
How Corporate Thought Leadership Drives Business Success



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What makes an organisation an opinion leader and how it affects business revenue.

In a world driven and dominated by digital communication, online thought leaders have never been more critical. Much like individual social media influencers, organisations are now leveraging their profiles on professional networking platforms such as LinkedIn to establish themselves as thought leaders. This grants them the power to mobilise and influence followers and enhance business outcomes.

While the influence of individual thought leaders is well documented, little attention has been given to the role of organisations as opinion leaders. A company can be considered a corporate opinion leader when it is a trusted authority in its field, shaping thinking about the company and the wider industry.

In a recent [study](#), my co-authors* and I found that corporate opinion leadership on professional social media platforms like LinkedIn is positively associated with company revenue. Essentially, companies that position themselves as thought leaders have a larger following, and as that following grows, so does their revenue.

This finding is important considering some companies prioritise popular social media platforms like Twitter or Instagram and neglect the potential benefits of online professional networks. However, given that LinkedIn followers provide data on their employment history, skills and interests, they are arguably more reliable than followers (including fake accounts and bots) on platforms like Twitter and Instagram. LinkedIn followers are therefore more likely to serve as potential customers, job candidates or business partners.

Being a thought leader is good for business

Our study investigated the impact of thought leadership on a company's financial performance, as well as the factors that facilitate an organisation becoming an opinion leader. We examined 310 companies, chosen from the S&P 500 list, with active profiles on LinkedIn. The sample comprised 99 sectors, which we grouped into eight broad categories: services, basic materials, consumer goods, finance, healthcare, industrial goods, technology and utilities.

First, we collected data on the number of followers and company revenue to examine the relationship between opinion leadership and business performance. Our results showed that firms with 1 percent more followers on LinkedIn have 0.5 percent higher revenue on average.

[Prior research](#) suggests that organisations can leverage their social media accounts to inform their followers about products and services, which can lead to increased engagement and sales. Our study confirmed that industry thought leaders can influence followers with suggestions and advice, resulting in product purchases and use of services.

Next, we focused on the factors that determine whether a company is a thought leader by analysing the content generated by companies, users and employees. Our findings indicated that job posts, user reactions to posts and employee profiles are positively related to opinion leadership. Put differently, content created by organisations, users and employees facilitates the

perception that a company is a thought leader in its respective industry.

Corporate opinion leaders have an impact not only on followers and **prospective clients** but also future job candidates. This is because professional networking platforms allow companies to communicate with candidates and improve their business performance through talent acquisition.

How to make your business a thought leader

Our research provides valuable insights into the strategies that companies can adopt to establish themselves as corporate opinion leaders on professional social media platforms. Companies need to stimulate user reactions by producing unique and innovative content, such as short videos, infographics, product launches, feature enhancements and company achievements. For instance, HubSpot has successfully established itself as a thought leader on LinkedIn by creating eye-catching graphics and photos that highlight the organisation's values and culture, as well as industry trends.

While companies often use paid job advertisements to reach candidates on LinkedIn, we found that they can reach a wider audience by posting job advertisements as visual posts directly to their LinkedIn feed. Visual content tends to be more engaging and memorable, allowing companies to showcase their strengths, differentiate their firm from competitors and establish themselves as opinion leaders in their respective industries. It further highlights the company's focus on talent acquisition and development, which is an essential component of being a thought leader in any industry.

Additionally, companies should motivate employees to set up LinkedIn profiles to broadcast their skills and employee experience to other users. Although LinkedIn serves as a head-hunting tool for many recruiters and there is a risk that employees will receive job offers from other firms, our study shows that employees make great online advocates and can further facilitate their employer's image.

Companies can also use humour and pop culture references to grab attention on professional social media platforms and establish strong connections with their audience. HubSpot, for example, **playfully used the "Barbie" movie filter** to showcase its key leaders on LinkedIn. Featuring employee profiles and highlighting their knowledge on specific topics not

only helps establish the company's thought leadership, but also provides employees with an opportunity to showcase their expertise, which can lead to increased engagement and job satisfaction.

Another example is Airbnb, which has established itself as a thought leader in the hospitality industry by promoting its hosts and showcasing real-life examples of how the platform has positively impacted people's lives. For instance, Airbnb [shared a heart-warming story](#) on LinkedIn of a former host who met his wife via the platform. This approach underscores the company's commitment to providing unique and memorable experiences for its customers and helps build a community of loyal users and brand advocates who can contribute to the company's continued success.

Becoming a thought leader in the digital age requires a multifaceted approach. It involves creating and distributing high-quality content on professional social media accounts, fostering employee engagement and participation in online conversations and leveraging user-generated content to build brand credibility and relevance. By focusing on these key strategies, companies can establish themselves as trusted authorities, enhance their online visibility and reputation and cultivate a loyal following of customers and advocates.

To achieve this, companies need to adopt a strategic approach to social media marketing, using data and analytics to track engagement and measure the effectiveness of their content, as well as investing in employee training and development to empower workers to share their expertise and insights with their online networks. In addition, companies should actively seek out and engage with followers and users, respond to comments and feedback and showcase user-generated content that highlights the unique value and impact of their products and services.

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About the research

"Corporate opinion leadership on professional social media" is published in *Management Decision*.