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## InTransition Episode 12 – Keren Flavell

David: Hello ladies and gentlemen wherever you may be listening around the world. Welcome to this week's edition of InTransition. The podcast dedicated to the practice of content marketing in government.

My name is David Pembroke and I'm delighted to be with you once again as we explore just how governments are using content marketing to strengthen communities and improve the well-being of citizens. Today, we will be speaking to Keren Flavell from TownHall Social but before we do that, I just want to take you to our definition of content marketing in government.

Content marketing is a strategic and measurable business process that relies on the curation, creation and distribution of valuable, relevant and consistent content to engage and inform a clearly defined audience with the objective of driving a desired citizen or stakeholder action. It's a modern approach and it's a really effective approach for governments to engage with communities.

My guest today is Keren Flavell. Keren, you have a long and distinguished career in community engagement and the creation of content. So, just before we get into the details of exactly what TownHall Social does and your views on content marketing, perhaps you could fill us in with the back story of Keren Flavell.

Keren: Well how long have you got David?

David: Plenty of time.

Keren: Okay. Well, look I'm a media person. That's where I've always had my focus. I wrote a book in my early 20s, a guide book to National Parks around Australia which was reprinted five times and is apparently a bestseller.

Then I moved into the online space because that was around 1994. I discovered the internet and realized that was the future of media. So from that point, I focused on producing websites and getting engagement because that's what it's all about.

As soon as we've realized there was more than a couple of 100 websites and we got a search engine called Google, well the race was on to get attention. That's really where the evolution of my work has gone because I was consulting to government through my consulting business wholesome media and realized we had time and again government were very challenged about getting citizens participating and getting them to engage.

So it was at that point that we developed TownHall Social as a way to get citizens engaging and consulting rather than expecting them to turn up to a TownHall meeting. It's about getting them to participate online.

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David: So we'll discuss the tool in a little while. But just given that you have had such experience over a long period of time, what do you see as the major challenges for government in terms of being able to go direct to take this gift of technology where they are able to reach out to citizens and to communicate and engage directly?

Keren: Well, okay. I should resist using the word disruptive but that's what we're talking about with online technology. So that the media paradigm as it's been has been disrupted because we no longer have to rely on the big monopolistic style companies to control access to the community.

In the past, the way that governments would communicate with the citizens is to post that very unremarkable ad at 25<sup>th</sup> page of a newspaper to let people know about public notices and changes and opportunities to engage.

Now, with online technologies and interactive technologies, the government agencies can earn the relationship with the end users. So instead of paying the hundreds or thousands of dollars for the ad in the media companies, they can spend that on building the direct connection with the audience which is what your podcast is all about.

David: If it sounds as simple as that and as easy as that, why in your view isn't government making better use of that gift of technology that enables them to go direct?

Keren: I think they are well on their way. There are some really remarkable people working in the industry now. With the Redlands Council, Matt Murray and Andrew Coulson from city of Salisbury, there are some brilliant people really working hard in this space and sort of paving the way.

There's a range of government and social media conferences where people are coming along and getting skilled up. So I actually see it's constantly changing. You know what it's like. There's barely a week goes by without a new gadget or tool.

It can be somewhat overwhelming for staffs that have been operating in a different communications paradigm to not just do their jobs day to day about reaching their local leading newspaper or what have you. But now they have to, as well as that learn a whole new thing. So I think it's understandable that it's taking a little while.

David: In terms of that skills development, how do you think government should go about improving the depth and quality of the skills that they need in order to make best use of this opportunity to go direct?

Keren: Sure, I think it comes down to a couple of things. First of all, if the top gets it then they'll put the right resources behind it.

That means you've got to really support the staff to experiment. You've got to support that they attend webinars or face to face conferences. You give them that leeway to allow them to really get better at this process.

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- David: That's an interesting point though about getting higher ups involved and engaged. What do you use or what are the methods or techniques that you use to convince the leadership that in fact they need to make better use of the ability to go direct?
- Keren: Sit them down and set up a Twitter account for them. You will always see the penny drop when someone actually starts using it. So once they start having a Twitter account and posting out some tweets and seeing their followers go up that's just the ego takes over at that point and then it's a done deal.
- David: But beyond the Twitter account then what's your suggestion or what's your method when you're engaging with people? And perhaps if you could just outline perhaps some of the way that you strategically go about developing some of these online direct programs.
- Keren: Sure. I think it does come down to effective story telling so that people can see simply what the impacts of their activities are. Because if you sit down and start talking about the tools and the features and you can just see people's eyes glaze over.
- But when you talk about happier communities through better consultation, when you see actual case studies of how communities have made decisions around whether their main central square is a smoking or non-smoking area, whether there are CCTV cameras; the discussion that comes on board in a positive way where risk and resources have been minimized, these are the metrics that they're looking for.
- First off a lot of them have wanted to put their heads right in the sand about social media because of the fear around it. But we're past that point where it can be avoided. So now it's about saying okay what are some ways to do it effectively?
- So we do see the results of more people having their say and being participating in what's happening in their local environment. And as a result further engaging because with that participation, with great responsibility. People actually are willing to do things. Also, they're less willing to complain later if they were given the chance to have their say early on.
- David: But do you see perhaps an area of resistance being in the area of resourcing and people thinking, well how are we going to be able to monitor this 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We don't have the resources. We don't have the skills. So we're just better off. Until we can do it properly, we're not going to do it at all. How do you overcome those sorts of objections?
- Keren: Sure and that is really has been a huge stopping point for a lot of organization is that very argument. But the ones who have proceeded have been really clear about. This is where we're going to provide live customer service during business hours. We just notify the end users that after that time, they're not going to get a response in the next 30 minutes. And that's quite reasonable.

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And it's also about looking at what resources does the organization have for customer service? And how can we actually embed social media response into the customer service activity? So in actual fact, you're getting less phone calls, more people are having their answers met and done online.

So it's really a transition. There are not more people suddenly wanting responses from the government. They're just choosing a different method to get their message responded to.

David: So I'll pick up a couple of points there. So setting expectations with citizens is obviously fundamental to any strategy that you put in place.

Keren: Yes.

David: And the second point that you raise there I think is a good one is around the communication function not just resting in the communication area. You extended it there out into the customer service area.

So are you suggesting that in content marketing, social media marketing that really the responsibility needs to be organization-wide not just in the silo of the communication area?

Keren: Absolutely, I think that's where we're going. Dynamic organizations are the future of all sorts whether it be government, private sector, et cetera. I realized in that siloing activity is very unproductive.

So overall, if you get everyone on a similar trajectory of our goals which might be to increase citizen happiness or whatever the metric is. If each department is working towards that and social media is a great leveller in that way.

And that's why a lot of organizations also are putting Yammer inside their organization so that they get that behaviour around quick updates and communicating easily happening. No matter where the people are in the same building or more and more of these people are in co-working spaces or working remotely, keeping people communicating.

So if that cultural behaviour exists internally within your organization, it's not a big step for that go over into the communications with the citizens. And remember there was a time where people were entrusted to pick up the telephone and that's laughable now.

But it will be the same thing with social media. Of course everyone in the organization is enabled and functioning and communicating using social media.

David: But you are describing a reality of agility, fast-moving, being able to respond, being able to be decisive. That's challenging in a risk averse environment such as government. So how again does government overcome that risk aversion to be able to be agile and to move quickly and to answer the queries and problems of citizens?

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Keren: Yes, bit by bit. It's not going to change overnight but like I said, I really see some very progressive people and people quite determined and that are very conscious of the agile. Great, that you raised that word.

Who would have thought that that's actually something the average people not the software developers would understand what agile is in terms of responsive, reactive responding. And it's very design-focused. It's responding to how people are responding or engaging with the organization and then adapting.

People that are working in government are not existing in a silo. They're very conscious of what is happening in the world. And that is how non-government organizations are having to change what the way they're doing and it's best practice, too. I think that it is happening.

David: Okay. So you've been in this game for a long time. Tell us a couple of great stories of success and where you see some real progress. Perhaps to give your advice to what are some of the simple things that government communication areas and wider areas need to do to start to make this change and make this transition?

Keren: Well I'm glad you raised simple as being a really key thing because I think that the simplicity is where there's been a lot of challenge for government and is actually the root of the issue with the lack of the citizen engagement. So if you go down that pathway of complexity then you've immediately narrowed your potential audience of citizens that have the time to engage in that way.

So what we saw with GetApp and the way that people will share a petition on their newsfeed inspired in us the vision to allow people to have their say in 15 seconds or less and to keep that happening.

When I first launched TownHall Social which is a essentially a voting tool that allows people to have their say directly from their Facebook newsfeed. So they follow a link from the feed and that's right within Facebook and the process takes less than 15 minutes.

But we understand who they are. We're able to give that to our customers as a way to provide the contextual information to make decision making easier.

So when people can respond so quickly and we did that for Moreland City Council, they asked around CCTV cameras after Jill Meagher was taken in Sydney Road. It was a hot topic around the installation of CCTV cameras.

So they put out the question and immediately those fantastic responses, people were able to choose the reasons why they voted yes or no and to vote on other people's reasons. And before I knew it, a friend of mine said, "Oh my friend just shared your question on TownHall." And that was less than a month after we'd launched.

And it was at that point I knew wow this really does work. When it's so simple for people to engage, the message is clear. It doesn't take them out of their other

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computer-based activities especially if they're on the mobile phone, if they've got a limited ability to commit the time that a lot of the previous way of getting engaged.

No one shares a 20-word survey. I don't know if you have that happen much. But now I've never seen a 20-question survey shared on my newsfeed on Facebook. So you're talking about a very low attention span environment.

We know that social media is 140 characters. We know that people are reading all sorts of feeds very, very quickly. So you've got to capture attention and give people the chance to have their say in the quickest possible time.

David: So just in terms of this case study with the Moreland City Council, were you then able to use Facebook's ability to target areas quite specifically just to send that particular survey to people who lived in that area?

Keren: Well that was a question because the questions are simple. So do you want CCTV cameras? First of all, Moreland posted that on their Facebook newsfeed so that's targeting that particular audience. And then tweeting it out to the community as well. So they were already targeting that audience.

Then the behaviour is that they then share it. So it was shared 97% of the time by the people who participated, 97% of them shared it with their friends. So the reason why that people shared it is it was a good experience. It didn't take much time. It's easy. And your response will make a difference.

David: I was intrigued by your earlier introduction and when we spoke right at the front and you mentioned the guidebook, The Camping and Tramping Guidebook, obviously a sensational piece of content. Why was it so good?

Keren: Well, it was done before the internet. So at that time, as I was traveling around, the only way to get information about the National Parks was an A4 flyer from the National Park's office. So there was a real lack.

Also, there was no lonely planet guide or anything else that made it simple for people to visit National Parks around the country especially for dwell doing instead of long hold to it. So I just saw the need. There was a need to make it easier for people to go and visit these magnificent places we have in Australia. So I saw the gap and I filled it.

David: In terms of that need, what was the need? Was it a very practical how to use, simple sort of information around where was the best walking tracks, where were the facilities, where were the camping? Was it that type and style of information?

Keren: Absolutely, it was very inspired by the work of the Wheeler family in lonely planet so it filled that format. So a bit of a description, the camping, the walks, the maps to get there. And then later I updated it with some aboriginal history at the front of each description.

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David: Okay, fantastic! Well done for that as well. There's nothing like a piece of content that resonates like that in an evergreen piece of content that continues to add value to people over time. The long tail is inspiring.

I think that's a good lesson to people to really understand that it's not what you want to say or what you want to tell people. But it's to get into the heads of the people who the content is intended for. And to answer their questions and to add value from their perspective and their point of view and that's where you'll create that real resonance and that real value.

So in terms of where you see the market moving from now. It's interesting; I know that you mentioned Redland City Council. I think one of the innovations around their content that also recently was using social media for people to identify weeds. And so each week, weed of the week to send it out there so people could almost create an army within the Redland City Council community.

So, as if they were eradicating weeds out there by themselves rather than relying on the rangers to have to do it. So I thought that was a really nice piece of content well-directed; and really being able to enable a community to act and to reduce the pressure on the city council to have a massive workforce to eradicate the weeds out there.

Just in terms of other initiatives and probably over the next 12 to 18 months, where do you see content marketing and social media marketing evolving in the government space, not only at a municipal level but at a state level and also at a federal level.

Keren: I think the weed example is a fantastic one where a creative approach builds the culture around it. So there's this great opportunity to sort of overcome the negativity towards public service and bureaucracy by actually embracing the fact that it can be a really strong effective member of the community itself.

That the government can bind the community, support them a rather platform for engagement. Even something like the... what's the organization doing the stats, the polls? Oh it just walked out of my head.

David: ABS? The Australian Bureau Statistics?

Keren: That's it. When they did the...

David: The census.

Keren: The census, the really creative use of social media. So it's rather as being per se kind of exercise of ticks and numbers. There's a lot of creativity applied to it.

David: Yes, they made it fun.

Keren: They made it fun. And that's the thing. You can have a personality in social media and in fact you need to.

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So what we would be doing with our strategy for a lot of the government agencies we work with was to really come back to the why and the purpose and to hone in on who are you when you act in the social media realm. How can you be an interesting person to speak with in the social media room?

David: Well Keren, lots to look forward to and I think I tend to agree with you that there are lots of examples of good things. But I do still think that we are very much in the early stages of the adaption of content marketing practice.

That strategic measurable, accountable process that people are able to take on some of those defining issues of what's our purpose, why are we doing this, what are we going to do, what channels are we going to select. And really try to manage it from end to end in a strategic framework.

I think that is a wonderful opportunity that we all can look forward to. So in terms of TownHall Social and yourself, what's next? And where can the listeners get a hold of to understand a little bit more about Keren Flavell but also a little bit more about TownHall Social?

Keren: Excellent! Well just visit townhallsocial.com. That's the website where I'm currently rebuilding it as a TownHall app. That will be fully mobile responsive and also self-sign up system. So you can just go ahead and set yourself up and have a free version of the tool and give it a try.

So it will be free until July and we're launching next month. So that's sort of what we're really knuckling down, working on right now. And then once that's going, we'll keep expanding the functionality of it but that's the big job at the moment. So townhallsocial.com or I'm also at Twitter @TownHallSocial.

David: Well Keren thank you very much for giving us some of your valuable time today. Some great insights there is to how people can take this on. Not to be scared, to be a personality, to act with simplicity and really to start to take small steps.

You don't have to start belting it out of the ground from day one. You can really just start to build in to building that engagement. Building that meaningful and trusted relationship with the community by using good, relevant, useful content to create stronger communities and improve the well-being of citizens.

So thanks very much for joining us InTransition. We've loved having you on and thanks very much for your time.

Keren: You're so welcome. Thank you.