Becoming a Thought Leader in Your Industry

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You might be asking...

How do I do research?

How do I create a survey?

How do I get information about an idea that I have?

How do I know if people will like or respond to this idea?

How do I use my new idea?

**Basically—you want to be an expert in your field.
How can data help you lead your industry?**

Springtide™
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

A Case Study in Thought Leadership

Let's start with a story.

We worked with a client who had an idea that she was *sure* would change the direction of her business for the better. She started to talk about the idea with friends and received tons of positive feedback and enthusiasm. This initial positive reception was a confirmation of her hunch, but she knew she'd need to make a stronger case when she presented this big idea to others in the industry.

She needed concrete data and information that could help make the idea credible and exciting to other experts in the field. She needed *something* that could help her demonstrate the way this idea could be the "next-big-thing" in her field.

In this story, listen for these obstacles or concerns that our case study exemplifies:

- They do not know what questions to ask to get to what they want to know.
- They do not have time to learn how to do research, let alone actually conduct a study and analyze the results.
- They feel time pressure to get the idea out into the world before competitors.
- They need original data to speak about the idea credibly and with authority.
- They want to sharpen their knowledge about the idea to decide whether it would be a good investment to use it to pivot the business.
- They need to show how the program fits their mission.

In this case study, the colleagues and higher-ups at our client's organization also agreed it could be powerful. They even began to consider pivoting the business using this new idea—but couldn't take unnecessary risks with the future of the company. This particular organization was in an industry that valued data and testing ideas through evaluation. But they had nothing in place to do so, and didn't have access to any original data. Instead, they were trying to piece together statistics or information from open sources on the internet. Soon they realize that, to truly test the efficacy of the idea, they'd need their own custom data collected. At the same time as this realization, they also recognize they don't have the in-house capacity to take on original research: much of the team is remote or traveling, and they don't have the combined skill to do something entirely from scratch. Moreover, they want to act fast, in case there are others in the industry thinking similarly.

What questions should they ask, and how? Who should they ask, and when? There are so many variables when it comes to a brand-new idea. If they could be *sure* they were asking the right kinds of questions, they could pivot their organization without looking back or worrying they missed something essential—and they could do so quickly. They make the decision to work with a research partner.

That's where we come in.
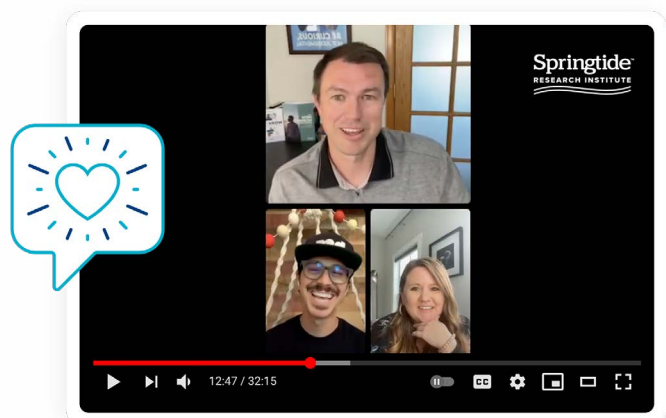
The Springtide Insight: Think Big, Act Wise

Tips to Test & Evaluate Your Big Idea

We *love* new, big, bold ideas. And we love helping you figure out how to bring them to life. Being a thought leader in your industry means making decisions that are new, big, and bold—but it also means making decisions that are *wise*. Before you jump into the "deep end" of a big idea, it's wise to stop and ask some basic questions: how cold is it? How deep is it? Are there other swimmers, edges, pool toys (etc.) I should be looking out for? Am I gearing up for a scuba expedition with an oxygen mask, or an aerobics class with floaty arms? And where are the stairs, anyway?

Springtide has compiled some of the early questions, prompts, and activities you and your organization can do to start testing out a new, big, bold idea.

1   **STEP 1: Write down your idea in a clear sentence.** See if you can come up with a few questions to help you measure that idea. What will you need to know about it in order to speak about it with credibility?

2   **STEP 2: Create a plan for how to use the research.** Will you post it on a website? Use it in marketing? Write a book? Do not collect data just to have it.

3   **STEP 3: Determine who the audience for this idea is so that you know how and what you would share after you collect data.** Does understanding the audience help you know how you would use the idea to pivot your business?

Once you've taken these three steps and thought through some of these big-picture questions related to your new idea, we can use that information in the coming tips to help you bring your idea to life and be a thought leader in your industry.

The Springtide Insight: *Becoming a Thought Leader*

Story Makes You Memorable; Data Makes You Credible

Are you writing a book, putting together a curriculum, or coaching and/or consulting? Then you need data. Here's why: Your audiences are increasingly savvy. They love your stories. Your ability to communicate a lesson learned through your own experiences, both good and bad, is crucial. Maybe you've even honed this skill over the years and you're something of a master storyteller. But there's a critical difference between someone who relays lessons from the field and someone who actually gets people to *take action* based on their ideas and lessons. That difference is in their perceived credibility.

In order to gain credibility, your audience needs to know not only that you've had experiences that matter to them and inform your message, but that your work is grounded in more than *only* the stories you tell. That's where original research plays a critical role.

Story might make you memorable, but it's the research that makes you credible in the eyes of any audience. It's what elevates your message and reputation to a level required to get people to not only listen to you, but to act, join, buy, or whatever it is you hope them to do within your organization.

The famous data scientist W. Edwards Deming said, "Without data, you're just another person with an opinion." (We also like his lesser known and far cheekier: "In God we trust. All others must bring data.") **Original data, when combined with powerful stories based in important experiences, can elevate a person's message to new audiences and deepen the impact you hope to have inthe world.**

We have witnessed firsthand the way commissioning your own survey, interviews, or other data collection project can move an organization from just a person with a compelling opinion to an actual thought leader capable of effecting change.

Visualize Your Data

At Springtide, we spend a lot of time thinking about how to convey our research findings in clear, easy-to-understand ways. Often, that means we're working hard to translate our data into visualizations that people can quickly and easily grasp. You can see some of what that looks like right on our *homepage*. You don't have to scroll far to see a sample of infographics that clearly convey the story of our data *and* our brand."

Over time, we've developed a top ten checklist of things we keep in mind when thinking about data visualization that helps us deliver on our brand promise and allows our audience to consume content without getting bogged down in numbers.

1   *Don't forget the qualitative:* Numbers are great, but quotes from interviews and focus groups helps your quantitative data come to life. Just make sure you don't get caught in the trap of thinking that numbers are "data" and everything else is just story. If collected and analyzed rigorously, your qualitative data is just as robust as your numbers. Words are data, too!

2   *Bold Colors:* A key to data visualization is your audience being able to quickly see the differences between two data points. For this reason, bold colors are your friend.

3   *One clear message:* Make sure each infographic or data visualization has one clear message. People can quickly become overwhelmed by statistics. Keep it simple.

4   *Avoid double negatives:* The human brain has tremendous difficulty making sense of double negatives. When you combine that natural inability that with the fear many people have about numbers, it's a recipe for disaster. Avoid communicating findings such as "Fewer than half of people who don't vote are suffering from a lack of social interaction." This can be reframed and simplified, even if the data stays the same: "40% of non-voters lack social interactions."

5   *Think in symbols:* Words can be your friend when it comes to visualizing data, but only if used sparingly. Think symbolically. Instead of a bar chart that needs to be labeled, could you replace the bar with an icon that represents what the finds are about?

6   *Use numbers sparingly:* This might seem strange for data, but listen. People get overwhelmed quickly with numbers. Think about using shaded images, icon sizes, and other creative options for communicating what might normally be left to numbers. You can give the visual impression of "half" in lots of ways that aren't just by saying, "50%".

7   *Remember your audience:* You might think that a particular research finding is incredibly interesting, but always ask yourself: *Will my audience care about this?* Your data visualizations should be aimed at things your audience will care about.

8   *White space is your friend:* The power of data visualization is related to the amount of information it can convey in a very condensed space. Resist the temptation to fill up every inch of the page with these dense information containers. Give your audience some "space" to think, process, and understand.

9   *Tell stories:* The best data visualizations tell a story. One illustration leads to the next and to the next. For example, in Springtide's report, *The State of Religion & Young People 2020*, we tell a story about religious affiliation and disaffiliation in our key findings section. Although each data point could be consumed independently, when they are put together, there is a clear narrative.

10   *Color consistency:* Think about the important ways that keeping your colors consistent throughout your document can help readers make sense quickly. When a family foundation approached us about doing a *Catholic Edition* of the 2020 report mentioned above, our designer had the brilliant idea of highlighting any new, specifically Catholic data points and insights in their own, consistent color. This helped the reader quickly and easily identify the ways Catholic young people might compare to young people in general.

As you work more and more to visualize your data, you will certainly come up with some standards and best practices that work for you and your organization. Keep track of these. Use the ones above and the ones you come up with as a checklist before putting something out into the world. You probably don't need to check every box for every visualization, but the more consistent you are in these principles, the more clearly and powerfully you'll tell the story of your organization and impact. In other words, the more effective you'll be as a thought leader.

Research that Reaches People

If you do research in a forest, and no one is around. . . can it have an impact?

Whether you're doing research to *support a grant*, *develop a strategic plan*, *write a book* or for some other purpose, you're far better off thinking about your distribution plan from the beginning.

To put it quite simply, how is your final product going to end up in the hands of the people who need it most?

Years ago, we worked on a project for over a year with a client only to find out that the results from that study were dutifully printed up, assembled into a three-ring binder and put on a shelf in the organization's conference room. . . never to be used again.

We made a promise to ourselves that we wouldn't spend our time on those projects again. It's a waste of our time and our clients' time, money, and other resources. While that might be all the client is interested in doing with data, our philosophy at Springtide is that data is meant to be actionable, not just interesting—and that all the work we do to discover new insights should impact future work.

Aware that, for many, the task of collecting data is very different from the process it takes to distribute and promote it when it's finally collected, we've compiled a list of helpful promotion efforts. If you want to be a thought leader in your industry, you have to make sure people know about your big, new, bold ideas.

Here are some things to consider. . .

Will the final product live in digital form, printed form, or both? This is an important decision to think about relatively early on in the process because it will impact format, color, length, cost, and other considerations that will allow you to print without redesigning. One of our favorite digital options is to do a *"flipbook"*. The user experience is great, and the overhead is low. But your consideration can't just be what you prefer: you have to know that your audience will be comfortable accessing digital only versions of your report. Otherwise, you'll want to build printing and shipping into your budget.

If you're working with a printer, make sure you ask for samples of their work so you can see what your final product will look like. We always do this ahead of time. Seemingly small decisions about binding style, paper weight, and glossiness of the cover can have subtle, but important impacts on how your audience experiences your final product. You are trying to communicate a certain message, and these little details matter in how people will respond to your ideas.

If you're doing digital-only report or a combination of print and digital, start planning ways to incorporate audio/visual materials into the digital experience if you can. These days, it's relatively easy for anyone to produce a short, professional video to communicate the intention behind the research and highlight key findings, for example. These introductory videos or even deeper dive videos for other aspects of the report, can go a long way toward increasing engagement with stakeholders and other key audience members. It adds a familiar and personal touch to something that might otherwise feel formal, serious, or dense.

Make sure you have both a compelling cover and a professional who can make the cover accessible for any marketing or web needs. Here's *an example of one of our reports*. This simple step can increase readership and engagement even if your report is a simple program evaluation.

Start a list, early on if possible, of everyone you talk to about your research project who expresses any interest at all. This will become your first "distribution list." Send them emails to keep them updated and ultimately to let them know when the project is ready for them to see. If you wait until the project is completed, it will be almost impossible to remember everyone.

If you're going to invest the kind of resources it takes to do your own research, you're going to want to make sure that you're thinking about distribution from the very beginning. And if you decide to work with an outside research partner, make sure they are familiar with your distribution plan so they can help capture key pieces of information and stay on time and on budget.

Conclusion

We were working with a client who knew her big idea could change her industry—and her coworkers thought the same. Partnering with Springtide, we moved her and her business through the process, bringing an idea to life through data and evaluation. They now have research and a measurement tool to accompany the idea for long term use. They have original data upon which to begin building program development, publications, and business strategies.

Importantly, they had all this *fast*—before competition in the market even caught wind of the idea, they had launched it. They knew this edge mattered, because they didn't just want to be successful, they wanted to be thought leaders and authorities in their field. This kind of status doesn't come from playing it safe, but from making new, big, bold, and *wise* decisions.

They did this with our help, and we advised them in the same ways we're advising you now.

Test and evaluate your big idea in three smart steps.

Be memorable and credible with story and data.

Make the data visual to help your audience understand your impact.

Do research that reaches people with a plan for promotion and distribution at the start.

If you've got a big idea and don't know where to start, start here. Soon enough you'll be at the cutting edge of your industry. A real thought leader, you'll not only impact your organization, but your whole field.

You can easily implement these same tactics in your own organization. If you need any help doing so, don't hesitate to be in touch. Email Megan Bissell, Head of Research for Springtide Research Institute: *megan@springtideresearch.org*

Custom research for mission-driven organizations.

Move your organization forward, confidently.

Springtide offers custom research to help you learn more so you can do more.

Our research services include program evaluation, grant support, custom surveys and data collection, and more. In addition, Dr. Josh Packard is available for presentations on Springtide data or the custom research you commission.

Contact Megan at *megan@springtideresesarch.org* for more information. If you haven't already signed up to receive our other three white papers directly to your inbox, visit *springtideresearch.org/custom-research* to sign up.

Program Evaluation

Grant Support

Custom Surveys

Thought Leadership