STRATEGY GUIDE

purpleiris COMMUNICATIONS



How to Build B2B Authority in the Age of AI Search

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Executive Summary

> Your company controls what it publishes. It does not control the opinions buyers form about you.

When a buyer asks a search engine or an AI assistant about a problem you solve, the answer draws from signals far beyond your owned channels.

Muck Rack's 2026 edition of its "What is AI Reading?" research found that 84% of AI citations come from earned media, with journalism alone accounting for 27%.[1]

External signals determine whether your company is visible, but that's not all. They shape how buyers understand your expertise, what they associate you with, and whether they see you as a credible source on the problem you solve.

1. https://muckrack.com/blog/what-is-ai-reading-may-2026



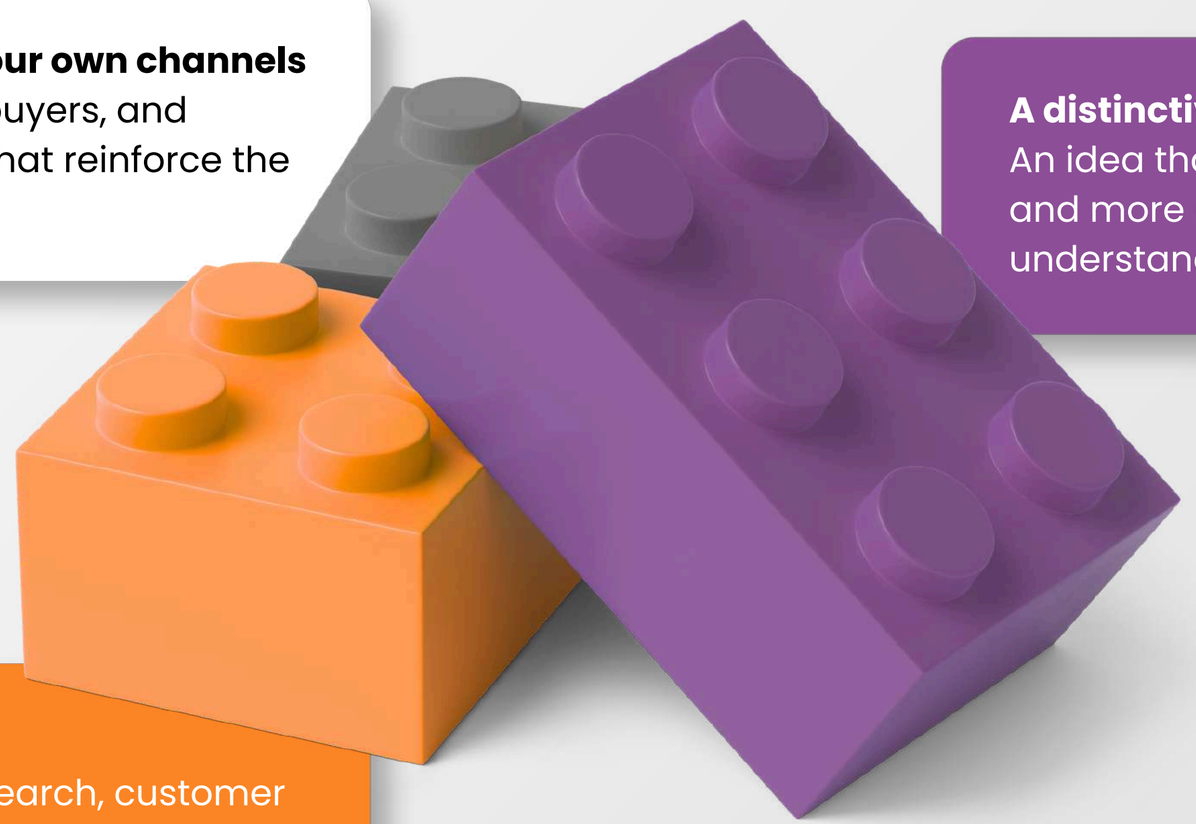
The new buying environment

Winning visibility is the first step. Next are questions that are equally important but harder to address.

- What are buyers learning about us on channels that are beyond our control?
- Are we building authority for buyers to trust and seek out our expertise?
- What evidence supports that reputation?

The building blocks of authority

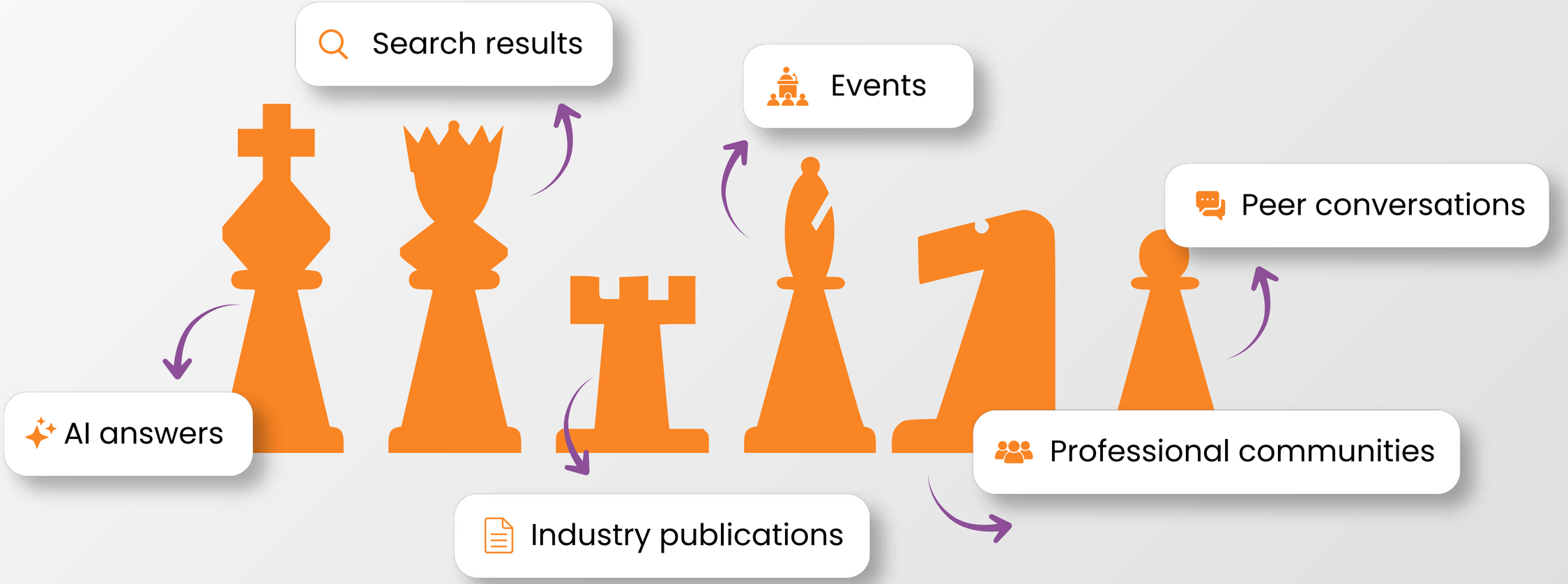
Recognition beyond your own channels
Independent sources, buyers, and industry communities that reinforce the association



A distinctive point of view
An idea that gives buyers a clearer and more useful way to understand a problem

Evidence behind the idea
Experience, independent research, customer evidence, or proprietary data that gives you the right to say it

Where Buyers Encounter Authority



This guide helps you understand how to

01 Know what buyers encounter

Understand what appears beyond your owned channels

02 Choose a space you can own

Find a buyer problem where your expertise can add a distinctive voice

03 Trace what travels beyond owned channels

Separate observable buyer signals from assumptions about influence

04 Build the next signal

Put one useful idea in places where buyers search

The visibility gap

Traditional reporting only shows you half of what's happening



Traditional reporting can tell you what you published, how much traffic you generated, and which channels produced measurable engagement.

But buyers increasingly research in environments where the interaction may not produce a website visit. Forrester's 2026 research on zero-click buyer behavior describes this as a growing visibility gap for marketers.[2]

> You may know what you published without knowing what answer the buyer received.

2. https://www.forrester.com/blogs/unlock-the-zero-click-buyer-data-hiding-in-your-bot-traffic/

Know your blind spot

Start with five questions your buyers routinely ask. Find them in sales and discovery calls, customer conversations, RFPs, search queries, and AI search prompts.

Use the exact buyer wording, then search each question in Google and an AI search tool to see what answer appears.



What do buyers know you for?

Most organizations know what they want to be known for. Far fewer know what buyers actually associate with them.

That's the gap between positioning and reputation.

Your positioning is what you say about yourself. Your reputation is what others remember, repeat, and associate with you.

The real question to ask is whether an independent buyer, publication, analyst, or Large Language Model (LLM) will make the right association without anyone from your company to explain it.

That distinction matters because buyers often have to infer what your company stands for from the signals they encounter across multiple sources. And when there is so much information to process, clarity becomes critical.

Trace the association

Start with one topic you want to own.

1. What do we want to be known for?

What expertise, point of view, or category association should buyers associate with us?

2. What are we being associated with?

Ask an AI tool, knowledgeable third-party, or buyers:

"What is [company/executive] best known for in [category/problem]?"

Don't give them your positioning statement or correct the answer.

Look for the ideas that keep coming up across responses, references, or conversations.

3. Is there a narrative drift, and if yes, where?

Ask:

Where is the gap between what we want buyers to understand about us and what they actually perceive?

What the result tells you

The association is right
The next step is to strengthen the specific evidence buyers are already responding to.

The association is vague
The market recognizes the category but not your distinctive contribution. Start addressing the gap by specifying the problem, audience, or perspective buyers should associate with you.

The association is wrong
Trace it back to the source. Is an outdated service page, executive profile, content theme, or third-party description reinforcing the association? Change the source creating the strongest mismatch.

Question for your leadership: What are buyers associating us with (and is it the space we want to own)?

Find the answer gap

> Don't compete for the answer others already own. Find what the buyer still needs to know.

Most competitive Answer Engine Optimization (AEO) work starts with:

Who is showing up?

A follow-up question is:

Why is that answer useful, and what does it still leave unresolved?

AI-generated answers increasingly draw from multiple sources rather than reproducing a ranked list. The opportunity is to understand why the current answer works and where your expertise can add context, challenge the prevailing view, or offer a better way to approach the problem.

The answer-gap audit

Pick one question your buyers actually ask.

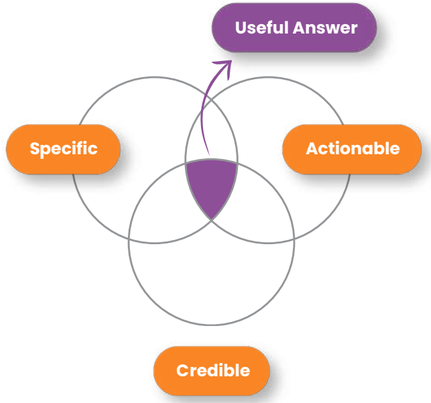
1. Who answers it best today?

Which company, expert, or source gives the strongest answer?

- **Industry Leaders**
  High-level guidance
- **Experts/analysts**
  Frameworks & definitions
- **Public Resources**
  General principles
- **Competitors**
  Broad case studies

2. Why is that answer useful?

What makes it specific, credible, or actionable?



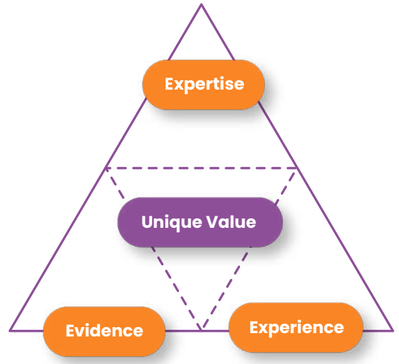
3. What does the buyer still need?

What would they still need to know, understand, or weigh before they could act?

- **Industry-specific examples**
- **Implementation steps**
- **Decision criteria**

4. Can we credibly answer that part?

Do we have the expertise, evidence, or experience to fill the gap?



EXAMPLE

Buyer question:
How should a mid-sized technology manufacturer of heavy machinery approach AI governance?

What the current answers may provide:
General governance principles. Definitions. Large-enterprise examples.

What may still be missing:
What governance looks like for a mid-sized manufacturer with limited compliance resources, a lean technology team, and multiple operational systems.

Do you have the authority to own the answer?

> **An unanswered question is an opportunity only when you have a credible reason to own the answer.**

Before you invest in creating and distributing an answer, test whether you have something you can credibly own and not something any competitor could say.

The right-to-own test

01 Experience

What have we seen or done that gives us a legitimate perspective on this problem?

Bring out specificity that builds confidence in a buyer:

- a recurring client problem
- a proprietary method
- direct operating experience
- original research
- a measurable outcome

02 Distinctiveness

What can we say about this problem that a competitor cannot credibly claim as their own?

Ask

Is this answer so generic that if a competitor puts its logo on the argument it will pass undetected?

03 Evidence

What can we point to that makes the argument defensible?

- Proprietary data or research
- Customer evidence
- Independent or external validation

04 Buyer consequence

What would the buyer understand, decide, or do differently because of this idea?

If the answer is: "***They will understand us better.***" That's not enough.

What decisions does the better understanding influence?

- ★ What they prioritize
- ★ How they approach the problem
- ★ What they look for in a partner
- ★ What risks they consider
- ★ Whether they invest

The test

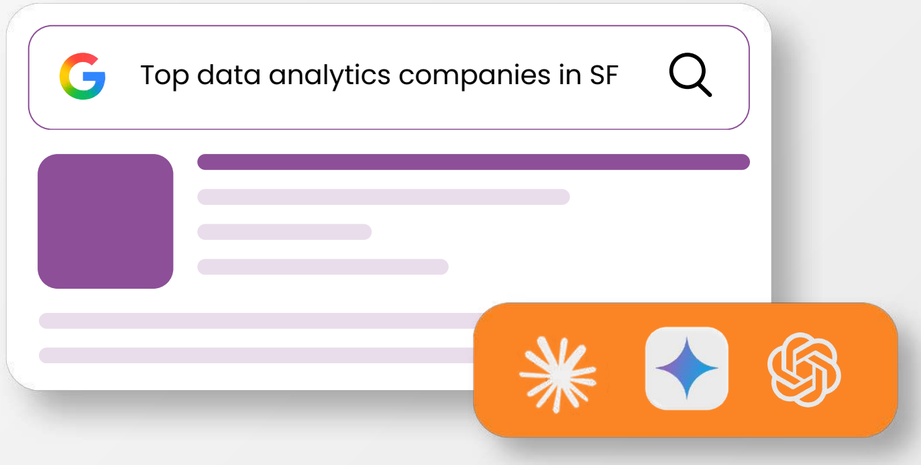


= You have direct experience of the problem + You can say something meaningfully different about it + You can defend that view with evidence + The difference matters to a buyer

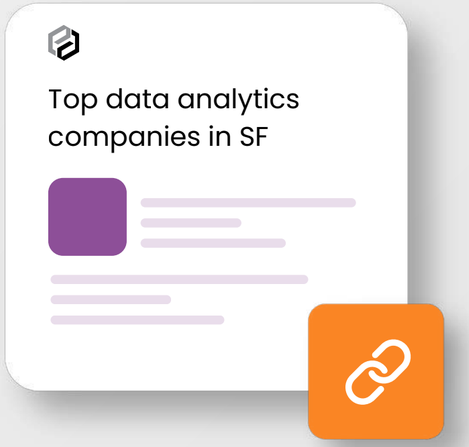
What can you actually trace?

A buyer may encounter your expertise through a web or AI search, a third-party source, an event, or your own content.

Rather than trying to connect a piece of content directly to revenue, trace the buyer behaviors you can actually verify.



Web or AI search



Third-party source



Your own content

The traceability chain

01 Encounter

"I saw your CEO's LinkedIn post about this."

Observable
The source or channel they mention

02 Recognition

"We've been seeing your CEO's posts on AI governance for mid-sized manufacturers."

Observable
The topic, idea, executive, or point of view they already associate with you

03 Reference

"I read your whitepaper about reducing AI compliance overhead."

"I heard your CTO speak about AI governance for mid-sized manufacturers at the International Manufacturing Technology Show."

"Our VP of Operations forwarded me your article on governing AI across multiple operational systems."

Observable
The specific content, event, idea, or executive they reference—and how it enters the conversation

04 Action

"Would your CEO be interested in taking part in a discussion we're hosting on AI governance?"

"Can you show us how you would approach AI governance across our manufacturing operations?"

"Can you include your approach in the RFP response?"

Observable
The action that follows

The rule: The further you move from an observable buyer action to a commercial outcome, the more evidence you need to claim influence.

One opportunity. One test.

Take one recent opportunity where the team believes thought leadership played a role.

Ask:
What can we verify the buyer said or did?

Then separate your notes into:

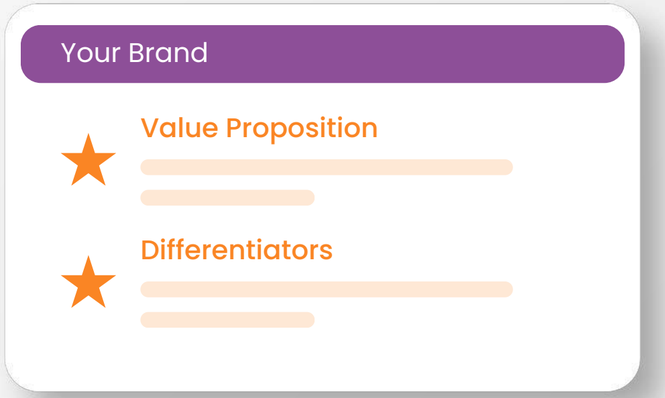
- What we know
- What we infer



What is the buyer telling you?

Your positioning tells the market what you want to be known for.

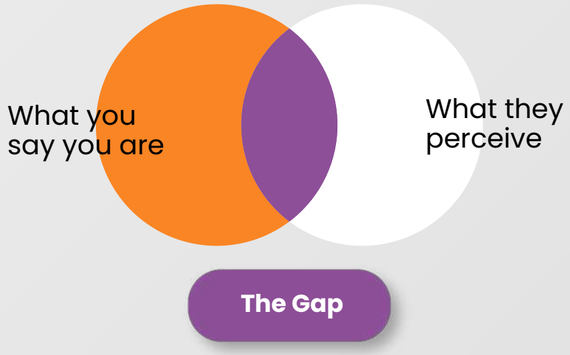
Your buyer conversations show how that positioning is being interpreted in live buying situations.



Your positioning



Buyer conversations



The gap (or alignment)

Listen for the language buyers use

Take five recent buyer conversations from discovery calls, proposals, RFP discussions, or customer interviews.

Look for the words buyers use when they describe the problem, your approach, or why they chose you.

Ask	Look for
What did they come to us for?	The problem they believed we could help solve
What words did they use to describe why they chose us?	The expertise, approach, or outcome they associated with us
What did they say they couldn't get elsewhere?	The capability or perspective they saw as differentiated

Then compare:

How buyers describe our value vs. How we position our value

What to do with the gap?

Their language matches your positioning
Keep using the language that buyers already understand and respond to.

Their language reveals a stronger advantage
Ask whether you can incorporate the ideas that are repeating into your positioning.

Question for your leadership

What do buyers repeatedly use us for? And is that what we want more buyers to do?

When does the market come to you?

A buyer asking for your expertise tells you something about a specific relationship.

Market pull is broader: it shows up when people outside your immediate customer conversations begin asking for your expertise, perspective, or participation.

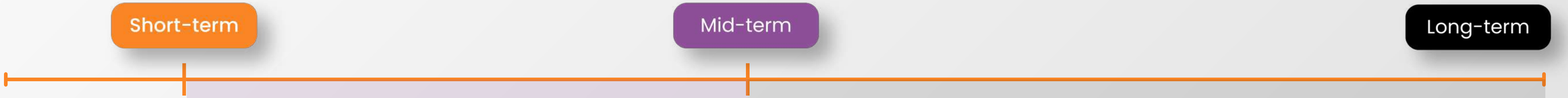
But there is an important distinction:

> **An invitation is a signal. The reason behind the invitation tells you what the signal means.**

Look at the time horizon

Take five recent buyer conversations from discovery calls, proposals, RFP discussions, or customer interviews.

Look closely at the way buyers describe their problem, what they expect, and the factors that drove them to you.



The following are visible signals, but they don't necessarily mean growing authority.

Speaking invitations
An industry forum or professional community seeks out your executive.

Expert commentary
A journalist, analyst, or industry publication wants your perspective.

Research participation
An external organization asks your team to contribute expertise to a study, report, or industry initiative.

The following signals over time point toward sustained recognition of your expertise.

Recurring citations
The same ideas, research, or executives are referenced across independent sources.

Professional adoption
Your terminology, framework, or method starts appearing in other people's work.

Repeat requests
The same organizations or communities come back to your team for perspective.

The market-pull check

Look at the last few external opportunities your executive team received. Ask three questions for each:

- **Who started it?**
  Did we initiate it, respond to an open opportunity, or receive an unsolicited request?
- **Why us?**
  Were they seeking access to our audience, our visibility, or something we specifically know?
- **What happened after?**
  Was it a one-time appearance, or did it lead to another request, reference, or relationship?

One award can be encouraging. A speaking invitation can be valuable.

When different people or organizations repeatedly seek the same expertise, that's a signal worth examining as it indicates growing market pull.

Question for your leadership

Is market pull the result of short-term visibility win or sustained authority building for our expertise?

What can you responsibly say about commercial impact?

Thought leadership rarely arrives in the CRM as a neat source field like:
“**This opportunity came from our CEO's point of view.**”

In many cases, the evidence is scattered across buyer conversations, sales notes, proposals, and RFPs.

From buyer signal to commercial claim

Evidence you can usually see

"I read your research."

Prior Exposure

"Your perspective on this came up at our board meeting."

Relevance

"Can you bring your CEO/SME into this?"

Expertise being sought

"Your approach is one of the reasons you're on the shortlist."

Influence on evaluation

"Can you respond to this RFP?"

Commercial action

The commercial claim test

- What do we know?
- What changed?
- What else could explain it?
- What can we confidently claim?
- What are we still hypothesizing?

A simple example

Too strong

"Our thought leadership program helped win $2.4M in new business."

More defensible

"In four of our last 15 opportunities, buyers referenced our research or executive POV before evaluation."

Hypothesis

The broader evidence supports treating this as a hypothesis worth testing, not a revenue attribution model.

Buyer research shows that thought leadership can be associated with awareness and commercial behavior.

Edelman and LinkedIn's 2024 B2B Thought Leadership Impact Report found that, among decision-makers who said a piece of thought leadership led them to research a product or service they had not previously been considering, 23% said they subsequently began buying from or working with the organization that produced it.[3]

The same study found that 60% said good thought leadership made them willing to pay a premium to work with that organization.

So match the commercial claim to the evidence chain behind it.

3. https://www.edelman.com/expertise/Business-Marketing/2024-b2b-thought-leadership-report

Start where you have an edge

For most B2B businesses, “become a recognized thought leader” is too broad a starting point.

A better starting point is one buyer problem where you have experience, evidence, and a reason to see the problem differently.

The one-territory decision

01 — Choose the problem

One problem your buyers care about is where you have earned the right to contribute.

02 — Find the opening

What are buyers still trying to figure out before they can act?

03 — Define the answer

What is the one idea you want your company to become associated with?

04 — Choose the first signal

What observable response would tell you that idea is beginning to travel?

From visibility to influence

Building authority happens in stages.

Visibility gets you found. Recognition gets you associated with a problem or idea. Credibility gives buyers reason to believe you have earned the right to speak on it. Authority is when others begin to seek out, reference, and reinforce your expertise. Influence is when that authority starts to shape what buyers consider, discuss, and do.

When buyers increasingly encounter your organization through synthesized answers, you need more than visibility.

You need a distinctive point of view, evidence behind it, and recognition beyond owned channels.

Purple Iris Communications helps identify the problems you have earned the right to answer, build an idea worth associating with, and test whether that authority is beginning to travel beyond your own channels.

Explore our AEO/GEO approach →

Purple Iris Communications is a B2B content agency that helps brands find differentiation in the age of sameness. For more than 15 years, we have worked with CMOs, business leaders, and company founders to turn expertise into authentic brand voices and distinctive points of view.

We apply business understanding, audience insight, and editorial judgment to every brief, uncovering the thinking behind each idea and creating content that builds authority and business impact.
We are listeners and thinkers first. Writers next.

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