

LESSONS FROM THE LEADERS

BEST PRACTICE CONTENT MARKETING SURVEY

RESULTS ARE BASED ON INTERVIEWS WITH 150 SENIOR CLIENT-FACING
PERSONNEL IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES, FINANCIAL SERVICES AND
TECHNOLOGY FIRMS



grist

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About the research

Independent market research agency, Coleman Parkes, undertook the research on behalf of Grist, conducting 150 interviews with senior client-facing executives at professional services, financial services and technology firms with revenues in excess of £20m. The interviews were carried out in May and June 2017.

1.0 Executive summary

Last year we published the Value of B2B Thought Leadership Survey, which unearthed some real surprises in how the C-suite at FTSE350 firms view and use thought leadership.

This year's survey examines whether those messages are getting through to those firms trying to market to them. We spoke to 150 senior client-facing personnel in professional services, financial services and technology firms to better understand their views.

We wanted to know how they plan, create, distribute and measure content marketing.

It quickly became clear that a small minority of firms are noticeably better in their approach. Content marketing has a significant impact for these firms, who confirmed in our survey that: they use it widely; they know clients' issues and produce engaging content that addresses their opportunities and risks; and it is highly effective.

These respondents we termed 'leaders', and this is what they do differently.

1. Planning. Leaders are much more likely than others to document their content marketing strategy. They use content marketing for a broader range of objectives and understand that the content must be truly helpful to achieve their aims. They also involve more internal functions in the planning process and are much more likely to use a content marketing agency. **See section 2.0 →**

2. Creating. All leaders produce content centrally, tailoring it to the needs of sales and using central brand guidelines to ensure consistency. The marketing department is instrumental in the content creation, and most likely in commissioning. They are almost twice as likely as others to include the views of inspirational

individuals outside their industry, and employ a much more multi-format approach to get their message across). **See section 3.0 →**

3. Distributing. All leaders know the channels their clients frequent and test new ones systematically. They target more groups, are likely to employ a much wider variety of channels and are, perhaps not surprisingly, more savvy with social media. Almost all leaders have a specialist communications department to organise the distribution of content. **See section 4.0 →**

4. Measurement. All leaders have defined KPIs for content, and use a wider variety of measures compared with others. They are more acutely aware of the need to create content with purpose, ensuring that they reach the right audience with a

wider variety of calls-to-action. They are more likely to measure using their CRM system and specific marketing automation software. **See section 5.0 →**

2.0 Planning matters

Plan your success.

Having a documented content marketing strategy clearly matters.

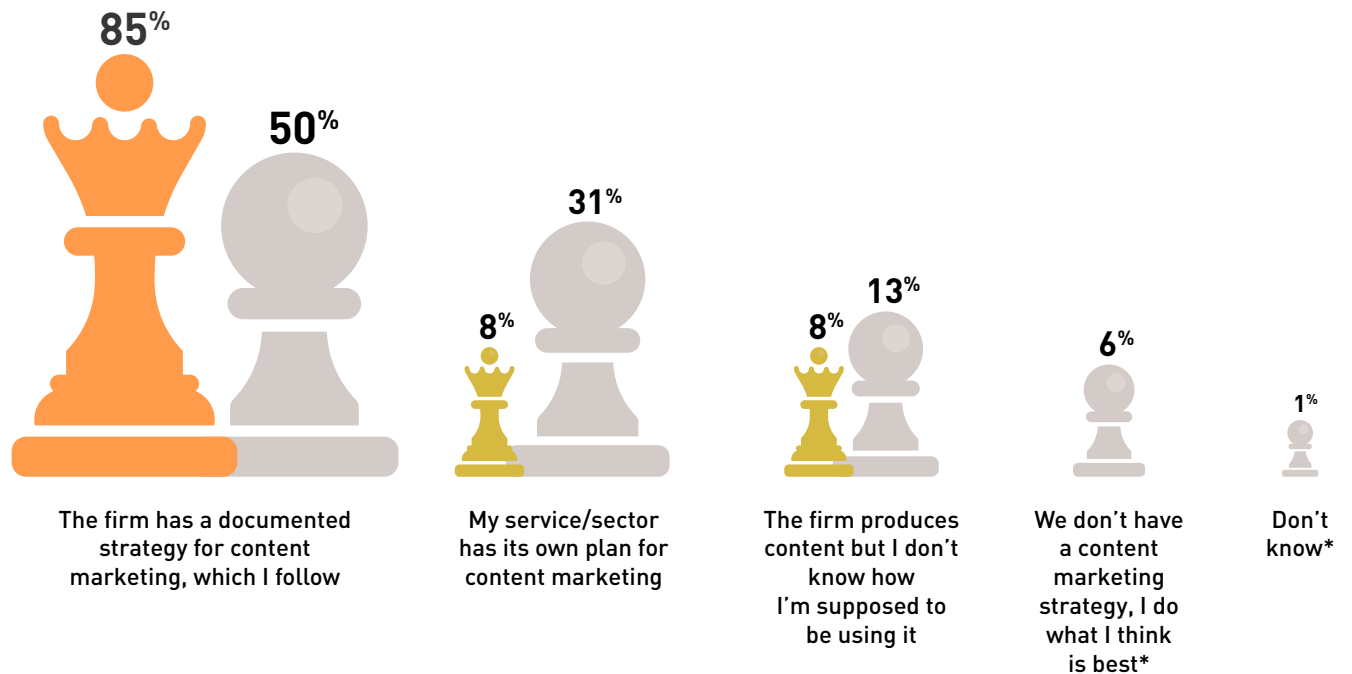
85% of leaders have a documented strategy for content marketing, compared with only 50% of others.

Codifying content marketing enables a shared understanding of fundamentals such as objectives, key messages and target audience, making success more likely.

Almost a third (31%) of others have discrete sector/service plans for content marketing, which likely means best practice is not as joined-up.

Q: Which of the following describes your firm's approach to content marketing?

Leader Others



*Leaders = 0%

2.1 Planning matters continued

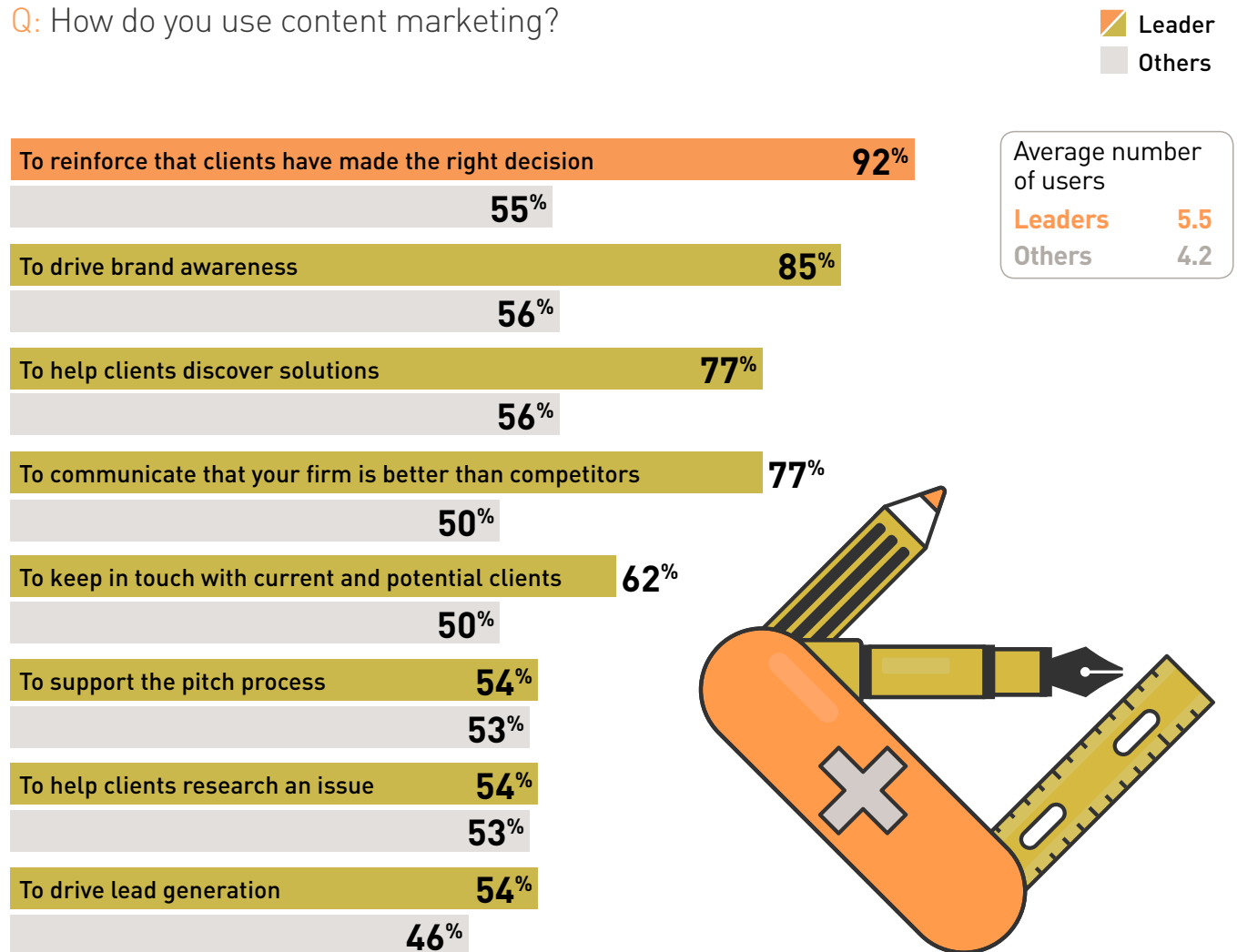
The Grist survey sought to understand how the participants use content marketing. Overall, leaders use content marketing more extensively than others, averaging 5.5 uses as opposed to 4.2.

Notably, leaders are almost twice as likely (92% vs 55%) as others to rely on content to reinforce that clients have made the right decision to use their services – thinking of a longer-term relationship early in the process and developing content to help facilitate it.

Leaders are more likely than others to: use content to drive brand awareness (85% vs 56%); to help clients discover solutions (77% vs 56%); and communicate that their firm is better than competitors' (77% vs 50%).

Both leaders and others also use content marketing for reasons including keeping in touch with clients, supporting the pitch process, helping clients research an issue and driving lead generation.

Q: How do you use content marketing?



2.2 Planning matters continued

Becoming a decision-maker.

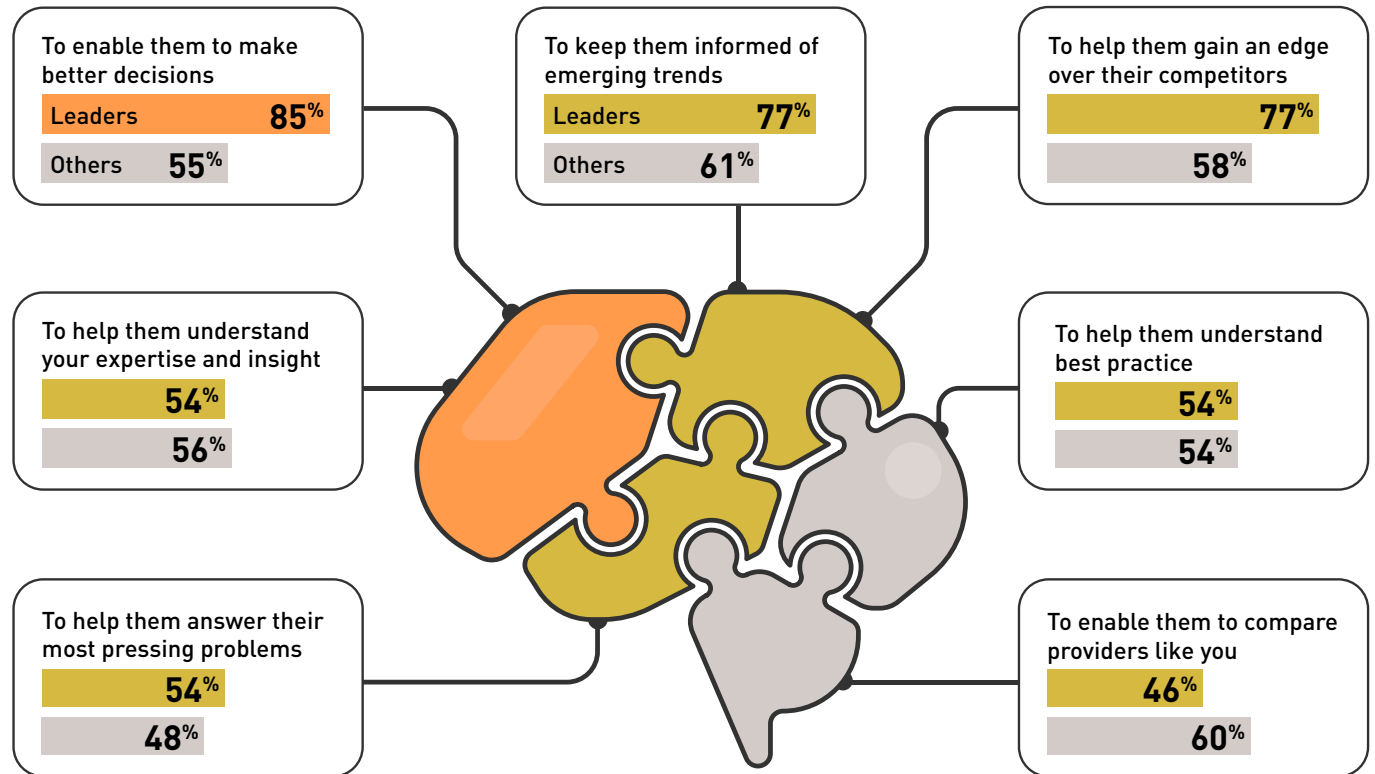
When asked about their clients, leaders have a deeper understanding of client needs, and the fundamental tenet that the content must be helpful to achieve their aims.

They believe that clients want content that enables them to make better decisions (85% vs 55%), keep them informed of emerging trends (77% vs 61%) and give them an edge over their competitors (77% vs 58%).

Others are much more homogenous in what they think clients are looking for. They value content that helps clients understand their expertise and insight, and content that enables them to compare similar service providers is just as important as client-focused content.

Q: What do you think your clients want from your content marketing?

Leader
Others



2.3 Planning matters continued

The shape of things to come.

Leaders have more groups involved in the content planning process, averaging 6.7 compared with 5.2. They differ significantly, however, in their use of external help in the planning process, using content marketing agencies and industry experts to shape their content marketing programmes much more than others.

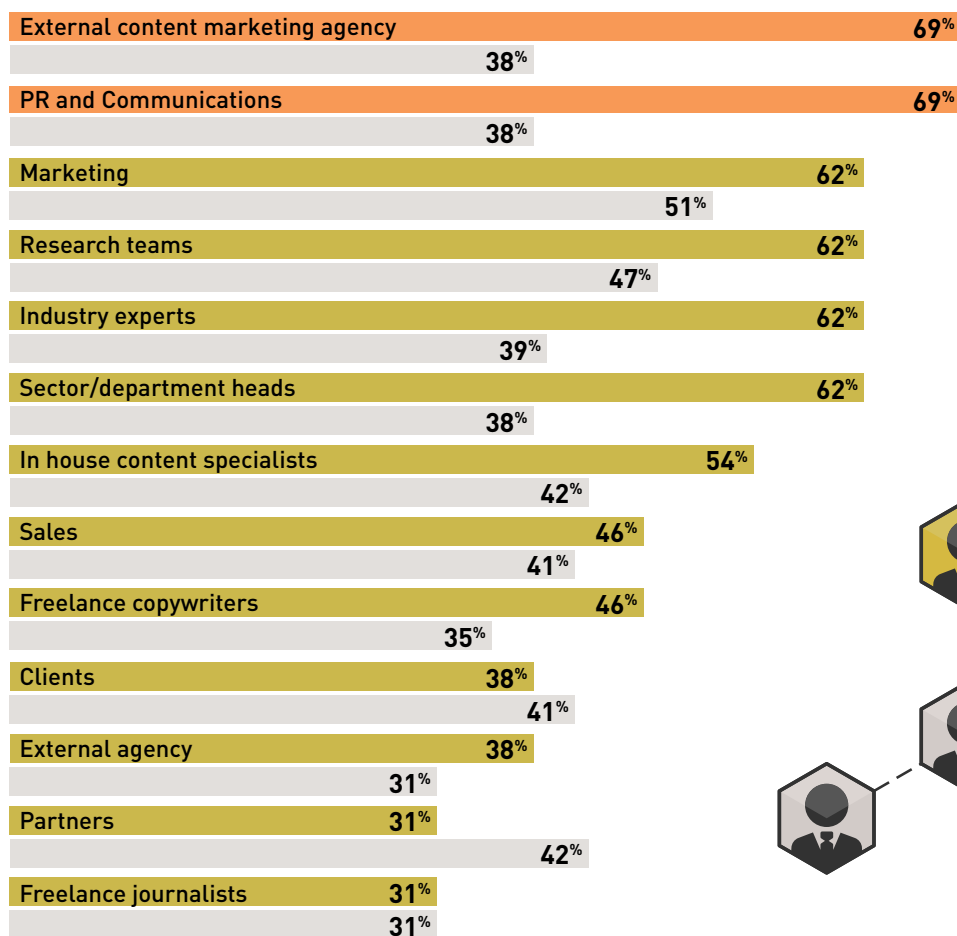
Internal PR and comms, research teams and sector/department heads are also better used by leaders.

As one might expect, marketing is involved in the planning process of both leaders and others. But surprisingly, sales (46% of leaders vs 41% of others) and clients (38% of leaders vs 41% of others) are underutilised by both groups.

Freelance journalists are used less than freelance copywriters – potentially highlighting a lack of understanding of the skill sets of these two groups.

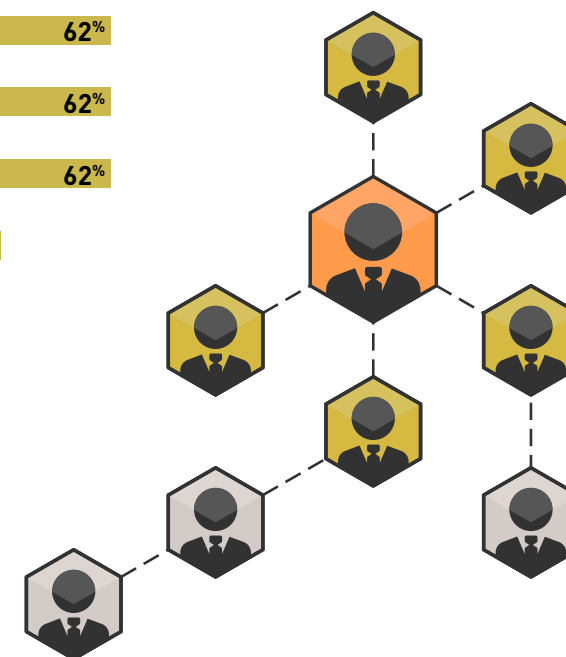
Q: Who is involved in the content planning process in your organisation?*

Leader
Others



Average number of groups involved

Leaders 6.7
Others 5.2



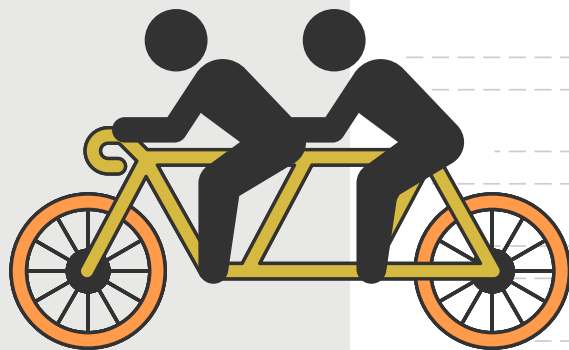
*Other than content marketing agency

2.4 Planning matters continued

When asked their thoughts on content marketing agencies, leaders have a more developed relationship with them than others.

Notably, 85% of leaders use a content marketing agency and believe that partnership to be working well, vs only 59% of others.

Leaders are less likely to believe that they would 'like to use a content marketing agency but don't know the right one' (15% vs 32%) or 'don't have the budget' (15% vs 31%).



Q: Which of the following best describes your views on content marketing agencies?

Leader Others

We use a content marketing agency; it works well 85%

59%

Content marketing agencies don't understand the technical side of the business

31%

37%

We would like to use a content marketing agency but don't know the right one

15%

32%

We would like to use a content marketing agency but don't have the budget

15%

31%

We have used content marketing agencies before and it has not worked

15%

25%

We don't see the need to use a content marketing agency

8%

18%

3.0 Content creation

The centre of activity.

All leaders produce content centrally, according to our survey. 77% of them do so and then tailor it to sales needs throughout the organisation, presumably driving benefits from the economies of scale and consistency of centralised production. Only 58% of others do.

Almost a quarter (23%) of leaders produce content centrally but do not align it to the sales process, suggesting there is opportunity for improvement even in some of the best organisations. However, none of the leaders leave content exclusively to client-facing teams, whereas a total of 28% of others do.

Q: How well is content aligned to sales needs?

Leader
Others

Content is centrally produced and tailored to the needs of sales **77%**

58%

Content is centrally produced but is not aligned to the sales process

23%

13%

Sales produce the content with help from marketing

0%

13%

Sales produce all the content they use

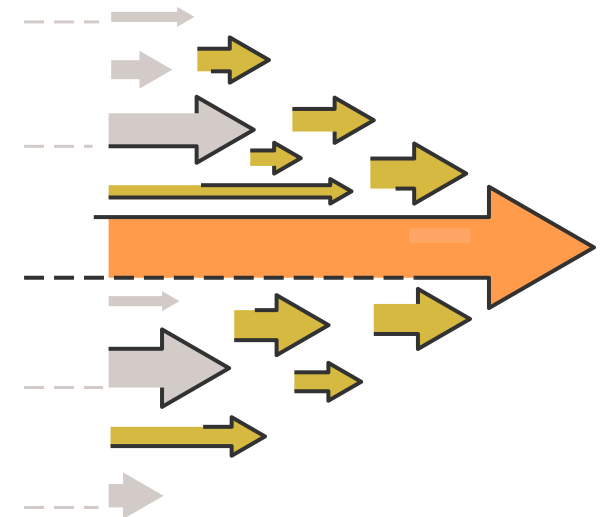
0%

12%

Sales produce content with help from freelancers/an agency

0%

3%



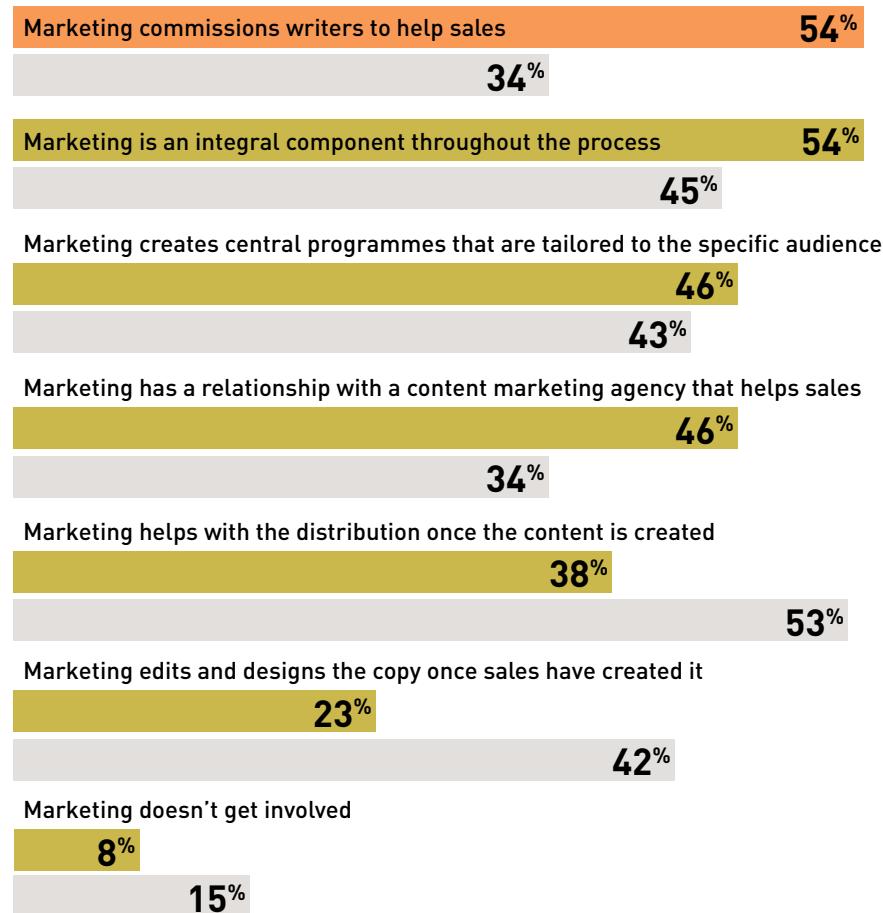
3.1 Content creation continued

Marketing is clearly instrumental in the content marketing programmes of leaders, who are more likely to employ marketing to commission writers to help sales than others (54% vs 34%).

Likewise, leaders are less inclined to treat marketing as an administrative function; helping with the distribution once the content is created (38% vs 53%) or editing the content once sales have created it (23% vs 42%).

Q: Which of the following best describes marketing's involvement in the content creation process?

Leader
Others



3.2 Content creation continued

Consistency is key.

Central brand guidelines including an editorial style guide are used by 85% of leaders to ensure consistency, compared with only 51% of others. This tallies with their propensity for centrally-produced content.

Both leaders and others also use a range of editorial tools such as templates and best practice examples to show the business 'what good looks like'.

Around half of both groups [46% of leaders vs 47% of others] use marketing to ensure consistency. Around a quarter [23% of leaders vs 26% of others] use an external agency.

Q: How do you ensure consistency of the content you are involved in?

Leader Others

We have central brand guidelines including an editorial style guide 85%

51%

We have a range of editorial tools such as templates to keep us on track

69%

57%

We have best practice examples to show us what good looks like

54%

49%

We give it to marketing at the end to ensure it adheres to house style

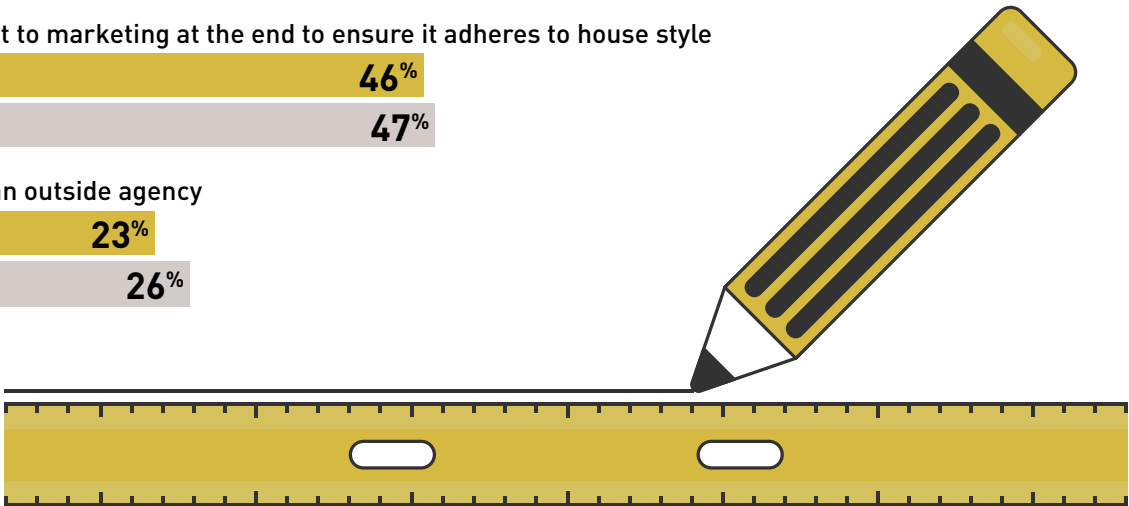
46%

47%

We use an outside agency

23%

26%



3.3 Content creation continued

Be inspired.

Leaders are almost twice as likely as others to include the views of inspirational individuals outside their industry (77% vs 41%). This possibly represents a more mature approach to content marketing, as leaders look to gain cut-through using a different method.

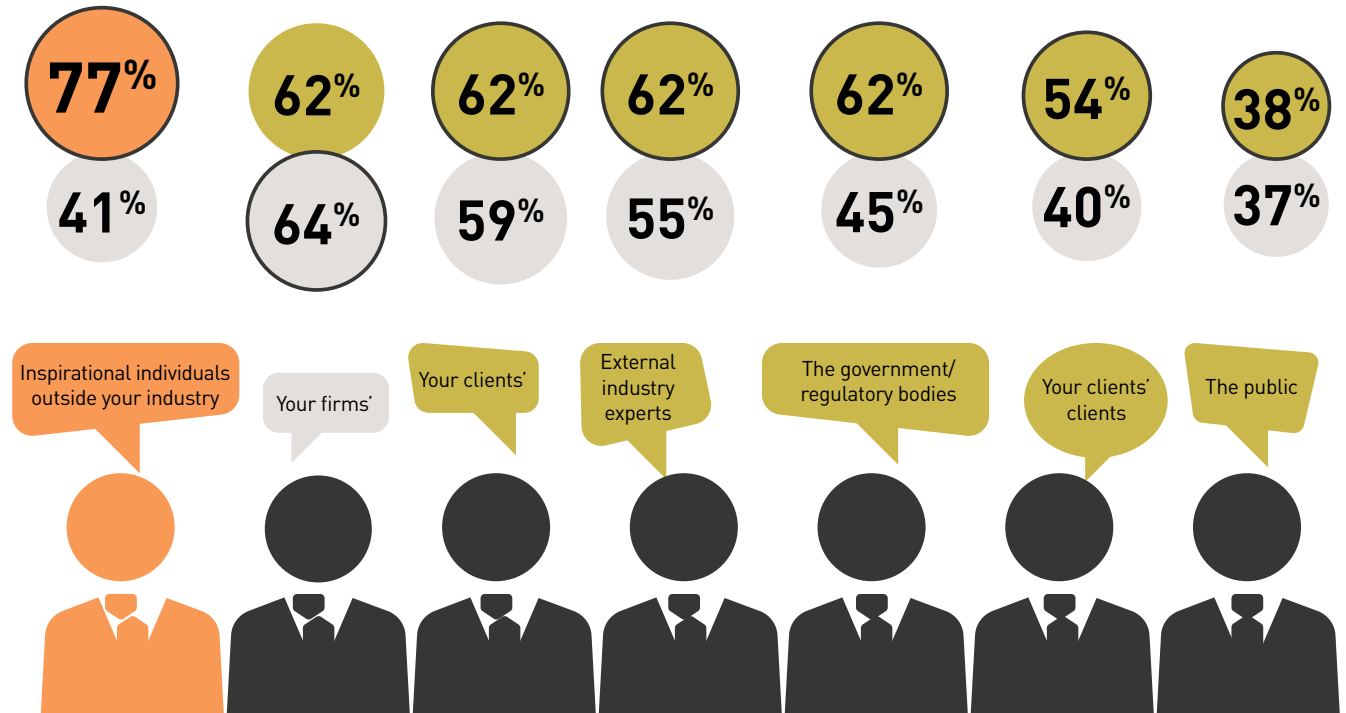
They are also much more likely to include the views of the government and regulatory bodies (62% vs 45%).

The views of the firm, clients and external industry experts are almost uniformly incorporated by around 60% of both groups.

The views of the clients' clients, the most sought-after group, according to our previous research, are currently a missed opportunity, with only 54% of leaders and 40% of others including their opinion.

Q: Whose opinions do you typically include in your content marketing?

Leader
Others



3.4 Content creation continued

Leaders employ a much more multi-format approach to get their message across, typically using around nine formats as opposed to others' six.

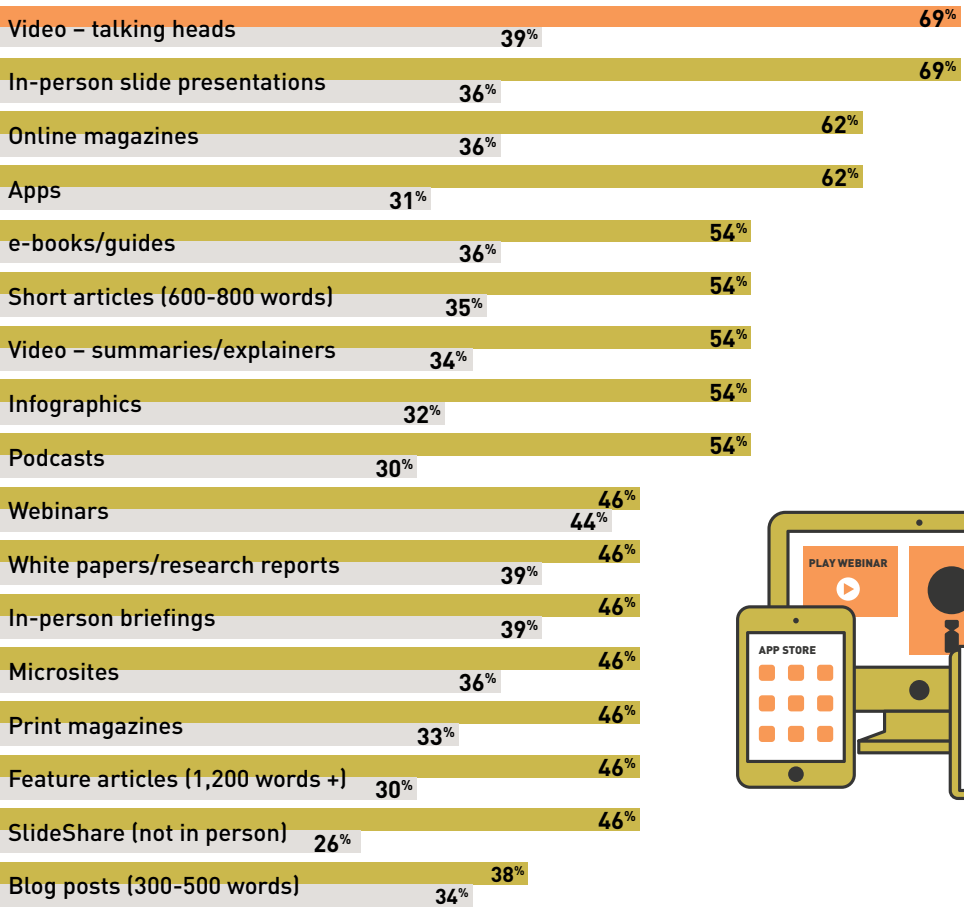
They use all formats more than others do, but significantly more: video (both talking heads (69% vs 39%) and explainers (54% vs 34%)); in-person slide presentations (69% vs 36%); online magazines (62% vs 36%); apps (62% vs 31%); e-books (54% vs 36%); short articles (54% vs 35%); infographics (54% vs 32%); and podcasts (54% vs 30%).

Feature articles (46% vs 30%) and SlideShare (46% vs 26%) are also used more than others.

Strangely, blog posts are not used widely by either audience and yet are one of clients' most desired formats, according to our previous research.

Q: Which of the following formats do you use for your content marketing?

Leader
Others



Average number of formats used

Leaders 9
Others 6



4.0 Effective distribution

On the right track.

All leaders know the channels clients frequent and test new ones systematically, showing that they are likely to remain leaders (at least in this discipline) for some time.

Only 44% of others can lay claim to this virtue, with 31% stating that they don't know the channels clients use for sure, but test whenever they can, and 25% either not knowing, using the same channels they always have or leaving it to marketing.

Q: Which of the following best describes your distribution strategy?

Leader
Others

We know the channels clients frequent and test new ones systematically



We don't know the channels for sure, and test new things whenever we can*



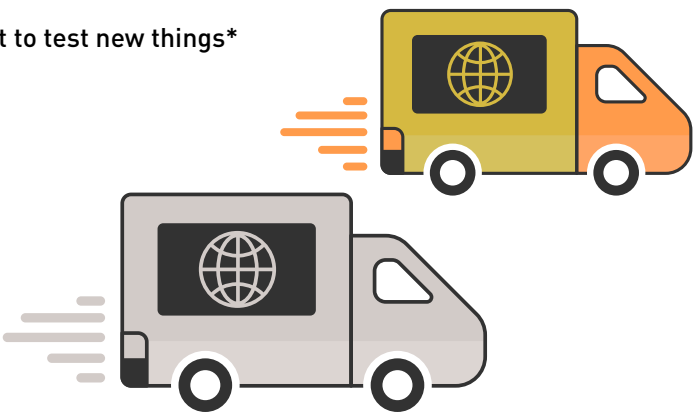
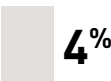
We don't know the channels for sure, and tend not to test new things*



We use the same channels we always have*



Marketing deals with distribution*



*Leaders = 0%

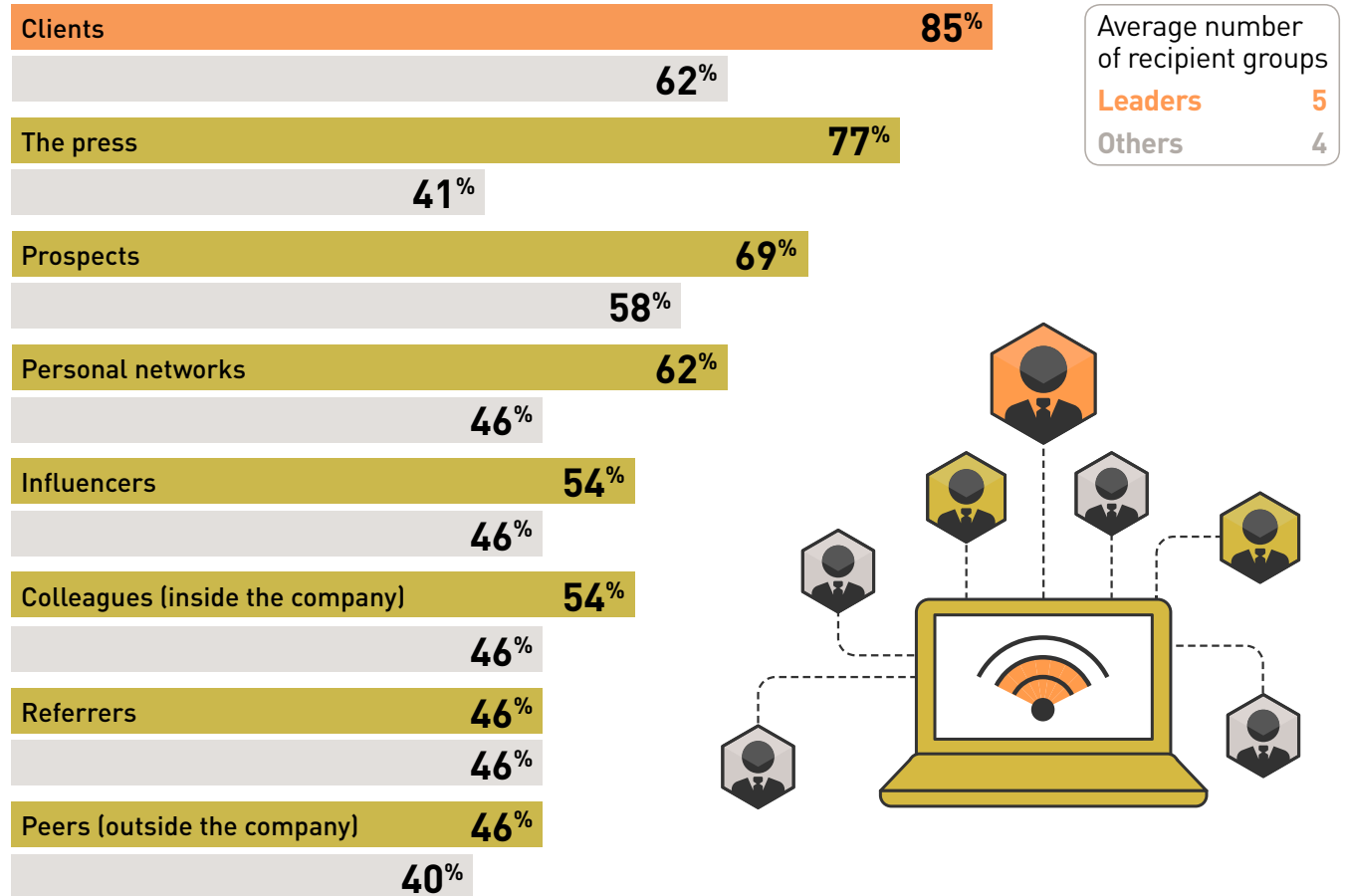
4.1 Effective distribution continued

Leaders distribute their content more widely than others, averaging five recipient groups compared with others' four.

Perhaps not surprisingly, leaders focus on clients more than others (85% vs 62%), but they are also much more likely to include the press (77% vs 41%) and personal networks (62% vs 46%) in their distribution plans.

Prospects feature highly in the distribution strategies of both leaders and others.

Q: Who do you send content marketing to?



4.2 Effective distribution continued

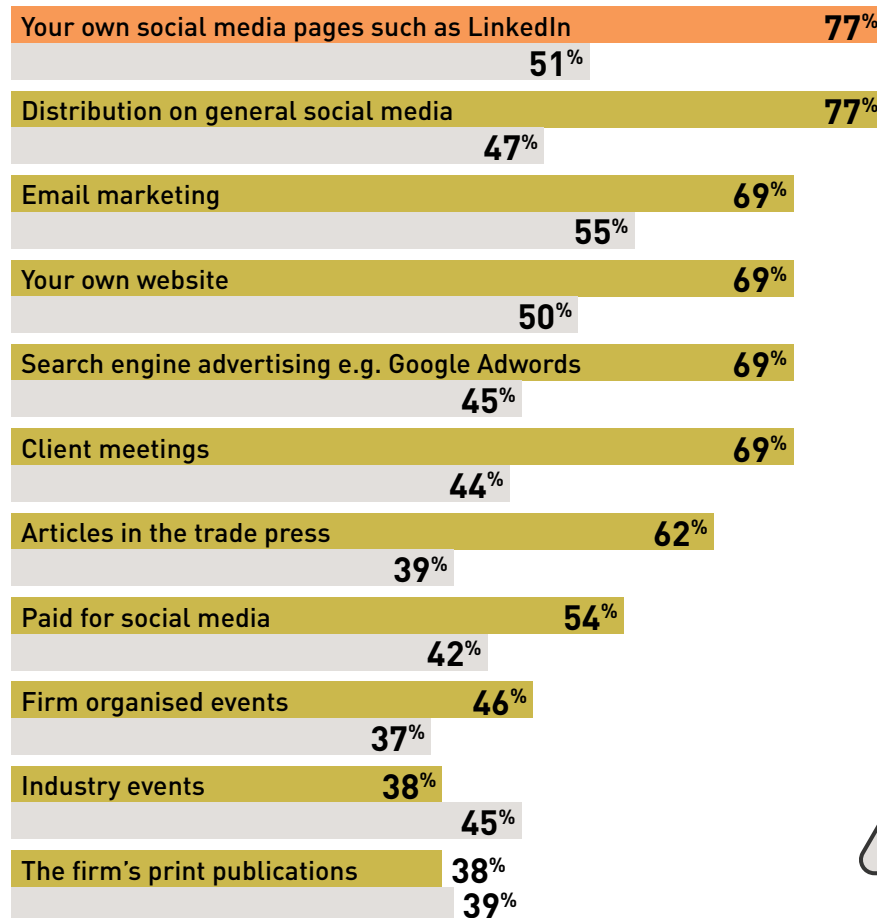
As with the use of formats, leaders are likely to employ a much wider variety of channels, typically using around seven formats as opposed to the others using five.

They use nearly all channels more than others, particularly social media. The channels used most extensively are their own social media pages such as LinkedIn (77% vs 51%) and general social media (77% vs 47%).

Leaders also make better use of their own website (69% vs 50%), search engine advertising (69% vs 45%), client meetings (69% vs 44%) and articles in the trade press (62% vs 39%).

The old stalwart, email marketing, is also used heavily by leaders (69%) and others (55%).

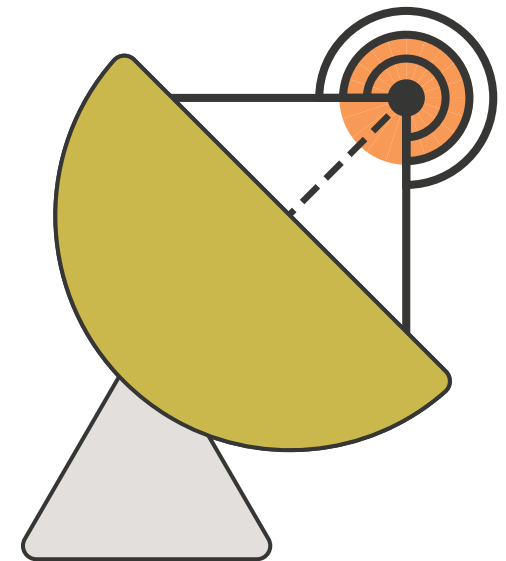
Q: Which of the following channels do you use to communicate your content marketing?



Leader
 Others

Average number of channels used

Leaders	7
Others	5



4.3 Effective distribution continued

Savvy with social.

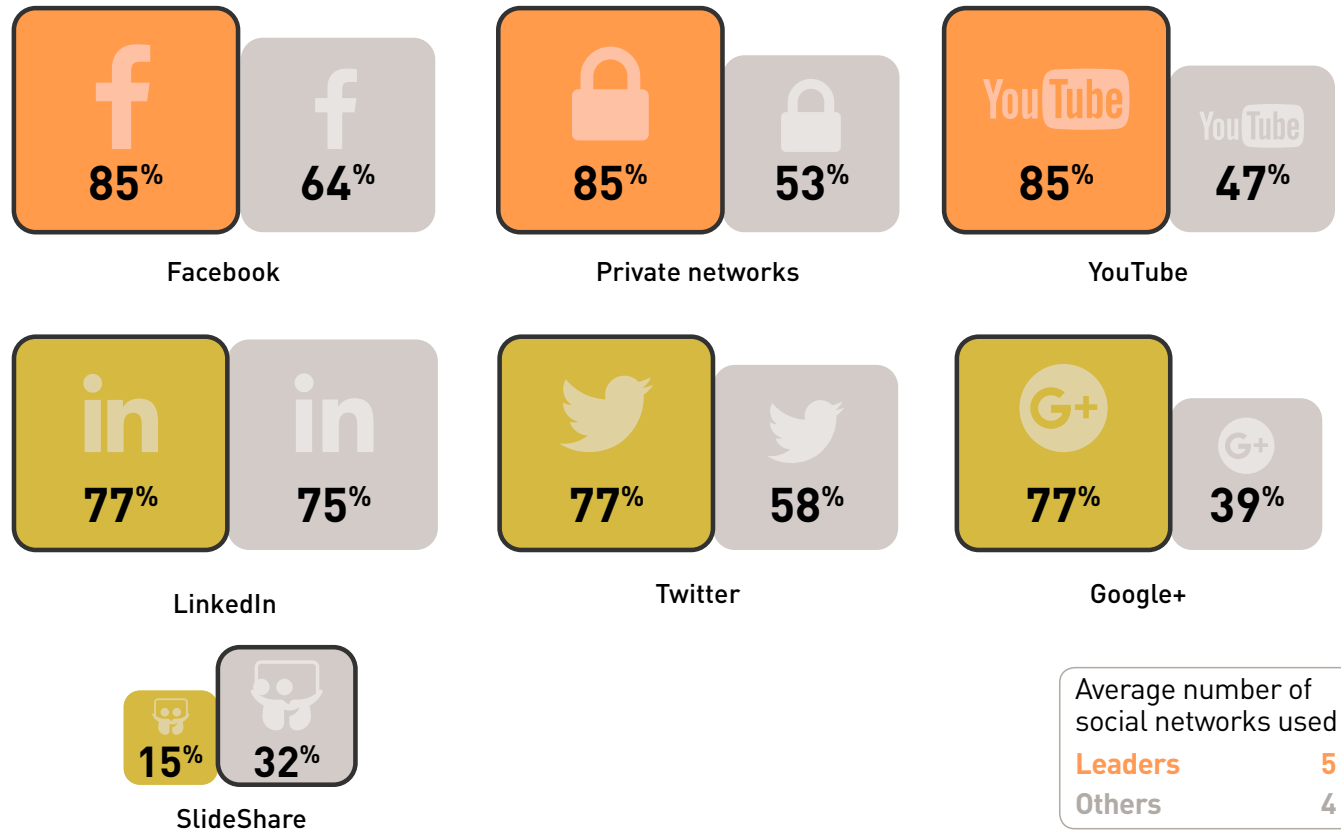
Leaders are way more social media savvy than others. They use Facebook (85% vs 64%), private networks (85% vs 53%), YouTube (85% vs 47%), Twitter (77% vs 58%) and Google+ (77% vs 39%) much more than other firms.

In fact, they use an average of five specific social networks, compared with the others, who use four.

LinkedIn is used in equal measure and Slideshare is less used by leaders than others. This could reflect that leaders are repurposing their slideshare content as video, for example, which they are then circulating.

Q: Which of the following specific social networks do you use to distribute content marketing?

Leader Others



4.4 Effective distribution continued

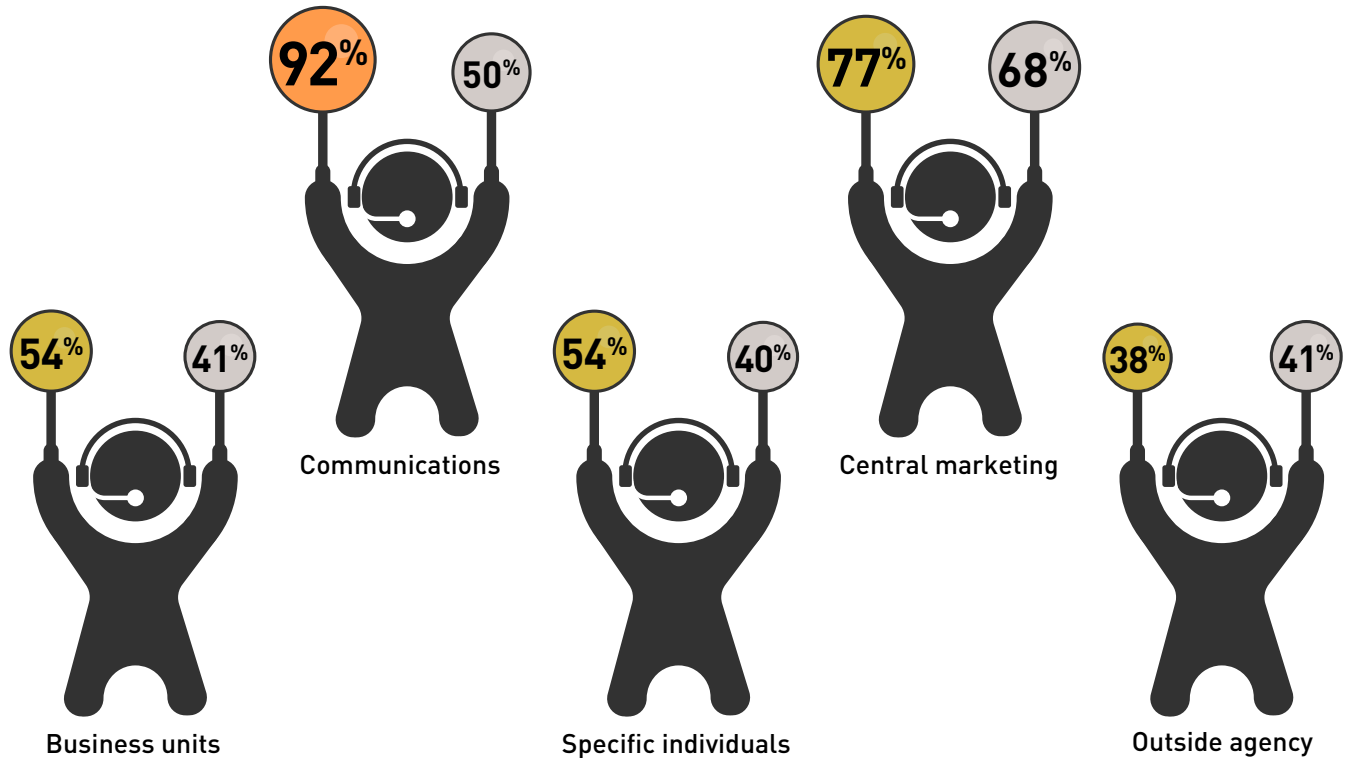
Almost all (92%) of leaders have a specialist communications department to organise the distribution of content, compared with only half of others. With a growing reliance on CRM and impending GDPR, we would expect this trend to increase.

Both groups often rely on input from central marketing, and to a lesser extent business units and specific individuals, to help with distribution.

Around 40% of both groups rely on help from an outside agency for distribution.

Q: Who organises the distribution of your content?

Leader Others



5.0 Made to measure

The measure of success.

All leaders have defined KPIs for content, and almost all (85%) measure accordingly.

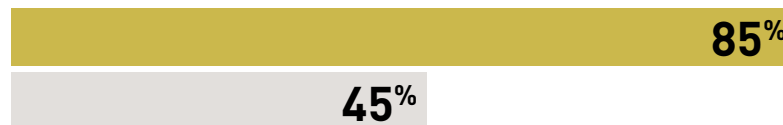
Only 45% of others have this focus, with 34% stating that they have defined KPIs but are not so strong on measurement.

A strange 12% saying they don't have clear KPIs but are strong on measurement, which obviously begs the question: what do they measure then?

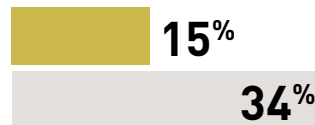
Q: Which of the following describes your approach to measuring the effectiveness of content marketing?

Leader Others

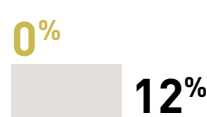
We have defined KPIs for content and measure accordingly



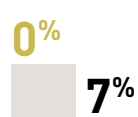
We have defined KPIs but are not so strong on measurement



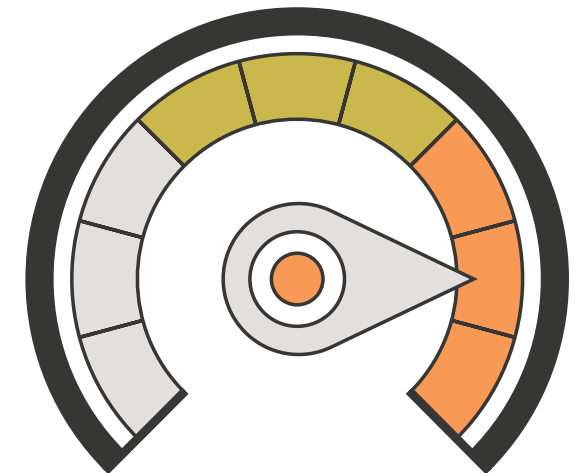
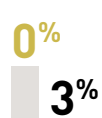
We have no clear KPIs, but are strong on measurement



We may measure it but I don't get to see the any analytics



We have no formal measurement in place



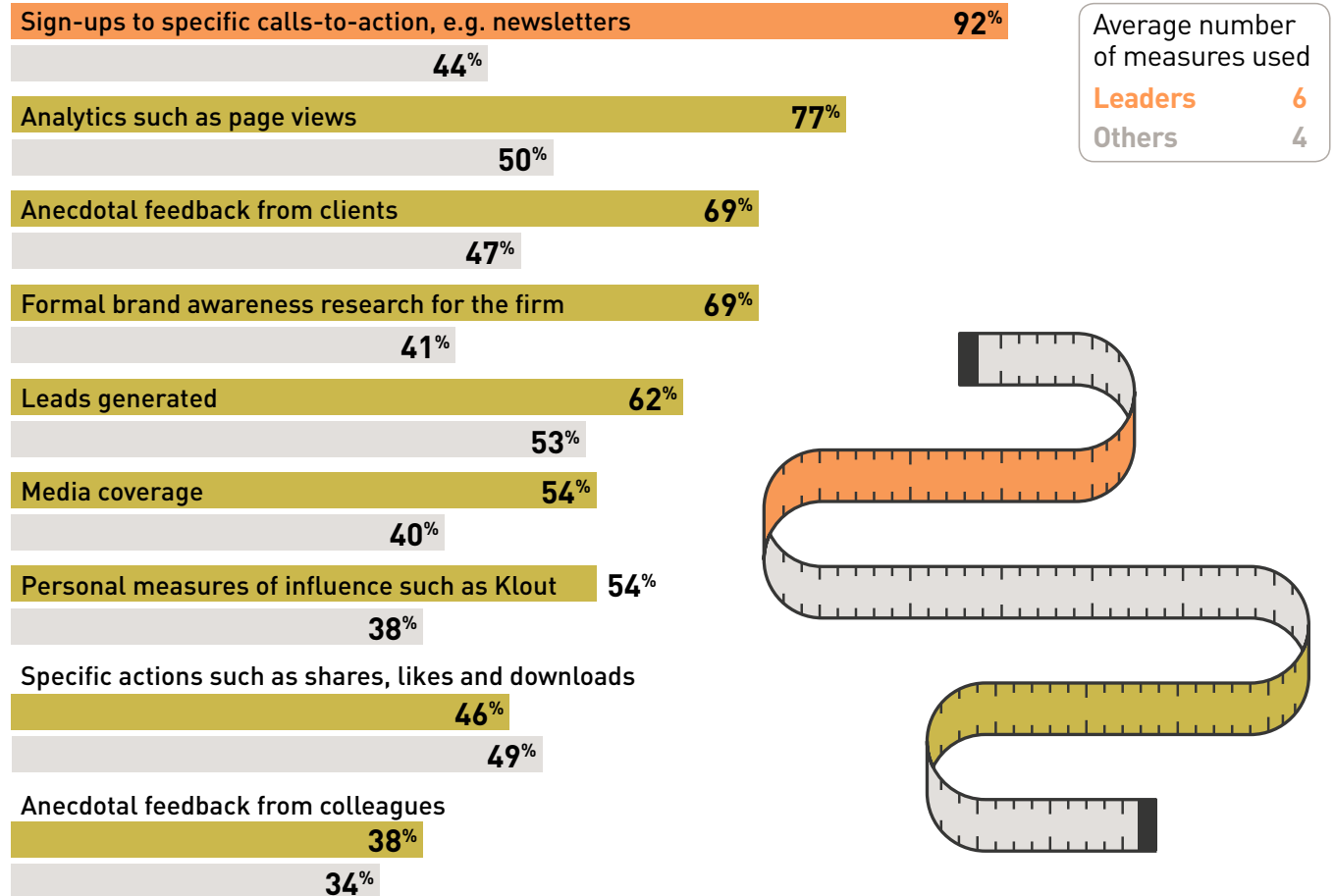
5.1 Made to measure continued

As one might expect, leaders are hot on measurement, and typically take in almost six different measures compared with four for the others.

Nearly all (92%) leaders measure sign-ups to specific calls-to-action, such as newsletters. However, only 44% of others do this.

Leaders also measure analytics such as page views (77% vs 50%), anecdotal feedback from clients (69% vs 47%), formal brand awareness research for the firm (69% vs 41%) and personal measures of influence such as Klout (54% vs 38%) more than others.

Q: What do you measure?



5.2 Made to measure continued

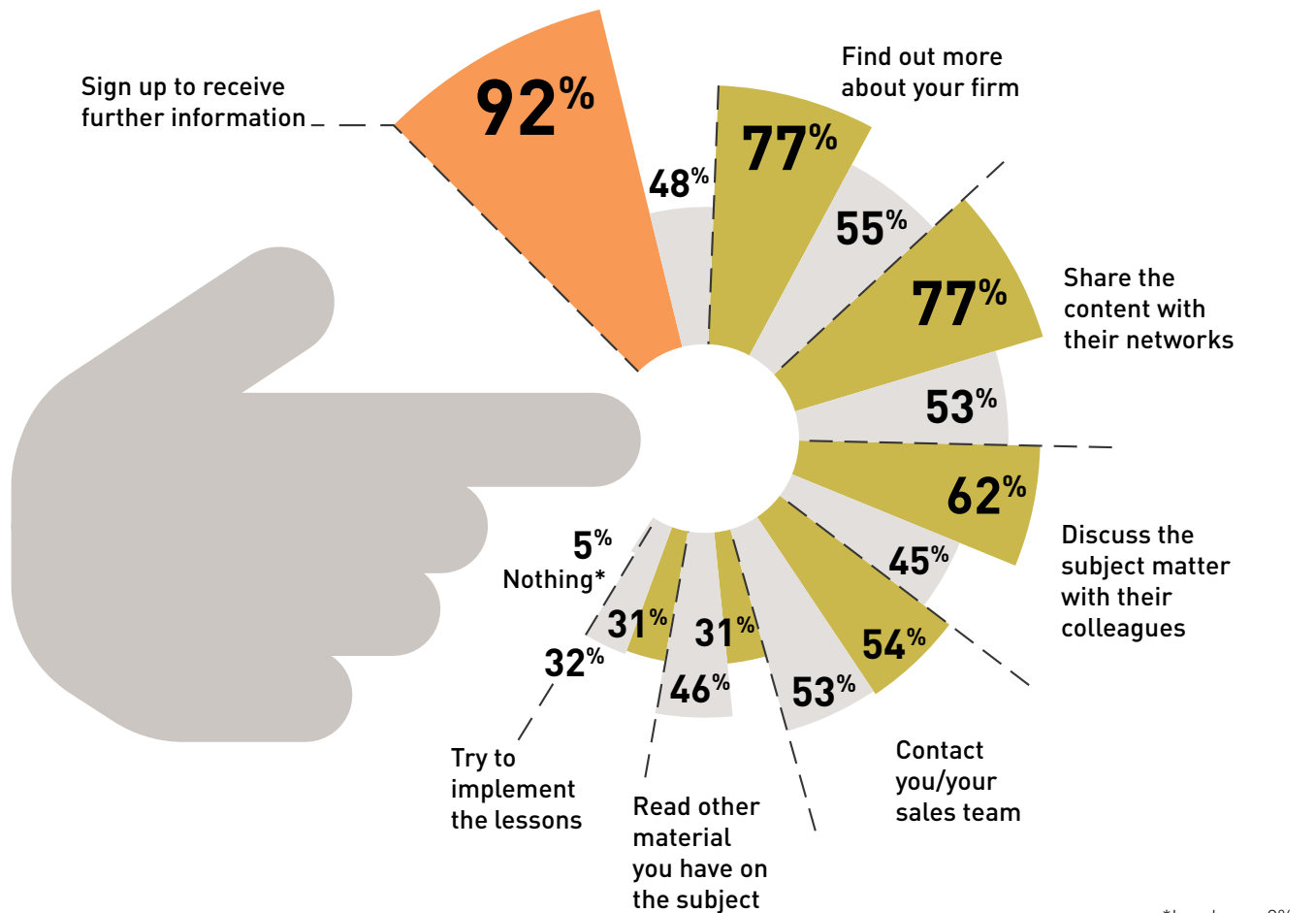
Take action.

Leaders are more acutely aware of the need to create content with purpose, with a wider variety of calls-to-action used.

92% of them are looking for readers to sign up for further information after reading, compared with 48% of others. Meanwhile, 77% of leaders are looking for readers to find out more about the firm (vs 55%). Another 77% want readers to share the content with their networks (vs 53%). And 62% want readers to share the content with their colleagues (vs 45%).

Perhaps counter-intuitively leaders are less likely to want readers to read other material than others, perhaps reflecting the fact that they are looking for a sign up to reach this additional information.

Q: Which of the following would you like clients to do after reading your content?



5.3 Made to measure continued

Leaders are also acutely aware of the need to link content with sales, with 77% believing that each piece of content they create is going to the right clients and prospects (vs 55%).

They are also more likely to nurture leads and deliver them to the right sales person, at the right time (62% vs 46%). Given that figure, it is probably not surprising that leaders are less likely to feel that leads might not be systematically shared or followed up.

Q: Which of the following describes the relationship between content and sales/lead generation?

Leader
Others

Each piece of content we create goes to the right clients and prospects



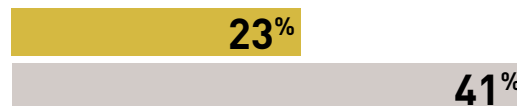
Leads are nurtured and delivered to the right sales person at the right time for follow-up



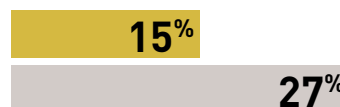
Our distribution strategy is a little fragmented and we are not always certain the content goes to everyone it should



There is a feeling that leads might not be systematically shared or followed up



We don't have clear oversight of the end-to-end process



5.4 Made to measure continued

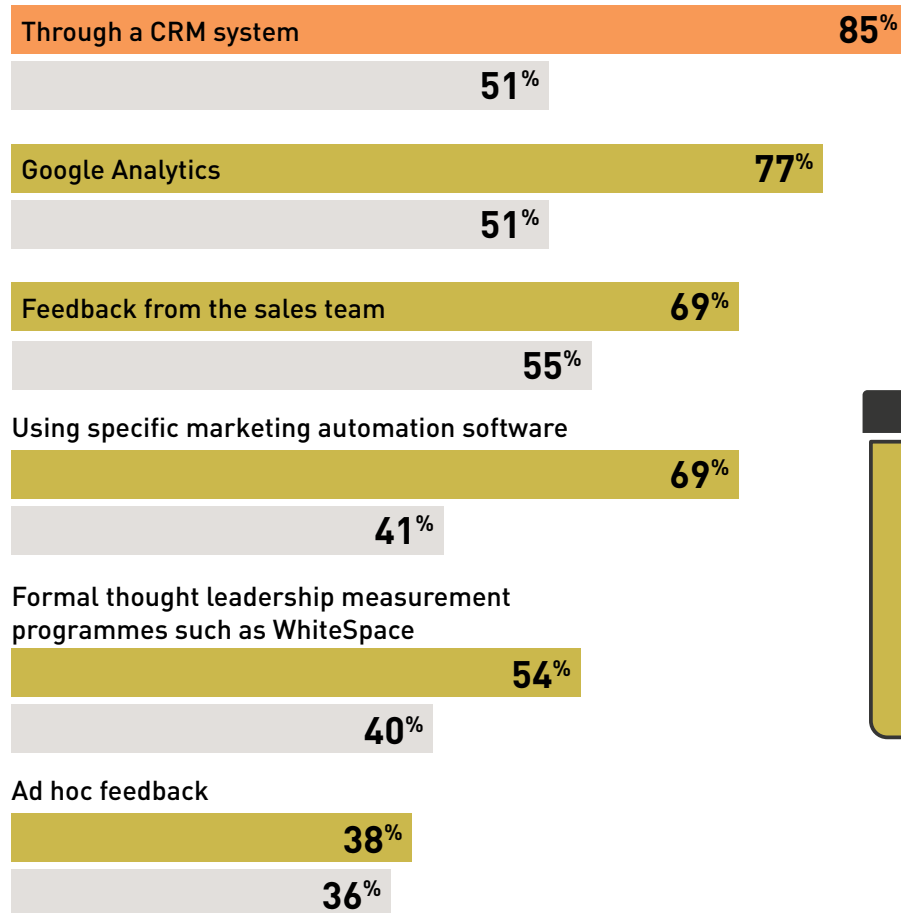
Leaders are more likely to measure using their CRM system than others (85% vs 51%). Similarly with specific marketing automation software (69% vs 41%).

They also have a better understanding of how to use Google Analytics (77% vs 51%).

Feedback from the sales team is the top measure for non-leaders, which infers that they are more reactive in their measurement.

Q: Which of the following do you employ for measuring the effectiveness of content marketing activities?

Leader
Others



6.0 Conclusion

The research provides specific insight into what the leaders in B2B content marketing do differently to others. Perhaps not surprisingly, leaders have defined objectives, clear messages and a deep understanding of the reading habits of their target audience.

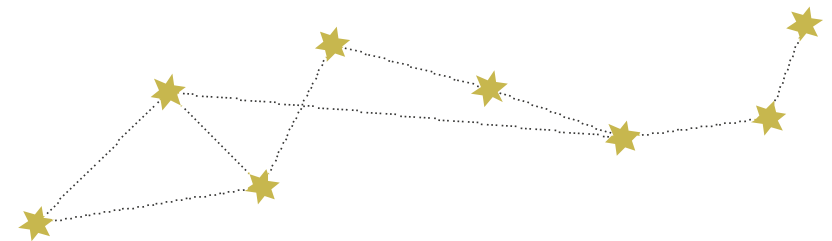
But behind this 'uncommon sense' lies a clearly confident focus. Organisations that are leaders in content marketing are no longer trying to support every communication initiative. They have learnt to say no, tackling fewer initiatives but doing much more with those they take on, focusing on what we believe are the areas in which their firms wish to be famous.

This direction provides the key to differentiation and, perhaps counter-intuitively, personalisation. All leaders produce content centrally (think business-wide initiatives such as CA Technologies annual programme

on digital transformation, or PwC's global CEO survey). They work hard on differentiation – and are almost twice as likely as others, for instance, to include the views of inspirational individuals outside their industry. They dig deeper into clients' issues and personalise the content to the needs of particular services, sectors and regions to achieve cut-through.

There is also a wider focus on project management. Yes, they are using technology, particularly in measurement. But leaders are much more likely than others to document their content marketing strategy, are as likely to be engaging their internal teams as their external clients and have a clearly defined process. They also get specialism – marketing is used in a strategic rather than administrative role, and (thankfully) leaders are much more likely to enlist the help of an external content marketing agency.

Focus, centralisation and effective project management might not be quick-fix revelations. They put the onus back on marketing to focus on the business's strategic initiatives and think big. Finding the white space for these initiatives might not be easy but that's the task ahead of us all.



7.0 About Grist

At Grist, we create content with purpose. We are a strategic B2B content marketing agency with the editorial heritage of The Economist and Financial Times in our DNA and a clear vision of the digital future.

As B2B specialists, we not only understand your needs but those of your clients. We understand how to produce and promote engaging content across all channels – content that helps your clients do their jobs; content that underscores your value to them; and content that influences the decision-making process. It's what we call the content marketing sweet spot.

We are also a results-driven business partner. That means we'll work with you to track return on investment, always aiming to exceed your marketing goals through the delivery of quality content.

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