

# Invisible Influence:

Unlocking the Power  
of Hidden Buyers

# Executive Summary

**More than 40% of B2B deals stall** due to internal misalignment within buying groups.<sup>1</sup>  
A major cause: hidden buyers — internal stakeholders who significantly influence business purchases even if they are not the primary users of a product or service.

Unlike target buyers, who are the functional users of specific products and services, these hidden buyers are often overlooked by traditional sales and marketing efforts, yet they play a pivotal role within the buying group. In fact, these **hidden buyers exert just as much influence over purchasing decisions as their target-buyer counterparts.**<sup>2</sup> With economic uncertainty ahead, suppliers need every advantage to win new business — understanding this group of influencers can offer a valuable edge.

In our 2025 survey of nearly 2,000 management-level professionals, we focused on key sub-samples of target decision-makers, hidden decision-makers, and hidden decision-influencers. The study reveals these **hidden buyers are not simply “box-checkers”** who are solely focused on their narrow remits. When evaluating purchases and providers, **they think more strategically and holistically than many might believe.**

They value original insights, are deeply engaged with thought leadership content, and are even more open to disruptive ideas and challenger brands than their more visible counterparts.

Both hidden and target buyers agree: **high-quality thought leadership is more effective than traditional marketing or product information** in conveying a supplier’s capabilities, thinking, and value. For hidden buyers in particular, the right thought leadership can transform initial skepticism into advocacy, creating champions for lesser-known brands.

In today’s crowded marketplace, **high-quality, memorable thought leadership isn’t just a nice-to-have** — it’s a critical lever for earning trust, creating differentiation, and winning deals.

This study is the seventh annual collaboration between Edelman and LinkedIn examining how thought leadership influences buying behaviors among B2B decision-makers and C-suite executives. Our research confirms the full-funnel, business-generating impact of strong thought leadership and the tangible risks of publishing low-quality content.

Edelman	LinkedIn
Joe Kingsbury	Jann Schwarz
David Bersoff	Mimi Turner
Annie Dunleavy	Lindsey Noble
Scott Hillis	Allison Schoer
Kristin Schmotzer	

<sup>1</sup> Matt Dixon, “The JOLT Effect: How High Performers Overcome Customer Indecision,” 2022.

<sup>2</sup> LinkedIn and Bain & Company, “How to Win in B2B: Unlocking the Power of Buyer Group Marketing,” October 2024.



# Key Learnings

1

**Surprisingly, hidden buyers actively discover, consume, and evaluate thought leadership just like target buyers.**

Hidden buyers may be hidden, but that doesn't mean they're passive.

2

**Thought leadership opens doors with hidden buyers that marketing and sales typically do not.**

Hidden buyers are less likely to take sales meetings. High-quality thought leadership can serve as a Trojan horse, building credibility with hidden buyers and drawing them into the conversation.

3

**Far from being "box-checkers," hidden buyers value thinking that informs or even challenges their perspectives.**

Bold, perspective-shifting ideas earn their attention. They gravitate to content that questions assumptions and invites new ways of thinking. Thought leadership is a way to impress.

4

**Hidden buyers can be powerful advocates for new or lesser-known brands.**

At the moment of the final decision, strong content and insights can help level the playing field, inspiring hidden buyers to advocate for less familiar vendors.

5

**Hidden buyers want content that is stylish, straightforward, and human.**

Companies that convey their insights in a compelling way can inspire hidden buyers to research and learn about them further.



# Terminology

## Audiences in this Report



### Hidden Decision-Makers (or “Hidden Buyers”)

People who, when the organization they work for is in the market for a service or product, are a final decision-maker in group purchasing decisions and are primarily involved as a representative of a function that does not require in-depth knowledge of the specific service or product. These functions might include finance, operations, legal, compliance, procurement, and others.



### Target Decision-Makers (or “Target Buyers”)

People who, when the organization they work for is in the market for services or products, are both a final decision-maker and are primarily involved as an expert in the service or product being offered. They bring their direct, in-depth knowledge, such as features or technical requirements, to the purchase process.

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### Thought Leadership

Thought leadership refers to content that offers **expertise, guidance, or a unique point of view on a topic or in a field**. It includes content like thought pieces, social media posts, videos, webinars, live presentations, PowerPoint slides, and research reports that organizations make available to the public for free (or in return for registering or giving contact information).

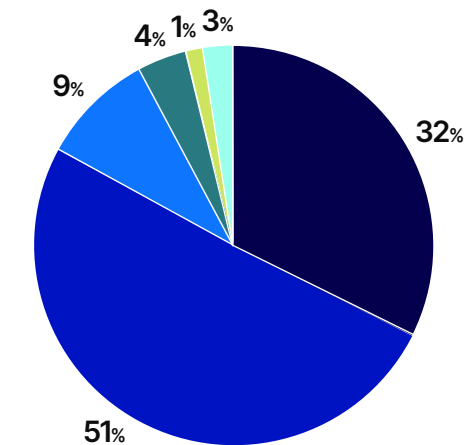
In this context, **“thought leadership” does not include content that is primarily focused on describing an organization’s products or services** or thought leadership that you pay to receive — such as client deliverables, subscription services, or reports that must be purchased.

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# About the Study

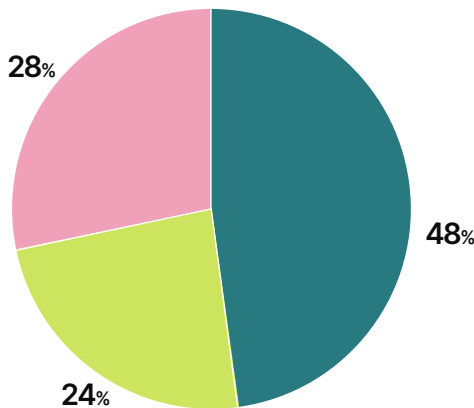
To help B2B companies understand the impact of thought leadership, Edelman and LinkedIn surveyed 1,934 global business executives across a wide range of industries and company sizes.

Seniority Level



● Manager    ● Director    ● VP  
● CXO    ● Partner    ● Owner

Company Size



● 1 - 200    ● 201 - 1,000    ● 1,001 +

**Data Collection**

Online, using the LinkedIn platform to survey LinkedIn members

**Markets Surveyed**

United States

**Fielding Dates**

March 17 – April 3, 2025

**Survey Length**

11.5 minutes

**Margin of Error**

+/- 2.0%



# 1. Surprisingly, hidden buyers actively discover, consume, and evaluate thought leadership just like target buyers.

Hidden buyers may be hidden, but that doesn't mean they're passive.



In fact, hidden buyers consume just as much thought leadership content as target buyers.

64% 

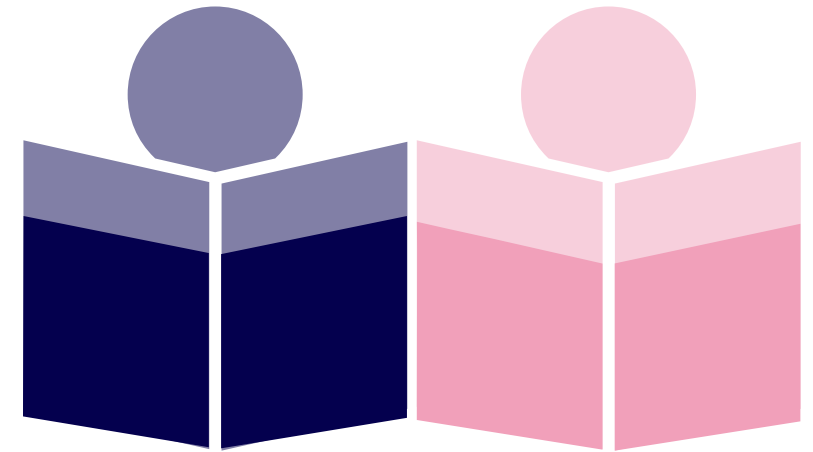
of target  
decision-makers

spend **more than an hour on  
average per week consuming  
thought leadership.**

63% 

of hidden  
decision-makers

do **the same.**



Just like target buyers, hidden buyers use thought leadership to evaluate vendors.

56% 

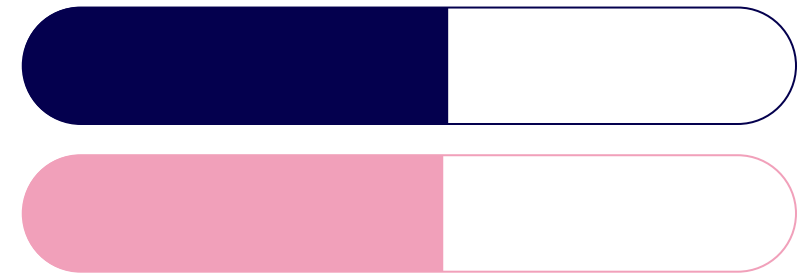
of target  
decision-makers

55% 

of hidden  
decision-makers

use **thought leadership as  
part of their vetting process.**

do **the same.**







Why do consultancies or tech firms lose deals they thought they'd win? Because they didn't fully understand the internal dynamics of their customers. **Hidden buyers were at play: people who were unknown — and possibly unknowable.** Key influencers who don't want to be sold to — who stopped the deal cold.

But how do you turn that around? How do you impact the opinions of individuals you may not even be able to identify? Traditional marketing won't do it. But quality thought leadership can. **By providing bold, clear, insightful, objective, and independent content, thought leadership producers can engage these hidden buyers in innovative ways,** converting detractors into powerful advocates — the hidden buyer on your side, not against you.



**Anthony Marshall**

Senior Research Director,  
Thought Leadership,  
IBM Institute for Business Value



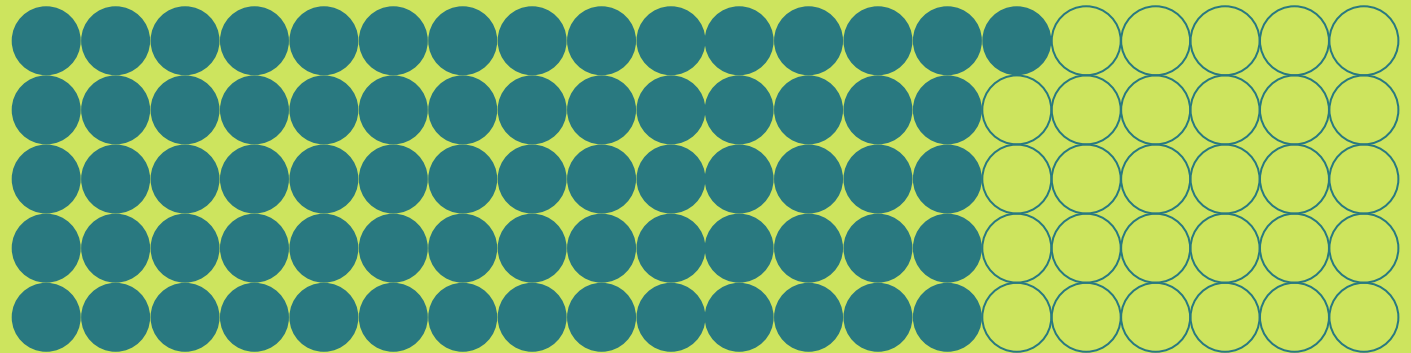
## 2. Thought leadership opens doors with hidden buyers that marketing and sales typically do not.

Hidden buyers are less likely to take sales meetings. High-quality thought leadership serves as a Trojan horse, building credibility with hidden buyers and drawing them into the conversation.



Hidden buyers are typically harder  
than target buyers for sales to reach.

71% 

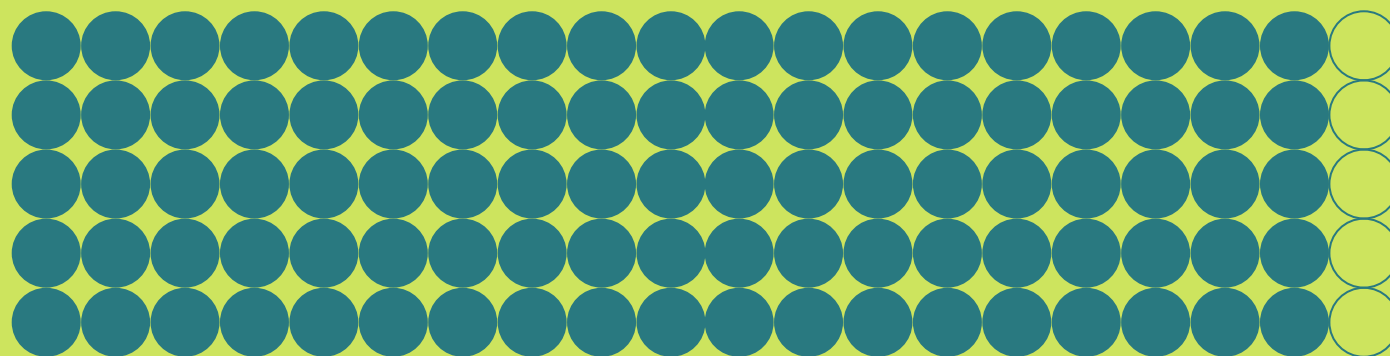


say **they have relatively little or no interaction with sales.**

Strong thought leadership makes hidden buyers more likely to welcome sales outreach.

95% 


of hidden decision-makers



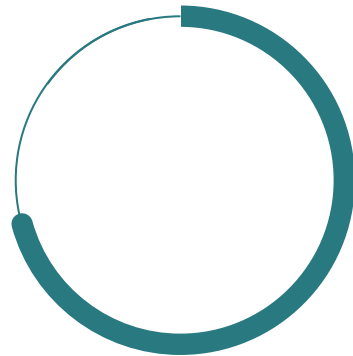
say **strong thought leadership makes them more receptive to sales and marketing outreach.**



## Thought leadership is more effective at influencing hidden buyers than traditional marketing materials.

71% 

of hidden  
decision-makers

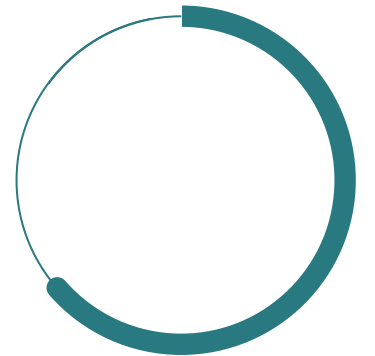


agree **that thought leadership is more effective than conventional marketing or sales materials at demonstrating a vendor's potential value.**

(73% of target decision-makers feel the same.)

64% 

of hidden  
decision-makers



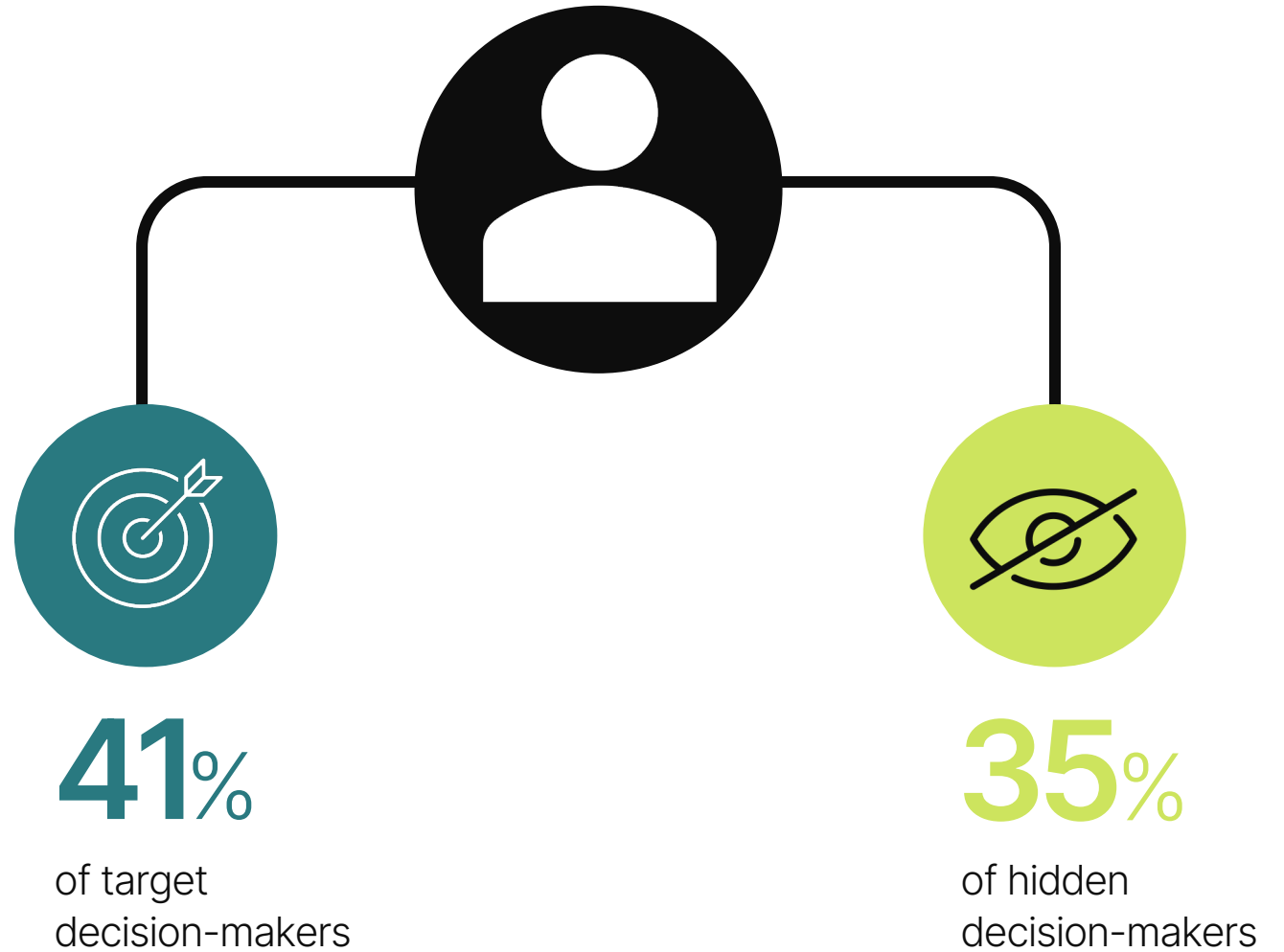
trust **thought leadership content more than marketing materials and product sheets when assessing capabilities and competencies.**

(65% of target decision-makers feel the same.)



## C-suite endorsement creates top-down momentum with the buyer group.

Both target and hidden buyers say that a C-suite executive has **encouraged them to consider working with a specific vendor** after engaging with that vendor's thought leadership content.





Our research shows that buying decisions are increasingly consensus efforts between the principal buyer and a hidden group of critical influencers. **Unlike primary buyers, these hidden influencers are less likely to have any direct relationships with the provider.** It is here that high-quality thought leadership plays a vital role in credentialing a professional services firm and differentiating it from the competitive mass."



**Elisabeth S. Bolshaw**

Global Content Strategist, Clients & Industries  
EY



# 3. Far from being "box checkers," hidden buyers value thinking that challenges and surprises.

Bold, perspective-shifting ideas earn their attention. They gravitate to content that questions assumptions and invites new ways of thinking. Thought leadership is a way to impress.



Even more than target buyers, hidden buyers value fresh insights into their industry or business.

91% 

of hidden decision-makers

say that **a hallmark of quality thought leadership is that it helps them uncover challenges or needs they hadn't recognized.**




That compares to

81% 

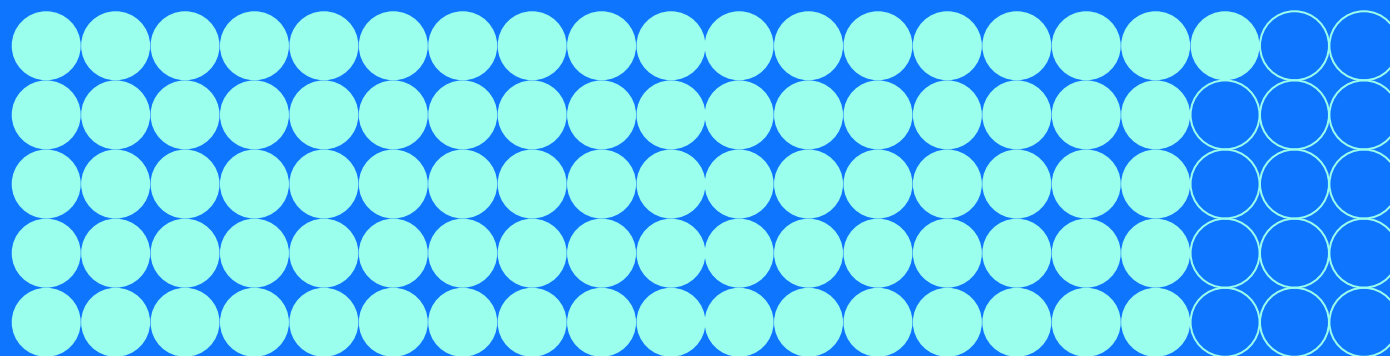
of target decision-makers.

**Source:** 2025 Edelman-LinkedIn B2B Thought Leadership Impact Report.  
Question: What level of thought leadership quality do you associate with each of the following attributes? "It helps you better understand a challenge your business is facing or gets you to see a need or opportunity within your organization that you had been missing," 4-point scale, top 2 boxes, "This is a characteristic of above-average quality thought leadership" and "This is a characteristic of the highest-quality thought leadership." Hidden decision-makers and target decision-makers, U.S.

Hidden buyers favor ideas that push boundaries,  
not just check boxes.

86% 

of hidden decision-makers



want **fresh perspectives and ideas that challenge assumptions, not just validate their thinking on a topic.**

Hidden buyers want to understand the kind of thinking your company can deliver to clients.

73% 

of hidden decision-makers

say that an organization's thought leadership is one of the **best ways to get a sense of the type and caliber of thinking** it is likely to deliver to clients.





Honeywell partners with customers to solve the world's toughest challenges, from enabling industrial autonomy to advancing AI and energy resilience. These aren't incremental shifts. They require bold thinking.

That's why our thought leadership is built to challenge assumptions, introduce new possibilities and inspire action. **For us, effective content doesn't just join the conversation, it resets it. It helps technical and business leaders think differently about what's next.**

**Honeywell**

**Stacey Jones**

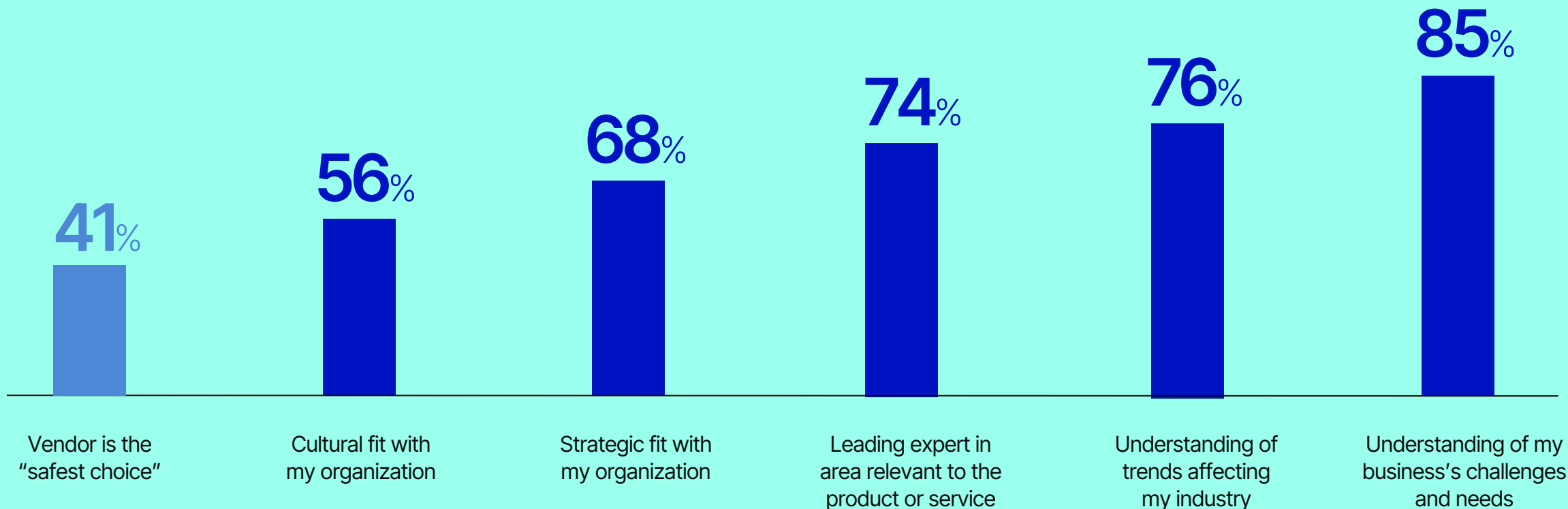
Chief Communicator,  
Honeywell



# 4. Hidden buyers can be powerful advocates for new or lesser-known brands.

At the moment of the final decision, great content can help level the playing field, inspiring hidden buyers to advocate for less familiar vendors.

For hidden buyers, the “safest choice” isn't the only factor that matters in a final purchasing decision.



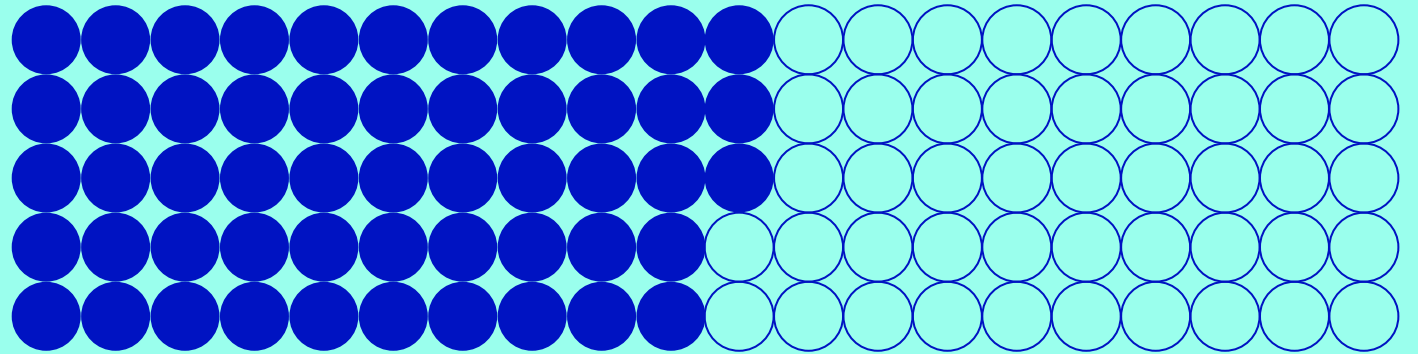


Smart insights from challengers  
can outshine big names.

53%



of both audiences



agree **that if thought leadership is high quality, then brand recognition matters less.**



High-quality thought leadership helps hidden decision-influencers\* persuade the rest of the buyer group.

**\* Hidden Decision-Influencers**

People who help vet potential organizations or products and feed their input into the decision-making process. While not the final decision-makers, they often manage the evaluation process and present recommendations to those who hold ultimate purchasing authority.

51%

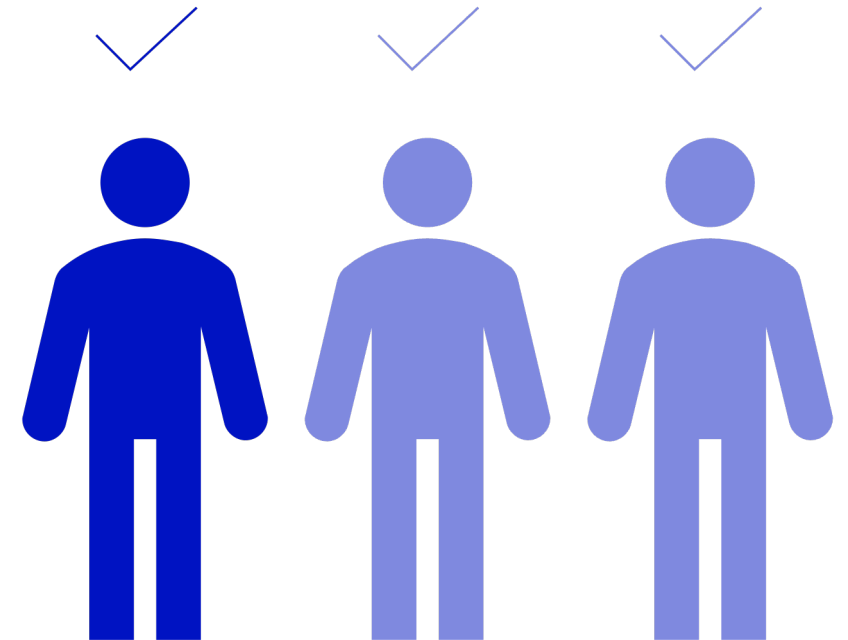
of hidden  
decision-influencers

say it helps them **convince C-level executives** to support their choice of vendor.

52%

of hidden  
decision-influencers

say it helps them **convince other decision-makers** involved in the vetting process.







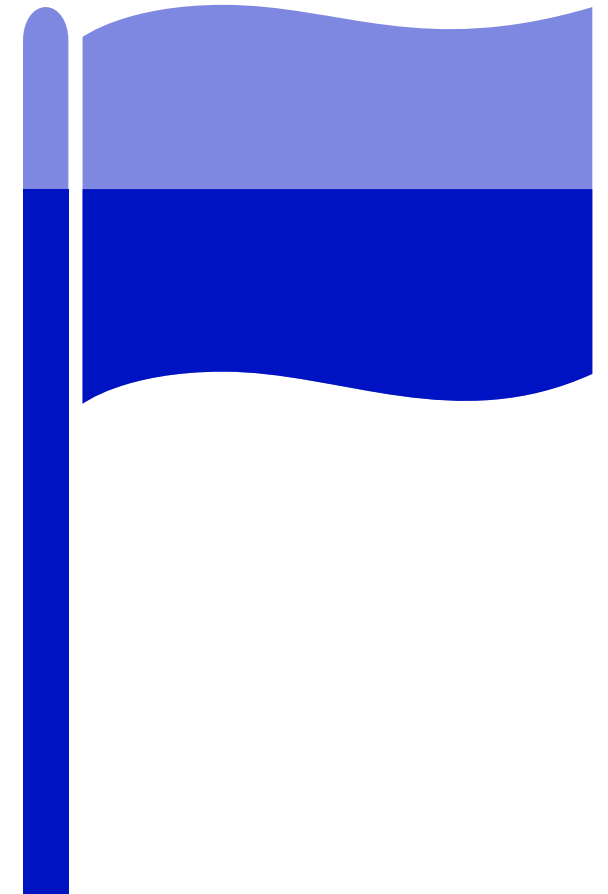
# Hidden buyers will “champion” RFP proposals from strong thought leaders.

# 79%



of hidden decision-makers

say that during the RFP process, they're **more likely to advocate for proposals** from companies that consistently produce high-quality thought leadership (versus those who do not).





It's essential to recognize that many companies don't have a one-size-fits-all procurement process — especially when purchasing more complex goods and services. **In many cases, the procurement process involves behind-the-scenes subject-matter experts who are curious about more progressive products and solutions. These experts value the thought leadership that a lesser-known brand can bring,** as it often brings innovative thinking and alternative approaches that go beyond a standard commodity buy and add meaningful value to the company."



**Kate Vitasek**

Distinguished Fellow,  
Global Supply Chain Institute  
Haslam College of Business  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville



# 5. Hidden buyers want content that is stylish, straightforward, and human.

Companies that convey their insights in a compelling way can inspire hidden buyers to research and learn about them further.



Form matters: a distinctive style signals high-quality thought leadership for hidden buyers.

60% 

of hidden decision-makers

value a **unique format or style.**



Versus

51% 

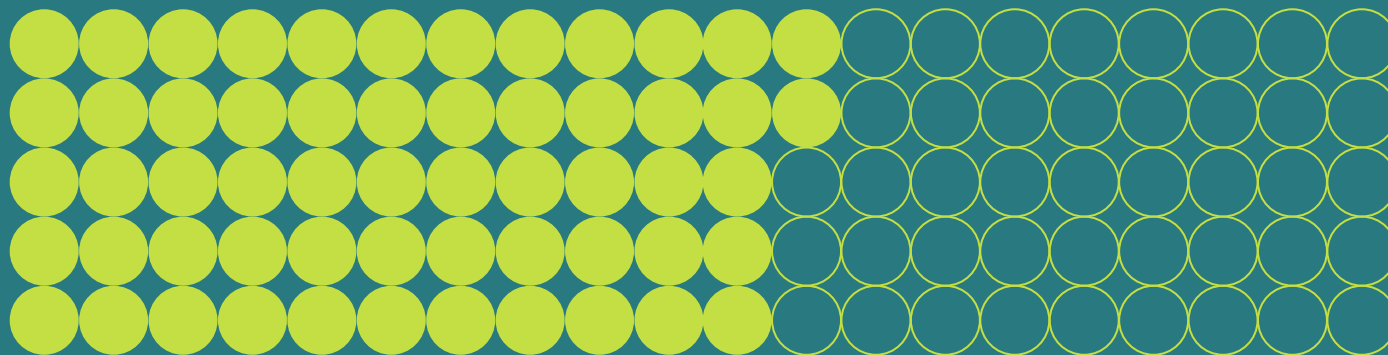
of target decision-makers.

**Source:** 2025 Edelman-LinkedIn B2B Thought Leadership Impact Report.  
Question: What level of thought leadership quality do you associate with each of the following attributes? "It has a unique format or style. It looks different from the other thought leadership you see." Data % who selected "This is a characteristic of above-average quality thought leadership" or "This is a characteristic of the highest-quality thought-leadership." Hidden decision-makers and target decision-makers, U.S.

## Hidden buyers lean toward accessible insights over technical deep dives.

57% 

of hidden decision-makers



favor **quick takeaways** over deep, academic-style content.



Hidden buyers want content that is approachable and informal.

65% 

of hidden decision-makers



prefer **a more human, less formal tone over an intellectual one.**



Producing content with a clear target audience that addresses specific problems is crucial. In the B2B landscape — where hidden buyers and deal influencers operate behind-the-scenes — precision in messaging is paramount.

These hidden buyers are often responsible for implementing change and need actionable insights to guide their next steps. By delivering such insights, our content provides tangible value, equipping all decision-makers with the strategies they need for success.



**Jeff Potter**

Head of Advisory Insights, US  
KPMG



# How to win over hidden buyers through thought leadership



## Prioritize them

Treat hidden decision-makers as a core audience from the start, not an afterthought.



## Identify internal obstacles to sales

Focus your communications and marketing strategies on potential detractors and friction points in the customer journey.



## Tailor the message

Develop content that speaks to the different priorities, needs, and responsibilities of various members of the buying group.



## Lead with bold ideas

Challenge assumptions, reframe thinking, and deliver insights that educate and excite.



## Equip them to advocate

Share insights and provocative questions that prompt buying groups to get on the same page.



## Make it human

Use distinct, creative formats and a human tone to break through and resonate.



## Be where they are

Focus on professional feeds to meet them where they are already consuming content.



## Earn trust through insights

Let the strength of your ideas, not just your logo or taglines, build credibility and influence.





In financial technology, buying decisions are among the most complex and consequential a business can make — and they rarely rest with a single decision-maker. Influence is distributed across finance, IT, operations, marketing, and more. **While the final ‘yes’ might come from the top, the power to say ‘no’ often lives elsewhere.**

Winning in this environment means going beyond features and functionality. It requires thought leadership that speaks to the emotional truth of what your solution can unlock, backed by the rational proof that it delivers. **You have to inspire belief before you earn agreement, not just selling the product, but the possibility of harmony.**



Vincent Bahk

Head of Marketing,  
FIS

To close more deals, B2B sellers must look beyond traditional decision-makers and engage hidden decision-makers — those influential, yet often overlooked, voices who can make or break a sale.

Our findings show that these hidden buyers respond strongly to thoughtful, innovative content, making thought leadership a powerful tool to earn their trust, shift perceptions, and ultimately, turn quiet influencers into vocal advocates.

# Thank You

## 2025 B2B Thought Leadership Impact Report

Edelman      LinkedIn

Joe Kingsbury      Jann Schwarz

David Bersoff      Mimi Turner

Annie Dunleavy      Lindsey Noble

Scott Hillis      Allison Schoer

Kristin Schmotzer