¶ Content that cuts through

71°

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sellus sollicitudin a diam et rutrum. Suspendisse poten
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A

The case for content

by freddie ossberg

¶ We're living in an era of content overload and it's nothing short of overwhelming. Our audiences have access to more sources of data, information and points of view, creating the paradox of greater choice, but at the same time greater difficulty in distinguishing value from noise. Brands have to work harder to reach senior executives amid a complex ecosystem of fragmented channels, platforms and devices.

Establishing value, expertise and the coveted role of a trusted adviser to the C-suite has long been an ambition of business-to-business marketers, but in this world of greater noise and clutter, the race for the attention of the decision-makers has never been tougher. Based on original, proprietary research among 500 senior executives, this report tackles some of the most pressing questions facing content producers. What really sets high-performance content and thought leadership apart from the rest? What does credibility mean in the eyes of the C-suite? What role do editorial and design play in securing attention? And how is content marketing set to evolve?

71%

*   *   *

It's 7.45am. I've already scanned the last 12 hours of updates from my Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Instagram networks. I've scrolled through various feeds on Slack, Quartz and Apple News. I've read a handful of blogs and articles that especially caught my eye, shared a couple of the best ones and downloaded a report for my commute. And it's only 7.45am. I've not yet made time for breakfast, but my morning diet of interesting "stuff" has been given its usual priority. Like most professionals today, I'm on the receiving end of a continual stream of a mass of content. Some of it has been shared by colleagues or clients I know and trust; some of it promoted by brands I follow and some I don't; some that I actively seek out; and a whole lot more that floods my various social streams. Whatever the source, I'm constantly trying to filter and process the noise, to determine what's worth time and attention.

Brands are fighting for visibility against an avalanche of rolling updates. They're up against big publishers, news agencies, social influencers and, of course, their competitors. Moreover, in the world of B2B, the goal isn't

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of c-suites think most branded content
is just boring, expected and repetitive
- more original thought and fresh
thinking is needed
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The spectrum of attitude
towards content produced
by brands (CPB)

NORDICS

SOUTHERN EUROPE

EASTERN EUROPE

WESTERN EUROPE

UK + IRELAND

% RESPONDENTS
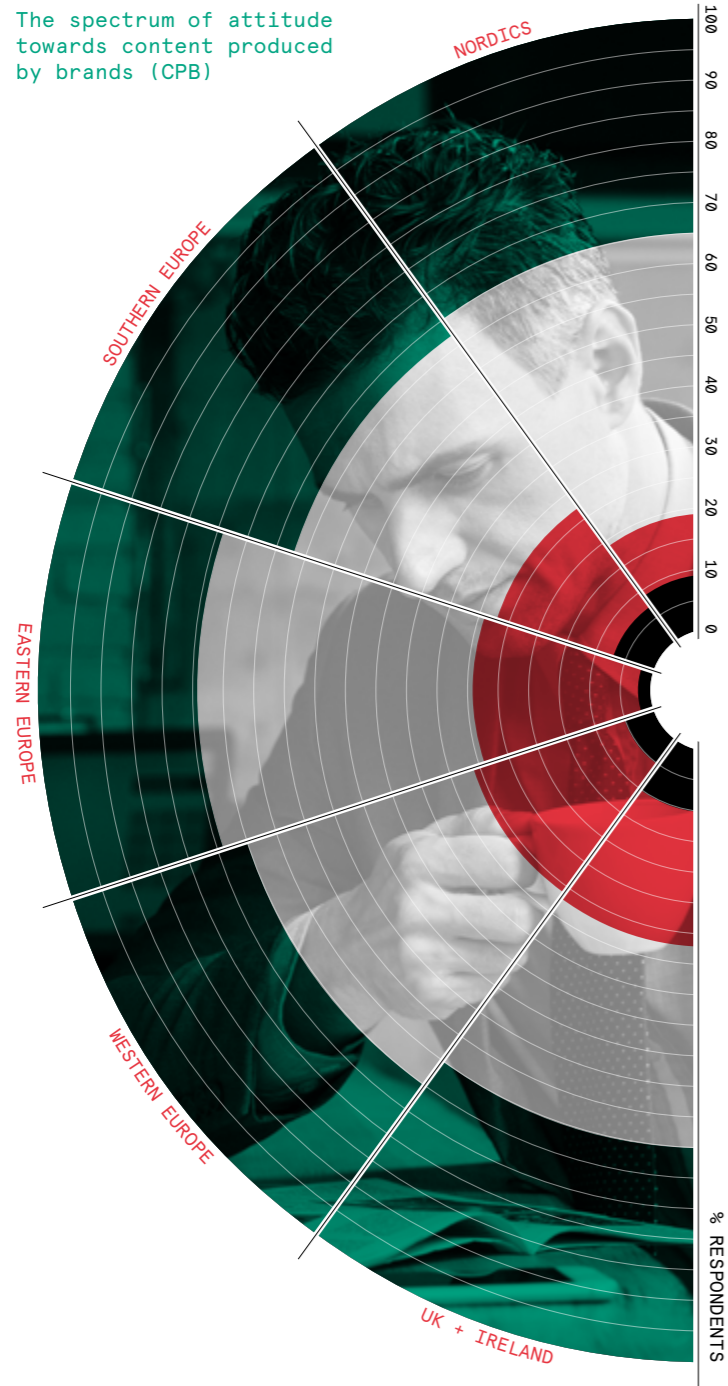
33% Hungry
I have a voracious appetite for content and actively seek out and/or subscribe to content from a wide range of businesses

37% Discerning
I only pay attention to content from brands and businesses that I know or am already familiar with, or that is shared or recommended to me by someone I know and trust

23% Pragmatic
I'm always willing to look at something for the first time from a brand or business but if it doesnt resonate I'll probably ignore that provider in the future

07% Conservative
I tend to rely on content from a small number of brands and businesses I know and trust, and have little appetite for discovering content from new sources

% AVERAGE

reaching the masses, but finding the target individuals, both existing clients as well as potential prospects. Identifying and engaging the right stakeholders involved in purchase decisions has always been a tough task, and it's only going to get tougher.

Business leaders are already wary of content published by brands or CPB, preferring publishers or institutes as their go-to knowledge providers. Raconteur's research reveals just 6 per cent of the C-suite think "subject matter experts in consultancies and vendors have an important contribution to make to advancing the thinking and knowledge base in my industry or profession".

While 30 per cent of the leaders we asked were "receptive" to brand content, believing it to be "generally useful, informative and offer[ing] valuable professional insight", these numbers are dwarfed by the 65 per cent that are "agnostic" or even "sceptical" about content produced by brands.

This massive group of highly influential individuals tend to disregard the majority of content produced by brands and even believe a high proportion is self-serving and offers "little or no insight or professional value".

Given the scale of investment in content and thought leadership, we need to address these perceptions, and fast. We need to shift our focus from creating what we want to say, to offering truly valuable, audience-centric insights that professionals not only want to hear, but need to hear.

Mark Schaefer, author and marketing professor at the State University of New Jersey, offers some advice: "The key to success is simple. You must be relevant and superior. The moment you are not relevant and superior you will be replaced.

"The only way content will work today is if it is transparent and helpful, seamlessly integrating into the needs and lifestyles of our customers. In a world where marketers still want to 'make the logo bigger', it is difficult to accept that customers don't want our name and our products all over everything we produce. But the truth is the competition out there is fierce and getting fiercer."

To compete, marketers need to carve out a distinctive and intentional voice, role and focus that can permeate their content and thought-leadership initiatives. This is often referred to as finding the "white space" in the industry or market, but as a term this can be misleading. The aim is not necessarily to find a place that your competitors aren't playing in, but to choose the one that's right for your brand and your audience. Just because the content landscape might be crowded, it doesn't mean you can't do it better than the competition.

The best place to start? With the customer themselves, at the very centre of your thinking. What are the issues or questions your audience are interested in, beyond the obvious? How could you bring new insights to a conversation that's already happening or start a new one? What are the real pressures or pain points your client is grappling with day to day and are you genuinely helping them to handle these?
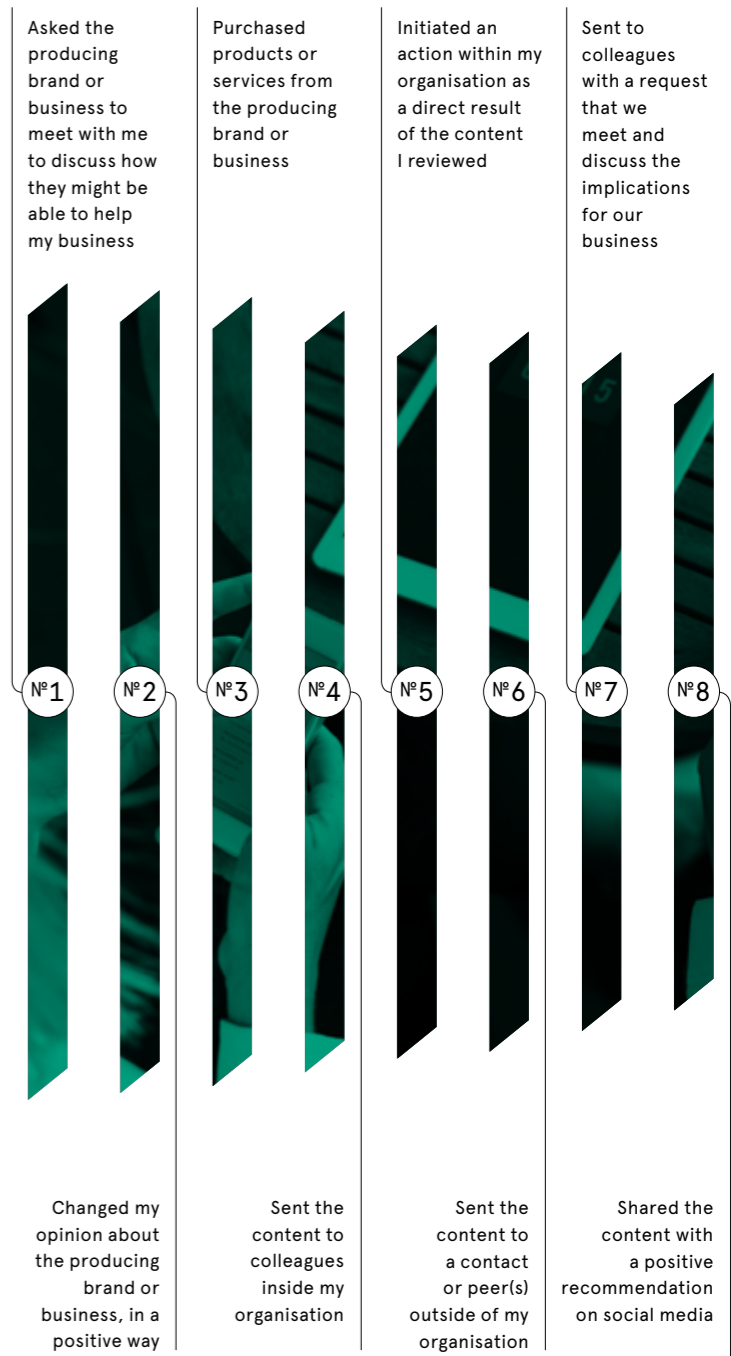
It's important to challenge ourselves with these questions then, once a path is chosen, to bring something distinctive to the table. Something nobody else has. This could be proprietary, in-depth research; unique methodologies; contributions from respected thought-leaders; or even a series of investigative features. Whatever the approach, it's essential to avoid a vanilla output. Don't be afraid to have an opinion or be provocative.

Creating high-quality content is only half the battle, getting it seen is an even bigger challenge. Professor Schaefer explains: "Great content is not the finish line; it is the starting line. The economic value of content that is not seen and shared is zero, so we must work very hard to ignite our content, assure that it is seen, shared and part of the habit of our customers."

There's some good news here. Seventy per cent of the C-suite are willing to look at something for the first time from a business, while 33 per cent describe themselves as "hungry" for content, actively seeking out updates from a wide range of organisations.

So, if you can create content that truly offers value to your target audience and actually lands in front of decision-makers, you stand a chance of winning their attention. But if it's mediocre or "safe", you've already lost.

What really helps get something read or watched? We asked the 500 senior executives we surveyed and these were their top three responses: if the author or producer of the content is a recognised expert in my industry or profession (selected by 50 per cent); if it's shared or recommended by a respected or influential figure in industry (47 per cent); and if the content is based on original, primary research or empirical evidence (42 per cent).

№1 Asked the producing brand or business to meet with me to discuss how they might be able to help my business

№2 Purchased products or services from the producing brand or business

№3 Initiated an action within my organisation as a direct result of the content I reviewed

№4 Sent to colleagues with a request that we meet and discuss the implications for our business

№1 Changed my opinion about the producing brand or business, in a positive way

№2 Sent the content to colleagues inside my organisation

№3 Sent the content to a contact or peer(s) outside of my organisation

№4 Shared the content with a positive recommendation on social media

**Top 8 actions taken as a result of reading CPB**

This tells us that authoritative content, whether from an expert or primary research, cuts through. It tells us that we're creatures of habit, and heavily influenced by recommendations from the people and brands we trust. If marketers can create top-notch content consistently over time, it will build credibility and instill trust. Keep delivering value to a consistent

standard and your audience will keep coming back, will follow your insights, and start to share your content organically. A virtuous circle.

Despite the headwinds in creating high-quality content and ensuring it reaches the right eyeballs, there's reason to be optimistic because there are huge rewards for businesses that get it right.

After reading a piece of content, 57 per cent of C-suites told us they "asked the producing business to meet to discuss how they might be able to help". 55 per cent have gone a step further and "purchased products or services". Meanwhile, less tangible, but still significant actions include "changed their opinion about a brand in a positive way" (56 per cent) and "sent the content to colleagues" (53 per cent).

It's clear, when producing content it pays to be exceptional. It allows brands to stand out from the crowd, then get taken seriously and, most importantly, make sales that drive business growth. #
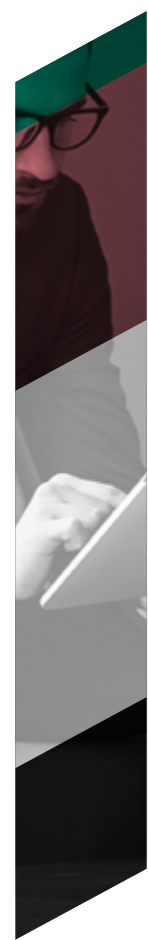
06% Enthusiastic
I think the subject matter experts in consultancies and vendors have an important contribution to make to advancing the thinking and knowledge base in my industry or profession

30% Receptive
I think content from brands and businesses is generally useful, informative and offers valuable professional insight

44% Agnostic
I am generally neutral to most content produced by brands and businesses, and tend to disregard more than I pay attention to

21% Sceptical
I feel most content produced by brands and businesses is self-serving and offers little to no insight or professional value

Opinion of CPB

opinion

jason miller
head of content
linkedin

Don't let a lack of finesse blot your copy

Marketers must aim to join the elite who make content marketing count

¶ No doubt you're familiar with the Rorschach test, when psychologists analyse your state of mind through the patterns that you see in abstract inkblots. I have a Rorschach test of my own for content marketers. It involves looking at the following statistic and seeing how it makes you feel: 5 per cent of branded content accounts for 90 per cent of all branded content engagement.

If you're a confident content marketer, with a clearly defined content strategy, then this statistic will neither surprise nor alarm you. You already know that there's a huge difference between effective content and the rest. Since you're tracking your engagement carefully and linking it back to business objectives, you're probably pretty confident that your content is in the 5 per cent. If you produce content that doesn't deliver the right levels of engagement, then you'll know about it – and you'll know what to do about it.

The sad fact is that there are plenty of marketers who don't fall into this category. When they look at my Rorschach stat, taken from the data platform Beckon, they instead feel disappointed, angry, betrayed. They've been promised that when they switch budget from making ads to creating content their engagement levels will automatically go up. Numbers like these make them feel they've been sold down the river.

The most worrying stat about the current state of content marketing isn't that big discrepancy between the 5 per cent and the 95 per cent. It's the latest research from the Content Marketing Institute that shows 60 per cent of marketers still don't have a documented content strategy, but despite this 73.6 per cent of marketers plan to spend more on content in the coming year.

This shows exactly why there's currently such a division between the small proportion of highly effective content and the vast amount of ineffective content. Only a small proportion of marketers are taking the discipline of content seriously.

There's still a myth out there that content is just a new, trendy form of advertising that doesn't require either specialist planning or specialist skills. There's still a lethal perception that if you ask your advertising agency to create something longer than a traditional ad, with a bit of a story to it, you can score tons of free engagement through your audience enthusiastically sharing it for you.

It's no wonder that 95 per cent of content struggles to make an impact.

Content marketing comes from the realisation that earning and retaining the attention of your audience is now a form of value exchange. People are less and less interested in hearing what you have to say unless what you say is rewarding to them in some way. As a content marketer you have to earn the right for audiences to give your content a chance. Then you have to earn the right for them to return to your content by making sure it delivers rewards – it entertains, it informs, it offers insights and ideas they wouldn't have found anywhere else; it sends their dopamine levels soaring.

The best content brands invest in the skills to understand the precise type of content that an audience needs. They invest in planning sequences of content that answer those needs better and more distinctly than anything else out there. And they invest in making sure that content gets in front of the people it's relevant for. They track, measure and optimise like crazy. And they're the ones creating the 5 per cent.

What does the content marketing 5 per cent look like? It looks like Adobe's CMO.com, quite simply one of the best and most thoughtful content resources that exists for marketers; it looks like GE's *Unimpossible Missions*, educational science content that's unique, captivating, funny and distinctly GE. It looks like BNP Paribas and a content strategy that is helping to make it "the bank for a changing world".

Creating great content isn't easy. If it were, everybody would be doing it. Creating content that's

"Only a small proportion of marketers are taking the discipline of content seriously"

lightweight, derivative or just plain boring is much easier, which is why there's so much of it around. That doesn't have to be bad news. You just have to work hard to make sure your content is part of the 5 per cent – and look forward to that big share of relevant engagement that's coming your way. #

Contents

The power of partnerships

The right partnership between a publisher and brand can be the key to unlock content marketing success

¶ In the world of content marketing and thought leadership, the term "credibility" tends to be used liberally and indiscriminately. We talk regularly about its importance. We make presumptions about whether or not we have it or we've earned it. We assert our individual views and biases about where it comes from – is it our heritage, our brand, our people or our thinking?

The one thing we perhaps don't do often enough is ask what it really means in the eyes of our audiences. To be trustworthy? To be believable? To be reliable? To be known for knowing what we're talking about?

Of the senior executives we surveyed, one in five said they think content produced by brands is self-serving and offers little or no professional insight or value. A little over half told us outright that they believe content and thought leadership lacks credibility. Only 6 per cent claim to be enthusiastic about the content they receive from brand producers; most categorising themselves as "agnostic" (44 per cent) or "sceptical" (21 per cent) about this form of marketing.

Credibility isn't just a term we can band around in a project brief or trade assertions with. It's the chips that get you to the table and give you a chance to be part of the game. Credibility is the entry point in the battle for an audience's attention and our research suggests there's some work to be done.

Michelle Huff, chief marketing officer of Act On, reveals one reason behind these findings: "I think there's potentially an inherent bias that brands may not put a lot of thought or research into what they write because they 'have an agenda'. So there can be an initial distrust that you have to overcome as you focus on building a relationship with the reader."

The growing investment in content is evidence that the marketing community clearly recognise the importance and power of this medium, but many are still failing to harness it. In some cases, it's a result of just not understanding the customer; in others, it's a lack of time and resources.

Penny Wilson, chief marketing officer of Hootsuite, explains: "Brands are still missing the main point of content – to engage directly with their audiences. Listen first and invest in customer-centric, personalised content to build relevancy and credibility with your audiences. Marketers can also partner with credible research firms to produce data-based content. In instances where a gap exists between what a brand is saying versus its perception in the market, marketers can associate themselves with the right partner to develop mutually."

While partnerships with publishers, academia and industry experts can boost branded content's credibility, business must be both highly selective and strategic when partnering with a third-party organisation. Like any brand relationship, if it's not a true match, cracks will quickly develop and the reputational consequences could be significant.

WHICH BRANDS ARE GETTING IT RIGHT?
The Creators' Project by *VICE* and Intel is a first-rate example of a great brand–publisher partnership. The collaboration, now approaching its eighth year, set out to showcase international artists who use technology within their work. Beginning as a series of events and exhibitions, it quickly evolved into an online hub, print and TV series. These were outlets where creatives could share ideas and knowledge as well as their latest work, and the partnership pulled in big music industry names, including Mark Ronson and Daft Punk.

The collaboration enabled *VICE* to cement itself as a cultural force, while letting Intel highlight the use of its technology in the creative process. Seven years on, Intel is still listed as a founding partner of Creators, but other big brands have joined too, including Adobe. The platform now has more than one million Facebook fans, 123,000 Twitter followers and 771,000 subscribers on YouTube.

Another great example of the power of brand-publisher collaboration is Microsoft's partnership with *National Geographic* in the Make What's Next campaign.

Launched on International Women's Day, the campaign aimed to inspire girls to take up careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths).

51%

think content produced by brands lacks credibility
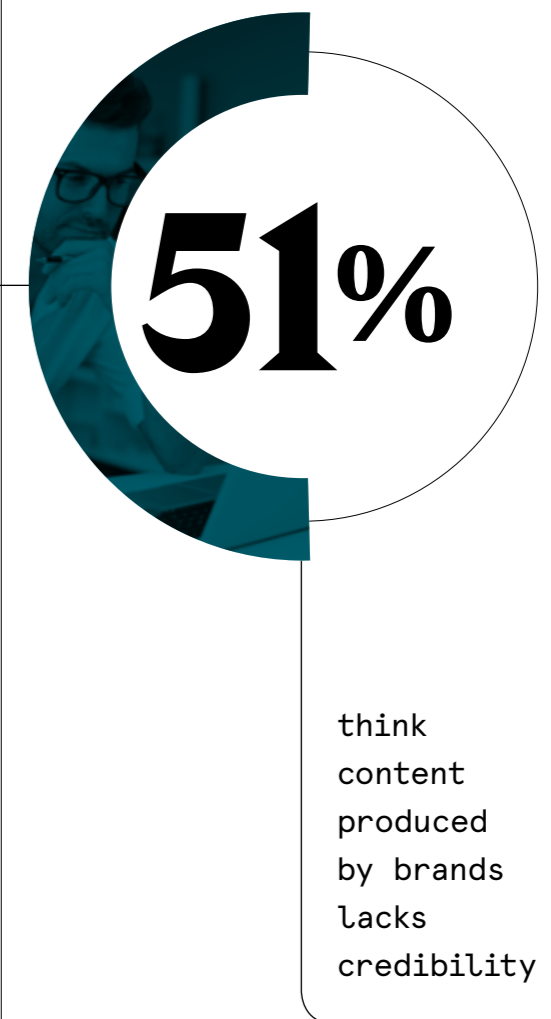
The technology giant teamed up with the magazine to harness the publication's science and storytelling expertise, and highlight its own technological know-how.

Aligned with a global event, the activity included a 60-second video advert, a career explorer tool launched in collaboration with LinkedIn, as well as workshops available in Microsoft stores and on Facebook Live. However, its influencer-driven Instagram campaign was the most interesting and successful part of the activity.

Before launching the campaign, *National Geographic* reached out to its network of female

explorers to ask them to become mentors to young girls looking to pursue STEM careers. These individuals, including volcanologists, ecologists and space architects, were asked to share their stories through photographs of them in action as a way of inspiring young girls to enter these fields.

On International Women's Day, *National Geographic* posted 30 pictures of these female explorers across five social channels with the hashtag #MakeWhatsNext. Shot by renowned wildlife photographers, each image told a story of the professionals' struggles, unique career paths and their successes. These inspirational captions were followed by an invitation to join the upcoming free Microsoft workshops which were running across the United States.

By tapping into a worldwide event and teaming up with a respected publication with a large social following, Microsoft managed to gather 3.5 million Instagram likes on International Women's Day alone. More importantly, almost 300 girls attended Microsoft workshops in person and the live-steam reached 90 million people.

These examples show that the right partnership with the right publisher can boost both credibility as well as general audience awareness – a vital way of being taken seriously by the C-suite. #

1-in-2

will pick up content produced in partnership with a recognised expert

A trusted and successful brand partnership doesn't happen overnight; it takes time and needs to be nurtured. Mastercard's relationship with Tufts University is a great example.

Partnering for success

¶ Beginning in 2011, Mastercard teamed up with the Fletcher School at Tufts University, the oldest school in the United States dedicated to graduate studies in international affairs, with the aim of initiating projects and studies based on subjects that both the organisation and institute felt were underserved.

Paul Truman, senior vice president, global enterprise risk and strategy at Mastercard, outlines the company's initial aims from the partnership: "It was knowledge and insight development with a trusted partner. To create genuine thought leadership for the benefit of the wider industry and regions, you must create the right foundation of data, expertise and will. You must also enable each other's networks to ensure we maximise the reach of our work."

Over the years, the partnership between the educational institute and multinational corporation evolved into the Digital Evolution Index, a bi-annual report, produced in partnership with Raconteur, exploring technology adoption and the state of digital trust across the world. First launched in 2014, the initiative now covers 60 countries, drawing on almost
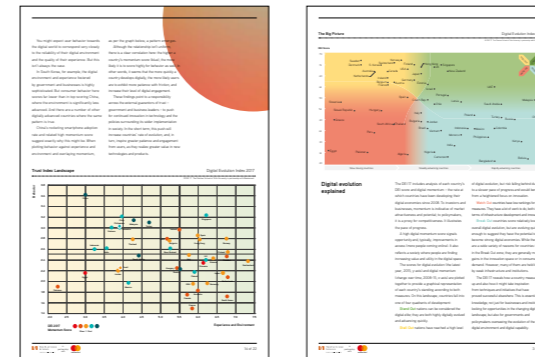
a decade's worth of historical data to track and contrast the pace of digital evolution in each nation, and securing significant and growing media exposure across the breadth of Mastercard's markets.

However, the partnership was not without its teething problems. Initially accessing and using data, which came with strict guidelines, was challenging. Preserving the anonymity of Mastercard's data would prove vital, not only to ensure compliance with global privacy laws, but also to strike the delicate balance between harnessing this rich vein of data to provide insight to both a business and consumer audience, while maintaining consumer trust and confidence in Mastercard's own privacy policies.

In addition, to create a clear picture of digital development across the world, the partners had to confront their limitations from the outset, recognising the need to augment their proprietary data with a variety of secondary sources, further adding to the complexity of the project and the partnership ecosystem which had to be formed. While perhaps bringing more opaqueness to begin with, this critical step ensured the study was purely data driven and analytical in all aspects.

Truman explains: "Collaborative approaches to research between market actors, policy-makers and academia are necessary to achieve a truly comprehensive understanding of evolving phenomena, such as digitalisation and their implications on countries, their economies and societies at large. No one party can do this alone and do justice to the topic at hand."

A global corporation and an academic institution may, at first glance, seem unlikely bedfellows. After all, there's seemingly more that sets them apart than they have in common. Commercial entities are more focused on the outputs of such thought-leadership initiatives, whereas an academic institution will typically put more emphasis on the integrity of the inputs. You would expect to find a distinctly different pace and rhythm between the two, as well as different definitions of success.

"No one party can do this alone and do justice to the topic at hand"

Often, marketers can find the prospect of collaborating with a fundamentally different organisation or institution risky or daunting, and embarking on a partnership, where the early conversations focus on forging an unnatural rhythm and making compromises, can feel like a hollow start. However, if we focus instead on articulating the common ground in the relationship and celebrating how the different capabilities of partners are complementary rather than sources of potential friction, it can start on a better footing

Truman offers a piece of advice for other brands looking to partner with publishers of institutes: "Pick your partners carefully, establish trust in how you work and what success looks like – mission alignment is key." #

C

Tactical content

Understanding the how, where, who and when

Adapt to the environment
The challenge of mobile consumption

46%

of content produced by brands is consumed on mobile devices

!
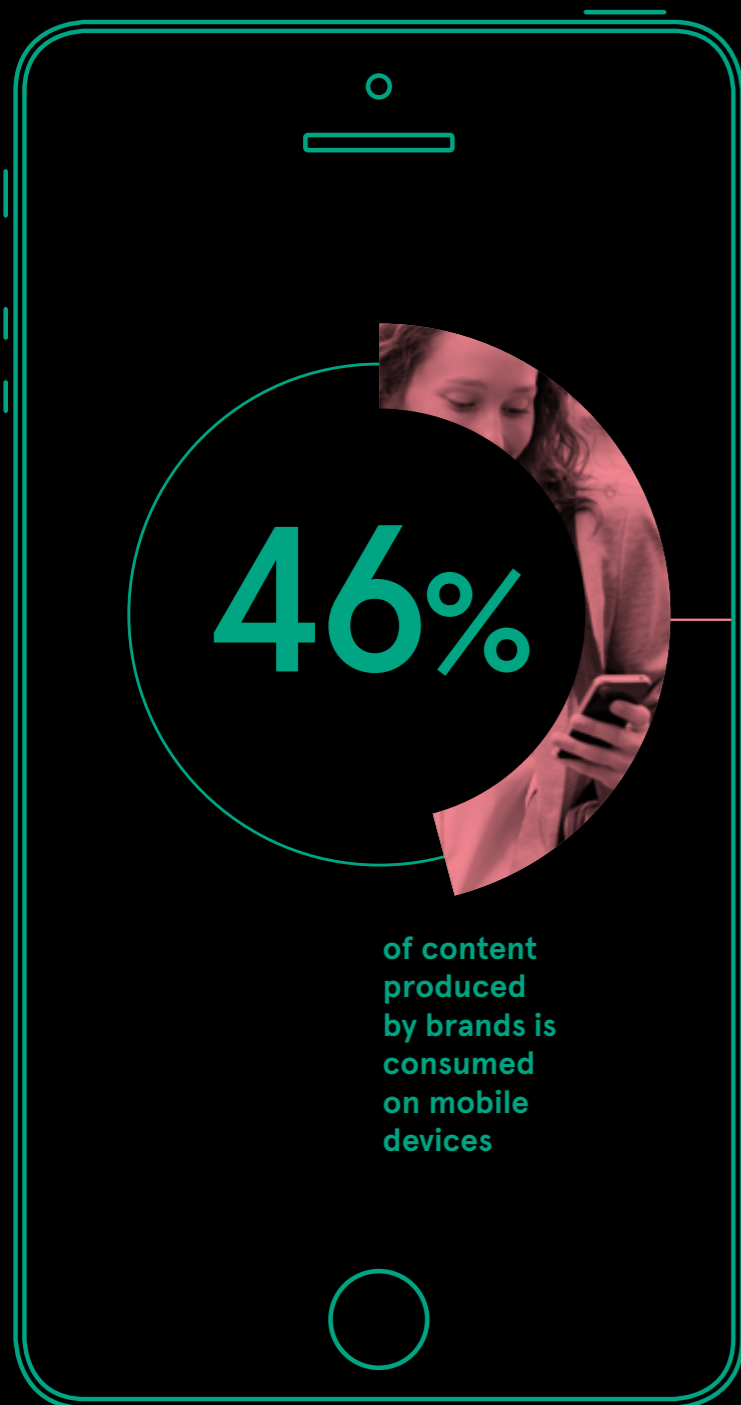
№1

irritant for business leaders is unsuitable format or design for mobile consumption

Choose your moments
Most receptive times for content

74%	Before work, first thing in the morning
58%	On my daily commute
54%	During the day at work
49%	At the weekend
36%	At home in the evening
29%	When travelling on business
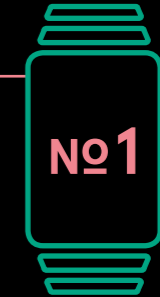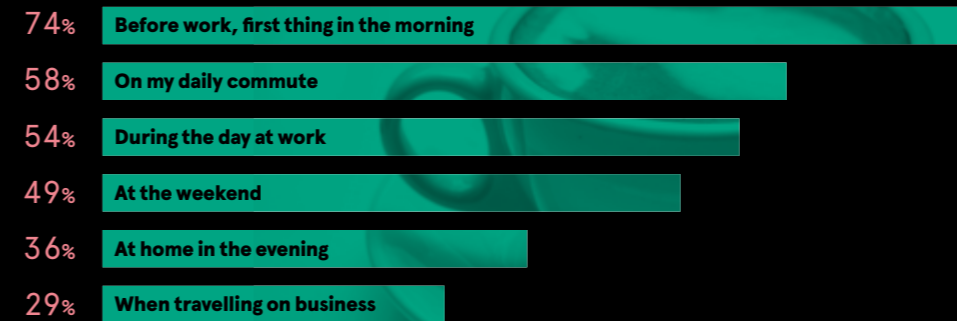
№1

time for all c-suites is before work, first thing in the morning

Get it shared
Most sharable formats

№1 for

48%	Short-form articles or blogs	MD, COO, CMO, CCO
43%	Other video (i.e. animation)	CFO, CTO
40%	Individual data points or statistics	-
40%	Long-form articles	-
39%	White papers or research reports	-
39%	Video interviews	CEO, CCuO
30%	Infographics	-
21%	News articles with brand commentary	-

Top 3 sharers of content

№1 Alumni network

№2 Colleagues outside division

№3 Personal or executive assistant

D

Finding your editorial voice

An editorial approach will get you heard above the corporate marketing cacophony

¶ Companies all around the world are locked in a battle for customer attention and the executives on the front line are grappling with an array of complex forces.

Audience fatigue – Our audiences are subject to a daily assault of content, thought leadership and information; the sheer volume of "stuff" produced around the world is nothing short of overwhelming.

Media fragmentation – They're searching, consuming and sharing this content across a more fragmented ecosystem than ever before with multiple devices, channels and platforms all increasing the gulf between a brand and their audience.

Increasing competition – In the world of business to business or B2B, for instance, we used to be able to count our main competitors on two hands. Today, competing voices are more diverse and often found as much in adjacent markets than core.

Data overload – This new landscape is producing more data than most companies have the time or the analytical know-how to handle, leaving teams anywhere from shooting in the dark, to piecing together incomplete pictures where they can, or just repeating decisions of the past.

In concert, these challenges create something of a paradox. On the one hand, greater opportunity to engage customers with greater precision than ever before; on the other, increasing levels of competition and the risk of missing the mark.

CUTTING CLUTTER
It's not just the volume of content that's a problem, it's the quality. Our survey revealed that an overwhelming 71 per cent of C-suite executives find most brands' content boring, expected and repetitive, saying that more original thought and fresh thinking is needed.

Moreover, two thirds felt that most content simply provides a commentary on established industry trends, not doing enough to create and lead future-focused conversations. Addressing these issues, therefore, isn't simply a matter of better marshalling internal resource or improving analytical capability.

If you truly want to cut through clutter and rise above the commotion of the rest, it's time to stop thinking about merely "marketing" and time to embrace an editorial approach to your content, thought leadership and reputational voice.

VOICE, FOCUS AND ROLE
We all know what to expect when we read or watch something from the *Financial Times*, *Fast Company*, *VICE*, *WIRED* or *Harvard Business Review*.

We instinctively know what each will feel, read and sound like, and we could also describe how each of these examples are different, not just their voice, but also how they focus their content and the role each play.

We know these things because each of these content producers has a clearly defined editorial positioning; one which they've taken time to institutionalise within their teams of writers and producers, and one they've reinforced consistently over time.

Yet for many, this sort of intentional editorial approach remains absent. Few companies invest time in the thought processes needed to determine an editorial positioning and tone of voice that matches internal ambition with audience needs and competitive differentiation. This despite companies working hard to create thought leadership with high journalistic standards and editorial value, beyond the legacy of product and service-oriented marketing materials.

IS THIS NECESSARY?
Without these editorial foundations in place, any ambition to capture the attention and imagination of your C-suite audience will be left purely to chance. That's not to belittle the importance of talent or great ideas, but without a strategy, which is what editorial positioning ultimately drives, you risk simply shooting tactics into the wind, along with the growing number of competitors doing the same.

Beyond failing to resonate with external audiences, a lack of editorial foundation leaves the question of your company's role, focus and voice unanswered, and highly susceptible to internal bias. This is most commonly seen in one of three outcomes.

1 **HIPPO rules** Without the robust and objective thought process, which helps forms an editorial

positioning, many companies often find themselves directed by the highest paid person's opinion (HIPPO). Teams often commission or refine content based on the whims or personal biases of senior stakeholders, often well intentioned, but ultimately lacking sufficient externalisation to result in distinctive and consistent outputs over time.

2 **Subjectivity rules** For most companies, content and thought leadership tend to originate from a disparate variety of places, and involves a range of different teams and stakeholders directing and
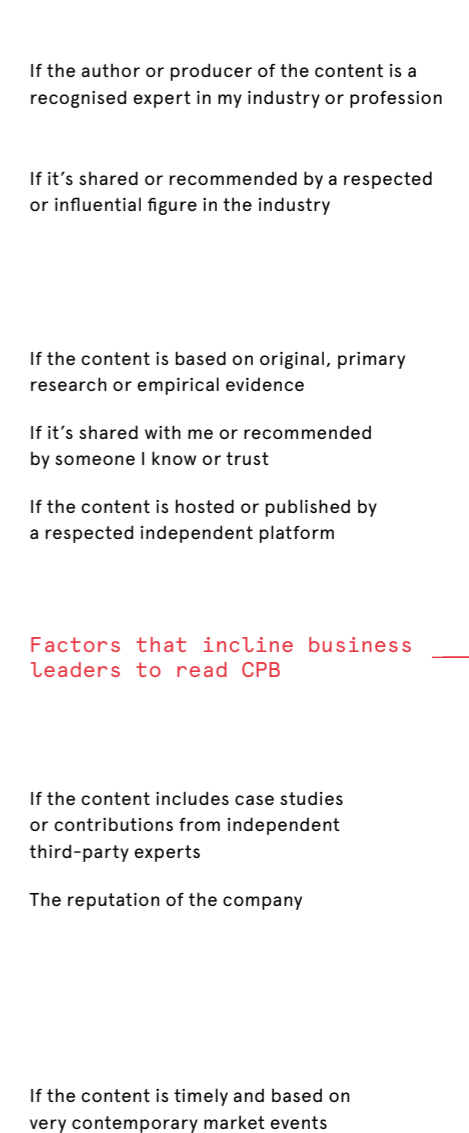
ultimately approving outputs. An editorial positioning helps to provide a framework for colleagues to operate within, ensuring coherence and consistency across a diverse or siloed organisation, without going so far as to seek standardisation. In its absence, even with good intent, a brand's editorial voice becomes fragmented and risks drifting from what resonates with an audience.

3 **Compliance rules** Companies might also find themselves defaulting to corporate guidelines and brand identity policies. While these are important, they're designed for a different type of communications output. Editorial foundations don't negate or conflict

50% If the author or producer of the content is a recognised expert in my industry or profession

47% If it's shared or recommended by a respected or influential figure in the industry

42% If the content is based on original, primary research or empirical evidence

40% If it's shared with me or recommended by someone I know or trust

If the content is hosted or published by a respected independent platform

Factors that incline business leaders to read CPB

30% If the content includes case studies or contributions from independent third-party experts

The reputation of the company

28%

22% If the content is timely and based on very contemporary market events

The forgettable middle

Why can we remember arguments better than day-to-day conversations? Why do editors relish crafting a shock-and-awe headline or front-page picture? Why do provocative or divisive political figures garner more media traction than their more moderate, centrist counterparts?

The things that catch our attention, which are most memorable, exist at extremes. They are striking, polarising, emotive and they get, by design, a reaction. They either align with our thinking or conflict with it. But either way, they get our attention.

These are important, but often uncomfortable themes for brands. The idea of being argumentative, of shaping startling headlines, or of polarising opinion with provocative or contrarian views all lead to one word – risk. But risk is not an absolute, it is a continuum, and it's time for companies to ask themselves: "Are we playing it too safe?"

During our research, we questioned C-suite executives on what makes content and thought leadership engaging and memorable, and some of the results are telling:

>> 71 per cent of leaders thought most branded content is just boring, expected and repetitive, and that more original thought and fresh thinking is needed;

>> 65 per cent felt most content simply provides commentary on established industry trends rather than creating and leading future-focused conversation;

>> 64 per cent preferred content that takes a bold, contrarian or provocative point of view.

The research shows that content being produced is predictable and unappealing. It is failing to provide leadership. It is not stretching or challenging audiences. And the majority of senior executives are looking for something with more of a punch. In today's hyper-competitive, saturated content landscape, brands cannot afford to produce vanilla content. It won't distinguish you from the pack. It will probably fail to garner attention or interest your audience. It won't be consumed, nor will it compel readers to share it. And it's probable, over time, that it will erode your reputation and positioning in the minds of your audience.

This isn't to say that you should be argumentative, provocative or extreme for the sake of it. But if you want to be truly distinctive, truly memorable and truly shareable, it's time to start to challenge yourselves.

Take some of your content to fresh eyes within the organisation, to people outside marketing, but with some degree of proximity to your customers. Ask them is this really worth the time it took to read? Does this really capture our latent ambition as a company? Could we really not do any better than this?

Do the same with a friendly client or two. The answers might just give you the momentum you need to push the boundaries.

64%

prefer content that takes a bold, contrarian or provocative point of view

with brand strategy; they complement it, translating its intent for an editorial output and dialogue with customers and clients. In their absence, compelling content can be watered down, emerging as a shadow of its potential and failing to capture its intended audience.

NO MORE GUIDELINES
The mere hint of a suggestion that yet another 64-page set of corporate policies or guidelines is needed will often be met with rejection, or at least dejection.

We argue, however, that it's not the existence or length that can bring about editorial coherence, but the thought process behind the conclusion. The resulting guidelines can live on one page or slide if need be. But getting the right internal stakeholders to understand instinctively what your editorial content and thought leadership should feel, read and sound like, just as they would with the *FT* or *HBR*, is key.

Align with the business agenda – Ensure your editorial content and thought leadership ambitions are explicitly rooted in the strategic priorities for your company, to avoid accusations of "vanity publishing".

Establish what good look like – Start by working with stakeholders to look both internally, within your sector, and well outside it, to source examples and build consensus on what great editorial content really looks, feels and sounds like. The more diverse or abstract, the better; don't be blinkered by your definition of your market, your customers won't.

Articulate your internal ambition and align senior stakeholders – Define what success means, and the brands and media owners you'd like to emulate or at least hold up as exemplars.

Conduct competing voice analysis and benchmark – Now it gets quantitative; we use Raconteur's proprietary analysis framework to assess and score content from direct, indirect and abstract competing voices across more than 24 dimensions.

Identify white space, strategic priorities and focus – Conclude the process by using voice maps to catalyse a series of internal discussions and debates that leads to shared understanding and better choices.

Underpinning all of this? Consistent and transparent communication with stakeholders, training for those who need to be in the know, and ongoing reinforcement, for instance through sharing best practice.

This methodology and the frameworks within are born of our experience helping a diverse range of companies to put their own editorial stake in the ground. Not a 64-page set of guidelines in sight, but a collaborative process for a group of stakeholders to work through together, to dispense with chance and subjectivity, and building coherence and internal commitment. #

65%

Most branded content I see simply provides commentary on established industry trends rather than creating and leading future-focused conversation

61%

Most content produced by brands and businesses lacks editorial quality – whilst the authors or marketers might know their subject, they're weak at turning it into a story

48%

I distrust most content produced by brands and businesses because it tends to be too self-serving

Design catches the eye and seals the deal

Design should never be an afterthought –
it can be the difference between success
and failure

¶ They say that first impressions count and, when it comes to your content and thought leadership, that impression is more often than not formed by your design. Whereas words, ideas or conclusions may take time to permeate, visual storytelling has an immediacy of impact that can make the difference when it comes to grabbing an audience's attention and then keeping it.

Worryingly, for the majority of brands, design is still seen as something of an afterthought. Some 57 per cent of the C-suite executives we surveyed believe "not enough brands take design and layout of their content seriously enough".

Tim Whitlock, head of design at Raconteur, explains: "Unfortunately, for many marketers design is considered a technical service akin to printing, rather than a discipline that plays an integral part of a strategy, with time and budget allocated accordingly. Design cannot be an afterthought; it must feature in

"Arguably, the battle is won or lost in the first few seconds"

the planning stage if the end product is to achieve desired objectives. Car engineers don't build a new engine then ask designers to come up with a car for it – the same should apply for brands and content."

This notion that design is just an "add on" and "nice to have" when it comes to content marketing can mean the difference between success and failure. When

asked to list the ten most irritating things about content produced by brands, the C-suite put "format or design unsuitable for mobile consumption" at number one and "low design quality" at number two. This shows exactly how much of a turn-off a poorly designed white paper, infographic or web page can be.

"Arguably, the battle is won or lost in the first few seconds. If it looks impressive and is visually appealing, people will give it a chance," says Whitlock. "With a hyper-busy and ultra-selective target audience, getting past that first line of defence is key."

This view is reinforced within our research: "Distinctive, eye-catching design" was listed as the top factor for enticing a member of the C-suite to read content produced by a brand. This factor came above "clear recommendations and conclusions" as well as "engaging journalistic writing style".
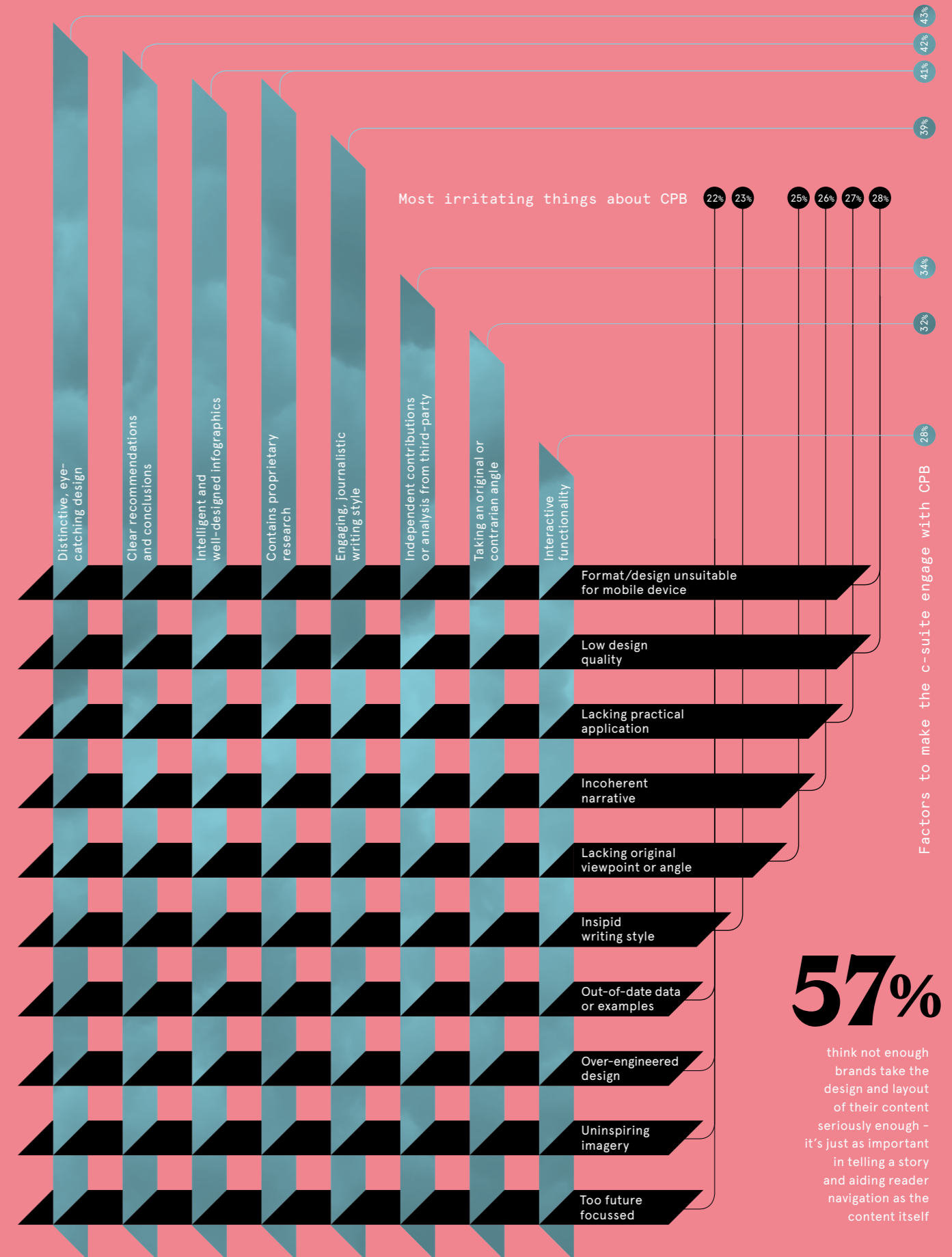
It's time to take design more seriously. It's no less important than editorial substance when telling a story or analysing a topic because visuals can go further to establish tone and communicate emotional cues about a brand than words alone. And this can work both ways as poorly considered or inappropriate design can convey precisely the opposite values to the written content.

Whitlock explains: "Having a distinctive visual identity is important, but the mistake many brands make is that they allow brand 'dogma' to obscure the purpose of the content and the people they're trying to engage with. Brands need to realise that the design requirements of a blog post or sales presentation are fundamentally different to an editorial report and not kid themselves that a one-size-fits-all approach will work."

However, for Whitlock, a distinct identity and flexibility needn't be diametrically opposed. "The utopia is that brand guidelines are developed with every possible content scenario considered and provisioned for, but in reality that's far from practicable. The most successful brands we have worked with are those that exercise discretion and, most importantly, trust the designer when entering uncharted content territory.

"If non-prescribed elements are required to make the format viable, work with the designer to innovate in a way that it is complementary to the brand. A brand's visual identity is not purely defined by a set of fonts, colours and images, so be confident that you'll still be able to retain a true sense of the brand's personality."

To give content the best possible chance of cutting through the clutter with the C-suite, or indeed any audience, design needs consideration at the outset of all content initiatives. What you have to say and the way in which you present it have to work in harmony to win the battle for attention and deliver value. #

Most irritating things about CPB

Factors to make the c-suite engage with CPB

	Distinctive, eye-catching design	Clear recommendations and conclusions	Intelligent and well-designed infographics	Contains proprietary research	Engaging, journalistic writing style	Independent contributions or analysis from third-party	Taking an original or contrarian angle	Interactive functionality		
										43%
										42%
										41%
										39%
22%	23%			25%	26%	27%	28%			
										34%
										32%
										28%
Format/design unsuitable for mobile device										
Low design quality										
Lacking practical application										
Incoherent narrative										
Lacking original viewpoint or angle										
Insipid writing style										
Out-of-date data or examples										
Over-engineered design										
Uninspiring imagery										
Too future focussed										

57%

think not enough brands take the design and layout of their content seriously enough – it's just as important in telling a story and aiding reader navigation as the content itself

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Debunking the myth of short form

Top executives want in-depth research and analysis to inform their decision-making, but high-quality short-form content marketing can first capture their imagination and ensure full attention

¶ We all accept we're living in an era of digital content overload. Our personal lives are centred on WhatsApp groups, Instagram uploads and binge-watching shows on Netflix. Our professional lives are similar, waking up to check emails first thing in the morning, reading LinkedIn posts on our commute and missing what's happening at conferences and events because we're too busy live tweeting about it. We're inundated with massive volumes of content in all corners of our lives, across a more confusing mix of channels, platforms and devices than ever before.

Christine Washburn, chief marketing officer of Rocket Software, sums up how digital is affecting our working lives: "I sleep with my phone on my bed and the first thing I do, before I'm even fully awake in the morning, is to scroll through my newsfeeds reading and sharing business or technology articles that have implications for my company."

How do our brains cope? We respond by craving instant gratification and lowering our patience threshold – how long we're willing to wait to be sure we've made the right choice in our content selection. Put simply, it's not just getting harder to win our attention, but our audiences are no longer willing to "work" for their content. Your opportunity to prove value, relevance and impact is a fraction of what it once was.

So, what does this mean for marketers attempting to use content to engage with the C-suite? The popular response is to make everything short, snappier and quicker to consume. It's obvious, isn't it? People are time poor, their attention spans are falling. We're being conditioned to believe that brevity is best. Dumb it all down; reduce it to its simplest, shortest form. Don't narrate it, use an infographic. Don't write about it; make a 30-second video. Better yet, fit it into a tweet or a meme.

Surely this isn't the answer? In the business-to-business world, our content and thought-leadership efforts often address issues with big, strategic consequences for individuals, their teams and the direction of their companies. Does short-form content really do justice to the gravity of what our audiences are grappling with? Is it really the panacea it's fashionable to say it is?

Not according to our research. Sixty two per cent of business leaders we spoke to "look to content from brands and businesses to help with complex, important issues". They expect depth and substance, something which you can't reach in 140 characters or a fleeting image that's quickly buried in the blur of a social stream. For brands attempting to offer their target audience these kinds of high-quality insights, long-form content is the best option. In fact, written articles were found to be the most valuable content format, with 67 per cent of the C-suite interviewed in agreement.

People respect big ideas. They respect brands that are diligent in how they investigate, explore and bring issues to life. And they respect complexity will often demand and deserve their time.
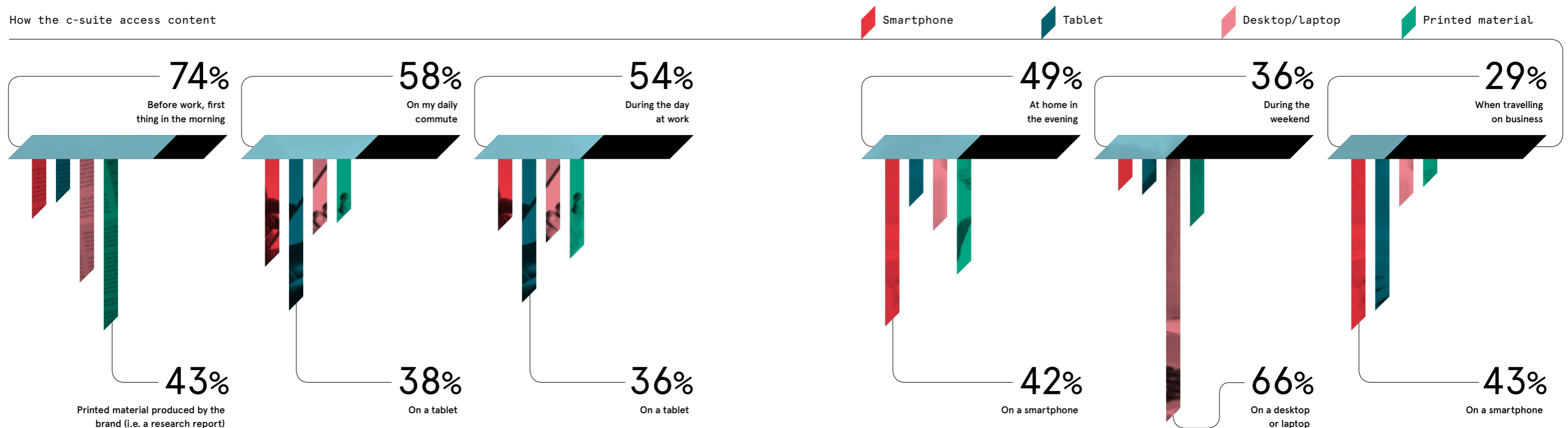
IT'S NOT A CASE OF EITHER OR
But one of the biggest missteps marketers can

encounter is making a choice between long-form and short-form content. It's easy to fall into the trap of debating depth versus brevity, but the thought process that's missed is about the differing roles of different content formats, not just the time it would take to consume them.

Consider this hypothetical example. A professional services advisory firm is producing a thought-leadership initiative exploring the impact of changing regulatory frameworks across Europe for their target clients. The complexity of this issue is deemed to clearly require a long-form treatment, perhaps a comprehensive report spanning 36 pages, for instance, comprising a series of in-depth and analytical articles. Conventional wisdom would define this as a long-form asset and the ensuing marketing process would focus on how best to compel senior executives to take an hour or so out of their day to consume it.

Here, we would argue that the smarter process is to think about the ecosystem around this asset. The complexity of the issues or ideas explored does indeed warrant articles and a report with depth and substance. But we argue there is also a complementary role for short-form content, not to replace the in-depth journalism, but to serve as an entry point to the more significant asset?

How the c-suite access content

Smartphone | Tablet | Desktop/laptop | Printed material

74% Before work, first thing in the morning
58% On my daily commute
54% During the day at work
49% At home in the evening
36% During the weekend
29% When travelling on business

43% Printed material produced by the brand (i.e. a research report)
38% On a tablet
36% On a tablet
42% On a smartphone
66% On a desktop or laptop
43% On a smartphone

As our research reveals, the long-form written editorial format is alive and well, remaining the preferred medium for a majority of leaders. In fact, 65 per cent of C-suite executives reject short-form content as the future. But the answer isn't to dismiss short-form out of hand – it's to understand the role it can play.

DON'T FORGET YOUR AUDIENCE
This report has shown that high-quality content is the perfect way to engage the C-suite. However, this type of content will only ever work if brands put their audience, rather than their ideas, first. And this is easier said than done when creative campaign ideas are flying around a room.

Jason Hemingway, chief marketing officer of Thunderhead, adds: "The challenge for brands is to 'enthuse' more of the C-suite with their content. There is a job of work to do to really understand the audience. These people are individuals. Not every C-level executive will be enthused by the same content. If we don't use the right tools to identify the person and their needs, everything we put in front of them will be a shot in the dark."
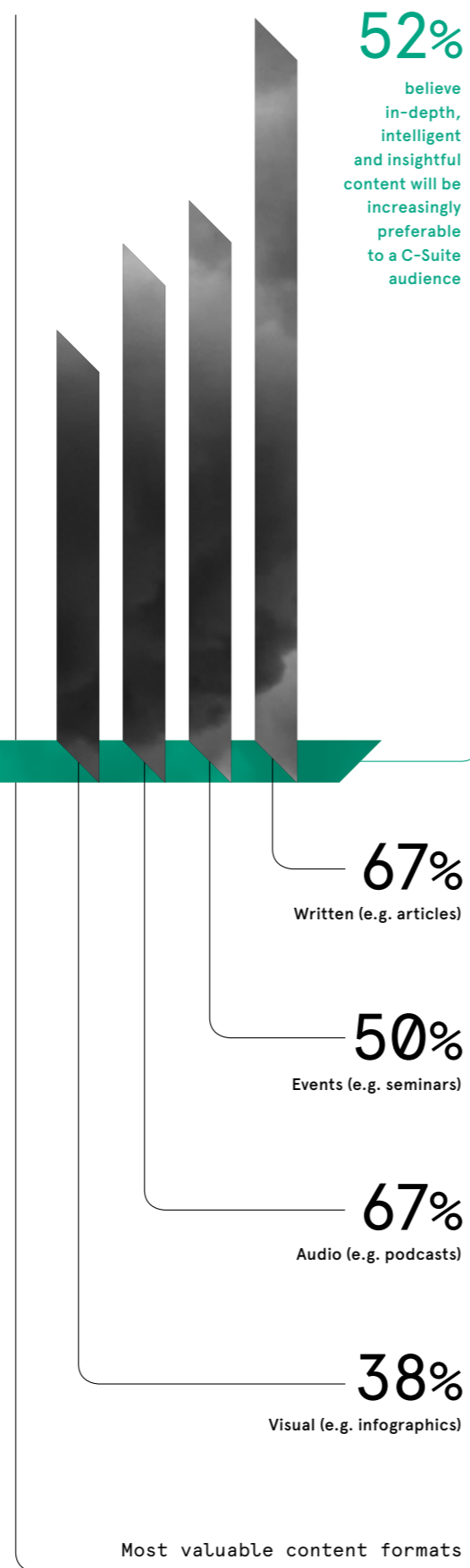
Evolution of preference

There's enough data available for companies to understand what their audience want. Scrolling through Google Analytics can quickly give you an idea of what users browsing your website like to read. Your email service provider will let you know what your database click on and social analytics can tell you what they engage with openly. However, this only tells you what they think about what you or your competitors are already producing.

Don't rely on the data alone. Put yourself in your customers' shoes. Talk to them about their priorities and pressures without the fixed agenda of what your brand wants to say to them. Understand them and their context outside how you think your product, service or solution fits into their professional context and their company's needs. Explore the big questions that keep them up at night.

Freddie Ossberg, founder of Raconteur, concludes: "We know from research that almost all content marketing initiatives go unnoticed and about 5 per cent of branded content gets 90 per cent of engagement. That's because they are a genuine value-add to their audience and most likely put together with an audience-first mentality. The rest is just noise, chasing after vanity metrics." #

36%
see short-form content, with almost exclusively 'snackable' information as the prevailing form preferred by business decision-makers

52%
believe in-depth, intelligent and insightful content will be increasingly preferable to a C-Suite audience

67%
Written (e.g. articles)

50%
Events (e.g. seminars)

67%
Audio (e.g. podcasts)

38%
Visual (e.g. infographics)

Most valuable content formats

tom goodwin
executive vice president
and head of innovation
at Zenith Media

Be brave and bold

Quality journalism is so important to tell the story that brings a brand or business to life

¶ Advertising is losing its edge. Not only are people overwhelmed by the number of ad impressions trying to reach them, they have lost faith in advertisers' messages. This collapse in trust is fueling the shift to the "content" strategies of native advertising, branded content and influencer marketing.

The digital world has created a generation who are thirsty for a sense of direction and search for material to help them think in different ways. They have a great hunger for advice about their professional lives, as well as intellectual and practical matters. This opens the way for businesses to use their expertise to offer original thinking that inspires and guides.

But many businesses are struggling to achieve this. Too much B2B content is bland and pointless, from telecoms companies writing indistinguishable pieces about the internet of things, to cyber-security firms saying the same old stuff about data breaches. There is so much stodgy, clichéd groupthink to wade through that the good stuff risks getting lost. If content isn't truly outstanding, it just won't get read.

To cut through, businesses need to be brave and have a high tolerance for risk. They need a willingness to stand for something and not be afraid to have a voice. If you look at most of what is written by management consultancies, their writers clearly don't feel confident in expressing an opinion because it might get them into trouble.

An area where many businesses go wrong is promoting their corporate entity rather than an individual working for that company. You probably don't care what BMW thinks about interior design, but you may care what the head of interior design at BMW says about it. After all, humans relate to other humans.

But promoting individual executives can be risky. The glory may reflect on them rather than the corporate name, so businesses need to create clearly branded content hubs. There is the risk that they give away valuable information. Thought-leadership pieces need to reveal just enough of the business insight to get people interested, but without giving up the thinking customers pay for. That is a tricky balance to strike.

Persuading the in-house experts of the need to work with writers to brainstorm ideas, tell stories and create great content is vital. Every company needs evangelists who understand their business and industry, and can work with writers and producers to create the content that reflects their expertise.

There is a lot of talk of artificial intelligence taking the place of writers and cheaply producing engaging, relevant content. There will be more complex and more creative writing from AI; the idea of content marketing that is personal at scale is in theory a good AI challenge. We need to be careful because great content performs strongly, while content that is a bit "run of the mill" or expected completely bombs. I find it unlikely that great content will be written by AI for some time.

It is better to employ good storytellers; people who can tease the nuances out of other people. You need to be brave enough to let them loose inside your business, to speak to the gurus and to tease out the stories.

Content is the future. But journalistic skills are so important. Companies will only succeed when they find an editorial voice or opinion that is original and striking, and carries sufficient weight to cut through the bland multitude. #
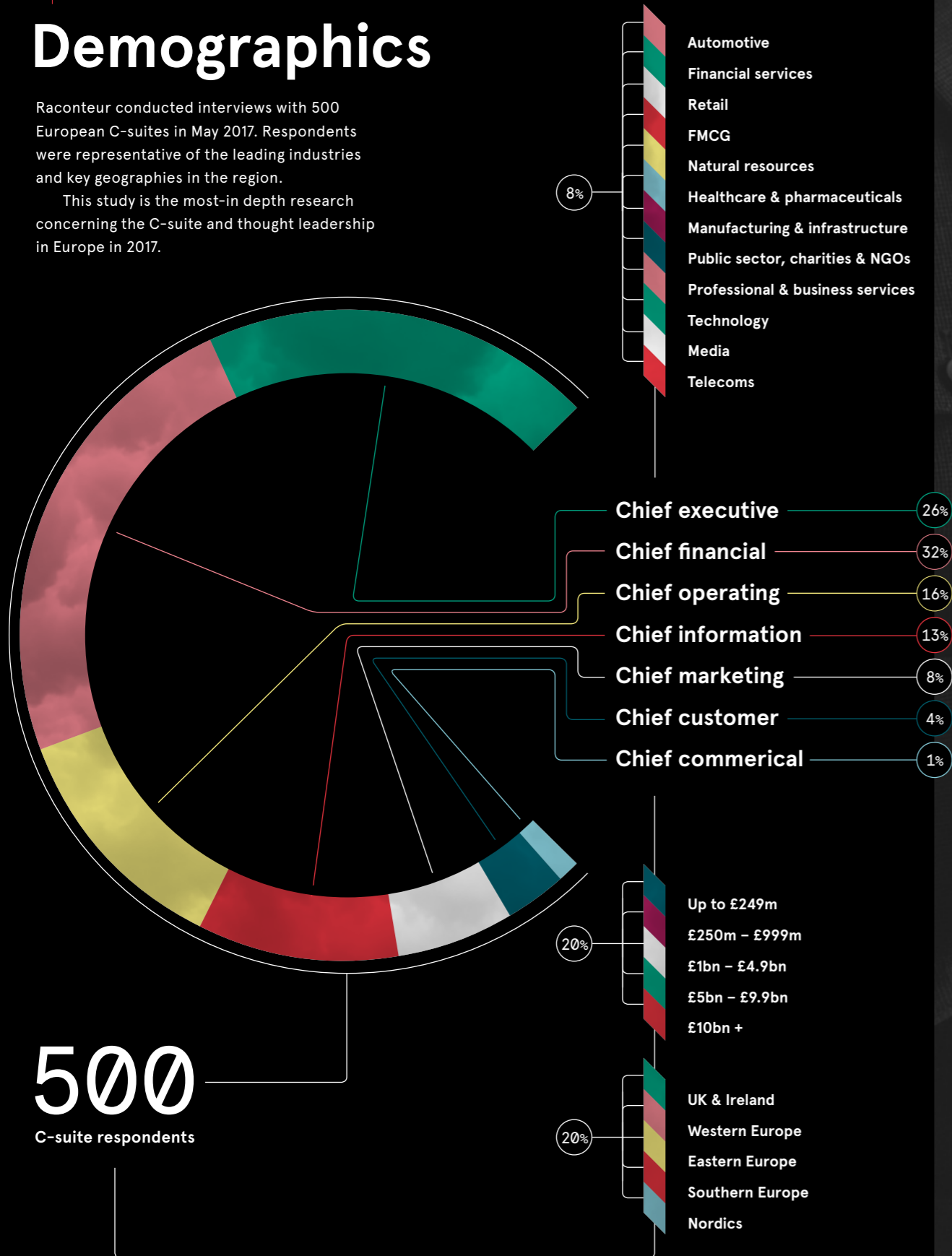
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Demographics

Raconteur conducted interviews with 500 European C-suites in May 2017. Respondents were representative of the leading industries and key geographies in the region.

This study is the most-in depth research concerning the C-suite and thought leadership in Europe in 2017.

8%

- Automotive
- Financial services
- Retail
- FMCG
- Natural resources
- Healthcare & pharmaceuticals
- Manufacturing & infrastructure
- Public sector, charities & NGOs
- Professional & business services
- Technology
- Media
- Telecoms

Chief executive	26%
Chief financial	32%
Chief operating	16%
Chief information	13%
Chief marketing	8%
Chief customer	4%
Chief commerical	1%

20%

- Up to £249m
- £250m – £999m
- £1bn – £4.9bn
- £5bn – £9.9bn
- £10bn +

20%

- UK & Ireland
- Western Europe
- Eastern Europe
- Southern Europe
- Nordics

500
C-suite respondents