

What does it mean to be a thought leader? Are you rising to the challenge? How about your company?

In the September/October issue of *The Hub*, Hedy Lukas of Kimberly-Clark said: “We’re challenging our agencies to challenge us and stay fresh and not be just execution partners, but also to be thought leaders with us.”

However based on our reader survey, it is safe to say that “thought leadership” is ill-defined at best and non-existent at worst in the marketing business. We’ve seldom seen so many meandering, cliché-ridden attempts at a definition.

Here’s a sample: “Having enough vision to look out to the horizon, imagine how things might change on the journey getting there, and possessing the mental nimbleness to envision all the dynamics and potentialities there; to understand that vision and be able to then envision what might be just over the horizon.” Hm. Russia, perhaps?

Some were kind of philosophical: “The constant challenge to fail forward with fearless thinking.” “Having faith in something when common sense tells you not to.” “Taking marketing from art to science and back to art.”

Others were a bit more succinct: “Game-changing ideas,” said one respondent. “Be the change!” declared another. “Being ahead of the curve,” said a third.

What most seemed to be trying to say was perhaps best articulated by the respondent who defined thought leadership as “the application of specific knowledge to the business challenges faced by the client.” Or, plain old “solving problems.”

What kinds of problems? A huge majority—78 percent—said that the marketing challenge most in need of thought leadership is “innovation.” “Shopper insights” registered at just 40 percent, compared to 58 percent for “consumer insights.” This is a surprising result, given all the chatter about “shopper insights” lately.

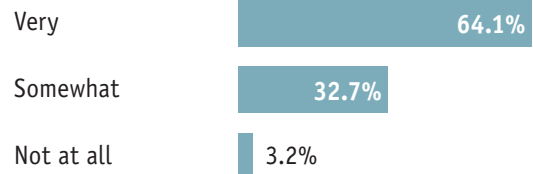
The other responses, in order, were “generating growth” (59 percent); “building customer loyalty” (53 percent); “brand identity” (49 percent); and “media R.O.I.” (40 percent).

Thought

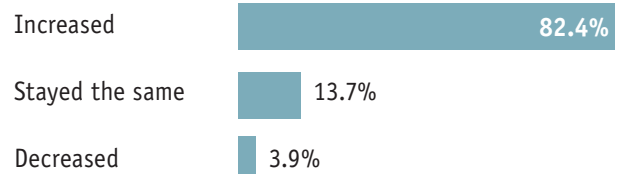
Do you think the marketing industry views your company as a thought leader?



How critical is agency thought leadership to sustaining client loyalty?



How have pressures for thought leadership changed over the past 5-10 years?

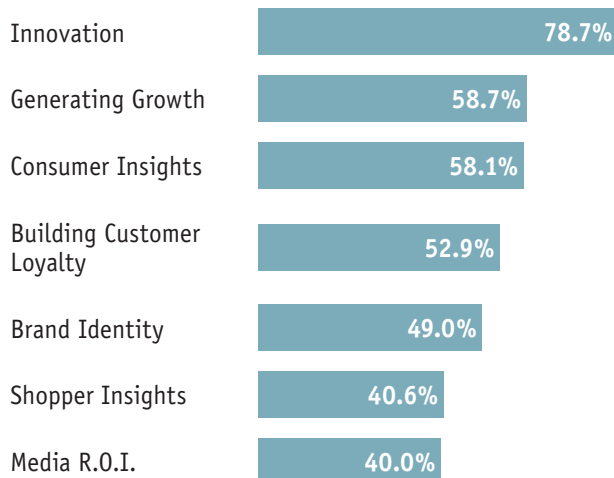


Leaders

How does your company encourage thought leadership, if at all? (pick all that apply)



Which marketing challenges most demand thought leadership today? (pick all that apply)



Despite the somewhat murky vision of what constitutes thought leadership, our survey respondents were clear about one thing: Thought leadership—whatever that is—is a sure path to new business, client retention, profits and growth.

When we asked how thought leadership has paid off for their companies, our respondents almost invariably cited some form of business development. “It has become a competitive advantage for agencies who want to do more than advertising and who want to have a bigger seat at the table,” said one respondent.

Indeed, on the question of the relationship between thought leadership and client loyalty, 64 percent said it was “very” critical, while 33 percent said it was only “somewhat” critical and three percent said it was “not at all” critical.

Meanwhile, only 45 percent of respondents said they thought of themselves as thought leaders, with 44 percent saying they were thought leaders only “sometimes.” Just 42 percent think their employers are thought leaders and a scant 34 percent believe the marketing industry views their companies as thought leaders.

Where thought leadership does exist, 53 percent said it was encouraged mostly by company “culture,” followed by “personal recognition,” at 43 percent. Twenty-seven percent said that their companies did not encourage thought leadership at all. Meanwhile, an overwhelming majority of 82 percent said that pressures for thought leadership had increased over the past 5-10 years.

However, as one respondent cautioned: “Not all clients are really interested. They want to be interested, but also they want things to be smooth—thought leadership is about exploration, it can be bumpy at first.” Added another: “The value of thought leadership and client budgets are at odds. Budget usually wins.”

RESPONDENT PROFILE

A total of 160 survey respondents included brand marketers (21%), consulting firms (24%) and agencies (29%). Twenty-eight percent worked in packaged goods firms, 6% in media/entertainment and 4% in retail. A majority were senior-level executives with 76% reporting more than ten years of experience in marketing. ■