Thought Leadership

The #1 growth channel in 2025.

By Xaver Lehmann

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE
Why thought leadership is essential for company success.

The Author.

Over the past decade, I've built two AI startups.

The first, e-bot7, scaled to 130 employees across five European offices and was acquired by LivePerson Inc. (NASDAQ) for $60M. It was an incredible ride but also the one that led to my first burnout.

After taking time to recover, I jumped into my next venture: Vidlab7, an AI avatar company backed by EQT Ventures. It grew fast, but by the end of 2024, I had to step away again. This time, to protect my health.

I spent four months in South Africa, working on social projects, helping local families, and rediscovering what really matters.

That's where The Honest Founder was born.

A desire to help ambitious people build the life they always wanted without losing themselves in the process (I learned that the hard way).

Add me on my channels for exclusive content and updates:

- Linkedin
- Website
- Substack Newsletter (One actionable article every week on startups, mindset and growth)

Enjoy the framework!

Xaver Lehmann

Why Thought Leadership the most underrated growth channel in 2025.

1. Why Thought Leadership is essential for success.

In 2016, my co-founder and I were 23 and just two business students.

- No network.
- No investors waiting.
- No customers.
- No product.

Only a big idea: *chatbots*.

We realized something early if we wanted anyone to take us seriously, building a product wasn’t enough.

We had to build trust.

So we started writing. Speaking. Sharing. Sometimes even just curating what others had said. We became known as the people asking the right questions and pushing the conversation forward.

Looking back, that was the foundation of everything.

It brought us customers creating millions in revenues. It brought us investors worth $10m millions of funding. It put us on stage at the biggest conferences for free or even paid. It put us in front of the biggest newspapers in Europe including Forbes, Gründerszene, TechCrunch and many more. It even got us on the list of Forbes 30 Under 30 DACH and Europe. It got us to the point where we were able to sell our company for $60m. One of the biggest exits for AI in Europe at the time.

All of that, not because we had the best tech or the biggest company, but because we had become a trusted voice in the AI space.

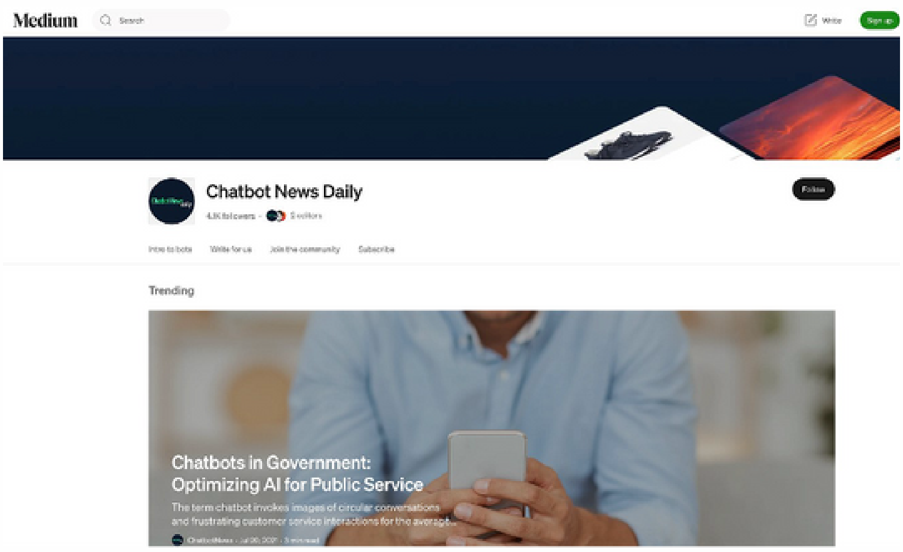
That trust didn’t happen overnight. It was a process: slow, deliberate, and sometimes frustrating.

This is how we started to build our Thought Leadership slowly over time:

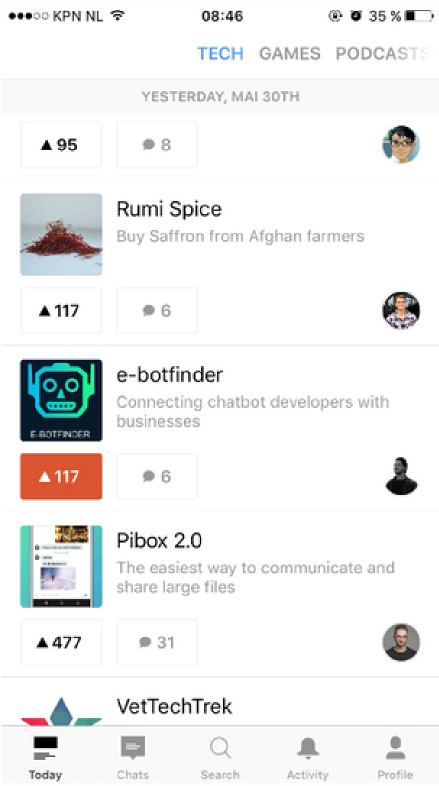
- We joined “Chatbot” Facebook groups and posted recent articles in the space. Liked and commented on other posts.

- We created a Facebook Company Page called “Chatbotnewsdaily” to post articles every single day:

- We created a Medium blog called “Chatbotnewsdaily” to post articles every week:



- We used Product Hunt to launch our website called "e-botfinder" where 100's of developers signed up over night:



- We seized every opportunity to get in front of people, pitching whenever we could, making sure our name stayed top of mind.

- We applied to accelerators, not just for funding, but to expand our network and credibility.

- We showed up at nearly every conference related to our technology, speaking on stage when possible, or setting up a booth to make our presence known.

And it paid off.

In 2016, we pitched at one of our first investor meetings at Wayra in Munich.

We had no product.
No traction.
Not even a developer.

Just a deck, a story, and a whole lot of confidence.

> When investors asked:
>
> *“What do you actually have?”*
>
> we replied:
>
> *“With e-botfinder, we already built the largest chatbot developer network in Europe.”*
> *“With Chatbot News Daily, we’re building thought leadership so strong that we are publicly viewed as a trusted leader in the AI space and companies will want to work with us.”*

The reality?

Our “largest developer network” was a hundred signups. And our “thought leadership” was mostly reposted articles.

But it didn’t matter. Wayra still invested $100,000.

It also paid off getting to our first revenues. Out of nowhere, we were invited to speak in Zurich in front of Switzerland’s top pharmaceutical companies. We had no product, no traction. But because we’d positioned ourselves as voices in the space, people wanted to hear from us.

The gig paid $2,000, huge for us at the time. Until we discovered the organizer had been paid $20,000 (that stung). But it sparked an idea. On the train ride back to Munich, we decided to run our own workshops. Within days we had a simple website, an Eventbrite page, and launched “Chatbot Consulting.” Tickets were €600, with an “Early Bird” tag.

At first, silence. No sales.

Then we started posting the link into Xing groups (the German LinkedIn). Suddenly the first ticket sold. Then another. And another.

Some workshops made $10,000. Others up to $17,000 in a single day. By the end of the year, we had generated six figures in revenue enough to finance the company before we even had a product.

And the real value wasn’t the money. It was the feedback.

In every workshop, participants shared their department's biggest challenges. Those insights shaped our understanding of the market. They showed us the exact problems large corporates were struggling with - the same ones our future product would solve.

Looking back, this is the perfect example of what thought leadership can do.

By showing up as trusted voices in a new market, we created revenue streams, credibility, and direct access to customer insights before we had a product.
That trust became our currency, and it bought us the time and validation we needed to go all-in on building the company.

Of course, this was nearly ten years ago, and some of the platforms we used back then aren't relevant anymore. But what hasn't changed and is more important than ever is the need for a voice behind what you build.

Trust has become the ultimate currency.
People don't always buy the best product.

They buy from the people they trust and see as leaders in the space.

2. How I use Thought Leadership today to generate revenues. $$

When I exited my last company, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do next. One thing was clear though: I wasn't going to build another B2B software company.

So I turned to my SOE Framework (you can check it out here). I used it to figure out what I could build next.

That's how The Honest Founder was born. A platform where I share everything I've learned from building two successful AI businesses.

But here's the thing: even though some of my LinkedIn connections and friends knew my track record, I still had to build thought leadership around this new topic.

I operate a two-tier funnel designed to build authority and drive revenue:

a. Top Funnel: Driving a massive audience. A single post can reach thousands, spark conversation, and build awareness in minutes.

b. Bottom Funnel: Where the *most engaged* part of my audience goes. A focused, engaged readership. Could be a website, a blog, a podcast, webinar or a newsletter. Something that cultivate trust, loyalty and ultimately drive conversions.

a. Top Funnel

I chose **LinkedIn** as my primary top-funnel platform to grow an audience.
Why? Because it's the world's largest business network. It allows you to share posts, add media, link out and most importantly, reach millions of people with a single click. But it doesn't have to be LinkedIn. Your top funnel could be Instagram, TikTok, X, Threads, or any other platform with massive reach.

How do you decide?

Ask yourself one simple question:

<u>Where does my target audience spend most of their time?</u>

For me, the answer was obvious. My audience is founders, and founders live on LinkedIn.

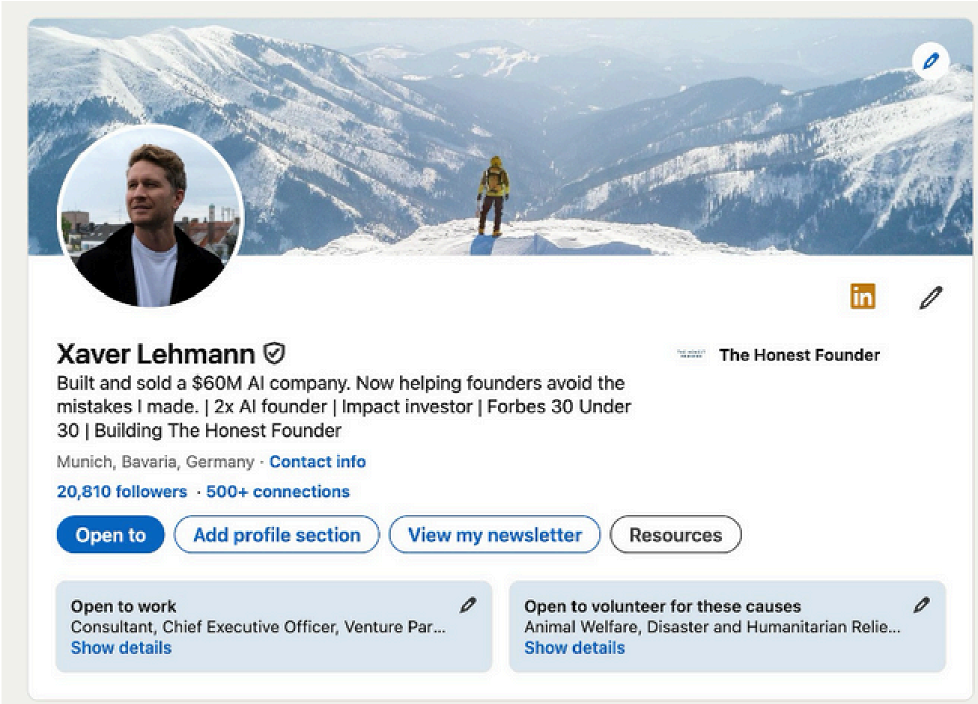
How I use Linkedin to grow a massive audience.

#Get clear on your positioning and niche

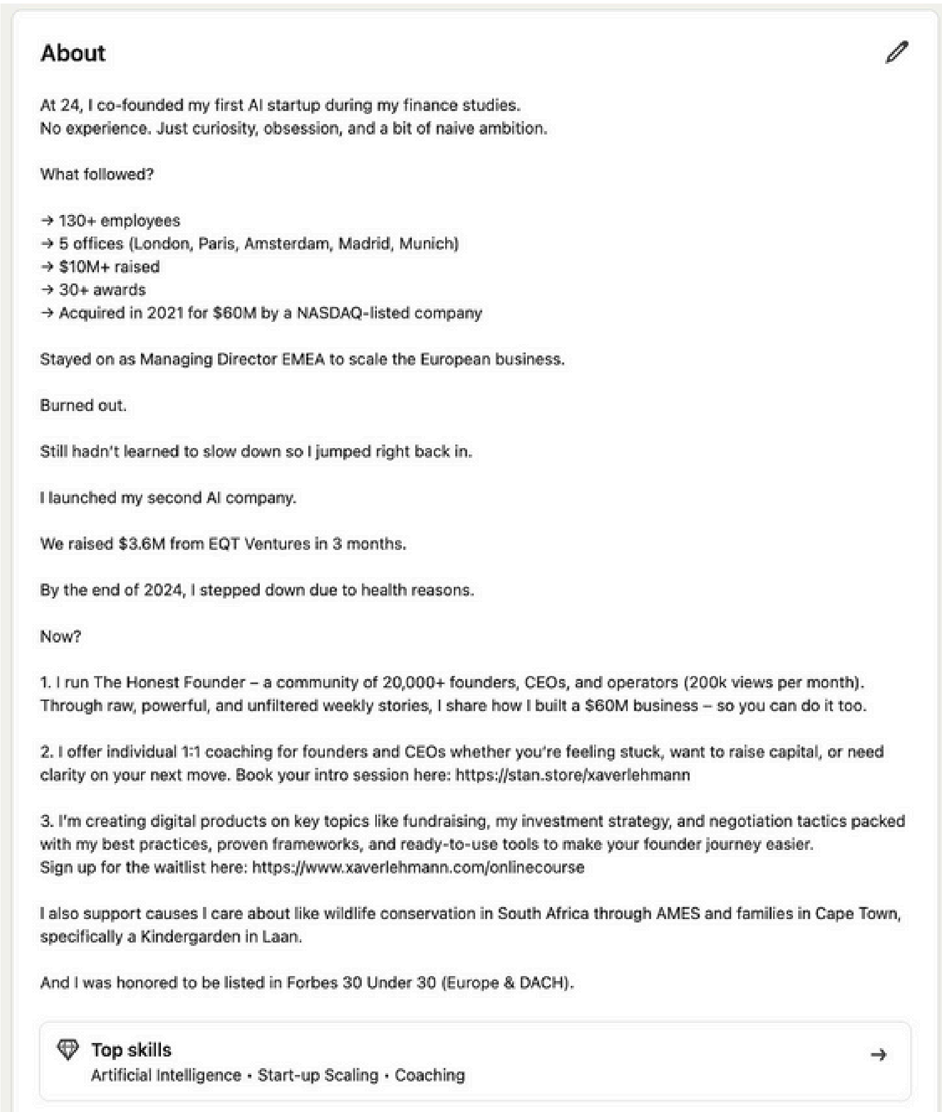
Write a an authority statement in your headline and about section.
Example: *"I help founders raise capital without burning out."*
You need to show instantly how you can help and why they should trust you

Choose 3-5 core topics you'll post about consistently (your "content pillars").
Make sure your profile looks credible: professional photo, banner that signals authority, and a strong featured section (newsletter, product, or post).

Mine looks like this:



* Let people know why they can trust you in the about section:



About

At 24, I co-founded my first AI startup during my finance studies.
No experience. Just curiosity, obsession, and a bit of naive ambition.

What followed?

→ 130+ employees
→ 5 offices (London, Paris, Amsterdam, Madrid, Munich)
→ $10M+ raised
→ 30+ awards
→ Acquired in 2021 for $60M by a NASDAQ-listed company

Stayed on as Managing Director EMEA to scale the European business.

Burned out.

Still hadn't learned to slow down so I jumped right back in.

I launched my second AI company.

We raised $3.6M from EQT Ventures in 3 months.

By the end of 2024, I stepped down due to health reasons.

Now?

1. I run The Honest Founder – a community of 20,000+ founders, CEOs, and operators (200k views per month). Through raw, powerful, and unfiltered weekly stories, I share how I built a $60M business – so you can do it too.

2. I offer individual 1:1 coaching for founders and CEOs whether you're feeling stuck, want to raise capital, or need clarity on your next move. Book your intro session here: https://stan.store/xaverlehmann

3. I'm creating digital products on key topics like fundraising, my investment strategy, and negotiation tactics packed with my best practices, proven frameworks, and ready-to-use tools to make your founder journey easier.
Sign up for the waitlist here: https://www.xaverlehmann.com/onlinecourse

I also support causes I care about like wildlife conservation in South Africa through AMES and families in Cape Town, specifically a Kindergarden in Laan.

And I was honored to be listed in Forbes 30 Under 30 (Europe & DACH).

Top skills
Artificial Intelligence • Start-up Scaling • Coaching

#Create content that stops the scroll

I almost always use my "Viral Founder Story Template":

Unexpected hook (1–2 sentences): Flip the expected narrative so it creates curiosity.

Example:

> *I almost gave up after selling my company.*
> *Not because I failed.*
> *But because sucess almost broke me.*

Set the scene with context (2–4 sentences): Briefly explain the moment/situation so people understand the stakes.

Example:

> *We had just exited for $60 million.*
> *On paper it was "done".*
> *But inside? I was numb, lost and completely burned out.*

Break the Taboo (1–2 sentences): Say the thing people in your position "aren't supposed to" say.

Example:

> *The hardest part isn't building th company.*
> *It's what comes after.*

Paint the before vs after (bullet rhythm): Use sensory, parallel contrasts to show the shift.

Example:

> *100 emails a day → inbox silence*
> *6-7 calls a day → zero conversation*
> *130 teammates → suddenly alone*

Name the emotional truth (2–3 sentences): Describe the core feeling others are afraid to admit.

Example:

> *You don't feel like you're allowed to complain because you "made it". But the shift is brutal.*

Introduce the big question or insight: Lead into why you're sharing this.

Example:

> *What if we talked more honestly about what it really costs to build a company?*

Introduce your mission or solution: Show what came out of this realization.

Example:

> *This is why I started "The Honest Founder Community". A community for Founders, by a Founder. Sharing real stories and insights to help grow your business. You can sign up here.*

I don't always follow the same structure.

But having a template like this gives me a starting point every time I sit down to write. It takes away the blank page anxiety and ensures my posts have rhythm, depth, and a natural hook that keeps readers engaged.

Sometimes I swap sections around, shorten them, or skip one entirely. The key isn't perfection**, it's being consistent, personal and relatable.**

If you can grab attention with a hook, share something real, and close with an insight or mission, you'll create content that people actually stop to read.

That's how you stand out in a feed full of noise.

Be sure to keep publishing and showing up because one post can make a huge difference!

One of my posts drove more than 1,000 Linkedin connections, 200,000 impressions, hundreds of likes and comments:

Xaver Lehmann · You
Built and sold a $60M AI company. Now helping founders avoid the mist...
View my newsletter
1w ·

I sold my AI company for $60M.

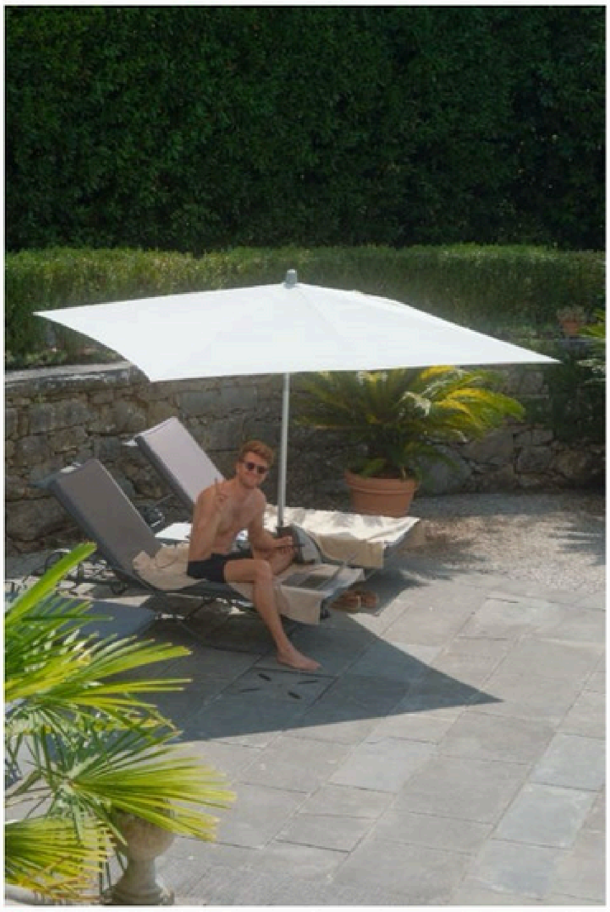
If I had to start again today, here's exactly what I'd do:

1. Start with SOE – my own framework (Signals, Obsession, Edge) to find a problem I care about and the market truly wants.
2. Prototype with AI – tools like Lovable let you ship a first version in hours, not months.
3. Bootstrap hard – stretch every dollar before raising.
4. Hire for mindset, not CVs – high-agency people > fancy skills.
5. Let customers lead – product evolves from real feedback, not guesses.
6. Sell from day one – revenue is the best validation.
7. Build in public – share wins and messy parts on social media.
8. Go premium – premium products, premium prices, premium customers.
9. Protect my energy – sanity > hustle, so I'd actually take time off.

I'd do fewer things, faster.
And I'd protect my health just as much as my P&L.

What would you do differently if you had to start over?

Join The Honest Founder community of 20,000+ people learning from the raw, real side of building 👉https://lnkd.in/dmEYTw6B



636 · 126 comments · 6 reposts

Reactions

Like · Comment · Repost · Send

208,097 impressions · View analytics

#Post Consistently

- Start with 3x per week → aim for daily during the week once you're in rhythm.
- I live in Munich, Germany so for me mornings around 8:30am to 9:30am have worked pretty well.

#Engage with other relevant people in your niche

- Like and reply to comments in the first hour of posting your article (boosts
- reach).
- Comment on other thought leaders' posts in your space with insights not just "nice post."
- Start conversations in DMs (this turns readers into relationships).

#Build social proof over time

- Share wins (but frame them as lessons, not bragging).
- Collaborate: tag other people in your space, co-create posts, or join LinkedIn Lives.
- Pin your best posts to your profile to show new visitors what you stand for.

#Move people down the funnel

- Use LinkedIn to fill your **Top funnel**
- Add a call-to-action in your posts: " Join my newsletter for deeper insights" to move people from top to bottom funnel.
- Remember: **LinkedIn = reach, Bottom Funnel = trust.**

b. Bottom Funnel

Once you capture attention in the top funnel, you need a place where your most engaged audience can go deeper with you.
For me, that's Substack.

Why? Because while LinkedIn is built for reach, Substack is built for **trust**. It's where people invite you into their inbox.

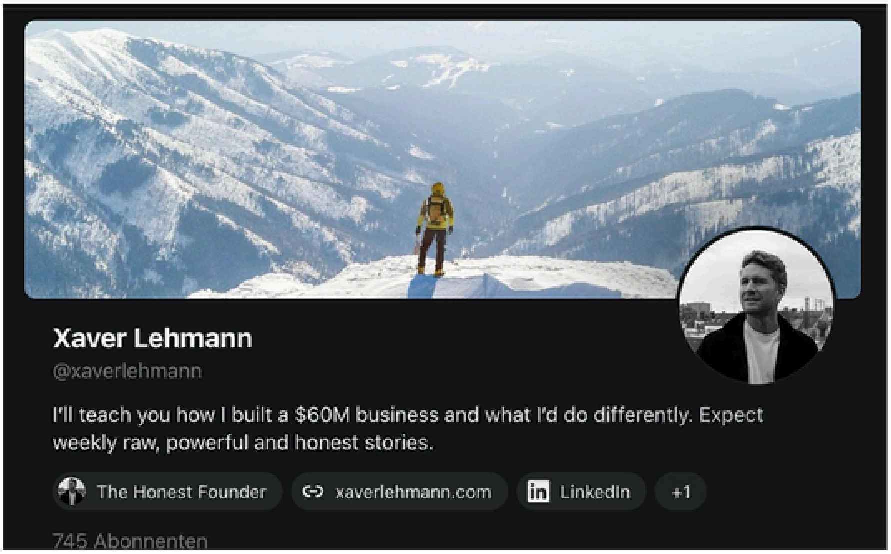
But it doesn't have to be Substack. Your bottom funnel could be an email list on ConvertKit, Beehiiv, or Mailchimp. It could also be a private community (Slack, Circle, Discord) or a website or a podcast.

How do you decide?

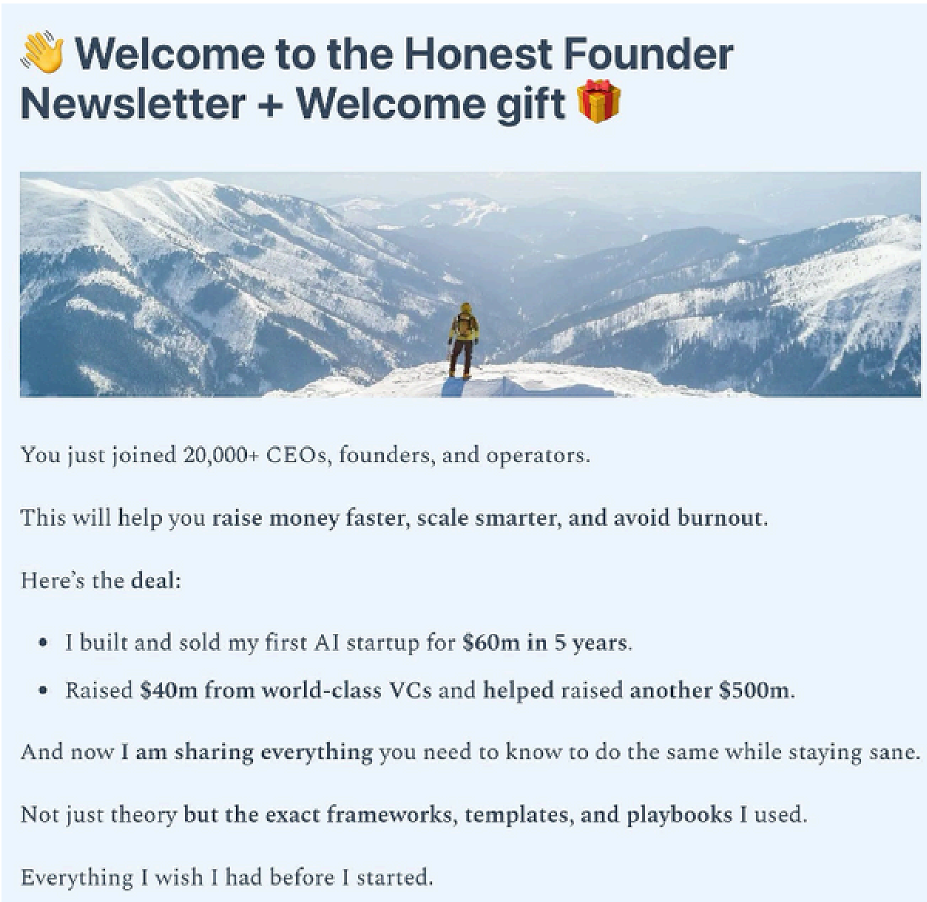
Ask yourself: Where can I build the deepest connection with my audience so that I can also offer them my services in an authentic, non-pushy way?

#Set up a clear promise

- People don’t subscribe to “a newsletter.” They subscribe to a specific outcome.
- My newsletter promise: “Expect weekly raw, powerful and honest stories.”



- Make your signup page and welcome email clear to instantly communicate **why they should trust you** and **what they’ll get every week:**



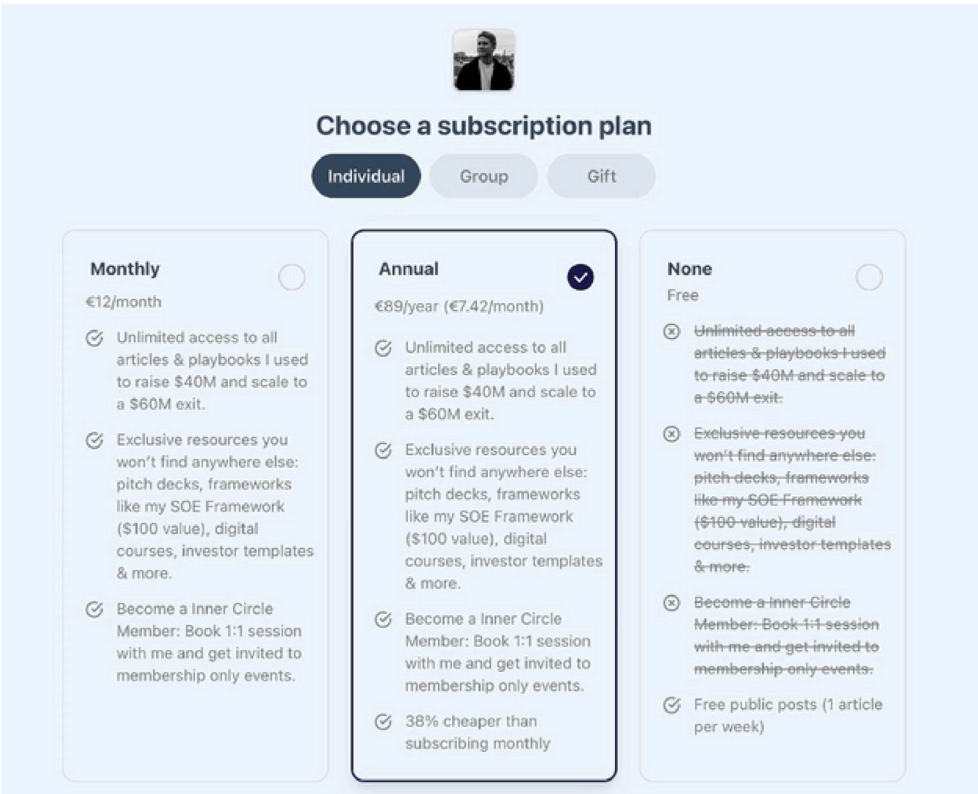
#Deliver depth (not volume)
- While LinkedIn is about frequency, Substack is about substance.
- Share full stories, frameworks, or deep dives that can’t fit into a LinkedIn post.
- Make it worth the scroll: when someone reads your newsletter, they should feel they’re getting insider access.

#Build consistency
- Pick a publishing rhythm you can stick to: weekly or bi-weekly.
- Show up reliably. The inbox is sacred. Breaking consistency breaks trust.
- For me, I chose tuesday and thursday as my rythm. It can change over time but for now that is what works well for me. On Tuesday's I share my personal stories from my past, on Thursday's I share frameworks and tools.
- Experiment with your audience to find your posting rhythm.

#Create conversation
- Treat your subscribers like your inner circle: respond, connect, and build relationships.
- Your followers are your warmest leads, **invest in them**.

#Layer in social proof and exclusivity
- Share milestones: “20,000+ founders now read The Honest Founder.”
- Add optional paid tiers for people who want deeper access.
- Offer perks: templates, case studies, or private Q&As.

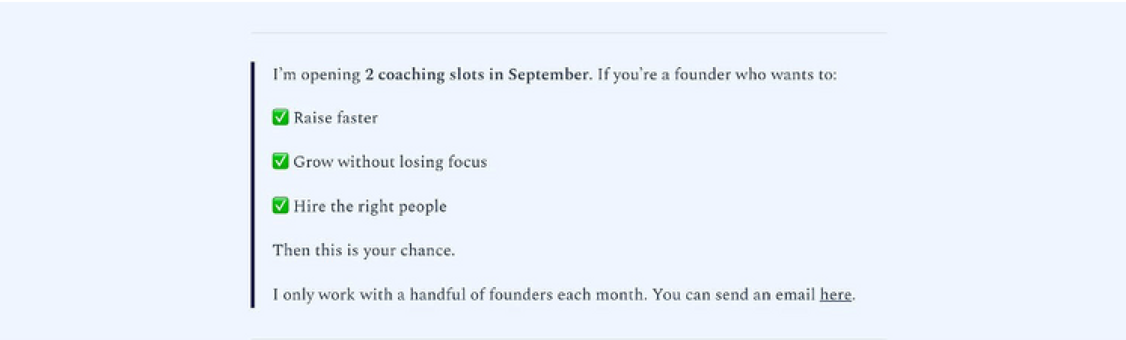
For example: I have decided that my Tuesday stories are for free and Thursday's are for paid subscribers:



#Convert trust into opportunities

- Substack subscribers are the people most likely to buy from you, join your program, or invest in your vision.
- Always include a gentle CTA: "Join my course," "Download the playbook," "Work with me."

This is where thought leadership stops being content and starts becoming business. For example you can add something like this at the end of the article:


I'm opening **2 coaching slots in September.** If you're a founder who wants to:

✅ Raise faster

✅ Grow without losing focus

✅ Hire the right people

Then this is your chance.

I only work with a handful of founders each month. You can send an email here.

You might think:

"Well, it's easy for you. You sold your company for $60M - of course people believe your authority." And yes, part of that is true.

It's easier now for me to grow an audience or convert customers because I already have a track record.

But I didn't start here. I also started at **zero**.

I was a student with nothing but a pitch deck. No product. No network. No customers. Just conviction.

And because of that, I had to build my top funnel the hard way completely from scratch.

Here's what that looked like:

- **Cold emails** → We reached out to companies pretending we had a real product, just to see if they'd even be interested.
- **Reposting content** → We shared articles, insights, and news about chatbots long before we had original research just to be seen as part of the conversation.
- **Online communities** → We launched a simple one-page website (e-botfinder) to connect developers and companies. It gave us instant credibility, even with just 100 signups.
- **Events & conferences** → We pitched at every accelerator we could find, went to every relevant conference, and made sure our name kept popping up.
- **Workshops** → When speaking gigs paid us peanuts, we started running our own workshops turning credibility into six figures of revenue in our first year.

Looking back, none of it was glamorous. We slept in cheap hotels, traveled on overnight buses, and said yes to everything.
But it worked.

Because the truth is this: trust and authority isn't handed to you. You build it one small step at a time.

And in 2025, the tools to do this LinkedIn, Substack, podcasts, communities are more powerful than ever.

3. Practical example: How I'd use Thought Leadership if I launched a new software startup today

When I stepped away from my second company in 2024 for health reasons, I knew I needed space to recover. I spent several months in South Africa - slowing down, recharging, and trying to heal after years of operating at full speed.

But when I returned, the entrepreneurial itch was still there. I wanted to build something new.

So I started exploring ideas with the same curiosity and drive that fueled my first two companies.

One idea stood out *(see my SOE framework to see the method I have used to discover all my startup ideas):* a longevity software platform that uses AI to analyze personal health data (wearables, bloodwork, lifestyle) and provide tailored longevity recommendations.

How would I build thought leadership around this?

a. Top Funnel
First, I'd **identify the core themes**: health , recovery, burnout, exercise, supplements, and longevity.

Then I'd **define my audience**: high-performance individuals,founders, executives, and professionals already tracking health with WHOOP, Oura, Apple Watch, or Garmin. People willing to spend money on cutting-edge health optimization.

Where does this group spend their time?

LinkedIn. That's where I'd focus my top funnel.

I'd rebuild my LinkedIn profile so every detail signals authority on health and longevity. Banner, headline, About section. **All aligned with the one mission.**

And I'd make it personal. In my case, I'd lead with my story:

"After experiencing burnout, I've dedicated myself to helping high performers avoid the same path and extend their health-span with science and technology."

This creates instant credibility, relatability, and trust.

After that, it's all about posting consistently and showing up where it matters. Not once a month, not when inspiration randomly strikes but building a rhythm so your audience knows they can count on you.

It's also about connecting with like-minded individuals: engaging with their content, jumping into conversations, and building real relationships in the comments and DMs.

Over time, this consistency compounds. People start to recognize your name. They associate you with your niche. They remember your story. *And when they need a solution in your space you're the first person they think of.*

That's how thought leadership turns into trust. And trust turns into opportunity.

b. Bottom Funnel

I would set up a simple website landing page as the CTA in my LinkedIn posts. That page could direct people into one or even multiple bottom funnels.

For example:
- You could invite them to subscribe to a newsletter (via Mailchimp, Substack, or Beehiiv) where you share deeper insights and stories.
- You could also promote a new podcast where you interview high-performance individuals: athletes, founders, executives and position yourself at the centre of those conversations.

Eventually if you already have a first MVP, you could offer your niche audience **exclusive access** as beta testers. This creates early validation and makes them feel like insiders. Over time, these early readers, listeners, and testers become more than just an audience. They turn into advocates the ones who spread the word, give feedback, and help you refine your product before you scale.

That's the real power of the bottom funnel: it's not just where you collect emails, it's where you build **trust, intimacy, and community** that compounds into longterm growth.

Looking back at my journey: two AI companies and now The Honest Founder, there's one constant that made everything possible: **thought leadership.**

It wasn't just about posting content. It was about earning trust before we had traction, building authority before we had a product, and showing up consistently until people started listening.

That trust opened doors.

- It got us customers before we could code.
- It brought investors when we had no network.
- It gave us credibility that money alone could never buy.

And the same is true today.

In 2025, attention is crowded and products are everywhere. What cuts through the noise isn't a shiny feature or a clever ad it's **your voice, your story, and your perspective.**

That's why thought leadership is no longer optional.

It's the foundation of trust.

And trust is the foundation of business.

If you take one thing away from this framework, let it be this: **people don't buy from the best product, they buy from the people they trust most.** So start showing up. Share your story. Lead the conversation in your niche.

Because the earlier you build thought leadership, the sooner you'll see doors open that you didn't even know existed.

Whenever you're ready to take your business to the net level, there are 3 ways I can help you:

What I offer:

- **The Honest Founder Newsletter.** A community of 23,000+ founders, CEOs, and operators. Through raw, powerful, and unfiltered weekly stories, I share how I built a $60M business - so you can do it too. Subscribe here.

- **1:1 Coaching.** For founders and CEOs whether you're feeling stuck, want to raise capital, or need clarity on your next move. Reach out here if you need help.

- **Flagship fundraising course.** This course gives you the exact playbook I used to raise $40M+ from top-tier VCs like EQT and helped other founders raise $100m+ without burning out. Use the code "thehonestfounder" for a 30% discount.

- And more resources available on my **Website** and **LinkedIn.**

I hope this framework has given you the tools to kick start your founder journey!

All the best,

Xaver Lehmann

Want more insights like these?

All my frameworks and courses.

CHECK OUT WEBSITE