



Diverse Perspectives on Thought Leadership

Cogently Communications

In 1996, the CEO of a thriving internet firm published a blog post entitled “[Content Is King](#)” on his company’s website. The essay predicted that much of the “real money” to be made online would come from content production, and that companies providing “information or entertainment” on the internet would thrive in the years to come.

The author’s name was Bill Gates, and his forecast proved eerily accurate. Online content creators, unheard of in 1996, comprised an economy worth [\\$25.6 billion](#) in 2022. The article’s title has even become a common catchphrase in the online marketing industry.

In reality, though, Gates’ article didn’t predict the future; it helped to build it. Standing at the helm of Microsoft, a company that had already revolutionized the world of computer technology, Gates took an opportunity to steer the hurtling juggernaut of the industry’s progress in the direction *he* wanted. He spoke, and people listened.

At Cogently Communications, our mission is to help leaders publish this type of thought leadership. You don’t need to be Bill Gates to write something that changes an industry for the better.

LinkedIn

We focus a lot of our attention on LinkedIn. Our Employees to Ambassadors service shows business leaders and their supporting staff how to show up on the platform to discuss big ideas and expand their profiles, and we also ghostwrite extensively for executives on LinkedIn.

Why LinkedIn?

As a group of thought leadership ghostwriters with clients in biotech, professional services, B2B SaaS, and higher education, we've found LinkedIn to be the most productive platform for the work we do most of the time. There are various reasons for this, but they ultimately boil down to LinkedIn's professional focus.

When you post on more mainstream platforms, you're competing with a *literal* world of content. Your thoughtful essay on industry developments could be sandwiched between a personal trainer's workout plan and a meme about after-work beers.

LinkedIn has much less of this diversity than other sites, so, if you're sensible about targeting, you can reach your desired demographic much more quickly. The platform also offers a lot of features you can use to build your professional profile, such as recommendations, featured posts, and profile analytics.

Of course, LinkedIn isn't the answer for everyone. If your craft relies heavily on visual elements, you might be better off focusing on Instagram. If you find written content boring and prefer to stick exclusively to video, TikTok or YouTube might be the place for you.

You can post on more than one platform, of course, but this can get labor-intensive quickly; if your time is limited, you'll be better off focusing on one channel. As noted above, every social media outlet has its quirks. You can't just copy/paste the same content onto four different profiles and expect high performance from all of them. Even if you could, keeping track of the engagement on each post would become a considerable headache.

Moving Like a Thought Leader

I not only use all the brains that I have, but all I can borrow. - Woodrow Wilson.

Thought leadership is not about standing in the proverbial town square and bellowing for all to hear. In fact, good content production often involves talking less than you listen.

"I was an early LinkedIn adopter, and it used to be a place where you didn't really talk," global regulatory strategist Aman Khera says. "There wasn't that much sharing going on. But, when I became home-based and found it a little bit lonely, because I wasn't able to have those "water-cooler" kind of moments, I found myself thinking "well, how could I build a virtual community?"

"LinkedIn was kicking off at the time, and I was thinking "okay, nobody in clinical drug development is talking too much, but that's okay, I'm going to be keeping in touch with people." But then it came to a point where I wanted to share my knowledge as well. That started with sharing knowledge with other people in the company I worked in; not formal knowledge sharing

as such, but having discussions about what we've learned about a particular program or the difficulties companies are going through when they're developing their product.”

Staying attentive will help you to learn about your industry and build genuine connections. Even if you don't start posting regularly (and 99% of LinkedIn's users don't, [according to Kinsta](#)), this will be invaluable. If your ambition is to publish your views, though, it's important to get familiar with the terrain in this way first.

The Trust Factor

Aman Khera says her presence on LinkedIn has helped her to build trust with stakeholders. “In my experience, when my company arranges meetings with subject matter experts and stakeholders from other organizations, it often begins with an exploratory phase. This occurs well before any competitive dynamics come into play; it's about early engagement. I understand that during this initial phase, individuals are likely to look me up on LinkedIn. They're searching and verifying.”

“And, if they do a Google search, they will see I talk a lot, I write a lot, I speak a lot, I share my thoughts. They see that I am respected by my colleagues, not even just those working in the company, but across the industry as well.”

LinkedIn gives you the chance to introduce yourself to other members of your professional network without really meeting them. As the economy continues to globalize and trust remains as important as ever in the world of work, this is an invaluable opportunity.

How to Get the Most Out of LinkedIn

So, you've decided to start posting on LinkedIn. Great! It's now time to set your goals, manage your expectations, and settle in for the long haul. LinkedIn posting is a marathon, not a sprint, and most people don't stay around for enough time to realize the gains they want.

It's important to note that platform-specific guidance is *crucial* here. Publishing thought leadership on LinkedIn isn't the same as posting it on your website or in a Forbes Council piece. It's also not the same as posting it on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter (or X, or whatever it's called by the time you're reading this).

To succeed on a platform, you need to play by its rules.

Shameless Plug Alert: The vast majority of busy executives lack either the time or the skills to make it on LinkedIn, but that doesn't mean its benefits should be out of reach for them. If you're in this position, you might just be the perfect candidate for our ghostwriting or consulting services. We offer free consultations, so please reach out if you'd like to learn more.

Technical Considerations

Successful content is always about quality, regardless of where it's published. You need to inform, provoke, or entertain (or, ideally, a little of all three).

That said, it's important to keep the algorithm in mind when you're focusing on a given platform. There are a host of technical considerations that may help you to boost your reach on LinkedIn, and it's important to familiarize yourself with them in order to generate the best possible ROI for your posts.

Richard van der Blom's annual [Algorithm Report](#) is full of valuable technical insights for those looking to grow on LinkedIn. The most recent [update](#) contained some of the following nuggets:

- The “sweet spot” in terms of the length of text-based posts is between 1,200 and 1,800 characters.
- The ideal number of hashtags (4) will yield 11% more exposure for posts, on average, than no hashtags at all. However, van der Blom notes that the importance of hashtags in general on LinkedIn has declined over the years.
- Failing to respond to comments under your posts can result in 25-40% less engagement.

Staying Consistent

A river cuts through rock, not because of its power, but because of its persistence. - James N. Watkins.

Consistency is probably the biggest predictor of success on LinkedIn, for a few reasons.

Firstly, the algorithm is kind to those who keep showing up, and unforgiving to those who don't. Van der Blom's research indicates that regular posters (those publishing content twice a week or more) who spend a month away from LinkedIn will see an average engagement drop of about 30% on the first 4-5 posts they put up after returning.

Of course, the algorithm isn't the only reason you need to post consistently. If you want to build an audience, you need to keep showing up for your followers, or their attention will shift elsewhere.

Struggles with consistency were a common theme in the interviews we conducted for this ebook. “I wish I had the time to be methodical,” Aman Khera says. “I just haven't had the time yet.”

If you're reading this, chances are you don't have a whole lot of spare time – not many people with successful careers do. Yet, some busy professionals manage to maintain productive posting schedules, while others don't.

So, if you're serious about LinkedIn, make space for content creation in your schedule, and be prepared to leave it there for an extended period. There are very few overnight successes in social media; you need to be willing to keep going even when you're not getting the engagement you want. This is a hurdle at which *a lot* of people fall.

Derive to Survive

Originality is nothing but judicious imitation. - Voltaire.

Many people approach LinkedIn posting with the belief that they need to reinvent the wheel to be successful. This is almost never the case. In reality, many of the platform's most successful creators have gotten where they are by relying on well-worn templates and talking points and adding creative flourishes.

Social media users are notoriously lazy when it comes to paying attention, and they often have little patience for the unexpected. So, they're more likely to consume your content if they understand its aims right away.

This doesn't mean you should plagiarize the work of others. What it *does* mean is that you should write about a small number of topics within your area of expertise, in a way that adds to contributions others have made on the subject, and in a recognizable format.

It's also important to be aware that the LinkedIn algorithm tends to reward certain types of content more readily than others. According to Richard van der Blom, carousel posts attract between 1.8 - 2.3x the reach of standard text posts with images, while the multiplier for polls is 2.1 - 2.9x. You shouldn't shoehorn your content into these formats purely for the sake of the algorithm, but it's generally a good idea to work them in here and there, particularly if you have a high-frequency posting schedule.

Dr. Ali Tinazli, CEO of precision medicine data company Lifespin, reports that he has noticed a lot of success with video posts on LinkedIn; his best videos get roughly twice his average number of post impressions.

An advantage of this type of content is that it can easily be reposted on TikTok, Youtube, or Instagram Reels. Videos attract more engagement when they're posted with captions, as users can watch them without turning up their volume.



Keep it Professional

We asked each of our interviewees about their dislikes in terms of LinkedIn content. Olivier Lemaigen, founder of executive coaching firm HPO Coach, succinctly summed up a grievance that came up repeatedly, responding: “pictures of puppies.”

LinkedIn is a professional platform. You can allow your personal life to spill over into your presence on it to some degree, but you must take care to limit this, and to retain some degree of relevance to your work at all times. Your professional network is looking at what you post, and it doesn't care what's going on outside your 9-5.

“I have been very strategic about what I post on which platforms,” says Adron Hall, software architect and consultant. “I have Threads, I have Facebook, I have LinkedIn, I have Instagram. On LinkedIn, I try to post almost exclusively tech content that's business-related, focused around what I technically do [for work].”

So, save the pet photographs for Instagram (unless, perhaps, you're a veterinarian).



[Image Credit](#)

Picking Your Battles

Unapologetic commentary on the issues of the day is absolutely necessary. Throughout history, concerned citizens with the courage to go against the grain have made tremendous differences in society.

However, you're probably not going to be able to do the same, and you're definitely not going to manage it on LinkedIn. If you try, you'll essentially be staking your professional reputation on your political views. In 2024, this is an extremely high-risk strategy.

“I find it a little bit negative if people do political content, because I believe that doesn't belong on LinkedIn. I never read things like that. If somebody posts something about Party X or Party Y, I believe that that's something for Facebook or other platforms. It doesn't belong on LinkedIn,” says Bjorn Cochlovius, CEO of German biotech company Eleva.

Gaining a following as a content creator is immensely difficult, but losing one couldn't be easier. Followers are fickle, and they'll hit the "unsubscribe" button as soon as your content starts to bore or upset them. Don't take the risk.

What Is Thought Leadership?

“It's funny; other people have said, “Oh, you're a thought leader in the industry,” and I don't really know what that means,” Aman Khera says.

Khera isn't the only one who's confused; many top-class thought leaders find it difficult to pin down exactly what the term refers to. Of course, that's not necessarily a problem. Bill Gates probably didn't bother considering the definition of “thought leadership” when he wrote “Content Is King,” in 1996, but he still managed to pen an article that charted the future of his industry.

Essentially, you just need to add to the most pivotal discussions in your industry in a way that's at least productive, and ideally entertaining as well.

“First and foremost, you must understand what keeps professionals in your industry awake at night. Only then can you delve deep into the complexities of problems and present well-reasoned solutions,” says Irma Becerra, president of Marymount University.

Or, as Aman Khera puts it, “I'm here to make that small difference. If everyone's making small differences, then we're making change.”

Thought Leadership vs. Content Marketing

Technically, thought leadership is a type of content marketing. Content marketing refers to *every* piece of content (from paid ads, to social media posts, to those banner messages pulled across the sky by airplanes) a business uses to advertise itself.

So, what separates thought leadership from all the other types of content used to promote and sell?

With most types of content marketing, the focus is on, well, *marketing*; the content is trying to present your business in the best possible light so that readers will become clients or customers. So, you select topics that highlight your areas of strength, and you write content in such a way that your business comes out looking as capable and value-oriented as possible.

With thought leadership, the focus is not on your business, but your industry. You tackle the issues that are facing your competitors and your clients as well as yourself, and you suggest answers that don't necessarily benefit your bottom line.

Let's think about this in the hypothetical context of a car dealership in a city with chronic traffic congestion and a highly efficient urban rail network. That company might, if posting an ad, highlight the comfort and fuel efficiency of its vehicles. It might note that its cars will get you from A to B at rush hour without costing you a fortune or leaving you with an ache in your back, because of these wonderful features.

If the company was writing thought leadership, it would tell you to take the train.

“Whenever I go to conferences, I hear it over and over again,” says Adron Hall of the importance of neutral thought leadership. “People say ‘oh yeah, I read your stuff because you’re not a sell, you’re not trying to hock me a product or a service and not tell me, because that happens a lot in the industry. They just want to know about the tech, they want to know what your opinion is of it.’”

The confusing part is that thought leadership can achieve the same ends as content marketing. In fact, it often does a much better job. The modern consumer has learned to be skeptical of self-promotion; if you expend too much energy singing your own praises, your readers will question your authenticity.

However, if you seek truth in your content at the expense of everything else, you’ll develop stores of a very valuable resource: trust. This is particularly important in situations where misleading information is potentially dangerous.

“I’m talking to the public because I believe it’s very important that scientists do so,” Bjorn Cochlovius says. “I mean, I always do it on a small scale, in private or with my family or whatever, but that, of course, is not enough.

“There’s too big a gap between scientists and nonscientists, and that became clear to me personally for the first time during the coronavirus pandemic. People were helpless to understand the conflicting information and fake news that was floating around, even from medically trained people.”

If you’re going to publish thought leadership, you must understand that the primary goal is to inform other industry figures and the public at large, not just to promote yourself or your company.

As Aman Khera says: “We can make people aware of obstacles. It’s not just saying, ‘oh, this is great, we can do this.’” One of the things that has really helped me in my thought leadership journey, is that I don’t just talk about the good, I also talk about the bad.”

Your Industry

“You need to get conservative stakeholders in healthcare to buy into new technology, which can make healthcare a counterintuitive market. In the consumer market, if you’re selling a new PlayStation, you will immediately sell millions of it, right? Just because it’s new, it’s cool. In healthcare, it’s the opposite. If it’s new, stakeholders are necessarily cautious, as their primary commitment is to the maintenance of patient safety and the highest standards of care,” says Ali Tinazli.

It’s not just the end user this applies to. When you’re working in a heavily regulated field, like healthcare, you need to get governing bodies on board as well. As Aman Khera explains, it’s crucial to become adept at discussing important industry trends with government officials.

“There are lots of technological advances happening in the healthcare industry right now. Tech companies are coming in to say we can solve problems, but it's not going to be the tech people that explain it to the government or regulatory agencies; it's going to be people like me.

“We know algorithms and what they're based on. Are we doing the right thing, especially when they come into patient safety? Because, unlike other companies, we can't just throw the tennis ball against the wall and keep on throwing it and see what comes out and then fix it later.”

Khera also notes that thought leadership has a role to play when it comes to emerging markets in potentially controversial areas, having personally worked on clinical trials of psychedelic drugs for potential therapeutic applications. “I think our children's generation will have access. I'm hopeful because I can see the results. Like many spaces in industry, there are so many who have a personal story, and that's where they're making a difference. They are prompted and fueled by [issues family members have had] and they're saying, we don't want that ever to happen again.”

Tim Donnelly, CEO of software firm ORtelligence, echoes this position. “Everybody falls somewhere along the adoption curve. You've got your innovators, your early adopters, your early majority, your late majority, and your laggards.

“I use Uber as an example. You know, not everybody was keen on Uber in the very beginning. It was like, you know, “no, I'm not messaging somebody to pick me up in their own car, that's crazy.” So, greater exposure can provide an answer. Number One is getting the word out there, Number Two is getting the people to believe that it's possible, and then Number Three is getting them to try it.”

How Long Does Thought Leadership Need to Be?

There are technically no upper or lower limits when it comes to the length of thought leadership content. However, there are some guiding factors you'll need to be aware of.

If you're publishing LinkedIn posts, you'll have to use fewer than 3,000 characters on each one. If you're writing guest posts, the publication you work with will likely impose a word count limit.

Of course, if you're using your own platform (such as Substack, or your company blog), you won't encounter any such limitations. However, that's not to say you shouldn't try to keep things brief. Most people are much less interested in what you have to say than you are, so they won't stick with you through thousands of words of meandering fluff. To make an impression, get to the point with as little pomp and ceremony as possible.

“There are many ways to share your hard-earned knowledge. Still, the internet can get extremely noisy, so focus on clarity, practicality, and evidence-based logic when creating content,” says Irma Becerra.

Thought Leadership as a Means of Communicating With the Workforce

On November 9, 2022, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg shared an update with his staff via an [open letter](#). For the first time in the social media giant's history, it was implementing large-scale

layoffs, with 11,000 people (13% of the organization's workforce at the time) set to lose their jobs.

Zuckerberg made no excuses and offered no platitudes. Instead, he explained the situation in the context of market realities, and reported his own failures unflinchingly.

This letter came at a tumultuous time in the world of Big Tech. The sector, which rode a scarcely believable wave of success throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, was slowing down, and hundreds of thousands of people were losing their jobs as a result.

Zuckerberg's letter is a masterclass in productive thought leadership. Good leadership content must be honest, sometimes to the point of discomfort. It must address the most pressing issues and explain them in the context of the market and the economy. It must start the difficult conversations, rather than reacting to them.

As a consultant who frequently works with leadership handovers, Susan Grayson Stone (chief operating officer at Adnant) says important messages should come from the top wherever possible. "I think communication should always come from the standpoint of, 'here's the greater context, and here's why I'm telling you this,' right? Like, here's why we're about to make this change. Here's how it's going to impact what you used to be doing, and here's how it's going to be different."

As AI, political instability, and slowing economic growth continue to wreak havoc across industries, it's vital to be prepared for difficult conversations as an executive. Insulating yourself from them might sound inviting, but it will likely do more harm than good in the long run.

Thought Leadership & Artificial Intelligence

No ebook discussing content production in 2024 would be complete without some coverage of generative AI. Tools like ChatGPT have undoubtedly changed the game when it comes to content production, but it's important to be realistic about what they can do.

"It's a big question with generative AI in the sense of research and analytics," says Elizabeth Parks, president and CMO of market research firm Parks Associates. "I do think that generative AI has already impacted a lot of companies in terms of the understanding of what's happening in the industry, simply because bots can go out and search across news and then come up with condensed versions.

"But, original content is what's behind all of the generative AI, so you can't get to some of the output that's good without the original content providers. So, I don't think it's just going to take over everything. I don't think you can use it without the human involved."

Another key point to remember is that AI is available to everyone. If you're posting its output completely unedited, you'll have no way of differentiating yourself from the *millions* of others doing the same. Also, AI's work is fairly obvious to the trained eye – you don't want to gain a reputation as someone who's trying to pass off the work of a robot as their own.

So, don't expect to hand your writing tasks over to ChatGPT and see massive follower growth and skyrocketing business revenue; if you don't use it sensibly, you're almost guaranteed to do more harm than good. Granted, as a thought leadership agency, we *would* say that – but it's still true.

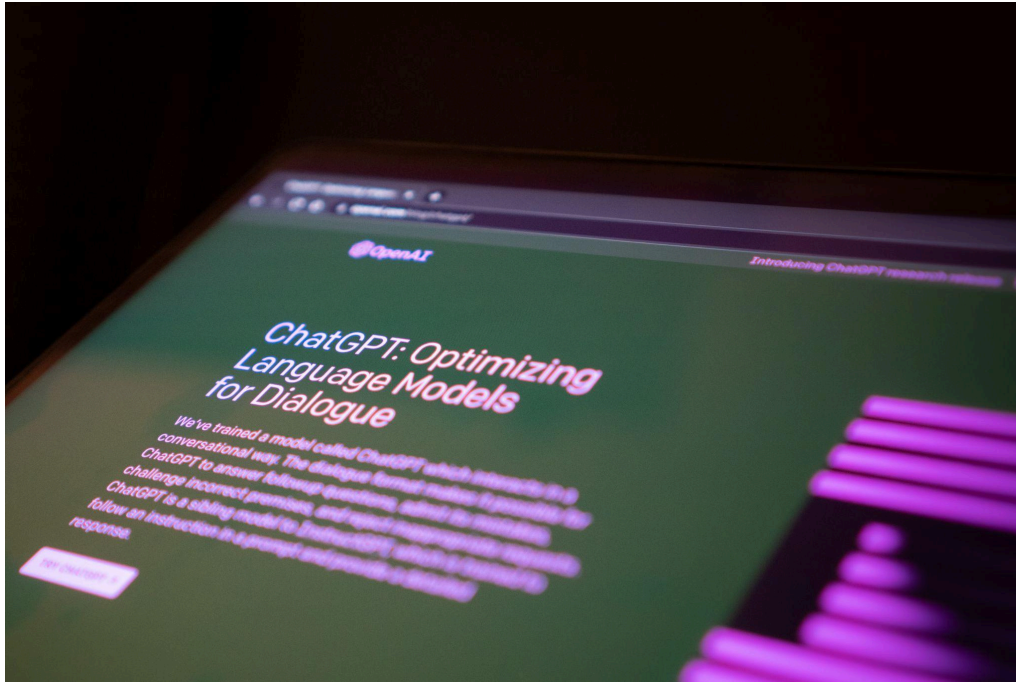


Image credit: <https://unsplash.com/photos/a-close-up-of-a-computer-screen-with-a-blurry-background-MMUzS5Ozuus>

Measuring Thought Leadership's Return on Investment

“The role of content couldn't be overstated right now in terms of business strategy,” says Elizabeth Parks. “I think that that took hold truly at the beginning of the pandemic and the world became a different place. The digital marketplace, not only for consumers but also for businesses, is where people go first to investigate new solutions, to understand what companies are doing, and even the culture of the business.”

Many commentators share Parks' certainty about the value of thought leadership content, but this doesn't mean it's easy to measure in precise terms. A Financial Times [study](#) on thought leadership shows just how challenging this can be. The FT's straw poll of senior marketers found that 98% think it's difficult to measure thought leadership ROI, and that 82% were dissatisfied with their own approach.

So, if the returns cannot be quantified, how do you justify the investment?



This depends on your own position and what you'd like your thought leadership to achieve. Adron Hall notes that his publications and conference appearances have opened the door for him to “influence the direction of technologies.”

“Because of where I was at and because of the way I positioned myself, I got much more involved in the dev ops community, and I was able to help influence the direction of a lot of the technologies [in that area].

“I was involved in a lot of the testing and some of the technologies around Kubernetes and Cloud Foundry. Now, around 80% of companies are using Kubernetes to build their infrastructure.”

Hall also mentions that his publications have created numerous opportunities for him by expanding his network. “My having a presence out there and speaking my mind and talking about various things allowed me to get more involved in my industry. People I knew reached out and said, “hey, we know you're involved in X, Y, Z would you also like to be involved in this thing or that thing?””

The benefits for the career-driven individual here are obvious, but, if you're reading this as a business leader, you may be wondering why you'd invest in thought leadership for your supporting team members if it's not going to have a measurable effect on your bottom line. However, it's highly likely that your employees will appreciate you helping them to develop their professional footprints, and this appreciation could translate into smoother operations for you.

Talent bleed, which has plagued big companies in recent years, is closely related to feelings of apathy and disconnection in the workplace; a [2022 study](#) from McKinsey & Company revealed

that just over half of recent job departures at the time were related to employees' perception that they were not properly valued by their companies or their managers.

Conclusion

Last words are for fools who haven't said enough. – Karl Marx.

Conclusions are generally the least important part of any piece of business writing. Many of your readers will have checked out by the time they reach this point, so you shouldn't save anything too consequential for your closing section.

With that in mind, we'll keep this brief. [Contact us today](#) if you'd like to take your thought leadership to the next level.

Acknowledgements

The research process for this ebook included interviews with nine industry leaders who have previously worked with our agency or one of its team members. They were kind enough to share insights about their business, how thought leadership has helped them achieve their goals, and the value they would like to see thought leadership content deliver, both inside and outside the confines of their industries.

They are:

- **Dr. Irma Becerra:** The president of Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia.
- **Dr. Bjorn Cochlovius, Ph.D.:** The CEO of Eleva, a German biotech company focused on “bryotechnology,” through which complex therapeutic proteins can be produced from moss.
- **Tim Donnelly:** The co-founder and CEO of ORtelligence, which produces software to assist operating surgeons.
- **Susan Grayson Stone:** The chief operating officer at Adnant, a premium accounting and consulting firm specializing in technical accounting and taking companies public.
- **Adron Hall:** The principal consultant at Composite Thrashing Code, which helps financial organizations modernize their APIs.
- **Aman Khera:** The “Rebel Regulator” who advises and implements global regulatory strategy in the lifesciences industry.
- **Olivier Lemaigen:** The founder of HPO Coach, which provides executive coaching, marketing, and process optimization services to companies across industries.
- **Elizabeth Parks:** The president and CMO of Parks Associates, a leading technology market research firm.
- **Dr. Ali Tinazli:** The CEO of Lifespin, a precision medicine data company focused on creating human metabolic profiles to map broad trends in illness and healthcare.

Sources:

1. <https://about.fb.com/news/2022/11/mark-zuckerberg-layoff-message-to-employees/>
2. <https://medium.com/@HeathEvans/content-is-king-essay-by-bill-gates-1996-df74552f80d9>
3. <https://longitude.ft.com/how-to-pick-thought-leadership-metrics-that-matter/>
4. https://media.licdn.com/dms/document/media/D4D1FAQHn5bK_bYRglO/feedshare-document-pdf-analyzed/0/1667804588983?e=1705536000&v=beta&t=Q05VRL0cFPvxN_Ukhp1nbK9uUEpcmlWV-eDxwflkfCA
5. <https://blog.hootsuite.com/linkedin-statistics-business/>
6. <https://kinsta.com/blog/linkedin-statistics>
7. <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/digital-content-creation-market-report>