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Capture more value from surveys with fresh research, content, and amplification strategies

Companies seeking better quality and ROI on survey content should rethink old ways and integrate survey development, content, and promotion, rather than treating each stage as a one-off.

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Introduction

Thought leadership and content based on surveys are a staple of B2B communications and marketing. While the advent of online tools has enabled a broader range of companies to develop and field their own surveys, we've found the quality of survey-based content has suffered greatly as a result.

Seeking to raise the bar, we collaborated with an AI-driven research company and a strategic communications consultancy to reinforce best practices across the entire process, from research to content development and promotion to distribution. To better understand the challenge—and the opportunity—we conducted our own survey of more than 30 marketing and communications professionals. This article features our collective knowledge and findings to help companies get more from their surveys and survey-based content.

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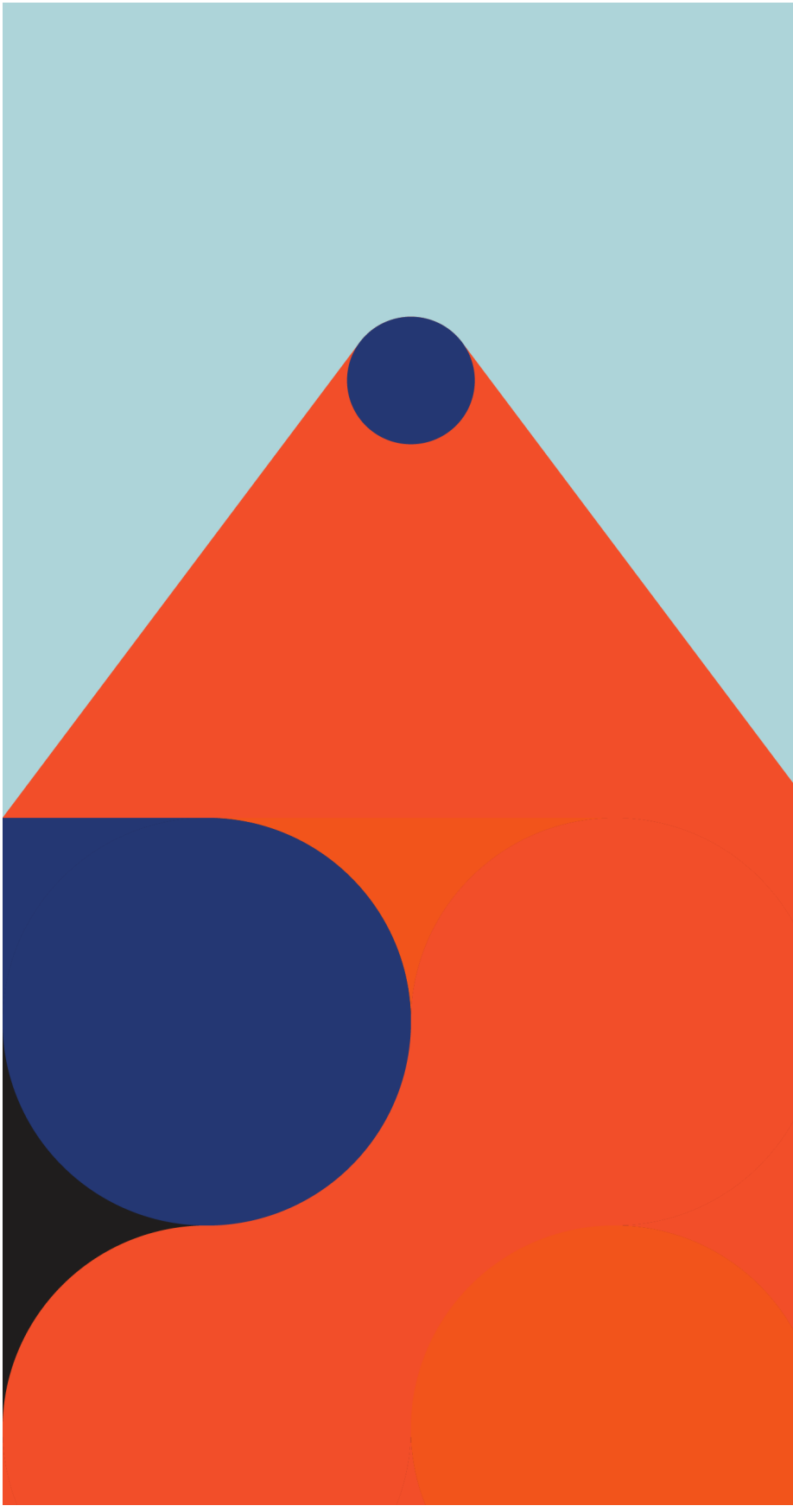
The path to an effective survey



Capture more value from surveys with fresh research, content, and amplification strategies

In the not-too-distant past, the most common way to conduct a survey was to engage established market research companies with access to carefully curated panels of respondents. The total duration of such projects was often measured in months, and the high cost served as an obstacle for many companies.

Over the past few decades, the emergence of online tools has democratized access to surveys and also expedited the process, from survey development to distribution and data and analysis. As a result, survey-based content has proliferated, becoming a common part of thought leadership offerings. Among our respondents, 53 percent reported their organization had conducted six or more surveys over the past year, with an additional 34 percent fielding three to five.

This speed and lower bar for putting surveys out into the world have come at a cost to quality. Teams are now able to condense or skip steps that are vital to producing compelling insights. Chances are that you have run across seemingly promising survey-based content, only to find upon digging in that it lacks the expected analytical rigor, synthesis, or insights.

So how can companies ensure they're taking advantage of the latest technology to accelerate timelines, maintain quality, and create surveys that yield compelling insights? Four best practices can help.

Have a clear strategy and end product in mind

Too often, we have seen companies obsess over the process of creating survey questions, diving in before clearly articulating what they hope to accomplish. It's important to remember the end product is not a survey questionnaire but how you plan to use the data—for instance, identifying market opportunities, uncovering white space for thought leadership, or obtaining data to inform perspectives or insights.

Companies can avoid getting sidetracked by forming a core team at the outset to discuss the high-level objectives of the project. The creation of a strategy brief can ensure consistency and alignment as the project team expands. This brief can also be used to inform the development of an integrated campaign. (We'll discuss this step in more detail in subsequent sections.)

Do the necessary legwork before fielding your survey

With fewer steps between developing a survey and sending it out into the world, companies may be tempted to skip the internal refinement that can be vital to quality. Without a gatekeeper or any incentive to distill a survey to only essential questions, many companies end up with a bloated survey that has too many questions on multiple topics.

Several issues can result. The focus of the survey can drift from the initial intent, with the risk of results that don't pay off for the thesis or offer value to target audiences. Further, internal teams can be overwhelmed by the amount of data and breadth of insights, leading to paralysis or an inability to home in on the most distinctive findings. The result can be overly long articles or reports that fail to produce notable or counterintuitive findings.

We recommend convening a dedicated team and having detailed conversations about the topic, angles, and questions needed to elicit distinctive insights. Having these discussions to winnow the questions and topics is a worthwhile investment and can expedite subsequent phases of a survey project. The result is not just a more concise survey but also better alignment on the hypotheses and narratives of the material you'll create from the survey.

One more tip: Avoid the temptation to ask questions with a specific answer in mind. The goal of an effective survey is not to confirm preexisting opinions but to uncover the unexpected, counterintuitive responses that can offer real value to your audiences.

Understand where technology can save time and add value

Fortunately, online survey tools have advanced to the point that extensive custom coding and multiple rounds of iteration before going live are largely a thing of the past. Advances in tools and templates, when used correctly, lower the bar for non-experts without sacrificing rigor. Gen AI can now be deployed to further accelerate key parts in the workflow, including question generation, the creation of crosstabs, and the once-monumental task of coding free-form, open-text responses.

Prioritize the respondent experience

It's obvious but has been overlooked for too long: Respondents play a critical role in surveys. They provide the knowledge and expertise that make results credible and authoritative. In today's world of bots and spam, they are also increasingly in demand, particularly for specific roles such as the C-suite, but also elusive.

Despite these dynamics, the market research industry has consistently overlooked the link between the experience respondents have when completing a survey and the quality of the survey data. The combination of easier survey creation tools, the rise of customer feedback culture, and the push for data-driven decision-making has increased the burden on respondents. The key issue isn't just the overall volume of surveys; their cumulative impact, combined with poor design and lack of follow-through on results, may lead to poor response rates.

Common transgressions include too many questions, superfluous questions, bad survey interfaces, misleading instructions, ignorance of real-world expectations of mobile respondents, and repetitive answer structures (for example, endless rows and columns). If the survey is a slog, respondents are less apt to complete it and more likely to rush to finish it, depriving companies of real insight.

Companies can cater to respondents in a few ways.

// Don't ask people to do the heavy lifting on a survey by wading through too many questions. **Focus their attention** and reap the rewards.

// Meet them where they are, with surveys tailored to **desktop** and **mobile**.

// Reward their interest in a survey with more **engaging question formats**, such as the ability to dynamically rank answers or offer open field answers.

If you hold up your end of the bargain by developing surveys using a respondent lens, you will be rewarded with better engagement and a bounty of additional insights.

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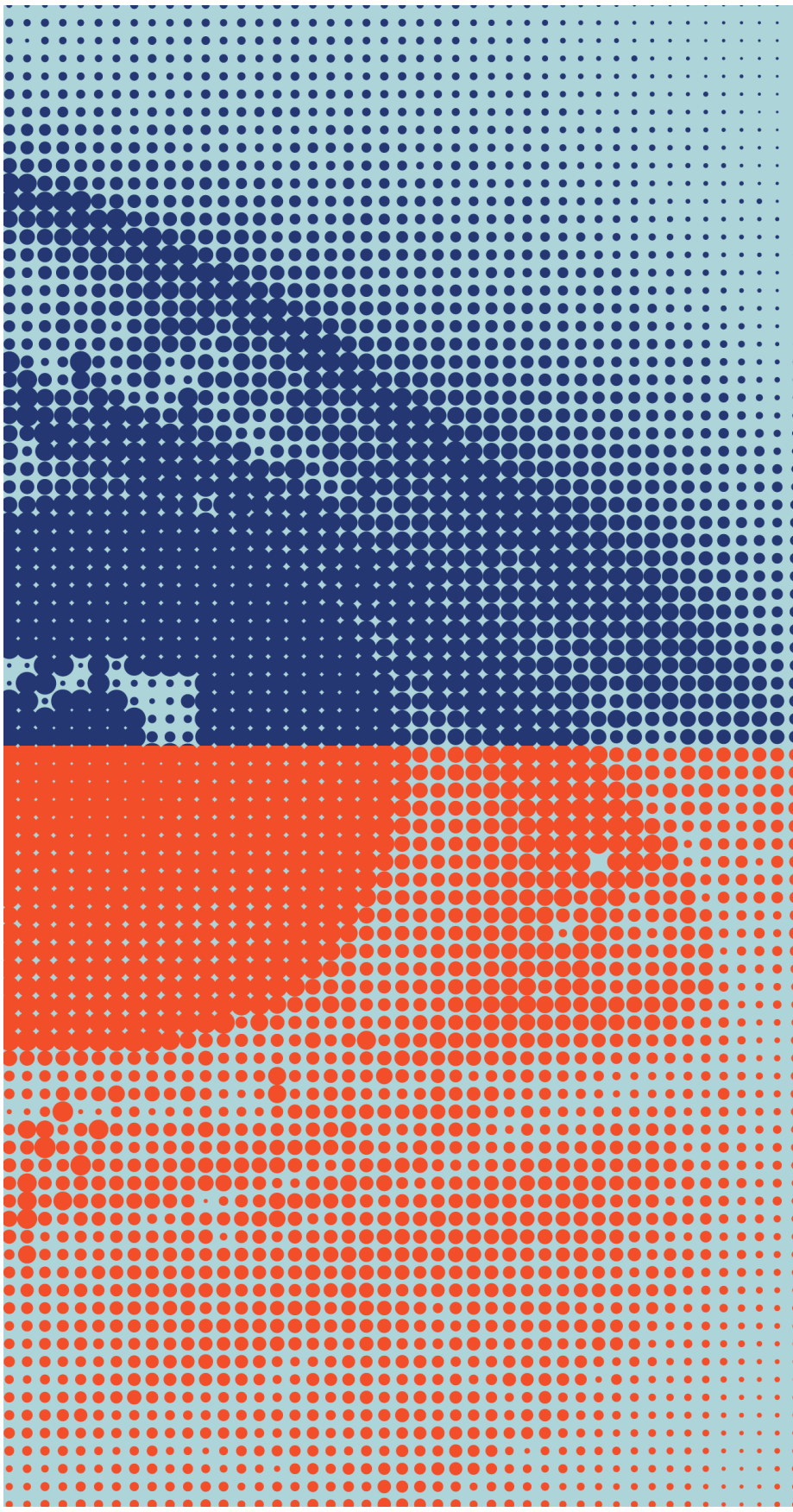
Make your survey-based content stand out



Companies have long relied on so-called thud factor reports—weighty, 80-page reports that provide instant gravitas. And there's still a time and place for those. But having your audience truly engage with your research requires more than just heft. It's about creating a dynamic story, presenting novel findings, and bringing clarity and insight to a business issue in an effective way.

Good content is critical. Many companies execute a survey or pay a firm to do so. Fewer bring analytical rigor and prescriptive guidance to the data, and fewer still communicate those findings with content that cuts through the clutter. Bringing your audience into the findings through engaging, high-quality content is a core differentiator.

There are several elements to focus on in survey-based content development.

Go beyond the surface

We've all read survey-based reports that do little more than report top-line findings. And while it can be initially interesting to find out how C-suite executives around the world are feeling about macroeconomic issues or responding to recent developments, those results are more framing than an exclamation point.

The real value in a survey comes from digging into the data and uncovering connections that shed new light on a business problem. Identifying different pieces of the puzzle and putting them together, often through comparing and contrasting results, are critical steps that can elevate survey-based content.

This process also begins with curiosity—looking at the results and questioning what they really mean. In our survey, for instance, we've noted that about half of respondents were happy with the ROI they were getting from surveys. That's where crosstabs can reveal interesting connections. A deeper dive shows that companies satisfied with their ROI cited infographics as the most successful format for engagement (Exhibit 1). Similarly, these companies emphasized email campaigns with owned lists to promote their survey content, but internal activation (with executives and sales teams) represented a largely untapped opportunity.

Showcase prescriptive guidance

If one of the hallmarks of good survey-based content is presenting a fresh lens on a challenge and tension or conflict, an even more important one is responding to it with distinctive ideas and solutions. We've all probably reviewed survey content only to find it's little more than a readout of data with little context, expert perspective, or recommendations. In such cases, companies are essentially promoting that they had enough resources to field a survey but lack the in-house expertise to add more value. That's a huge missed opportunity.

A credible piece of survey-based content underpinned by analytical rigor not only offers a detailed presentation of findings and data but also offers commentary from senior experts on what executives should do in response. To continue with the example of ROI, we would highlight best practices for the mix of content, duration of the resulting campaign, and appropriate metrics to gauge impact. (See the next section for an in-depth discussion of promotion and amplification.)

Why do companies fail to weave their expertise into survey content? Common reasons include the unavailability of senior leaders and tight production timelines. A few strategies can help teams incorporate this perspective:

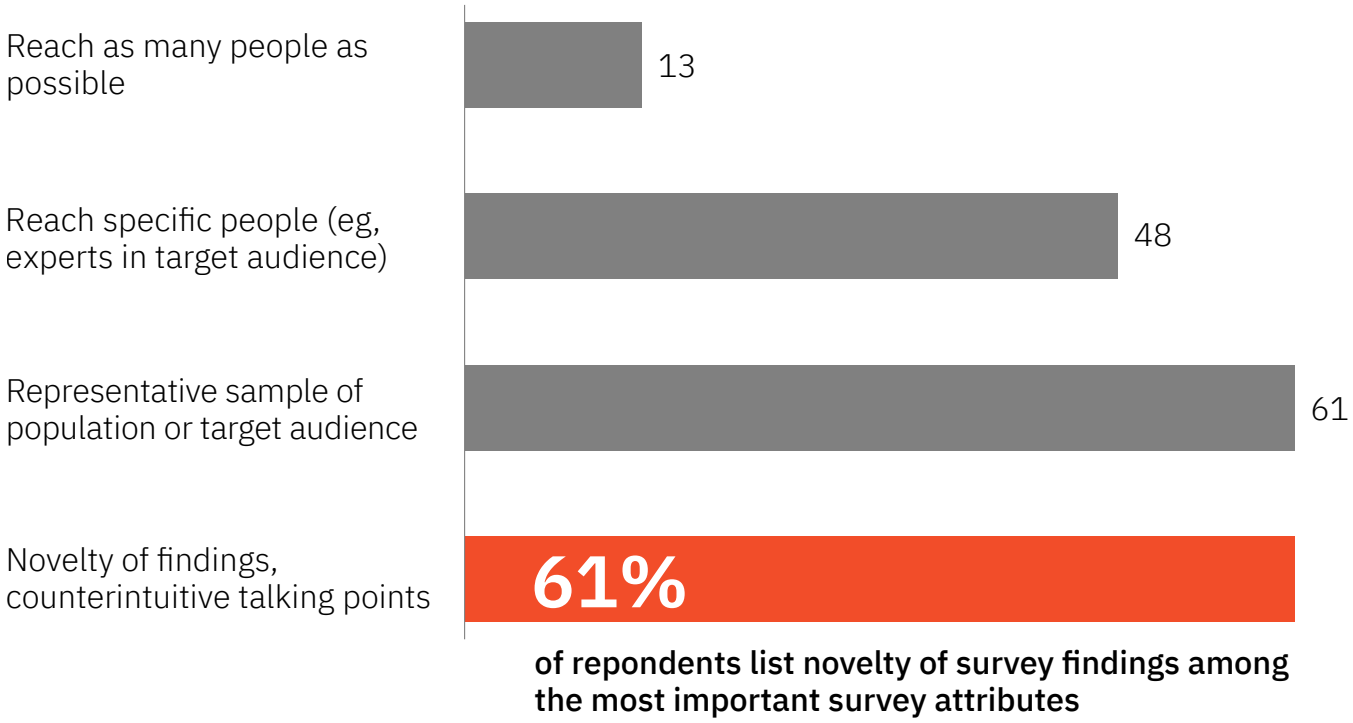
// Reach out to **senior leaders** at the outset of the survey project.

// Manage their **expectations** by sharing the production timeline and highlighting when they will need to engage.

// Make **efficient use of their time**—for example, by providing proposed narratives along with the survey results.

Exhibit 1

Which of the following survey attributes are most important to you?



Build an experience

The best way to maximize ROI on survey-based content is to think of the content as an experience, one that is unique and useful. To do so, companies have to go beyond a readout of the findings or commentary and find contrast and contradiction. For example, a survey might find that respondents are seeking a given outcome but not putting the necessary steps, talent, or governance in place to make that happen. The content can then illuminate and expand on a potential lack of direction or clarity on a given issue.

From a business perspective, that's why survey-based content works: It provides a fresh lens or illustrates a business problem using proprietary data and reinforces that a company is a go-to for direction and counsel, with information few others have or can analyze as well. But the question for many companies is how to bring a user into the findings and create that experience.

Strategic data visualization helps make the findings more accessible and interesting, and it ensures the audience gets key takeaways quickly. But it's about more than well-designed charts or graphics; the best companies create visualizations that convey that contrast or contradiction, presenting tension visually.

Good data visualization should help the audience make decisions, not merely review facts. And there are a number of fresh, dynamic ways to provide data visualization. Companies can go far beyond static articles and reports with content such as engaging "scrollytelling," videos that animate and highlight certain points or relationships, or interactives that give the user the ability to slice data in different ways. Storytelling that is more interactive and immersive can elevate survey data and provide additional layers of information in a more accessible, engaging way.

While the thud factor holds sway, developing a content experience—through stronger storytelling, data visualization, and prescriptive guidance—will help companies not only make a one-time thud but also sustain engagement and conversations over the long term.

Good data visualization should help the audience make decisions, not merely review facts.

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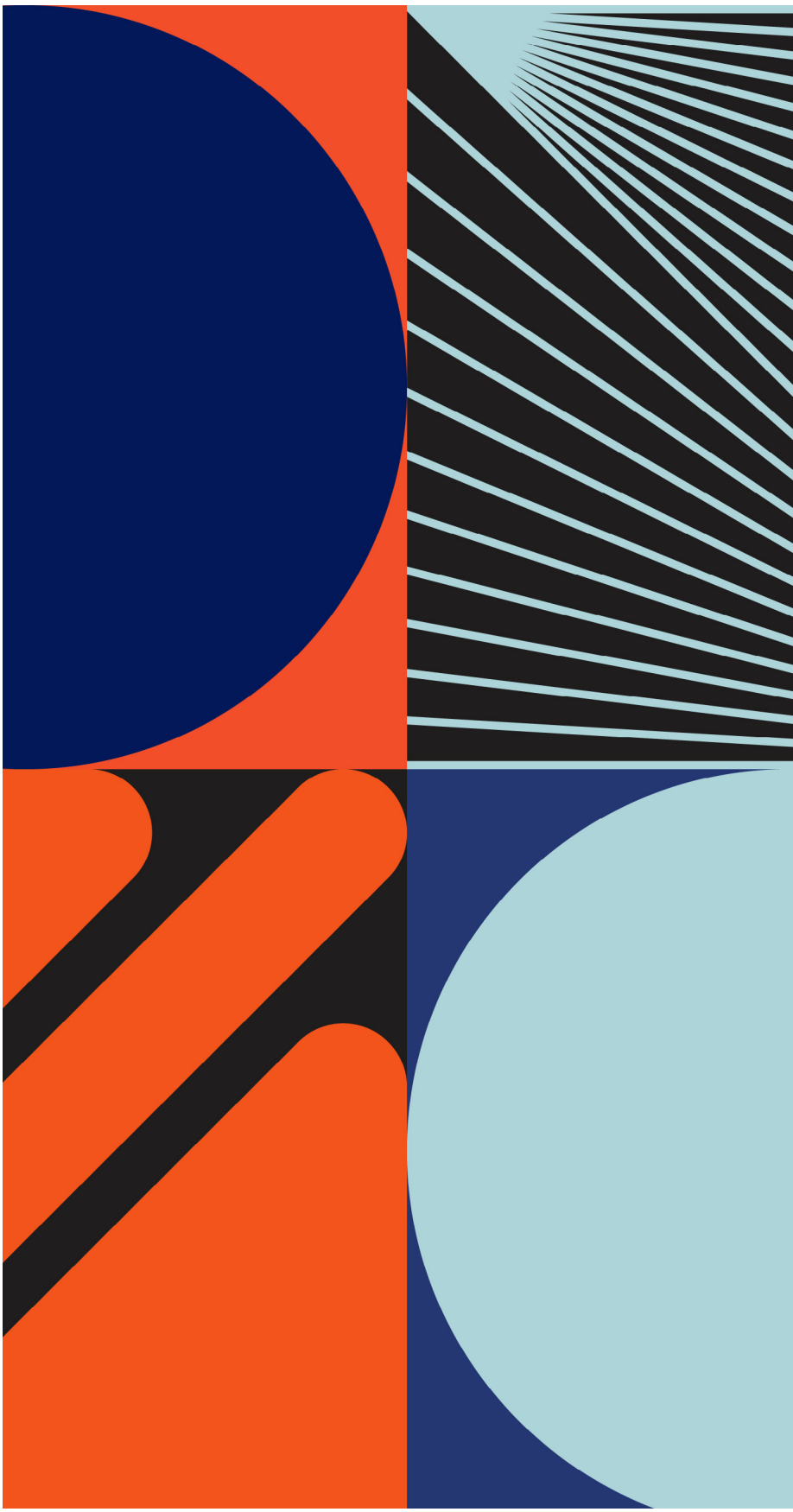
Getting survey promotion and amplification right



One of the benefits of surveys is that their data can yield enough insights to support an ambitious integrated content campaign across multiple channels. Given this potential, companies should ensure they take the necessary steps to maximize the returns on their investment.

Yet our survey found too many companies are leaving value on the table. More than half of respondents—53 percent—reported a shelf life of less than six months for their survey content, and about 15 percent got fewer than two months out of their investment. With these results, it's no wonder that 48 percent of respondents were dissatisfied with the ROI from their surveys.

We find companies that take three actions can significantly increase the reach and impact of their survey-based content campaigns.

Focus on strategy first, content second

We often observe a disconnect between what organizations think prospective clients want and what they actually want. This divergence can result in a tendency to concentrate on content creation from surveys rather than strategy and the desired impact. Therefore, to mount more effective campaigns, companies should clearly articulate their overarching strategy and objectives for promoting survey results. Options could include:

// ***Flagship content—***A longer article or report that can set the stage for an enduring conversation on a specific topic (think tech trends or executive takes on their industry or the broader economy)

// ***Pulse survey—***A quick-hit survey offering an update on attitudes and perspectives

// ***Market sizing and identification—***Research to determine customer needs, pain points, and budgets

// ***Solution positioning and messaging—***Surveys that test the resonance of products and services and their attributes

Then—and only then—should companies turn their attention to determining which content types and channels are favored by their target audience. Our survey highlights the potential pitfalls in proceeding without a set strategy: Respondents are producing a nice array of content types, but some aren't hitting the mark (Exhibit 2). For example, long-form reports are a staple, but they don't spur high engagement.

Developing the foundational asset is the heaviest lift. Once that is complete, companies can draw on that asset to create multiple formats for different platforms, such as executive summaries, a blog series, email campaigns, and gated white papers.

How can companies ensure strategy and content creation are in sync? A guiding principle should be to repurpose with intention—that is, create content with a clear objective in mind and tailored to a given channel. We advise clients to develop a "content waterfall" consisting of all the content pieces to support an extended campaign. This road map can then guide companies as they break a longer report into snackable content, such as carousel posts, reels, stat cards, infographics, and pull quotes for social.

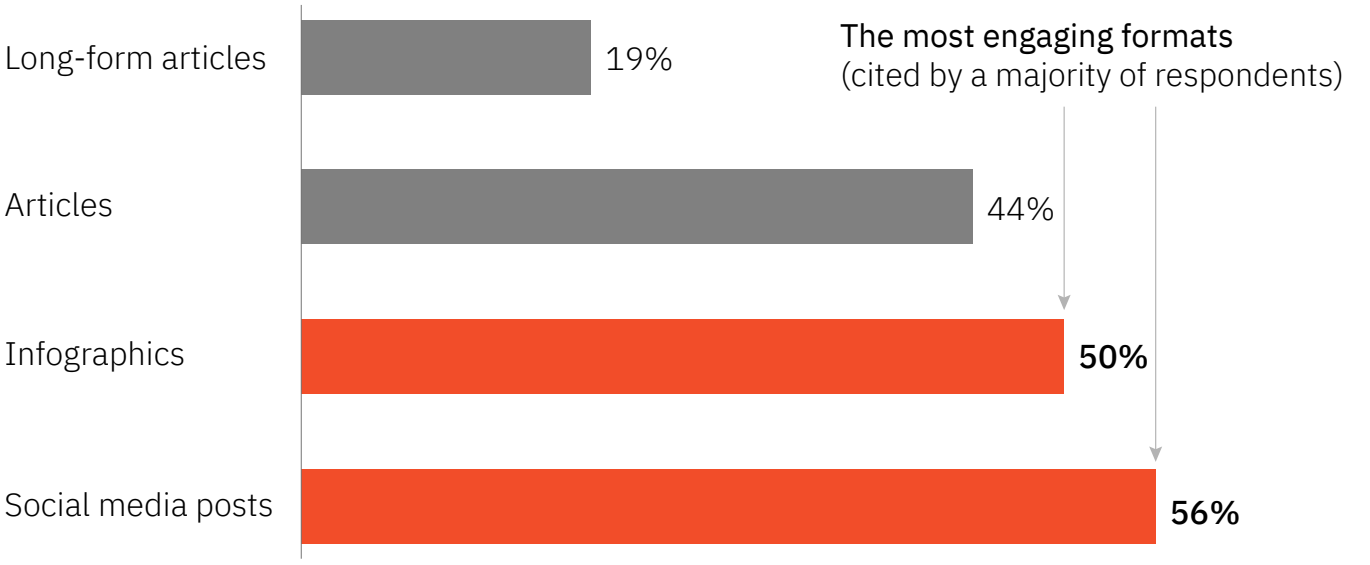
Pro tip: Companies can substantially extend the life of their flagship survey content by doing regional and industry cuts. These pieces can not only be more relevant to specific audiences and support better outreach but also drive people back to the main report and complementary content.

Prepare your senior leaders to promote the content

Early in a survey project, companies should identify the authors or other ambassadors who will be the face of the promotional effort. One recent example: A client was seeking to reach CFOs in middle markets, so its leaders took a deliberate approach to determining who within the company should talk about the insights. It then pulled in these leaders at the outset of a project to help inform the narrative and ensure they were fully on board.

Exhibit 2

What kind of content did you create from your survey data?



A project's designated ambassadors will need a well-developed platform for promoting the survey insights. That means your company will likely need to help their senior leaders establish or elevate their presence on select channels, such as LinkedIn, in advance of publication. A common obstacle is a lack of regular activity on the prescribed channels. We have found that when leaders are introduced to the metrics for gauging reach and impact, they often become competitive and more likely to engage. As ambassadors get traction from posts and see their number of followers grow, it can be a huge boost for the project, resulting in additional momentum.

In advance of the flagship content's publication date, companies can ensure authors, researchers, and senior leaders are briefed and equipped to post and talk about the report. Calls to discuss the narrative, key takeaways, and some of the counterintuitive findings can help ambassadors be consistent in their messaging. The marketing team can provide prewritten social posts and email copy so ambassadors can share the content easily and consistently. To make the content more relevant for each ambassador's networks, companies can consider drawing on data cuts by region, industry, or job title.

Collectively, this activity boosts the personal brand of senior leaders and establishes a platform for ongoing outreach.

Mobilize your broader workforce for promotion

Internal activation is an important—but often overlooked—effort. In the vein of "many hands make light work," involving the entire organization can substantially extend the reach of the campaign. LinkedIn's data reinforces the value of personal outreach: Posts from personal profiles receive an average of three times more engagement than the same posts from company accounts.

How can companies rally their employees to the cause? As with many efforts in an organization, it starts at the top. The marketing team should seek to gain buy-in from senior leaders, who can model the desired behavior by posting themselves. And as with external activation, companies can provide employees with a range of content optimized for different channels. Frequent posters could be recognized and even rewarded for their efforts.

When done well, surveys can be the source material for original intellectual property that positions your company as a leader. The best content from surveys goes well beyond simply presenting results to create a platform for showcasing your analysis and unique perspective. Following the recommendations in this article requires up-front discussions and close coordination throughout survey development, content creation, and amplification and promotion, but the reward will be a significantly higher return on your investments in surveys.

About LEFF
LEFF is a global content marketing agency. We partner with B2B clients to tell their stories, illuminate their insights, and help them build lasting connections with their audiences.

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