



*THE FUTURE OF
THOUGHT
LEADERSHIP IN
THE AGE OF AI*

A Guide for CEOs





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1.0 What is Thought Leadership?

The concept of ‘Thought Leadership’ as a marketing strategy came into its own around a decade ago as a way of building Brand Awareness (including personal Brand Awareness) which was intended to be more authentic and, critically, to avoid the growing resistance felt by potential customers towards overt advertising or self-promotion. (1)

B2B marketing was already far behind the curve at that point, still listing projects and self-promoting in the conventional manner (namely, “we are great”), whilst consumer-facing advertising, including TV campaigns, had decades before abandoned direct product pushing (2). There was, too, a transitional period, with the rise of ‘Advertorials’ – ads written in the style of ‘real’ editorial features but which still clearly remained ads and as such displayed their basic intent of ‘getting you to buy’.

Ideally, Thought Leadership was undertaken non-cynically, with CEO’s / Directors / companies / individuals sharing genuinely useful ideas and insights and so developing a meaningful relationship over time with future clients or customers. It was about sharing useful information and ideas, and building trust, without expectation of instant Sales: an initial step in a longer and more **realistic / organic** customer journey in which Brand trust was first established and only later ‘converted’.

It was - and remains - a great strategy. When done properly it builds extremely durable associations between certain companies or individuals and certain areas of expertise or particular concepts, which in turn drives brand awareness, profiles, respect and profits.

“ *I challenge you to find a leading French vineyard who refers to their finest vintage as ‘Wineglass Content’* ”

In fact, companies (or individuals representing companies) who undertake long-term quality campaigns (for example repeatedly publishing both online and in leading industry journals in any given field, or else writing full-length ideologically-driven books), and who truly offer genuine insights, tend to keep quietly winning contracts in the exact areas on which they publish – but it can look like a miracle to those who don’t take the same approach. And those who know this are already doing it.

So why do we need to reconsider strategy in light of the sudden mainstreaming of AI (notably the open availability of ChatGPT)?

Because an unfortunate trend towards low-quality but increasingly prevalent *faux* Thought Leadership is going to be significantly exacerbated by the mis-use of ChatGPT et al – and this will affect anybody who is already undertaking good quality Thought Leadership.

Equally, it provides significant further opportunities to stand out from the crowd.



2.0 The Demise of Quality in Thought Leadership

As tends to occur with any ‘trend’, genuine Thought Leadership marketing sadly and rapidly descended into what can only be described as mimicry or filler-content: reasonably-written but ultimately empty verbiage with very little Leadership in it, and certainly no new Thought.

Thought Leadership marketing was soon plagued by weaker and weaker and more cynically produced ‘content’, whilst too many campaigns that began well were cut short before any success could reasonably have been expected. Whilst there remains great quality Thought Leadership out there, it is certainly harder to locate in an internet awash with pseudo-thought. Why did this happen?

The main difficulty was a certain level of cynicism in the first place (usually cynicism in the Middle Management combined with brief over-enthusiasm in the C-Suite: a toxic mix).

Many in Middle Management, for example, were more comfortable with old-fashioned overt advertising (regardless of whether that actually worked or not) which led both to under-investment (in terms of time and resources) and a short-termist viewpoint which led to campaigns being cut short, throwing in the towel *before* true Brand Recognition in any given subject could reasonably have been established. Bear in mind: conventional thinking has it that it takes several previous encounters (or ‘touchpoints’) for someone to even *begin* to associate a company with a given expertise.

The problem was exacerbated when it came to offline material such as conventional features, because at least with online material one can peacock various stats about ‘engagement’ at meetings. With offline Thought Leadership, it is almost impossible to ‘prove’ readership or any direct link to sales. This is unfortunate because offline material often has greater caché.

These worries may seem understandable: they are not dissimilar to the issues that cause short-term, unsustainable thinking amongst Shareholder boards (the type of thinking that outliers such as Unilever have so successfully fought against, and which also plague smaller non-listed companies: if we don’t see Quarterly results, ‘it’s not working’).

But most companies (even SME’s) feel the need for 5-Year Strategic Plans. Yet 5-year *Thought Leadership* Strategy Plans are perceived as ‘pie in the sky’.

Perhaps a bigger issue was that too many campaigns were half-heartedly undertaken and poorly capitalised in the first place: either rushed into without underlying Strategy that tied the campaign to the company’s wider Vision or Ethos, or else farmed out to solid but generic content writers with no previous experience of Editorial Strategy and little to no meaningful contact with the CEOs / Directors themselves – which meant that true insights were missed and content was generic to multiple companies. The writers may have been different but the written style was highly standardised and – far more critically – the so-called ‘leading thoughts’ were indistinguishable.

Take sustainability (or now ESG): precisely because these are highly current issues and companies feel they *must be seen to have a stance*, endless material continues to be pumped out without companies or CEO’s *ever spending the time to actually think about what really makes their stance unique*. As such *faux* Thought Leadership and ‘greenwash’ are intimately linked.

A final problem: some simply couldn’t make the transition from company horn-tooting, which led to various published features recounting company successes which ultimately amounted to little more than glorified Advertorial.



3.0 The Problem with the Concept of ‘Content’

Once Thought Leadership became assimilated under the broader category of what came to be known as ‘Content’, the problem became even worse. Let’s face it: ‘content’ is what fills *something else up*. For example the ‘content’ of a wineglass is, generally, wine. But I challenge you to find a leading French vineyard that refers to their finest vintage as ‘Wineglass Content’. Ultimately the entire endeavour in too many companies became a cynical manoeuvre.

Nonetheless, for a while, this could still ‘work’ (in the most cynical way) because Thought Leadership was still something only a portion of companies undertook. As such, even when half-hearted, it was still possible, at least, to *give the impression* of being ahead of the curve.

Not any more.

Two things have recently occurred which change the game: firstly, Search Engines such as Google have started to take a stance against what they call ‘Thin Content’ – that is, content which is short or superficial. Secondly, the sudden and startling mainstream appearance of early-stage AI programmes such as ChatGPT radically alters the competitive landscape.

If much Thought Leadership is already weak, generic and lacking in original thinking, how much worse will the situation become now that any individual or company can sign up to Chat GPT for free, within minutes, and have it produce something that *looks and feels* like Thought Leadership almost instantaneously? At least previously companies had to have a certain level of commitment because producing Thought Leadership was an investment of sorts.

Actually, this may seem appealing to those companies wanting to spend less (or nothing) on writers (let alone spend time thinking!). The difficulty is that every other similar company will be thinking the exact same thing – which means that there will be almost no point bothering in the first place, unless you want simply to contribute to the tidal wave of empty, generic material, and which Google will almost certainly take a stronger stance against. (Google’s policy toward AI is that it does not discriminate against such material but only on grounds of quality - whether ChatGPT can be improved in terms of quality is covered in the following section.)

By contrast those who are already undertaking high quality Thought Leadership may feel it doesn’t affect them – but it does. Not only will there be a larger morass of material to ‘compete’ with for attention (Google’s quality stance may help but it remains to be seen whether its algorithms can ascertain *quality of thought* or merely quality of written style) but more critically, readers themselves will become ever more cynical. In fact there are already cases of reasonable quality material being mistaken for AI productions simply because it is *solid but generic* – and ChatGPT is surprisingly adept at producing convincing, averagely adept generic writing.

In fact, in this sense, the fashion-industry businesswoman quoted in Forbes as saying ‘I’ve never hired a writer better than ChatGPT’⁽³⁾ is not actually wrong if we are talking about fairly standard generic writing. (By contrast I believe she is wildly wrong when it comes to writing that is original, quirky and stands out from the crowd, and 100% wrong if she is hoping to produce actual Thought Leadership this way.)



4.0 AI and the Coming Wave of *Faux* Thought Leadership

What does all this mean for the way that we now approach Thought Leadership writing? AI is not (necessarily) the enemy. By contrast it can be a useful tool for certain tasks. But it's certainly a potential enemy of your own AI (Authentic Intelligence) and the true Thought Leadership that stems from it if you don't take charge.

To be clear, I am not claiming that ChatGPT is inherently a bad thing: it can certainly be useful for certain purposes (e.g. for writing where only a reasonable standard is required and where originality is not the issue). And its results can also be improved: in fact the new area of 'Prompt Crafting' is premised on the fact that the better quality the Prompt, the better the results. It can also certainly be useful for producing outlines, for example (although there are some issues with this which will be discussed shortly).

But despite its name what it simply cannot do at present is *think for itself*. Nor can it produce authentic material that truly reflects the writer's personality and quirks of thinking. The key is that (publicly available) AI in its current form is far less 'intelligent' than it is cracked up to be. Bluntly – at this point at least – all it does is 'mimic thinking' via what amounts to a gloried version of 'Cut & Paste'.

An example: looking to ascertain just how intelligent ChatGPT actually was, I asked it to tell me the 'possible meanings of the green light symbolism' in the American Classic, *The Great Gatsby* – thinking that it could not hope to understand subtle material such as ambiguous literary symbolism. And I was at first shocked by how intelligent its answers *appeared*. Yet all ChatGPT had really done was trawl through and integrate hundreds of previously existing internet essays on *The Great Gatsby*!

Ask it to have genuinely original thoughts, however, and it simply can't (of course AGI – Artificial General Intelligence - is a very different matter but outside of the scope of this paper. At present, anything less than AGI is simply a very impressive tool, albeit a tool that purports to speak in the first person).

How then to rise above the coming swamp of AI-generated faux Thought Leadership Content?

Most obviously: sit back and actually think, and work closely with editorially experienced writers with proper knowledge of your field.

On a more superficial but no less important note, learn what ChatGPT either cannot do or is poor at doing – and do more of *that*, because these factors (summarised below), are precisely how your Thought Leadership content will be able to stand out from AI-generated material.

What ChatGPT Currently Cannot Do:

- 1) On the most straightforward level, since it has been 'trained' on internet material only until 2021, AI currently can't work with factual material past this point. So ensure that you (or yourself in conjunction with your writer) work with highly current themes / data (that is, material post-2021). Of course as AI speeds up (this is likely to be exponential) this timelag will likely reduce (and possibly even disappear at some point) – but for now you should take this opportunity, since AI generated material will be lacking in *current thought or data*.
- 2) ChatGPT is currently *very poor* at humour and playfulness. Put it this way – it's wildly funny...but for all the wrong reasons. So if you are a Thought Leader who happens to be naturally witty but who has been toning this down (or eliminating it) in your material because you wanted to be taken seriously or are an expert in a rather dry or technical subject, it's now worth allowing a little more of your playfulness to come through in a subtle way (subtlety is precisely what Chat GPT lacks), either in your own writing or by working with a writer who is experienced in capturing their clients' unique voice and wit.



- 3) ChatGPT can in no way draw on what makes *you* unique as a CEO or Business Leader (or indeed as a company with its own unique history). It does not know your unique background or interests or your favoured metaphors or turns of phrase.

Many Leaders, for example, have interesting back stories or unlikely personal interests that lead them naturally to characterise subjects in unique ways. For example (and I don't call myself a Thought Leader, but still) I recently wrote a piece about AI in Thought Leadership in which I happened to use a metaphor relating to 17th Century Art History, purely because before training in Finance, many years ago, I had a lot of training in Art History and Design. Yet ChatGPT would never have used such a metaphor in discussing itself because it would have no logical reason to put the two subjects together (and by the time that metaphor had organically occurred to me, it would have been fruitless to attempt to prompt ChatGPT to produce it for me).

Similarly – imagine a finance expert who happens also to have a strong interest in, say, cars, or fine wine, or architecture. They are likely to describe financial ideas using certain unlikely metaphors.

These are what I call 'quirks of thinking'. And Chat GPT is completely unable to 'think' in this way. Of course you could *prompt* it to be 'quirky' but this leads to rather comical, laboured and bizarre results (for example, as an experiment, I asked it to write a piece on European Real Estate in a 'quirky, playful style' and its results included the line 'ensure that your apartment has its own guillotine!' The rest was equally unusable.)

Related, ChatGPT cannot produce quirky 'structure' because it is so logical and conventional (via its 'training') that it is exceptionally focused on providing a standard way of structuring (say, a feature): but you *may not want to actually structure your thinking in the conventional way for best readership results.*

Crucially, current publicly available AI has no understanding of *why* something should be structured in a particular way. Yet the structure of a piece of writing (and *especially* with a book or e-book) is the central determinant of what sort of readership (or indeed publishing house) it attracts. If, for example, you try to produce a book using numerous ChatGPT prompts, you will simply have a series of mini-essays that in no way come together in the right overall structure to appeal to a specific readership. Why? Because ChatGPT has no real-world Editorial training.

In short, to distinguish yourself from what AI is able to produce, Thought Leadership now needs to become not only highly strategic but also as **individual, authentic, novel and representative of the unique traits, thoughts and personality of the Thought Leader** as, frankly, it should have been in the first place.

Is there then any place for AI in Thought Leadership at the Present Time? People will of course have varied opinions on this. For me the answer, currently, is **yes and no - but mostly no.**

Hypothetically there is certainly a place for it – for example in generating structure outlines for more conventional style features with the intention of thoroughly working the material over to the point of unrecognizability.

Yet the time and effort involved in rewriting and personalising a text to the point where it is truly unique and distinguishable from other material generated by a similar Prompt may be far more cumbersome than producing fully original material in the first place. Also to be borne in mind is that currently available AI is renowned for accidental errors (for example in data and referencing): as such there is a Time-Cost attached to the fact-checking process.

But there is a far bigger issue at stake.



5.0 Conclusions: The Bigger Issue

Publicly available AI (namely, as we speak, ChatGPT) is certainly not the enemy – but it may not be a suitable tool for genuine Thought Leadership.

Yet even those companies or individuals currently producing high quality Thought Leadership campaigns are likely to be affected by the coming onslaught of sloppily AI-generated faux Thought Leadership content.

There are numerous reasons to (currently) avoid the use of AI for anything other than basic writing or research tasks, although as AI ‘trains itself’ in an exponential manner, quality may improve – which ironically will only prompt ever more original thinking.

But there is surely a much more profound and wider issue at stake: if your own or your company’s Thinking and Innovation is not its most important and unique asset (apart, of course, from people), then What Is?

Are you entirely happy to leave the expression of your finest thinking in the hands of a generic, efficient but (at present) somewhat flawed and automated Tool?

More than ever, true Thought Leadership will require in-depth and *highly current* conversations with CEOs themselves, drawing on truly unique insights and personal authentic experience that simply cannot (currently) be replicated by widely available AI.

You will also need repeatedly to refresh your thinking. In the past, your Major Position or Big Idea was safe for, perhaps, 5 years. Now, anything you publish will have been ‘AI trained’ 2 years from now – and this ‘lag’ will likely get shorter. As such the need to remain ahead of the game conceptually will be increasingly paramount.

Artificial Intelligence is by no means to be ignored and is invaluable in its right place. But at present at least it is no substitute for your own AI (Authentic Intelligence) when it comes to Thought Leadership.

REFERENCES

- (1) It is difficult to put a date on the first true example of Thought Leadership content and professionals in this field will have their own opinions: for me, as a former Commissioning Editor, it was when NatWest launched an in-house magazine with Content that was of genuine Editorial Quality and Value.
- (2) See for example Gibbons, Joan, *Art & Advertising* (2005) which explores the non-direct strategies of influential TV ad campaigns of the ‘80s and ‘90s.
- (3) “I’ve Never Hired A Writer Better Than ChatGPT”: How AI Is Upending The Freelance World, Forbes, Apr 20, 2023

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