

A child with long brown hair and a red bucket hat is looking at a target. The target is a circular object with a red center and a blue outer ring. The child is holding a bow and arrow, ready to shoot. The background is a wooden wall with a circular opening.

Two types of thought leadership and their impact on brand positioning

Insights based on the Thought Leadership Monitor™

Fontys

Lectorate
Thought
Leadership

ORGANISATION LEADERS, brand or communication managers are increasingly looking for evidence that thought leadership will have a positive impact on their organisation's positioning. Hence, a common question that we receive from organisations is: 'Are there studies available that show how thought leadership drives your brand or reputation?' In this study we distinguish two types of thought leadership. We share the findings of our latest survey in the Netherlands showing that both types of thought leadership have a positive impact on stakeholders' perceptions and supportive behaviour towards an organisation, and that stakeholders show the strongest appreciation for organisations that demonstrate both types of thought leadership.

The research team



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Thought leadership *in a nutshell*

It is not something you can claim.

Thought leadership is not something you can just claim to have; it needs to be earned. It is not a self-proclaimed status; it is granted to you, your brand or organisation by stakeholders.

What are thought leaders?

Thought leaders are organisations that are driven by novel points of view on important themes in their sector or society, and that show leadership in translating these viewpoints into real behaviour and results.

What is a Novel point of view

A novel point of view is the viewpoint or perspective from which the organisation tries to have its stakeholders look at relevant themes in a renewed or (re)clarifying way.

Organisations driven by a Novel Point of View



Renewi flips the perspective on waste by saying that 'waste' is an attitude. It is not waste in our hands: it is a product, an opportunity and a small part of our planet preserved. Their strapline 'waste no more' catches their novel viewpoint and has for quite some years now been the driving principle underlying their strategy and business model.



Buurtzorg still has time for people. They put 'humanity over bureaucracy' in everything they do: away with management, away with needless paperwork. Buurtzorg believes in short lines and closely involved, optimal cooperation with all disciplines around the client.



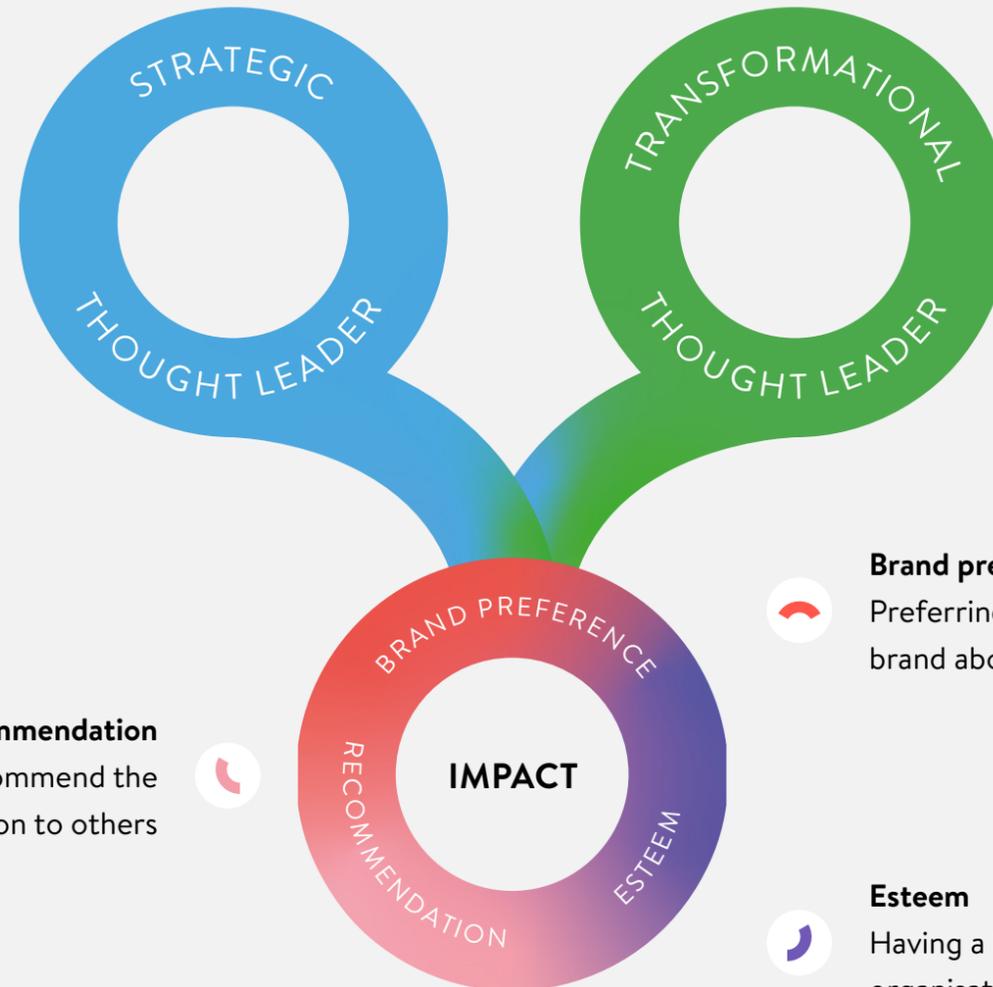
Unilever's novel point of view is captured in the vision of doubling the size of the business while reducing our environmental footprint and increasing our positive social impact. While 'profits' and 'social' were traditionally seen as contradictory, Unilever clearly believes that this is a false contradiction. This viewpoint has been driving their strategy since 2008.

Our study shows that *thought leadership pays off*

In this study, we found that stakeholders have two different types of thought leadership perceptions. The first is what we call the 'strategic thought leader'. The second is what we call 'the transformational thought leader'. Both types of thought leadership perceptions positively relate to higher levels of esteem, recommendation and brand preference among the Dutch public.

The 'strategic thought leader'

The organisation is seen as an inspirational source offering refreshing knowledge and novel views that are meaningful to the clients and other stakeholders.



The 'transformational thought leader'

The organisation is seen as a transformational force on important themes at the intersection of business and society.

Recommendation
Prepared to recommend the organisation to others

Brand preference

Preferring the organisation's brand above a similar brand

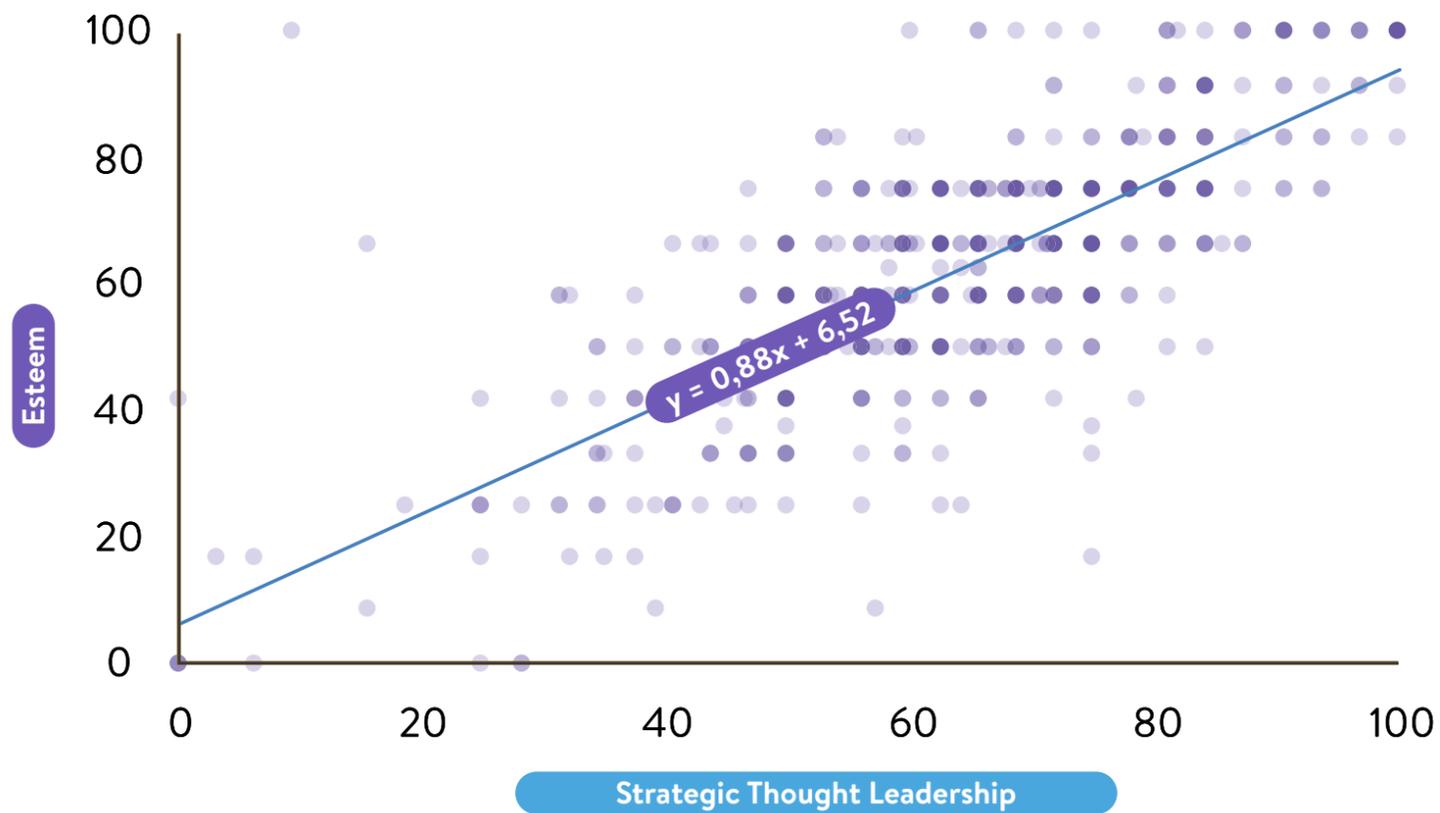
Esteem

Having a high esteem for the organisation

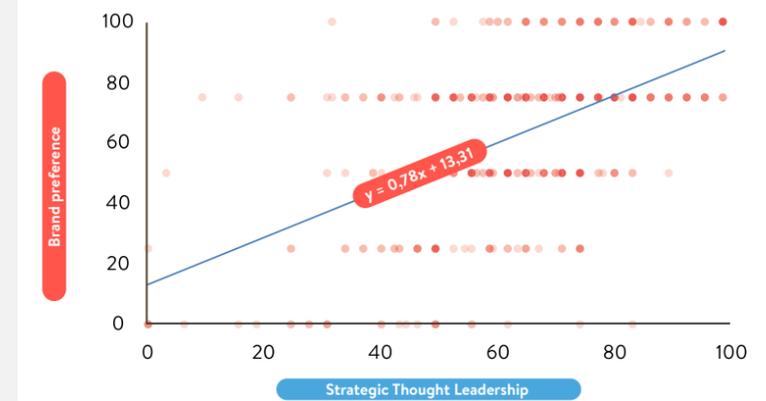
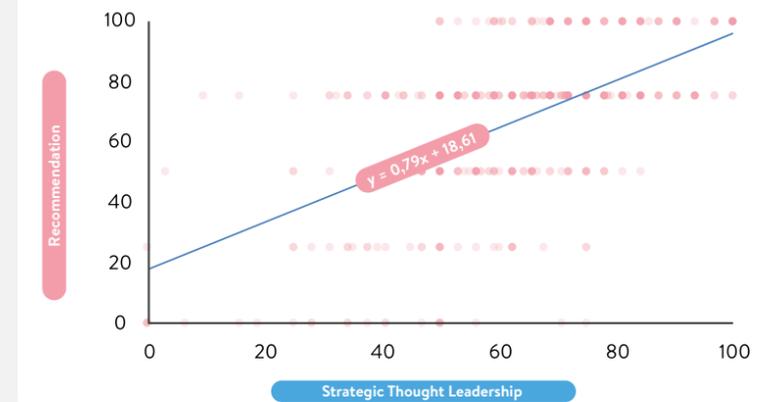
The impact of thought leadership

the results ^(1/3)

The degree to which stakeholders perceive an organisation as thought-leading positively relates to their expressed esteem for the organisation, their brand preference and their tendency to recommend the organisation to others.



The degree to which the organisation is seen as an inspirational source offering refreshing knowledge and novel views that are meaningful to clients or other stakeholders.



Recommendation: 'How likely is it that you would recommend organisation X to a friend or colleague?' (5-point scale: very unlikely-very likely).

Brand preference: 'How likely is it that you would prefer the products/services from organisation X above those of a similar organisation?' (5-point scale: very unlikely-very likely).

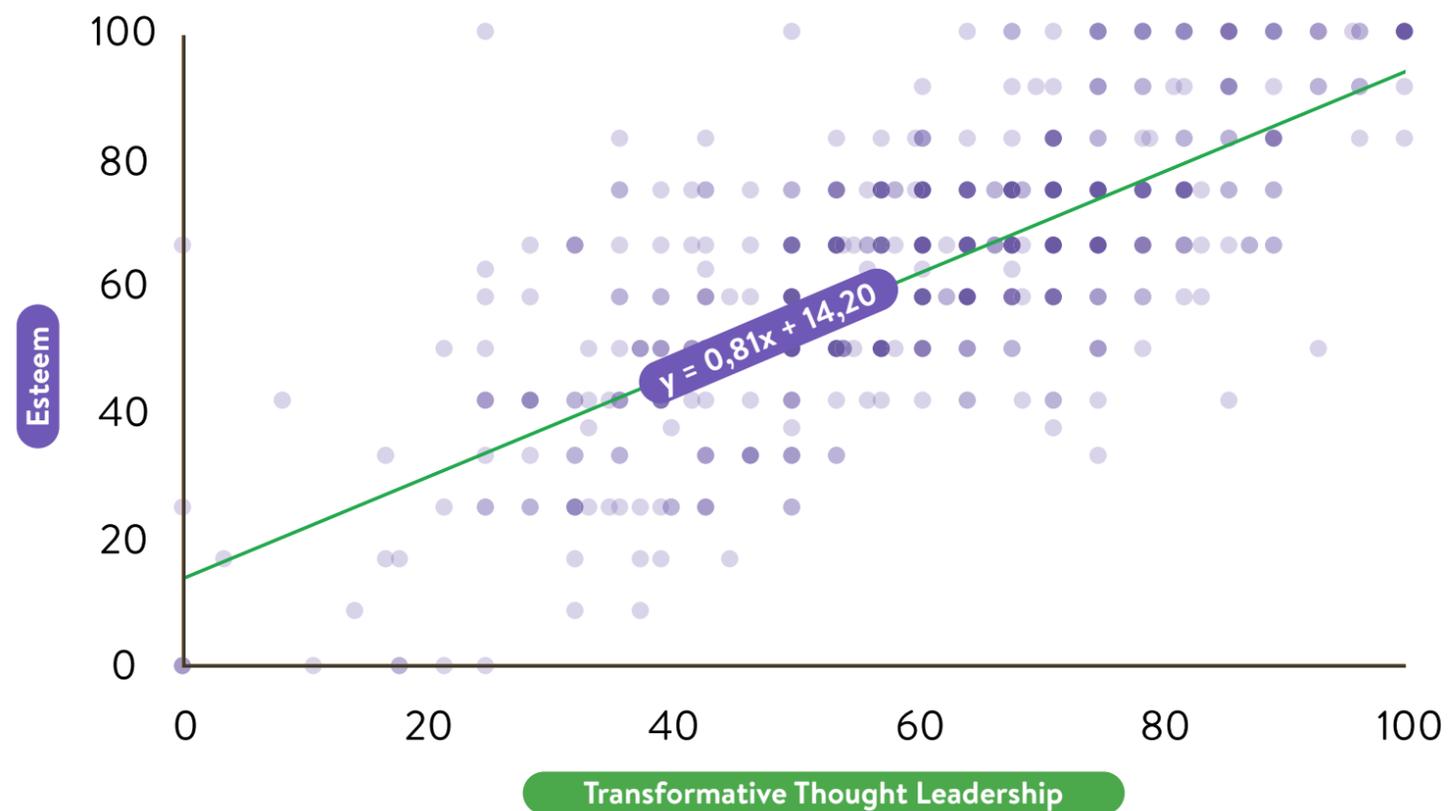
Esteem: We calculated people's esteem for an organisation by taking the average of their levels of admiration ('I admire the organisation'), respect ('I respect the organisation') and inspiration ('This organisation inspires me') (5-point scale: disagree strongly-agree strongly).

All scores are converted to a 100-point scale.

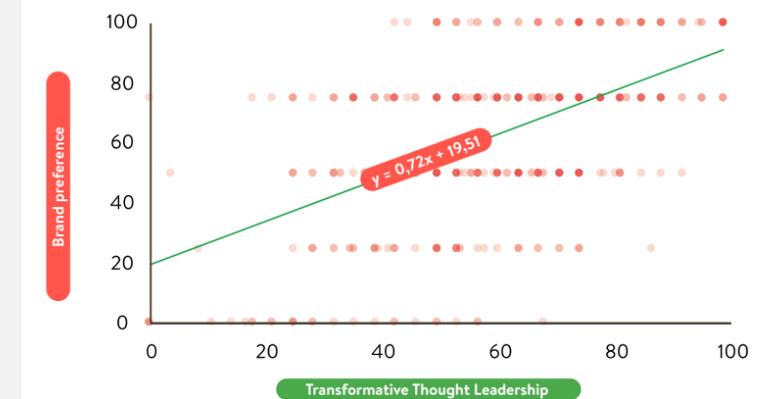
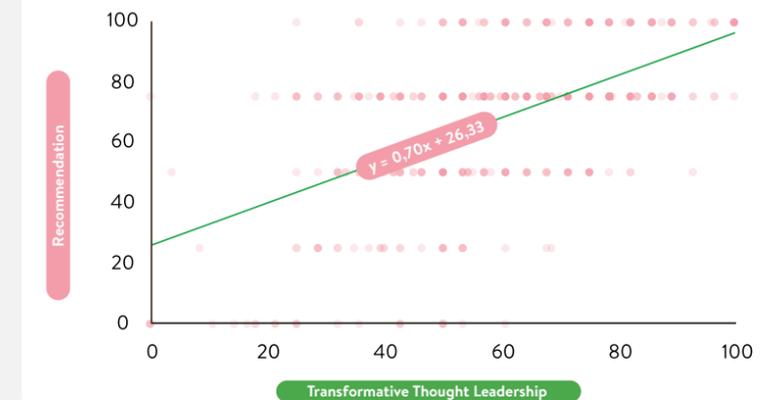
The impact of thought leadership

the results (2/3)

The degree to which stakeholders perceive an organisation as thought-leading positively relates to their expressed esteem for the organisation, their brand preference and their tendency to recommend the organisation to others.



The degree to which the organisation is seen as a transformational force on important themes at the intersection of business and society.



Recommendation: 'How likely is it that you would recommend organisation X to a friend or colleague?' (5-point scale: very unlikely-very likely).

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The impact of thought leadership

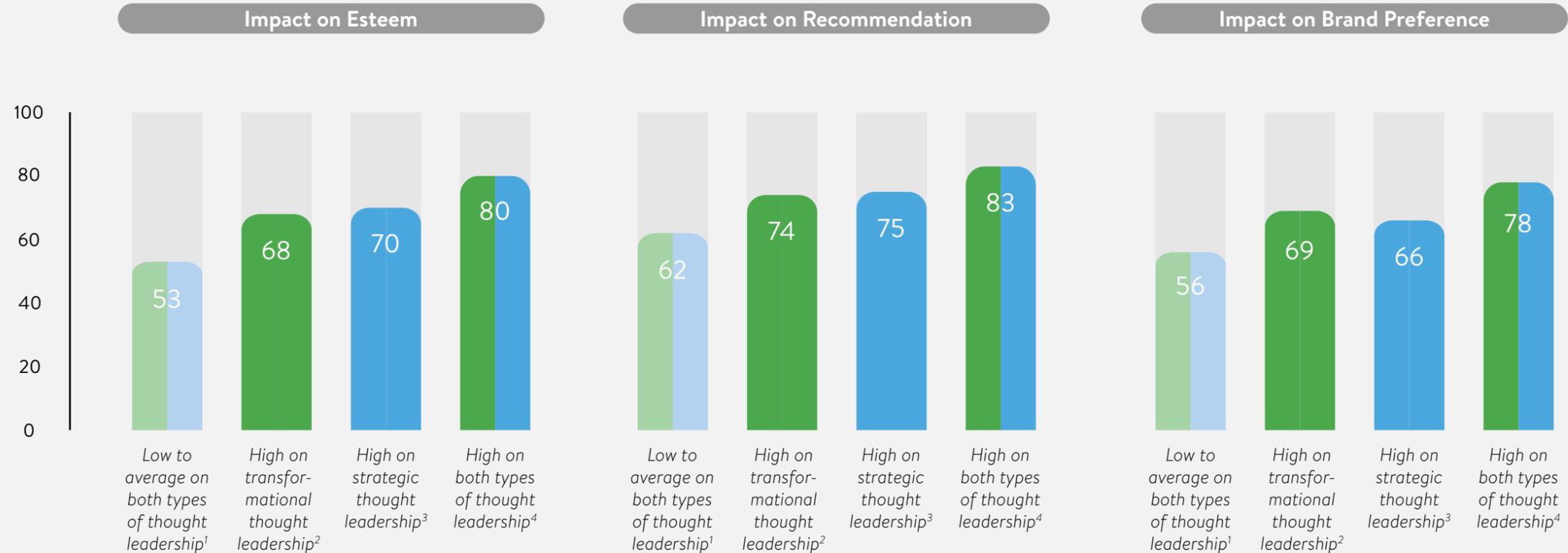
the results (3/3)

We wanted to know whether people demonstrate higher scores on esteem, recommendation and brand preference if they regard an organisation as both strategic and transformational. The results show that this is indeed the case.

The scores in the fourth bar of each chart are significantly higher than the scores in the other bars.

Legend

- The degree to which the organisation is seen as an inspirational source offering refreshing knowledge and novel views that are meaningful to clients or other stakeholders
- The degree to which the organisation is seen as a transformational force on important themes at the intersection of business and society.



Note 1: ¹Respondents who score less than 70 on both types of thought leadership; ²People who score more than 70 on transformative thought leadership but less than 70 on strategic thought leadership; ³People who score more than 70 on strategic thought leadership and less than 70 on transformative thought leadership; ⁴People who score more than 70 on both types of thought leadership.

Note 2: All scores are based on a 100-point scale.

Note 3: All differences were significant, except for the difference between the scores in the second and third bar in each graph.

A last note

a forward view on thought leadership

This study focused on the impact of thought leadership on brand related assessments, such as stakeholders' preference, esteem and recommendation for an organisation. Understanding the impact of thought leadership on an organisation's brand or reputation is important, as organisations are increasingly searching for substantive evidence that thought leadership is a valuable twist in their positioning strategy. However, purely taking a positioning perspective to thought leadership is looking at only one side of the coin.

We consider thought leadership to be a strategy that is based on propagating and realising innovative world views and approaches at the intersection of business and society. In other words, thought leadership is about taking a progressive role in shifting paradigms on themes important to your business and society. Themes that beg for transformative change. Think of the energy transition, healthcare, agrofood, mobility, etc.

Taking a thought-leading role on these themes requires an organisation that is capable of placing its own contribution within a broader context than a merely economic one, and that is prepared to take a progressive, driving role in the transformations that our society is facing. From this point of view, organisations do not strive to achieve thought leadership, but instead to make a clear contribution to changing and improving the economy and society, and to shift toward positioning that is based on this contribution, and the innovative body of thought on which this contribution in turn is based.

Thought leadership is therefore still a positioning strategy because it asks organisations to word their views openly and clearly in the public debate (to position them), and to demonstrate how they give their views concrete form and meaning each and every day.

If we are to embrace thought leadership as both a positioning and a transformational strategy, we must also develop measurement systems that integrate these two approaches. We are convinced that it is only a matter of time before stakeholders start asking for metrics that offer insight into how much the organisation has contributed to triggering new worldviews and approaches that positively progress market and societal related themes (e.g., the energy transition, healthcare, agrofood, mobility). In that case, only measuring your thought leadership strategy on brand impact is not enough. We also need to find ways to capture and appreciate the transformative value of a company's thought leadership.

Thought leadership is still interpreted in all too many ways and often easily equated with content marketing. This is why we need underlying items that explain our perception of thought leadership. We believe that these items should focus on the degree to which the company is known for its thought-provoking viewpoints, for triggering stakeholders' transformational thinking, for contesting existing societal discourses and for getting stakeholders to understand, accept and support their alternatively articulated world views. This study is part of our attempts to do so.



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About this study ^(1/2)

Research purpose

This research is part of a series of studies with the aim to better understand the concept and impact of thought leadership. The purpose of this study was to develop a valid and reliable measuring instrument, identifying the perceptions that people have of an organisation's thought leadership.

Based on our earlier explorative research, we wanted to know whether the two conceptual types of thought leadership (strategic/transformational) can empirically be distinguished from each other and whether these perceptions of thought leadership influence 1) people's esteem of an organisation, 2) their preference for the organisation and 3) their tendency to recommend the organisation to others.

As such, the insights can be a steering mechanism in the development and implementation of an organisations' thought leadership strategy.

Research method

To test the measurement tool, we collected data through an online questionnaire. The study took place in July 2018. The questionnaire was completed by 717 people, a representative sample of the Dutch population (based on age and gender). To test the measuring instrument, it was important to ensure enough variance in how much the organisations that respondents were assigned to are generally seen as thought-leading (not thought-leading at all to very much thought-leading). Hence, we asked professionals in the fields as well as students enrolled in our thought leadership class to mention organisations that they considered to be thought-leading as well as organisations that they do not regard as not thought-leading. This resulted in a list of 14 organisations. The respondents were randomly assigned to one of these organisations.*

* List of organisations: AirBnB, ASN Bank, Blokker, Coolblue, FrieslandCampina, Google, Hema, ING, NS, Philips, Rabobank, Tesla, Triodos Bank, Uber.

About this study ^(2/2)

Limitations & future research

This study was a first attempt to develop a balanced instrument for measuring stakeholders' perceptions of an organisation's thought leadership. There are several limitations of this research that must be addressed for future research.

We have collected data from a total of 717 respondents, a representative sample of the Dutch population. Although the sample size is more than adequate for generalisability among the Dutch people, it is not adequate for the generalisability of our findings to other countries. In order to examine whether the scales are generalisable to other countries, cross-country replication of the scales is valuable.

The scale development was tested on a preselected set of companies. Replicating the study across other organisations would be prudent to further improve the generalisability of the scales.

To judge an organisation on its thought leadership, there needs to be a certain level of prior knowledge of, or familiarity with, an organisation. To increase levels of familiarity, it would be worthwhile to test the scale among the direct stakeholders of one or more organisations. Another possibility is to conduct a quasi-experiment, allowing us to offer respondents more background information about a specific organisation.

While confirmatory factor analyses confirmed our two types of thought leadership, both constructs appeared to correlate strongly. This is not very surprising, given that both types of thought leadership carry the characteristic of promoting novel viewpoints. In a follow-up study, it makes sense to investigate the option of one thought leadership scale that reflects both types of thought leadership in a potentially more gradual way.

In this study, we focused on the thought leadership of organisations. But what about the thought leadership of other entities or persons that can have a driving force in the transformations that our society is facing? Think about cities, citizens, social entrepreneurs and political leaders. Future research could focus on that.

More information about *thought leadership and our professorship?*

www.fontys.nl/thoughtleadership



Have you watched?

The webcast on what thought leadership is, why it is important and how to develop thought leadership strategies



Dr Mignon van Halderen



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Marieke Wenneker



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Thought leading organisations in the Brainport region



Irene Jaspers



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Dr Mignon van Halderen
& Bran Martens