

RSW/US

New Business Solutions for Marketing Agencies

Thought Leadership's Role in New Business

Finding Your Voice, Telling your Story

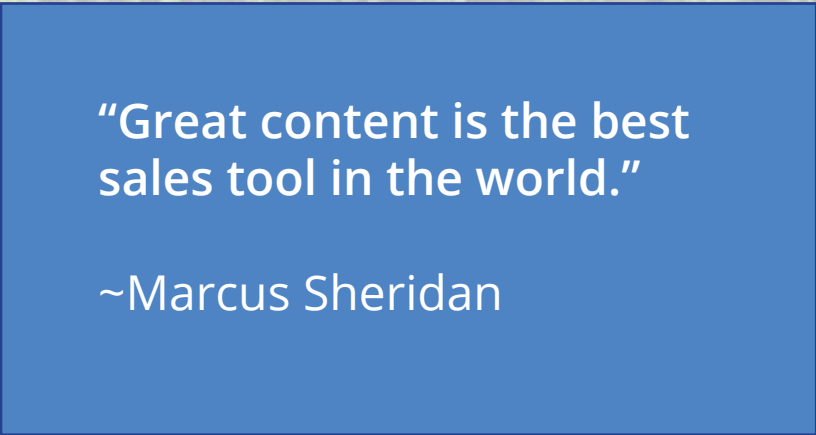


Introduction

There are numerous facets to an agency new business program:

There's your website itself, which serves as a digital handshake, taking your prospect on a tour of everything you have to offer. There's the case studies and showcases of previous work, which serves as the product demonstration, allowing the prospect to see themselves in the work you've done for others.

But of course, a handshake and a demonstration can only get you so far without a voice behind them. That's where thought leadership comes in: it defines who your agency is, and the lens through which you see the work you do.



"Great content is the best sales tool in the world."

~Marcus Sheridan

Solving for Why: The Numbers Behind Blogging Success

First, a bit of self-validation: why blog? You'll quickly find that getting into the thought leadership groove is much easier said than done, and as much as we'd like to tell you that it's a quick and easy way to make millions, the fact is that developing this kind of content requires consistency and persistence, and it's easy to pack it in before you even put digital pen to paper. And while we recommend a blog hosted within your agency "ecosystem," if the hurdle you face is one of website design - LinkedIn has emerged as a powerful alternative; all principles noted in this ebook will apply to these external LinkedIn articles as well.

However, you'll find that thought leadership is a shortcut for multiple facets of your new business process, which is reason enough to get over that proverbial hill...

Want help generating some top-funnel leads?

Content marketing generates three times as many prospects as outbound marketing, but costs 62% less. (Demand Metric)

Looking to get more people onto the website?

72% of online marketers describe content marketing as their most effective SEO tactic. (HubSpot)

Impressing a client in the lead-up to a pitch?

65% of B2B content consumers strongly agree they have higher preferences for credible content from industry influencers. (Demand Gen)

And, if you absolutely must, look at blogging as a necessary evil: 53% of marketers say that blogging is their top content marketing priority (HubSpot). Are you going to let yourself fall behind that curve? Didn't think so.

Let's get to it.

So...What to Write About?

You sit down, ready to share your agency's voice with the world, and you realize: you're not sure what to write about. It's not indicative of a blog effort destined to fail. It's simply the first step in finding your agency's voice.

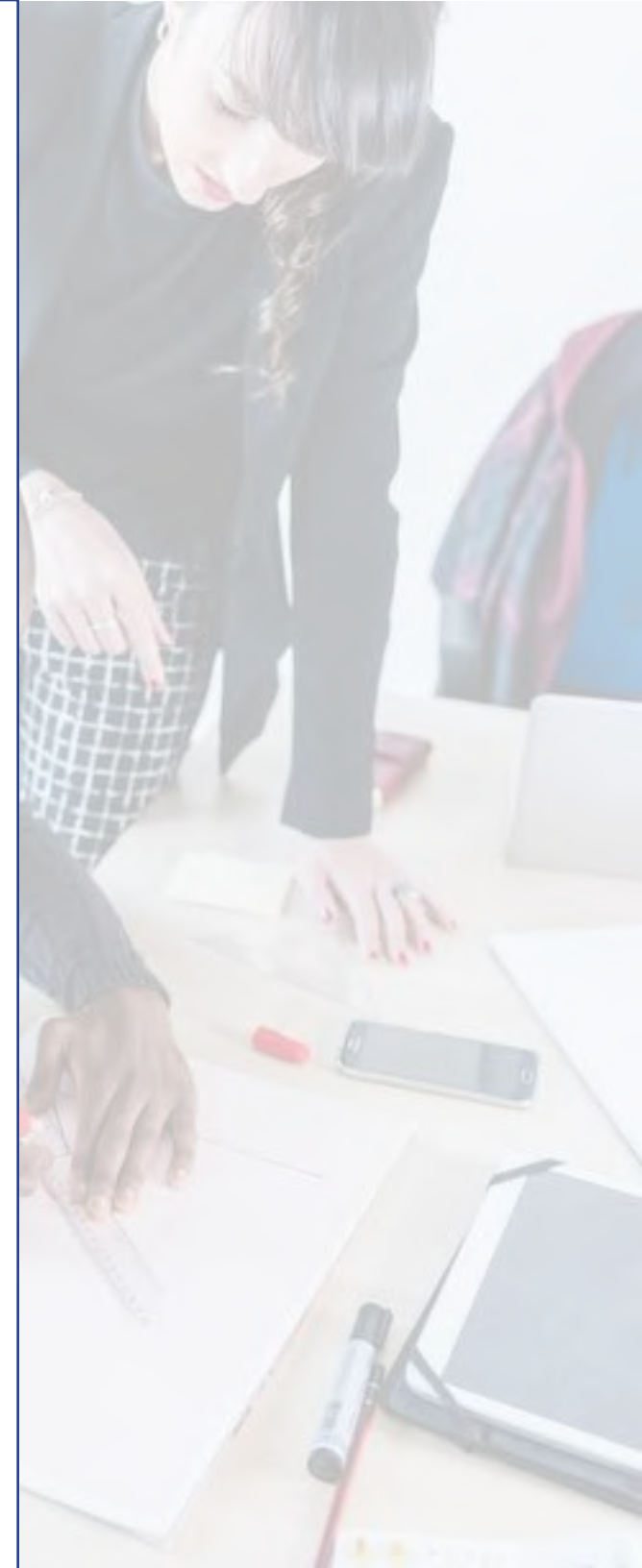
The most important thing to remember when choosing topics is exactly that: you are the one choosing them. Think of it as the most flattering Q&A possible, and cover the things you know your agency excels at. What makes your approach unique? What has proven to be the difference in the experience you provide to clients? These are the things you need to be writing about, and the things that will drive engagement.

This topic choice is more than self-flattery, it's a chance to show that you understand the reader's challenges, and simply talking about these hurdles is an inherent signal that you get it. Write with the underlying tone that the challenges your reader is hearing about - the things they need to do in order to succeed in their industry - are things that are best handled by your agency.

Self-promote Without Promoting

Of course, you may be thinking that engagement alone doesn't pay the bills and be tempted to write with an eye toward sales, telling readers all about your offering, and packing it full of new business calls to action. After all, the reality is that a blog is a piece of a larger engine with the purpose of building new business (not to mention some profit).

Our advice is this: good thought leadership inherently serves as promotion for your agency's ability to solve your prospect's challenges. Light promotion? A "contact us" spiel at the end of the post? Sure. But if your thought leadership reads more like a sales pitch than a lecture, it's time to reevaluate your content strategy. There are plenty of opportunities to leverage your thought leadership in a new business effort - leave it out of the content itself.



Building A Better Blog Post

We'll get into how to incorporate your posts into a larger/strategic/comprehensive content plan later in the ebook, but for now, it's time to sit down and do some writing. Every journey begins with a single step, and every blog begins with a first post. And in that same vein, it's time for us to examine the nuts and bolts of what goes into an effective piece of content.

Unfortunately, this is also the point at which we often see agencies become their own worst enemy, fearing that a "bad" post will derail their agency's message, and the blog will do more harm than good.

For those agencies, we have good news and bad news.

First, the good: if your topic choice is solid, and your agency's philosophy is on display (which, you'll find, is easy to do when you've done an effective job in the planning stages), the insight will come naturally and the blog will add value for readers.

Now the bad news: the only way to get better at blogging... is to blog. There's no secret formula to the perfect blog post, and the easiest way to improve the voice is through repetition. Luckily, the resulting volume will be an advantage in and of itself - a steady stream of solid posts is a more powerful tool than a handful of stellar ones, and the full body of work is what will keep readers engaged as you continue the development.

What Thought Leadership Isn't

Walking us through past work

There's nothing wrong with showing how your chosen topic has applied to a past project, but if that project is the entire topic...you're writing a case study, not a blog.

"Culture" posts

We know you're looking for summer interns. We know your agency is a cool place to work. We know you recently took the team bowling. These are all great to share, but do so on your social platforms, and keep them from cluttering up the same space as your more substantial content.

Your personal pontification

It may seem obvious, but we've seen agency principles use the agency blog as a journal of sorts, telling stories with little to no connection to their agency perspective or, really, to marketing at all. Keep your topics focused, and leave the autumn stroll imagery to your personal pages.

Building A Better Blog Post, Continued

All that being said, a few considerations to make as you're laying out the format of your blog post:

Length

The average word count of top-ranking content (in Google) is between 1,140-1,285 words. (Social Media Examiner). While this isn't a requirement set in stone, it does illustrate a sweet spot of sorts, finding a balance between short in-the-news commentary (250-500 words) and broader "state of the industry", which can stretch to 1,500 words or more.

Information organization

Nobody wants to read a proverbial "wall of text" without a paragraph break or sub header to be found. There's a reason that "listicles" have cemented a place in high-traffic content sites: it's an easily digestible way to display the components of your insight. And while we're not asking you to hammer out "50 Ways Your Marketing Could Use A Boost (You Won't Believe #36!)", a little formatting goes a long way in making your content easier to consume for the reader.

Series

As an extension of those organization principles, look for opportunities to develop posts around a common theme as part of a series. Not only does it help to give the reader an easy reference as they work through your body of work, but will also evoke the human tendency to "collect 'em all" when presented with a collection of work. When you enjoy a post titled "Pt. 3", it's only natural to hunt down the first two installments of the series!

Read All About It: Sharing Your Post

Once you have the blog post live on your site (or, ideally, beforehand as part of your planning), it's time to develop a strategy around promoting and sharing that content.

Making the most of the content into which you've invested is arguably the most important step of the process, and it's one that's often overlooked by agencies that relish the fantasy of hitting the "submit" button on the blog, walking away from the computer, and waiting for the leads to roll in. Creating the content is only half the battle - and sharing your post is the best way to make sure you're seeing a return on your efforts.

For many, the obvious place to start sharing content with your network is LinkedIn - and in terms of social reach, it's certainly not a bad option. Depending on the extent to which you use LinkedIn in your new business efforts (tip: it should be a lot!), it can be a valuable platform in getting it to the people to whom it matters most.

Regardless of where you're sharing the post, don't make the mistake of simply sharing the link and title; add depth, give a brief preview at what lies behind the click, and demonstrate why it matters.

By the same token, don't limit your LinkedIn article feed to just your own content. There's value in sharing external articles and offering your own perspective on the content. This is what drives deeper discussions with prospects, and positions you and your agency as a thought leader: noticing trends, and finding where you fit in. And, if nothing else, it's an effective way to start thinking of your own thought leadership in new ways, feeding into your next wave of content.

The Long and Short of Medium

You may see companies that forgo a self-hosted blog page in favor of posting on Medium, an online publishing platform that's gained traction as a hub for thought leadership in a variety of industries. It's a viable option, although one that has a few caveats - you can see our pros and cons below:

Pros

- Curated feeds directing readers to your posts based on similar interests, essentially a self-contained SEO
- Intuitive publishing allows for simple, streamlined editing and publishing.

Cons

- Undermines the advantage of bringing reader onto your site and into your agency's "ecosystem"
- The same simple editing tools are also restrictive, preventing you from injecting your branding into the post beyond simple images.

Plotting Your Course

You've written your first blog post, you've shared your blog post, so of course, the next step is....planning? It may seem odd, but now that we have a post in hand, let's take a look at building a game plan for your next few months, and how the existing post - and those still to come - fit into the big picture of your content marketing. Having an overarching strategy is the best way for your content to go from good to great, and with 63% of businesses lacking a documented content strategy (Content Marketing Institute), it's a competitive edge in driving readers to your content.

Who's Writing These Things?

Another piece of the planning process is answering the question of byline: who's going to be doing the blogging and, in essence, take up the mantle of speaking for the agency? It may seem obvious, but you'll want consistent bylines from senior members of your team - these are the people leading your agency and forging its identity, and are the best equipped to speak on its behalf.

Once that "senior" distinction is fulfilled at a steady cadence, however, your aim should be providing as varied of a gallery of voices as possible. Have your designer write about what makes for a great brand, get your account manager to write about the components of a successful agency relationship, ask an intern to write about their experience coming up in the industry. An agency works best as an engine of moving parts - demonstrate that in your blog perspectives.

Plotting Your Course, Continued

Build around your tent poles

The best way to begin building out your content calendar is to define a couple larger pieces to be your “tentpole” projects. This could be quarterly survey reports, bimonthly ebooks, or whatever else you plan to be your premier pieces of content. From there, you’ll use this cadence to build out smaller pieces (think infographics or videos) to fill in the gaps, and smaller content still (blog posts) to fill in the rest. When you’re done building out from those larger projects, you should be able to visualize a cascade of smaller pieces forming the mortar between each.

Think holistically

As you’re putting the plan together, ask yourself: how does this bring you closer to your new business goals? Thought leadership is a valuable exercise to define your agency, but like any investment, it needs to be purposeful in the pursuit of business objectives. Evaluate the resources necessary for each piece of content, and forecast how much longevity you’ll get as a return on that investment.

Is it a webinar you’ll be promoting for weeks ahead of time, and sharing for weeks following? A quick post that requires far less investment, but will largely come and go within a week or two? Find a balance that works within your team’s bandwidth to create a balanced, steady variety of pieces. As you work through this thinking, you’ll often land on blog posts as the “safest” investment in terms of resource dedication compared to value provided.



Example Content Calendar

Content	Follow Up	Topic	Date
Ebook		Thought leadership	Jan
	Blog	The first steps to strong thought leadership	Jan
	Infographic	What's in a blog post?	Feb
	Blog	Writing to your audience	March
Survey report		New Business Trends	April
	Blog	Recapping the Next Big Thing in new business	May
	Print mailer	How to get more new business meetings	May
	Blog	Most effective strategies for nailing your next prospect meeting	June
Ebook		Building A Website	July
	Blog	Is your website due for a redesign?	Aug
	Webinar	Best practices for your new business website	Sept
	Blog	What turns a website into a "new business" website	Sept
Survey report		Year End Recap	Oct
	Blog	The year that was in marketing	Nov
	Video	Showing recap results	Dec

In the sample calendar above, we've developed 4 tentpole content pieces: 2 ebooks in Q1 and Q3, and 2 multipage survey reports in Q2 and Q4. From there, smaller pieces of supporting content achieve two goals: boosting the signal of (and linking back to) these larger pieces to continue to drive engagement, while also giving us a steady stream of content that can be used to bridge back to the most relevant findings from the tentpoles, enhancing their message and credibility.

You Can't Spell Content Strategy Without S, E, O

Thought leadership and SEO go hand-in-hand in shaping your website to be the well-oiled new business engine you know it can be. Good thought leadership puts relevant content onto your site, and (ideally) creates an uptick in readers and site visits. This, in turn, improves your credibility in the eyes of Google, which helps your search engine listing, driving more readers for your good thought leadership, which puts relevant content onto....well, you get the idea.

Point is: thought leadership is awesome, strong SEO is awesome, and when combined, they feed into one another to make both even more awesome (awesomer?). And if being a marketing buzzword for the last decade isn't enough to nudge you down the path toward SEO enlightenment, here's a few numbers for you:

- The first organic search listings on desktop and mobile get 19.3% and 27.7% of clicks, respectively. (SEOClarity)
- 75% of people never scroll past the first page of search results. (HubSpot)
- 67% of all clicks go to the first five results. (Databox)

You Can't Spell Content Strategy Without S, E, O

The point stands: when people search, they're looking for the best, the closest, and the most trusted sources. For better or worse, Google has become the digital gatekeeper of these things, and therein lies the core of SEO: making sure your agency is among those most trusted sources on the internet.

So how does thought leadership factor into this? Put simply, a steady stream of content is among the top factors in your SEO ranking, thanks to the links, industry terms, images, and number of content pages that are inherent to blogs. Even without paying a second thought to it, your blog will significantly improve your listing. Of course, this boost only stands to increase when making a few deliberate tweaks with SEO in mind:

Keywords, early and often:

Using relevant terms early in your content, and as often as a natural narrative will allow, ensures that searches for services in your agency's wheelhouse take them straight to your content.

Use meta tags:

At its core, SEO is all about telling Google what you're all about, and meta tags are a simple way to do just that. Once implemented into your website platform, these tags allow SEO crawlers to sort you into the correct bucket of searches, essentially making sure that prospects are getting the right message at the right time for them. Sound familiar?

Link...to yourself:

One component of SEO is providing an easily navigable site for readers and crawlers alike. One of the simplest ways to do this is through internal linking - connecting content pages with one another through hyperlinks. This allows your full range of content (ideally relevant to one another) to be easily accessed, providing a fuller picture of who would find the site valuable, and the terms these searches might use.

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle: Creating Evergreen Content

As your content marketing plan takes shape, one consideration to make is the “evergreen” nature of what your writing. How will a piece of content age? If someone reads your content 6 months, even a year down the line, will they still be able to find value in it, or will it exist solely as a snapshot of your agency’s thinking at a given moment?

There are benefits to each approach, and when faced with a choice between the extended value of an evergreen piece or the in-the-moment relevance of a news-related piece, the most important consideration is the scope and size of the piece itself.



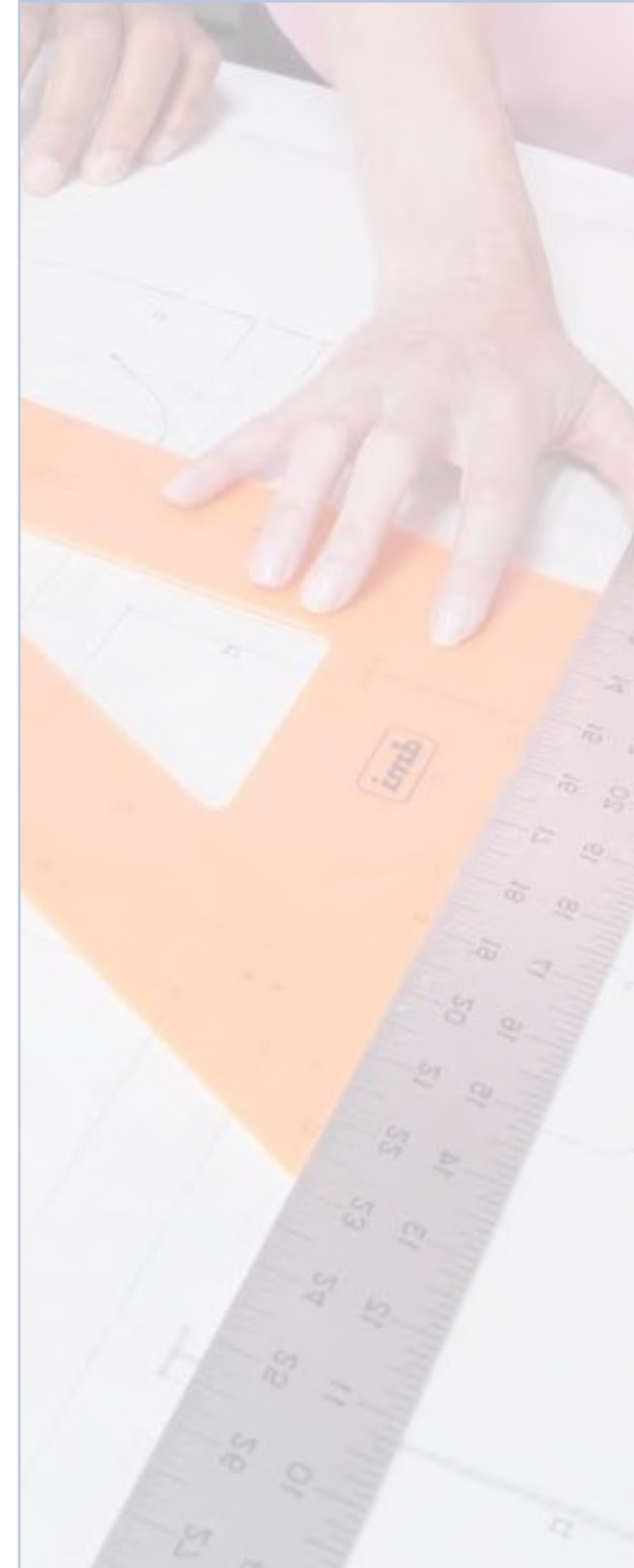
In this sliding scale, the smaller the piece, the more time-sensitive it can be. A quick blog post or, as we’ll discuss in a bit, commentary on a shared article, is a prime example of something that can directly discuss the news of the day, examining trends in the moment and how your agency’s work fits into that setting. In most cases, you won’t be promoting an individual post for longer than a month or so, giving you room to crank up the current trend commentary and throw time-sensitive caution to the wind.

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle: Creating Evergreen Content Cont.

On the other side, a longer-tail project like an ebook (*ahem*) is best written as a zoomed-out, macro analysis of fundamental principles, with little or no references to these day-to-day shifts. Besides being a longer and more resource-intensive development process, these larger projects need to retain value for much longer than a blog post to prove worthwhile. You don't need to be an economist to see that an ebook that takes a month to create and a week to become obsolete is a bad investment.

Of course, there is a middle ground here: ebooks are more permanent by virtue of being downloaded by the reader in some fashion, whereas blogs live on your site. Because of this, a blog post that's been rendered obsolete by shifting marketing trends, a new industry development, or the entire year of 2020 can be updated to reflect these changes. Around 60% of marketers will reuse blog content 2-3 times (OptinMonster), and it's an easy way to squeeze more efficiency out of the content you've already created.

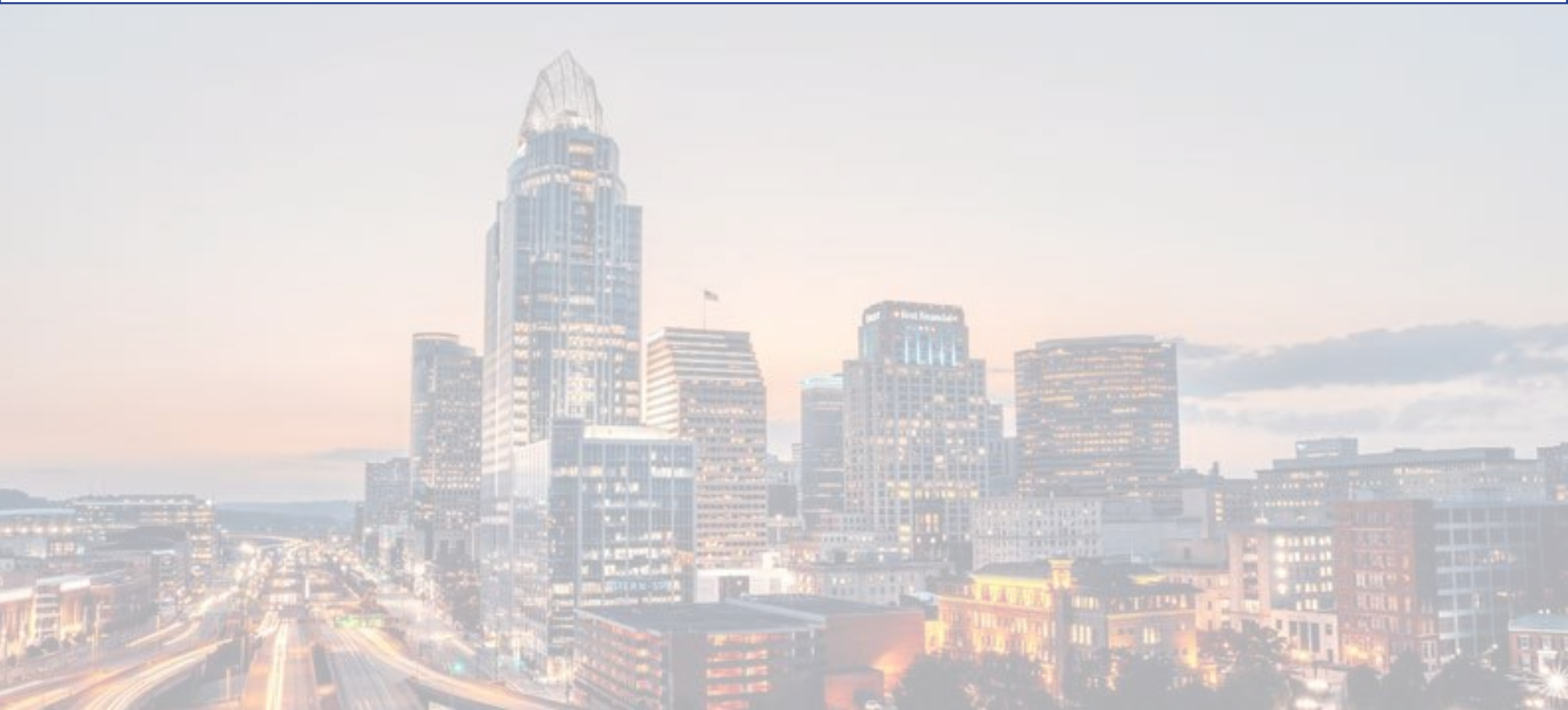
This "living document" approach allows for the best of both worlds: the relevancy of a blogged commentary piece, with the "high-mileage" potential of an ebook. It's not something we recommend for your entire catalog of content, but certainly a path to consider for a select few of your "cornerstone" posts.



Conclusion

Thought leadership is rarely the first thing on an agency's to-do list. It's seen as a "nice-to-have", the icing on the cake. As today's seeds of innovation become tomorrow's industry-defining trends, however, this content allows your agency to set the tone, have your say, and speak for yourself as experts of what your perspective adds to the conversation. This kind of impact is a powerful piece of driving new business, and isn't something your agency should allow to fall upon the back burner.

So as we close this ebook, we hope that you take from it an understanding that thought leadership content is more than icing. It's a way for you to join the conversation, and ensure that your agency has a seat at the table of an industry built on understanding what's next.





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