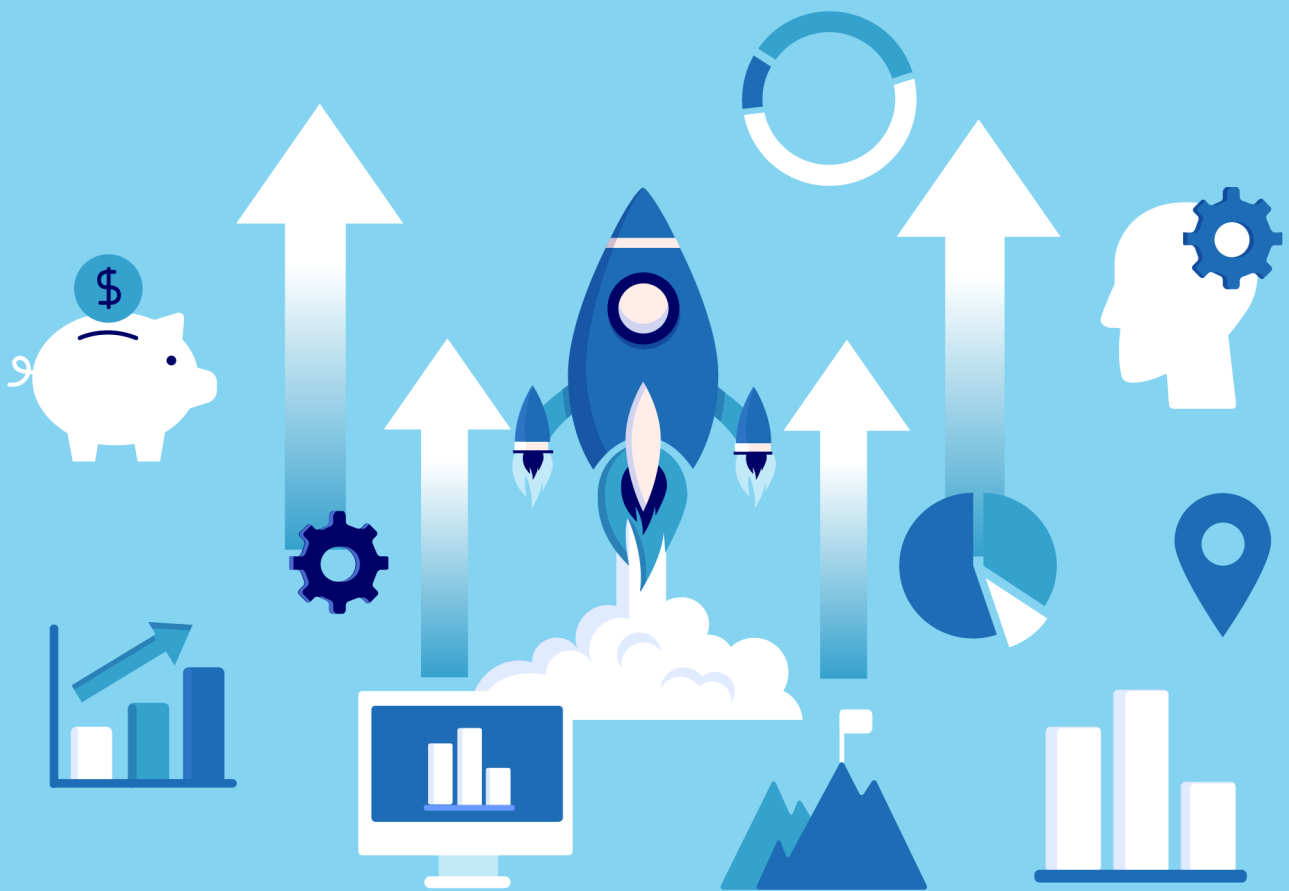


# The ROI of Thought Leadership

• 2020 Executive Summary •



Presented by

PREDICTIVE  
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## Introduction and Study Goals

In late 2019, Predictive ROI embarked on an initiative to gain better insight into the attitudes and perspectives of professionals who follow experts or thought leaders.

Predictive ROI partnered with Audience Audit Inc. to design and field a custom quantitative attitudinal segmentation study of 325 professionals. 250 respondents came from a panel of professionals in a range of industries, with the remainder from Predictive ROI's own contacts. All respondents indicated that they follow "someone you consider an expert on a business topic or industry". The study has an overall margin of error of +/- 5.4 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This study was designed to provide business owners who desire to build their thought leadership with insights to help them become more visible, more relevant, and more helpful to those who consume, utilize, and share their content.

Our goals were to determine whether there are different types of thought leadership followers — whether how they feel about thought leadership is different, whether they assess qualifications for being a thought leader differently, and whether they desire different things from the thought leaders they follow.

We also wanted to assess whether attitudes about thought leadership align with characteristics such as organization size, experience, or demographic characteristics of respondents.

And — would we have the opportunity through our analysis to determine if the perception of someone as a thought leader would influence decisions, impact choices, and ultimately drive return on investment for the thought leader.

# Attitudinal Segments

Our study was designed to organically reveal different segments that might exist in the audience of thought leadership followers, based on the attitudes they hold.

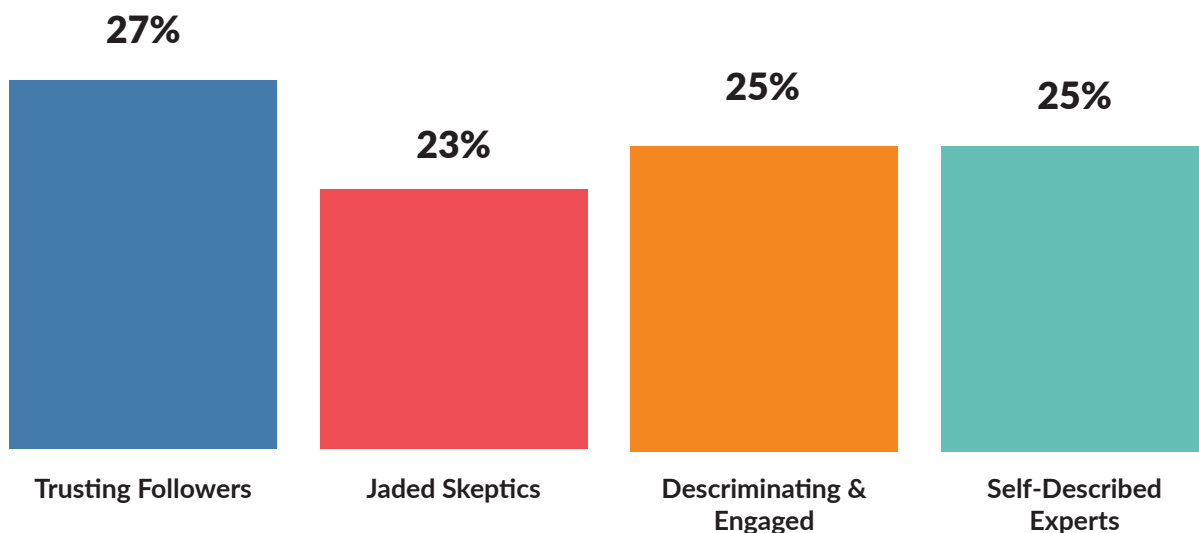
To accomplish this, we asked respondents to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with 35 attitudinal statements. For analysis, the ratings on these statements were encoded so as not to reveal the specific statements being rated (to eliminate any potential for bias during analysis). The ratings were assessed independently, without using predetermined segments or “seed” responses around which other responses were clustered. Neither the number of segments or their defining characteristics were established prior to analysis.

The result is a set of segments within the respondent group, each defined by a set of attitudes that are statistically linked for the respondents in that segment. They’re not based on agreement with a single attitude, and they’re not based on the level of agreement with any of the attitudes per se. Instead, when respondents in a segment establish a level of agreement with any one of their defining attitudes, their agreement with all other defining attitudes follows suit. In all likelihood, they are unaware of these linkages, but they exist nevertheless.

The resulting segmentation reveals groups deeply connected by the set of attitudes that are connected for the respondents in each segment, and that make them very different from the other respondents in the study.

For more about this approach, visit [www.audienceaudit.com](http://www.audienceaudit.com).

## THOUGHT LEADER FOLLOWER SEGMENTS



## Trusting Followers (27% of participants)

**Trusting Followers** rely on fame, visibility and signals from others to find **thought leaders**. They actively seek them out, learn from them and trust their advice. They are more likely than other segments to say they have a lot to learn about their industry, and to trust that what they hear from experts is, for the most part, new and helpful information.



This segment is defined by 14 attitudes:

- I typically trust the opinions and advice of those people **others have identified as experts**.
- Most experts are offering **new and helpful** insights and ideas.
- Working with a recognized expert **reflects well on my organization**.
- I have **a lot to learn when** it comes to my industry.
- I **actively seek out** and follow experts.
- I worry that **my industry is moving too fast for me to keep up** with the latest thinking.

I am more likely to trust an expert who:

- Is mentioned often by people like me.
- Offers innovative thinking that flies in the face of widely-held thoughts about an industry or discipline.
- I can see in person.
- Has published a best-selling book on the subject.
- Speaks at a lot of events.
- Is a professional speaker.
- Hosts a well-known podcast on the subject.
- Is under 40.

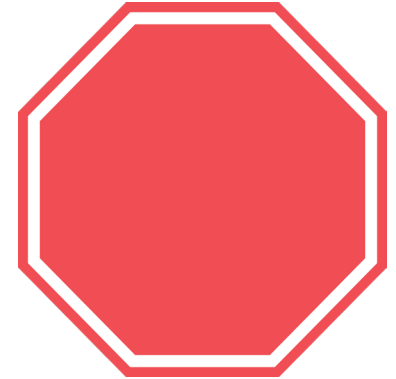
In addition to connecting all of these attitudes together in their minds, they also agree more with nearly all of these statements on average than other respondents.

***“Help me think differently and solve persistent problems.”***

***“‘Thought Leader’ implies new and innovative. ‘Expert’ just means they know how things are currently done.”***

## Jaded Skeptics (23% of participants)

**Jaded Skeptics** are the least likely of all respondents to trust the **expertise of thought leaders**. While they do follow thought leaders, they are far more likely to believe that most experts are egotistical and self-promoting and offer tired advice.



Seven linked attitudes define this group:

- I listen to experts, but **don't always trust their opinions** and advice.
- Most experts focus more on **promoting themselves** than trying to be helpful.
- Most experts are sharing the **same tired advice**.
- I am **much less likely to consider someone an "expert"** than most of the people I know.
- Most experts are **egotistical**.
- I am **generally skeptical** when it comes to taking advice from experts.
- I **rarely pay attention** to who the current experts are in my industry.

***“Think outside the box - don't just say the same thing and label it as 'outside the box.'”***

***“‘Thought Leader’ is a title made up for people on LinkedIn who think they are ‘disrupting the industry’ by making videos.”***

## Discriminating & Engaged (25% of participants)

Discriminating & Engaged respondents expect the thought leaders they follow to have demonstrable success in their field and recognition as an expert in the respondent's own industry. They appreciate helpfulness and are concerned that failing to stay abreast of the latest insights will negatively impact their organization.



They are defined by five linked attitudes:

- I **worry that my organization will suffer** if we don't keep up with the latest insights, resources and tools.
- I am more likely to trust an expert who:
  - Obviously works hard to be **helpful**.
  - Has **achieved success** in their own business ventures.
  - Has been in their field for a **long time**.
  - Is widely recognized **in my industry**.

***“Different ways of tackling the most common problems in our industry is the most helpful.”***

***“I want ideas that I can implement in my everyday worklife - and I need access when I have an important question.”***

## Self-Described Experts (25% of participants)

Self-Described Experts are defined by their self-confidence in their own knowledge about their job, their discipline and their industry.

They are defined by three linked attitudes:

- I know as much about my **job or discipline** as most experts.
- I know as much about **my industry** as most industry experts.
- I am more likely to trust an expert who is **businesslike and serious**.



*“I’d love to know how to corral what I know after 40+ years doing what I do into thought leadership.”*

*“I need advice on how to second-guess my own decisions.”*

*“I want stories of failures and success that teach bigger lessons - and case studies with specific and detailed transformations.”*

## Other Attitudes

Other attitudes that were not found responsible for defining different attitudinal segments nevertheless shed additional light on the perceptions of thought leadership followers:

- **Trusting Followers** are slightly more likely to value a unique perspective than other segments.
- **Jaded Skeptics** are less likely to trust an expert for currently providing services to organizations like theirs, or for being mentioned often by other experts. They are more likely to trust their own opinions over those of experts.
- **Discriminating & Engaged** respondents are least likely to say that they trust their own opinions over those of experts, and disagree most strongly that they rarely trust the opinions of other experts.

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*Regardless of segment, respondents indicated that irreverence and humor have little impact on trust in an expert.*

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### IMPLICATIONS

Professionals follow thought leaders for different reasons, and often feel very differently about their own level of expertise and the state of the organizations in which they work.

Thought Leaders must carefully consider which “problems” they seek to solve for their audiences and whether their audience will view them as qualified.

Trusting Followers may be less discriminating in the experts they follow as long as those experts exhibit the popular markers of “thought leadership.”

Discriminating & Engaged and Self-Described Experts who are seeking deep experience, fresh insights and have a high bar for helpfulness and applicability.

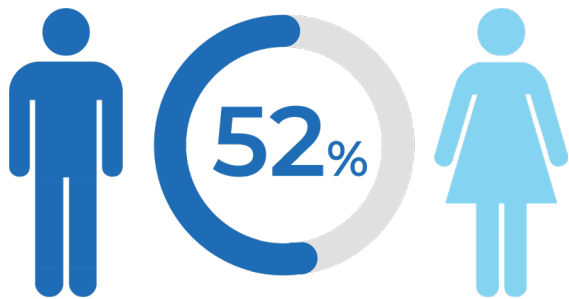
Jaded Skeptics expect thought leaders to be frauds, and need to be convinced otherwise.



# Respondent Characteristics

## Age

Respondents are well-distributed between age ranges, with 25% 60 or older, 28% in their 50's, 21% in their 40's and 26% under 40. Trusting Followers are more likely than other segments to be under 40 (41%).

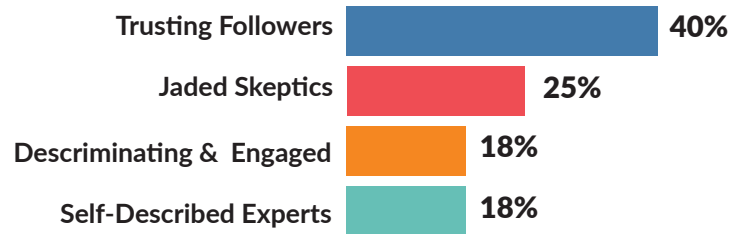


## Employer Size

39% of respondents work in organizations of at least 1,000 employees. Self-Described Experts are more likely than other segments -- 51%, compared to only 26% of Trusting Followers, who are more likely than other segments to work in organizations of 10-499 employees.

*All segments are found in all age groups, genders, organization sizes, industries, and job levels.*

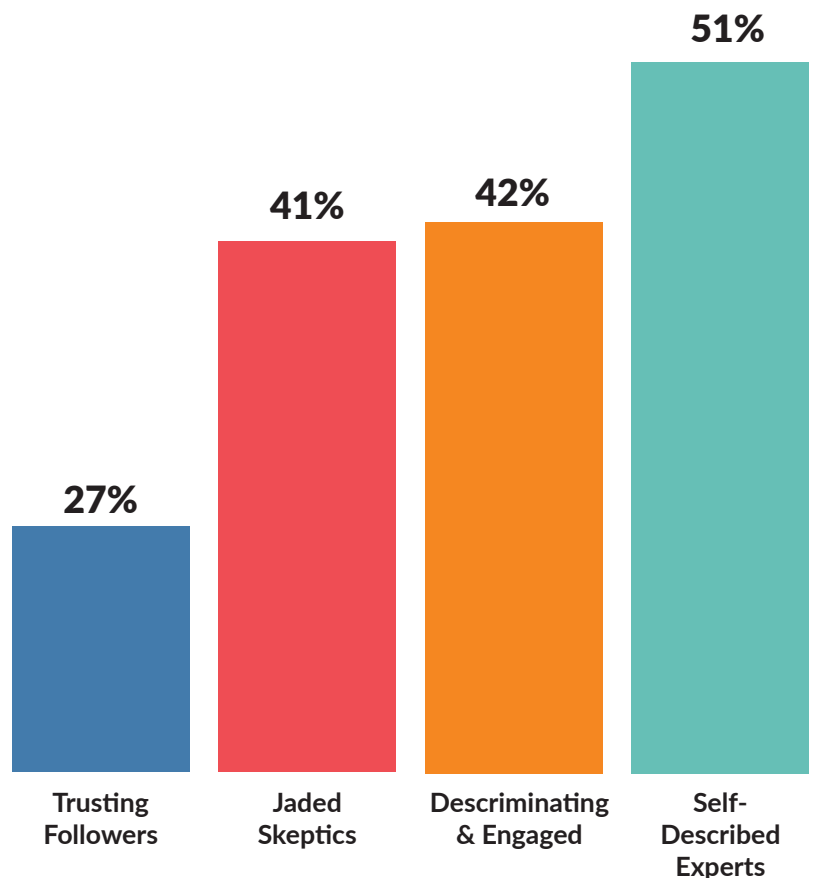
## % UNDER 40



## Gender

52% of respondents are male. Discriminating & Engaged respondents are disproportionately women (57% compared to 48% overall).

## % WORKING IN LARGE ORGANIZATIONS



# Respondent Characteristics

## Industry

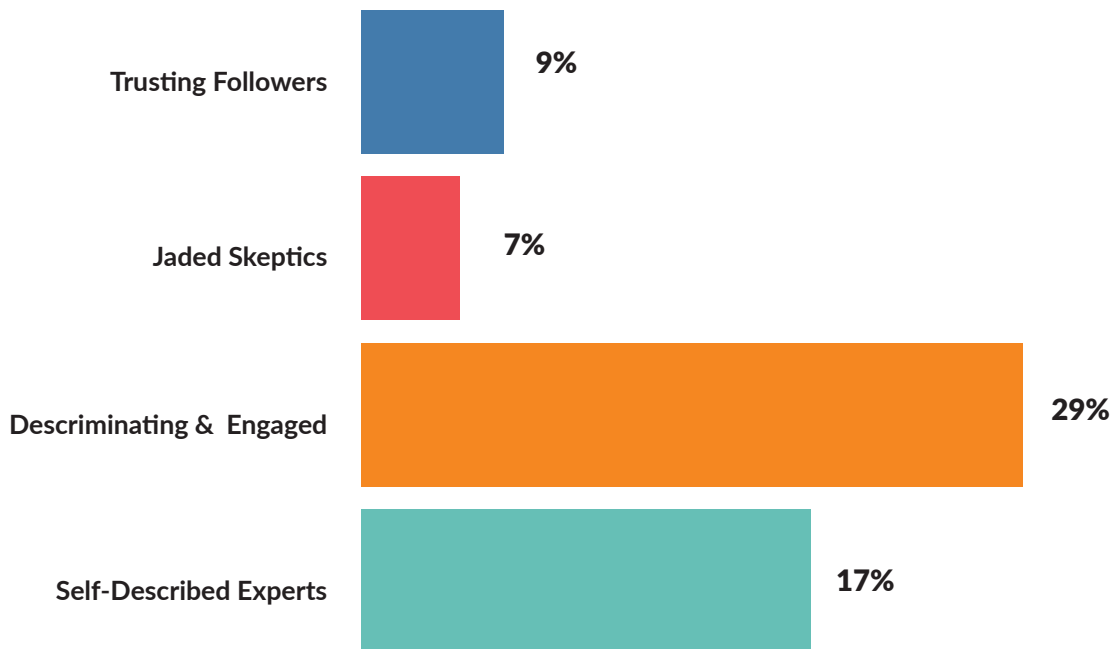
Respondents work in a range of industries -- more than 30 in all. 36% of Discriminating & Engaged respondents work in marketing or business services, and 35% of Trusting Followers work in finance, banking, insurance or manufacturing.

Respondents are evenly distributed across the spectrum between working 3 years or less in their industry, or up to 40 years. There is no clear difference between segments -- in fact, Self-Described Experts in the study are as likely to have worked in their industry for 3 years or less as they are to have worked in it for more than 40 years.

## Job Level

All segments can be seen at all job levels, although Discriminating & Engaged are more likely than other segments to be founders, partners or owners (29% vs. 15% overall).

### % WHO ARE FOUNDERS, PARTNERS, OR OWNERS



## IMPLICATIONS

The pervasiveness of segments across traditionally used characteristics suggest thought leaders must consider whether their strategy may have broader appeal than previously considered.

# Thought Leadership

## Qualifications

Overall, the characteristics that respondents most often say qualify someone as a thought leader are sharing ideas that change how the respondent approaches their work (57%) and sharing ideas the respondent hasn't heard before (54%). Far less important are having a YouTube channel or having an online course.

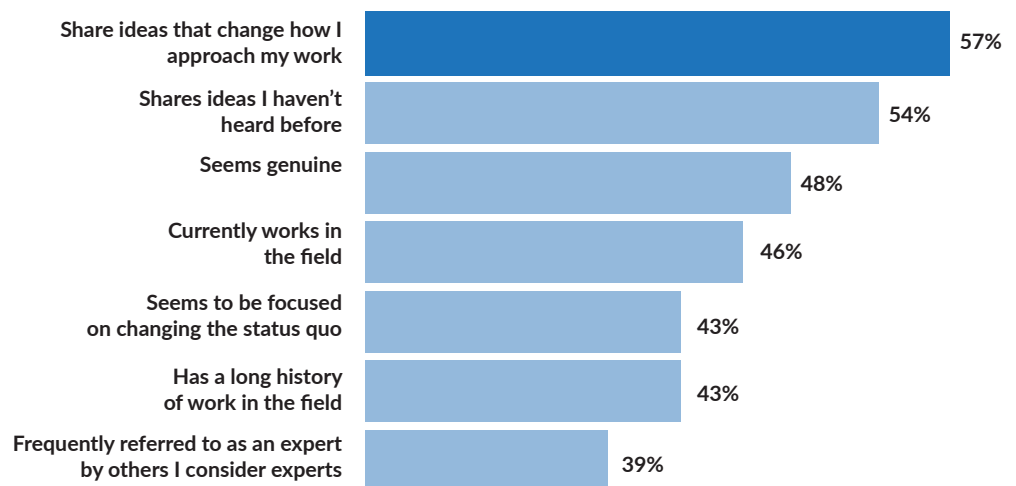
Trusting Followers are more likely than other segments to identify being a professional speaker, regularly seeing an expert's name or content in their social media feeds, and having a large social media following.

Jaded Skeptics are least likely to cite any characteristics as qualifiers for being a thought leader.

Discriminating & Engaged are more likely to cite many of the characteristics as qualifications -- in addition to sharing new ideas that inspire change, they are more likely to reference having a long history of work in the field, being frequently referred to as an expert by others the respondent considers experts, speaking at conferences and publishing a book.

Self-Described Experts often align with the choices of the total respondent group overall.

## WHAT MAKES SOMEONE A THOUGHT LEADER



## IMPLICATIONS

While all respondents follow “thought leaders”, they feel very differently about them -- and the same characteristics that say “thought leader” to Trusting Followers can be far less important to other segments, and are likely to brand someone as a self-absorbed waste of space to a Jaded Skeptic. Those who want to be considered a thought leader need to carefully consider these characteristics and their own goals for their thought leadership and craft messaging and resources specifically designed to resonate with the segments they want to target.

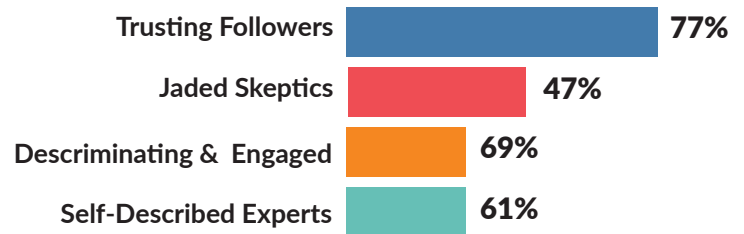
# “Thought Leader” Terminology

When asked how they feel about the term “thought leader”, the majority of respondents like it (52%) or love it (12%).

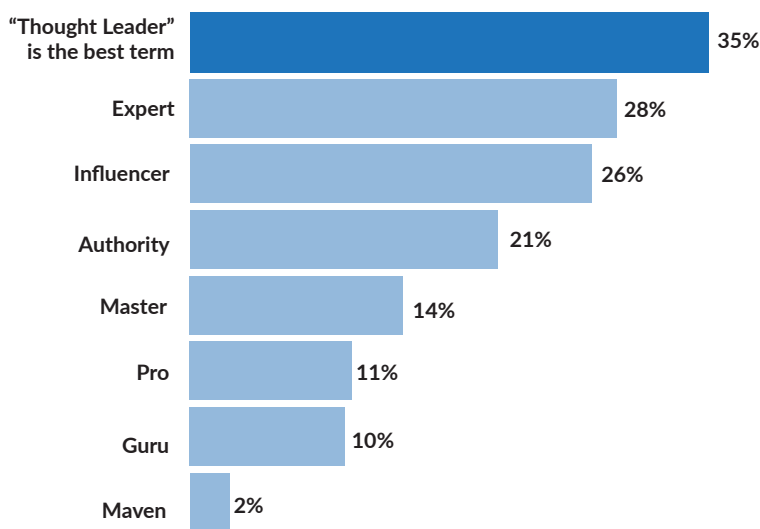
Trusting Followers are the most enthusiastic.

19% of respondents either don’t like or hate the term, led by Jaded Skeptics (26%) and Self-Described Experts (25%).

## % WHO LIKE THE TERM “THOUGHT LEADER”



## PREFERRED TERMS



Only 20% “definitely” feel that the terms “Expert” and “Thought Leader” mean the same thing. Trusting Followers are most likely to equate the two.

When asked which of a list of terms they prefer, 65% chose a term other than “thought leader”. 28% chose “expert”, 26% chose “influencer” and 21% chose “authority”. Few preferred “pro”, “guru” or “maven”. Discriminating & Engaged were most likely to choose “thought leader” as their favorite term (49%).

## IMPLICATIONS

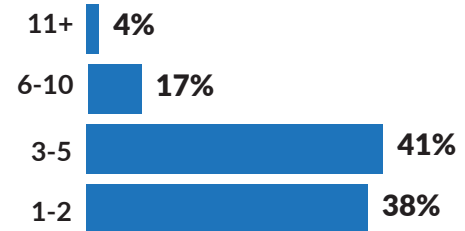
Even the terminology around “thought leadership” can be fraught. Many respondents don’t feel the term is interchangeable with expertise, and for Jaded Skeptics it can be seen as a marker of exactly the opposite.

## Following Thought Leaders

62% of respondents say they regularly follow at least three thought leaders, and 21% follow six or more. Self-Described Experts and Jaded Skeptics are most likely to follow only one or two (49% and 45%, respectively) and only 23% of Discriminating Skeptics say the same.

**54% of respondents can name a particular expert who's been helpful to them.**

### HOW MANY THOUGHT LEADERS THEY FOLLOW REGULARLY



Jaded Experts are much less likely than other segments to say they can name a particularly helpful expert. 73% of respondents who can name an expert say the term “thought leader” definitely applies to that person. (Only 55% of Jaded Skeptics say the same.)

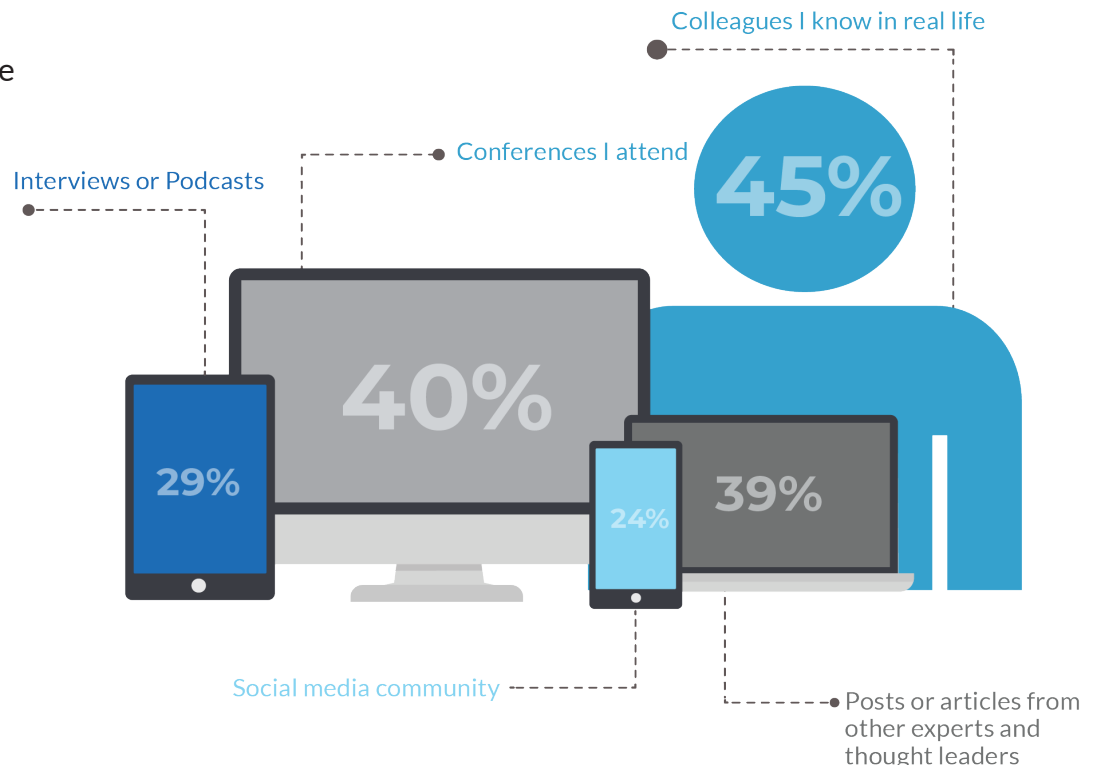
Most respondents describe the experts or thought leaders they follow as experienced, thought-provoking, trusted, helpful and innovative. Discriminating & Engaged respondents are far more likely to choose these terms than other segments. Jaded-Skeptics are the least likely to describe experts they follow using these terms.

Many respondents say they hear about thought leaders from colleagues, conferences, industry organizations and other experts.

Discriminating & Engaged are more likely than other segments to identify all of these sources.

Trusting Followers are more likely than other segments to identify Facebook Groups as sources of information about thought leaders.

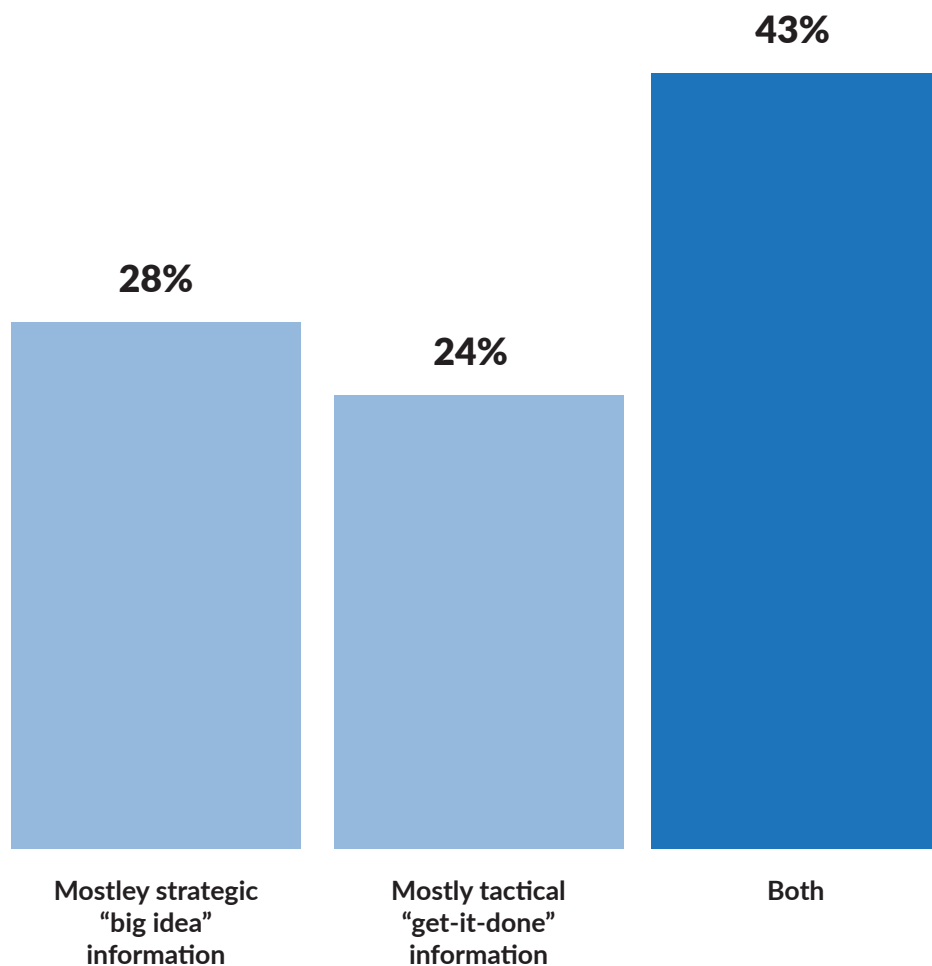
### WHERE THEY HEAR ABOUT THOUGHT LEADERS



## Following Thought Leaders

Asked to choose which types of information, advice or content they'd find most helpful, 43% of respondents say both strategic, "big idea" information and tactical, "get-it-done" information would be most helpful. Discriminating & Engaged are much more likely to choose both (55%) and Trusting Followers are more likely than other segments to choose only strategic information (36%).

### PREFERRED CONTENT FROM THOUGHT LEADERS



### IMPLICATIONS

Referrals are a key awareness builder for thought leaders -- whether those are referrals from colleagues, from other experts, from conference platforms or industry organizations. And it's clear that a mix of strategic and tactical information can often be valued, although such a decision should be based on the thought leader's expertise and the problems they are seeking to help their audiences solve.

## Consuming Content

Respondents use a wide range of platforms to consume content from thought leaders. Live events are the most frequently cited overall, followed by podcasts, email newsletters and blog posts.

Discriminating & Engaged are far more likely to cite many sources for thought leadership insights -- attending events, listening to podcasts or interviews, reading blog posts, watching online videos or reading books.

43% say they have joined an online community formed by a thought leader. Trusting Followers & Discriminating & Engaged are most likely. Most say those online communities have provided value, with 31% considering them extremely valuable.

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**41% say they “Definitely” would consider joining an online community formed by an expert they trust.**

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Jaded Skeptics are least likely to cite any of these, are far less likely to mention reading social media posts (7%) than Discriminating & Engaged (35%) and Trusting Followers (33%).

### HOW THEY CONSUME THOUGHT LEADERSHIP CONTENT



### IMPLICATIONS

There are a wide range of vehicles that followers are using to access information from thought leaders, and online communities appear to be generally well-received. However, it's clear that thought leaders would benefit from more than solely a social media post approach.

## Being a Thought Leader

11% of respondents say they “definitely” consider themselves to be a thought leader, but 56% say they do “to some extent”. Trusting Followers are slightly more likely to say so. Many also say others consider them a thought leader -- 63% say “to some extent” and 15% say “definitely”.

Discriminating & Engaged and Trusting Followers are the most enthusiastic about being a thought leader themselves.

### IMPLICATIONS

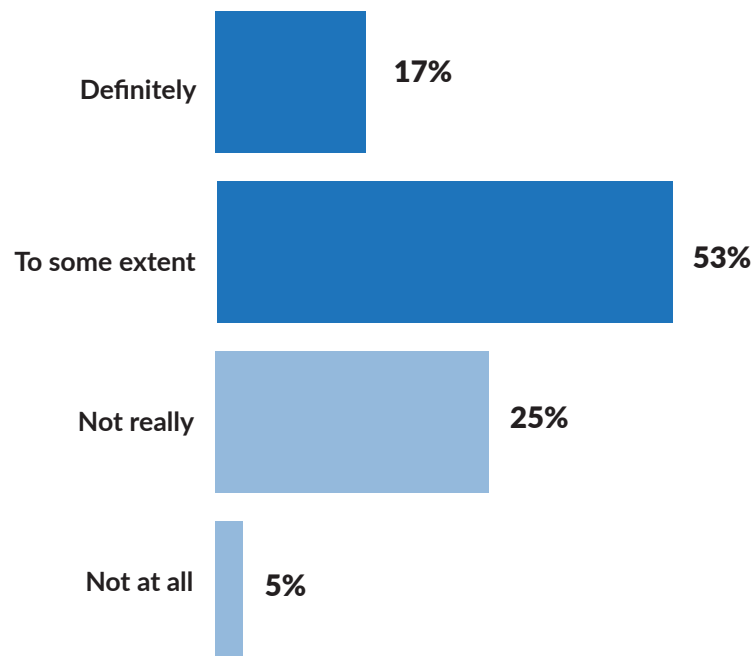
It’s important for thought leaders to remember that many of their followers may in fact have hopes to one day be recognized as a thought leader themselves. Content that helps followers build their own expertise and be recognized for their unique insights and helpful content may provide additional appeal for followers.

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*70% of respondents say they would like to be considered an expert or thought leader.*

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### % WHO WANT TO BE A THOUGHT LEADER





## ROI of Thought Leadership

91% of respondents say they have recommended a particular expert or thought leader to a colleague -- 66% have done so sometimes or often. Trusting Followers are most likely to have done so sometimes (63%) or often (18%). Jaded Skeptics are less likely with 46% saying they have done so at least sometimes.

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***62% say they are more likely to recommend a business service provider who is also a recognized thought leader.***

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***61% say thought leaders impact decisions.***

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49% of respondents have made a business purchase based on a recommendation from a thought leader. Large groups of all segments, including Jaded Skeptics (39%) have done so. 59% say they would be more likely to continue to work with a provider who is a recognized thought leader.

And 62% of respondents say that the recommendation of a thought leader they trust would have a greater impact on their consideration of a business service than advertising by the provider. Another 34% say the impact of the thought leader's recommendation and provider advertising would be about the same.

### IMPLICATIONS

The research clearly reveals that thought leadership generates real results in terms of referrals, purchase and client retention. In addition, nearly all followers value a thought leader's recommendation for service providers as much or more than the provider's own advertising -- confirming that thought leaders who have gained the trust of their followers have an outside impact on their choices.

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***91% have recommended a thought leader to a colleague***

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Most respondents say that thought leaders impact at least some of their decisions or recommendations to their organizations. 61% say thought leaders impact some decisions, and 23% say they impact most decisions. Trusting Followers are more likely to say that thought leaders impact most decisions (38%) while Discriminating & Engaged are most likely to say that they impact some decisions (75%).

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***59% would be more likely to continue working with a thought leader.***

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***62% say a thought leader's recommendation has more impact than advertising.***

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## Segment-based Content Recommendations

**The following are not exhaustive segment-based content strategies — but — we wanted to share some specific ideas for each of the four attitudinal segments to help you and your team get started.**

### Trusting Followers

- Show them you recognize that it can be hard to find quality, helpful advice in a sea of thought leaders. Reinforce the value they place in the recommendations of recognized thought leaders and other markers of expertise such as speaking engagements, books, etc.
- Conduct primary research where your goal is to challenge the status quo and firmly held beliefs within your audience's industry.
- Generously share your findings and teach online workshops so your followers can learn from you.
- Write a book as one of your cornerstone content channels, choose a provocative title, and base the content on your status quo challenging research.
- Slice and dice the content from your research projects and books into keynote speeches, workshop content that you can deliver at industry events, blog posts, webinars, social media content, etc.
- Host a podcast where you interview other thought-provoking guests from within the industry and outside it — then curate the golden nuggets from each episode and share with your audience.
- Collaborate with other recognized thought leaders and promote your appearances on their podcasts, in their books, and when they share or call out your content. Include their testimonials of your expertise in your books, your website and your bio.

### Jaded Skeptics

- Empathize with their opinion that many so-called “thought leaders” are more focused on self-promotion than providing new and helpful ideas. Differentiate yourself by establishing your true experience and the innovation of your ideas.
- Be humble. Refer to yourself as someone with experience and ideas, but don't call yourself a thought leader.
- In whatever content you create and share — the emphasis must always be on the work, the outcomes of your work, and how the findings can help your audience. What you share is never about you.
- As with Trusting Followers — your work should help to break new ground for the industry. But — you're more likely to stand out, be heard, and build credibility if you collaborate with other established experts from OUTSIDE your industry whose provocative ideas combined with your industry insights will help you break new ground.
- Create profiles, case studies, and tangible (not of your clients) with fully illustrated data sets so Jaded Skeptics can evaluate the merits themselves.
- Generously share the ideas and work of others that can help your audience. Call out the expertise of others at least as often as you share your own content.
- Seek endorsements for your work — not for you personally — from credible 3rd party sources.

# Segment-based Content Recommendations

## Discriminating & Engaged

- Show the details of your work in the trenches. Take your audience behind the curtain in full transparency.
- Promote testimonials from organizations in the industry you specialize in helping.
- Collaborate with industry partners – and even competitors – all for the greater good.
- Share your journey -- Promote the real successes and failures you've experienced in your business. Be transparent and generous.
- Map out and illustrate your time in the trenches, milestones, etc. in a way that helps quantify your body of work. Share recognitions, awards, testimonials and well-known organizations you've worked with in the industry you're targeting.
- Create content that could help you win earned media placements – or – become a contributor to Forbes.com and other media.
- Create a “Resource Library” or “Research Section” on your website where your audience can download free tools, summaries, eBooks, checklists, or other helpful findings you've curated.
- Make yourself available for real-life questions and discussions with your followers. Consider establishing a place for online conversations in which you regularly participate.

## Self-Described Experts

- Create a helpful and content-rich online community to help self-described experts further hone their expertise because 82% would view this resource as either “extremely” or “somewhat valuable.”
- Launch a podcast where you interview real working experienced professionals in the industries you serve. Interview your Dream 25 prospects so they can share their insights and wisdom with your listeners (we call this the Trojan Horse of Sales Strategy).
- Curate and share all of the golden nuggets from each interview and tag your guests in the distribution.
- Launch a webinar series where you co-host and co-teach a webinar for your audience alongside one of your Dream 25 prospects (content goes into your online community).
- When you teach in-person, conduct a video interview, or attend an event – present yourself in a businesslike, professional manner. Show you're experienced and confident.
- Consider sharing your suggestions for how to build a thought leadership practice, based on your own experience. How do you produce your content? How do you get on podcasts?
- Promote quality content from other industry experts -- whether they're recognized thought leaders or not. Call out exceptional thinking wherever it comes from.

## Action Steps: How to Plant Your Flag of Authority

### Action Steps: How to Plant Your Flag of Authority

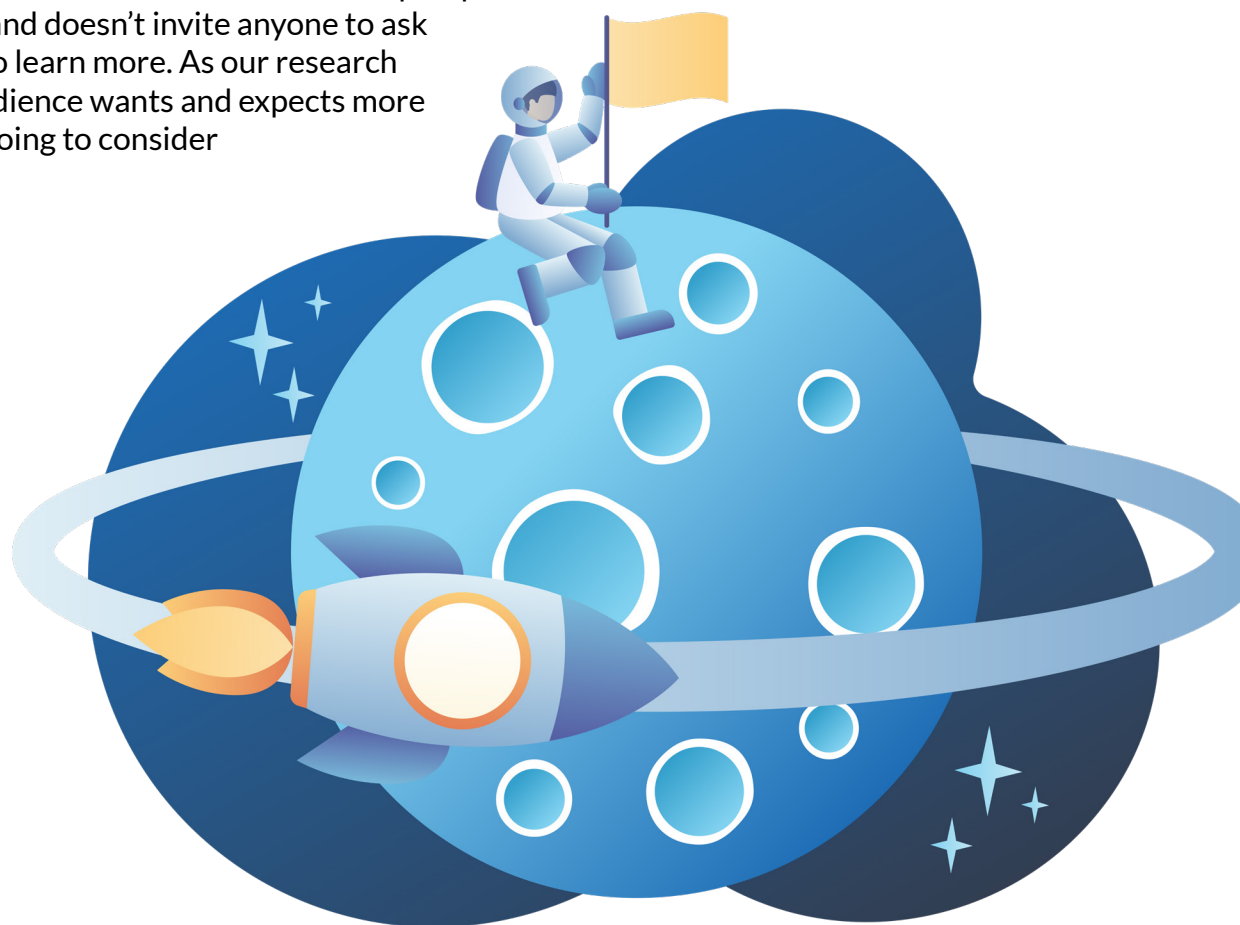
Our hope is that the findings of our research will help you and your team think through how to doubling down on what you share and teach — and ultimately — how you can be even helpful to your clients and prospects because you served up your content in the right way for the right segments. And in the process — you will have planted what Drew McLellan and Stephen Woessner call “your flag of authority” in their recent book, “Sell with Authority.”

We'll close out this Executive Summary by quickly summarizing the three essentials to planting your flag so you and your team can begin the work.

### Essential #1: Narrow is Gold

The narrower your audience — the better. It allows you to be quickly discovered and identified as someone your target audience needs to pay attention to, all because you're speaking their language. Ultimately, this means you can build an audience much faster. And when you combine going narrow with the power of selecting the right attitudinal segment(s) who best align with you and your content — it can be a powerful combination because you will no longer be trying to serve your audience as a generalist. You will be seen as a specialist within your industry and by the people within your segments. Most get this completely backward. They create broad, generic content as opposed to something that captures the interest of their ideal prospects.

The content is fluffy and doesn't invite anyone to ask questions or lean in to learn more. As our research has shown — your audience wants and expects more from you if they are going to consider you a thought leader.



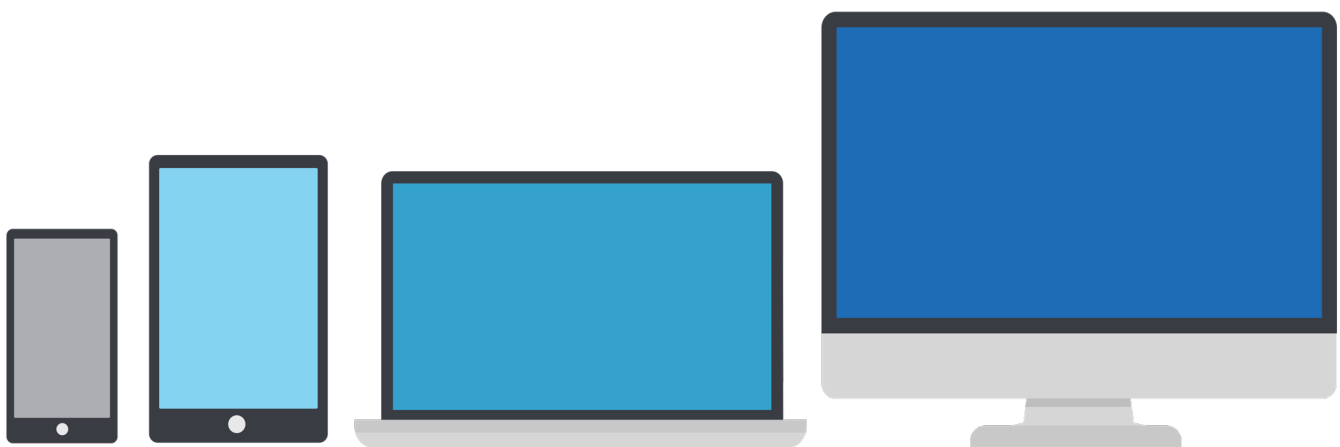
## Action Steps: How to Plant Your Flag of Authority

### Essential #2: Point-of-View

Your point of view is what you know to be true. And it's this truth that defines how you approach the work you do for your clients and how you add value through your content. And what we learned from all four of the segments — there are all looking for you to stand out, to share, to teach, and to help them be better. You can do that if you're not bringing anything unique to the discussion. You must stand out from the sea of competitors. You need to lay claim to what is uniquely yours — the ability to serve a specific industry, niche, audience, etc. because of what you know and what you believe. It also holds you firmly in place no matter what else changes. It becomes part of your differentiation equation. Without a strong point-of-view — even industry-specific content becomes claimable by others.

### Essential #3: You Can't Be a One-Trick Pony

You can't create content so narrow that it only works on one channel. A thought leader doesn't have just one book. Or just a podcast. You can't place all of your bets on one horse (or pony, to stick with our theme). The problem is that whatever pony you rode in on is not going to be the popular pony forever. You can't rely on all of your prospects consuming your content from one specific channel. And that was a key finding in our research — your prospects are learning about thought leaders and consuming content across a variety of channels. So your need to be findable across many channels — but — that does not mean you need to create original content for each channel. It simply means that you need to have a great slice and dice strategy so that one podcast episode becomes 30-40 smaller pieces of content. Or — your annual research project turns into webinars, blog posts, articles for Forbes.com, etc. Create a channel strategy best suited for your desired segment.



## About Predictive ROI

Stephen Woessner founded Predictive ROI in 2009 to help business owners drive predictable, repeatable, and measurable return on investment from all their marketing efforts. Predictive was built on the belief that most businesses go about sales in the least productive, most painful way possible. Predictive works along side their clients to create their own “Authority Sales Machine” -- a lead gen and sales program that is welcomed and often initiated by the potential buyer.

[www.predictiveroi.com](http://www.predictiveroi.com)

## About Audience Audit

Susan Baier founded her company, Audience Audit, in 2009 in order to help organizations understand their best audiences based on attitudes and needs rather than just demographics or purchase behavior. With 30-years of experience as a marketing strategist, she develops custom segmentation research for marketers and agencies around the world, supporting their efforts to create marketing initiatives that are more relevant, more efficient, and more impactful.

[www.audienceaudit.com](http://www.audienceaudit.com)

