

EXTRACT



Quality ratings of thought leadership for the first half of 2014

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This report is for firms that subscribe to White Space

Introduction

Think for a moment of your favourite publication. It might be a business or lifestyle magazine, or your regular newspaper. Or an online version of any of these. No doubt you have certain expectations about what you will find as you flick or click through the pages: a particular style, a particular approach that works for you. Some articles are more interesting to you than others, of course, but you'd be very surprised if you came across one that was poorly written or that attempted to pass off an unsubstantiated opinion as fact.

Here at Source, we read a lot of thought leadership, and when a new piece arrives from the firms that do it best, it can feel a lot like a favourite magazine landing on the doorstep. We know what to expect and look forward to a good read; seldom are we disappointed. For firms regularly publishing material of such quality (for example, The Boston Consulting Group and IBM), their enviable challenge is to continue to innovate, to ensure that consistency doesn't lead to complacency.

With other firms, we might have particularly high expectations depending on where in the business a given piece was produced (for example Deloitte University Press) or the format used (PwC's ten minutes). With their other pieces, however, we are less sure of what to expect – it's rather like knowing that the sports section of your local newspaper will be great while the rest of the content will be very mixed.

Firms offering mixed quality are likely to bounce up and down in our rankings depending on the random selection of reports we read – if they get lucky, they could easily move up a few places simply because we've seen more of their good stuff this time round. Of course the opposite can happen, too: if this half-yearly random sample is devoid of gems, they could see their ranking fall like a stone despite their actually doing no worse on the whole. But firms that consistently deliver inconsistent quality actually enjoy an excellent opportunity: if they're getting their thought leadership right at least part of the time, then the right processes are likely already in place – it's just a matter of figuring out what's working (when it's working) and applying those principles across the board. Do it well, and they could soon find themselves taking up permanent residence at the top of the list.

Last – and unfortunately least – are those firms that are consistently producing material that makes our hearts sink even as it lands on our desks. Our expectations are low, and sadly they're usually met. These firms can be regularly spotted languishing at the bottom of the list.

For those firms looking to change their thought leadership ranking fortunes, we can tell you this: those that have succeeded in making a dramatic and lasting change in their standings have implemented pretty dramatic changes within their organisations. Achieving a real and sustained move up the list depends not on luck or even good ideas, but on an unerring determination to put in place the right processes with the right people and supported with the ability to manage consulting firm politics.

If you're interested in some specific aspects that we think make a difference, please ask for a copy of our recent free report: What do the authors of the best thought leadership in the world have to say about why and how it's created?

Methodology

Potential clients are inundated with information and analysis from every direction. Unquestionably, the vast majority is binned or deleted instantly. Our methodology is based on research with senior executives and assesses the factors that drive a member of your target audience to pick up a piece of material, to read past the first paragraph and beyond, to have confidence in what they have read, and to take action based on what they have absorbed. We rate each piece against the following criteria. We give each a score between 1 and 5; this generates a total score for each report of between 4 and 20.

Figure 1:

Our criteria for rating thought leadership

Criteria	We ask:
Differentiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the subject topical? • Is it different from what others are doing – either because of the topic or the angle taken? • Is the article revelatory and/or contrary to prevailing views?
Appeal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the reader likely to continue past the introduction? • Does the report look good? • Does the structure and writing style make it easy to read? • Does the report do anything interesting to make the material stick in the reader's mind?
Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there any quantitative and/or qualitative primary research? • Is there any secondary research? • How good is the analysis? • Are internal experts used? • Is the methodology clearly described?
Prompting action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the article clearly articulate action steps for the reader? • Does the article give the reader a clear idea of how the consulting firm could help whilst avoiding being a thinly disguised sales pitch?

We review a random sample of each consulting firm's thought leadership based on 20% of output or 10 pieces, whichever is the greater. We include material that the reader would perceive as thought leadership – this may be a pdf, an online report or article, or material presented through an interactive site. In order to compare like-with-like we exclude blogs and blog-like material, and standalone videos.

Additions and omissions from the list of firms:

- We did not find sufficient material from Booz Allen, Hay Group, and Mercer.
- We were unable to collate L.E.K. material on White Space during the first half of 2014, but they will appear in future ratings.
- Infosys produced sufficient material this period to be included.
- Due to acquisition by PwC, Booz & Company no longer appears in the ratings list.





Thought leadership has come to dominate the marketing activities of consulting firms, and with good cause: our research with clients finds consistent evidence that good thought leadership matters to them, too. It helps them to do their job, to identify where world-class capability exists in consulting firms, and even to shortlist firms for projects.

But it's also important to see thought leadership within the context of a wider content strategy. Content strategy recognises that you've got to understand the opportunities and threats presented by the channels through which thought leadership is now promoted, distributed, and even created, in the first place. But it also acknowledges that there are other types of content, and even that some of it isn't yours. Understanding how you connect all those components matters now more than it ever did.

Here's an overview of how we can help...



Subscription products

WHITE SPACE

White Space – the standard by which the world's leading consulting firms assess and benchmark quality in thought leadership – is a vital resource for anyone who writes, researches or manages thought leadership within consulting firms. It offers the following:

- Access to our searchable database of more than 30,000 pieces of thought leadership from 30 of the world's leading management consulting firms
- Two half-yearly quality ratings reports, which rank firms based on their recent output and provide commentary on each firm's material
- Quarterly thought leadership digests, in which we select the best new thought leadership for a range of business functions.



Custom research

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP REVIEWS

White Space provides useful insights into where a firm is strong and weak in its thought leadership, but for many firms it acts as the starting point for a more in-depth analysis of their material. Our thought leadership reviews assess quality in a sample of material, which can be random (as it is for our White Space quality ratings reports) or can be determined by you in order to target a particular time-frame or topic. We'll provide detailed analysis about what you're doing well and where you need to improve, and show you the breakdown of our scores for individual pieces of thought leadership. We're also able to show you how your material compares against that of your competitors, and to provide a critique on your – and your competitors' – use of different channels for promoting and distributing thought leadership.



Consulting

STRATEGY BRIEFINGS AND CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT

Our work here is varied, but most typically involves:

- Helping firms to develop thought leadership strategy
- Helping firms with the effective positioning of individual pieces of thought leadership
- Providing regular briefing and seminars on trends in thought leadership
- Helping firms to develop capability for creating high-quality thought leadership (across a firm, or in a team or an individual)
- Helping firms to develop a wider, connected, content strategy

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