
In Transition Ep 15 - Scott Burns

David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome to InTransition, the podcast that explores the practice of content marketing in government. My name is David Pembroke and I'm delighted that you've decided to invest some of your valuable time to spend with me today.

Content marketing is a strategic business process that involves the creation, curation and distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content designed to meet the needs of specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen or stakeholder action. It's a modern approach that combines the power of strategic communication planning with the distribution of online and offline channels.

Well, today we head to Washington D.C. to speak with Scott Burns the CEO and founder of GovDelivery. Scott, welcome to InTransition.

Scott Burns: Thanks for having me.

David: Scott, give us a little bit of the background story of GovDelivery. Certainly, a very successful company that has been helping government to tell the stories since way back in the year 2000.

Scott: Thanks. You know, it's been quite a journey since then. It's a long story. When we were first starting out the idea of governments moving online was considered revolutionary. We were part of that initial transition and what we started was this kind of effort across the US here to put local governments online.

The idea was just to get City Hall online. A lot of times you'd go to websites back then and you'd see sort of the different departments separated out on the internet. Everyone was very excited when they got all their PDF files out and everything else.

But there was a wave of companies that really struggled to capitalize on making this very significant change in government. And we took a different approach. Rather than thinking about putting websites together and other things, we were from the beginning thinking about how we could do things in communications and technology to help government actually get better results.

And so, the earliest sort of genesis of the company was actually working with the City of St. Paul, our home city where our main offices, our largest office, St. Paul Minnesota, and the big issue in St. Paul Minnesota is snow emergencies. What we did with the city is just start pushing out alerts of snow emergencies by email as soon as they were published. So, everybody could move their car at the street, do the things they needed to do.

That's evolved from that sort of initial work in 2000 to serving now 1100 different government organizations all across the US, across the UK and even a couple of the main EU organizations in Brussels.

What we found is that sort of initial fundamental need that we were serving back in 2000 has become one of the main areas where government can drive value with technology and communications. That's really, that concept of reaching a lot of people and getting them to do what you want them to do. It started out reaching a lot of people and getting them to move their cars off the streets during a snowberg you see in St. Paul but now it's getting people to get flu shots, adopt a child, do other things.

So, we've become a major distribution engine to generate a lot more traffic and awareness of the content the government is sending out to get it in the people's hand in a more timely way into use it to drive action. That's the history of the company.

We have a couple of other interesting things we've done and expanded into but our main role continues to be generate a lot of audience and reach that audience with content and get people to do the things government wants them to do.

David: So, what's the process that you use to assist government to drive that action?

Scott: You know it's a mix of a process and a technology. So, the main sort of core business government is technology platform. The platform when the government chooses to use it basically connects with the government's website and allows anybody who's visiting that website to sign up for email updates and text alerts and that's an important step for a lot of agencies.

Now, if you go out to any government websites around the world, you're going to find social media, sign ups. You're going to find people promoting email newsletter that they could sign up to.

So, that basic capability within our platform is nothing that's particularly special but it's an important fundamental capacity that government has to put up online. Just allowing people when they're interested in something, to tell you who they are, how you have to reach them, tell you what they're interested in so that you communicate with them in the future you don't have to rely on them coming back to their website.

And the second part of what we do is offering all of the tools. Once you have that sort of data of who's interested in what, all the tools to get information in the people's hands when it's available.

At first that's a mix of two things. One is a lot of automation tools within the software so we can actually watch websites and databases and social media feeds and get new information out from those channels as soon as it's available automatically to the people who are interested. And then, we also offer a lot of, our clients are using a lot of tools to just draft, create and send really beautiful communications when they need to.

Sometimes a government just needs to tell people that the bus is late or the event is cancelled. But sometimes there's a more strategic objective that warrants a lot more

formal in design. We make that possible too. So it's sort of a mix up of just notification service right up to messages that would compete with the most impressive marketing messages in the private sector.

David: At the moment, as you're going around having your conversations with not only with your clients but potential clients, what do you see is the major inhibitors to government going further down this path of being able to create, curate and distribute their own content?

Scott: I think that the main inhibitor is a little different than, some people think the inhibitors are just realizing the power of the technology or the fact that these things can be done or working around some bureaucracy or something like that. For me it's something a little bit different which at least in the US and the UK which I think it made amazing advancements in the creation of content and putting it up online. The major hurdle to me is defining what success means.

So, our clients are increasingly, the ones that are most successful are defining what success means to them in clear terms that can be measured as they start to pursue a content marketing strategy. You know in the past, it was just getting information into people's hands or distributing press releases or just publishing something.

Now, as you think more strategically about what you want people to do you actually, I think, make better decisions about how to use content marketing well to pursue that objective, to pursue actual results and action rather than just distribution of press releases out of your communications effort.

And when you have that action in mind you're going to think a lot more strategically and sensibly about how to use the most modern content marketing approaches and digital marketing approaches to be successful.

David: Would you say that that traditional approach is still dominant within the clients that you engage with?

Scott: I think, you know, I love the title of our discussion and your series of InTransition. We see a wide disparity. We're working across, primarily across the US and the UK and across those two countries there are just an extraordinary disparity between the folks that are having the most success and those are probably still taking on and doing things in the old way. So I think there is a transition. It's actually interesting.

It's a very similar transition to what's happened in the private sector. The private sector used to be much more focused on PR and PR continues to be important and have a role. But the fact is that a lot of the communications don't have to go through a media filter anymore. And in private sector, marketing and communications has transition to be more results-oriented. It's about what kind of dollars can I generate out of my marketing communications efforts. And because that's more measurable now, that's how private sector companies pursue their strategy.

In the public sector because things are harder to measure, I think there are a good number of agencies that are still stuck thinking that throwing their press releases up online and sending them out to a couple of press list is their best solution. And that really limits their ability to take advantage of storytelling and sort of a more of a marketing funnel oriented approach to getting work done.

So, you know, they're in transition. Some are amazing, some are really struggling. And we could talk about some of those that are having the most success.

David: Okay. Let's do that right now. Tell us a couple of really good stories that are going to inspire the audience to say, "Right, today I'm going to get into content marketing."

Scott: Well, you know, I would start with, I get the most excited about what's happening in public health communications. So, both, all of our clients at the local level, the regional level and the central government level, we see really extraordinary work happening in public health. And one of the reasons I think they've been really focused on content marketing is because it's such a critical part of getting the job done.

So, what we've seen up – talk about CDC as just an example, The Center for Disease Control here in the US. So, CDC was very early getting into social media and starting to get content up online.

When I originally talked to them, they had at that time they had something called the National Centre for Health Marketing. What they said was, "We are very concerned as information is more prevalent that if somebody goes and searches for information on vaccines online that they could be pulling up a video from somebody who doesn't believe in vaccines. Maybe it's a chiropractor who believes vaccines cause autism."

And that's something there's no public, there's no scientific evidence for that but it's a commonly health belief on the internet. Well, CBC wants people getting vaccines. That's a major part of their mission.

And so they started doing two things. They would put up a flu map actually talking about how the flu is spreading around the United States regionally basically, getting that basic data out there. And then they created different types of variable content, posters, email examples and other things, and different content that doctors could use and offices and that they could use, that the CDC itself would send directly out to the public through email and other channels talking about how the flu shot doesn't cause autism, how the flu shot doesn't cause the flu and how it's really an important preventative measure.

That story telling combined with the drumbeat of information was incredibly impressive, served them well. And then when H1N1 hit which is still is kind of ancient history now but when that outbreak hit they were very successful calming the public and explaining the actions people could take. So at the federal level here that's the example I like the most. The CDC has been really into the content marketing.

David: I love the way you referred to it as the drumbeat. Because is what you're saying that they were very consistent with the way that they were publishing their content?

Scott: That's right. You know, sometimes, I think we can aspire to some amazing content marketing. We're going to play out an infographic or white paper or an incredible video or something else. And that plays an important role. But a lot of times in government it's just about giving the right information out of the right time in a format the people can understand.

And in their case, that was just a map of how the flu was growing out across the country. It wasn't very exciting. It could have all those diseases within the table with some numbers on it. But that started the drumbeat and allowed them to insert a little more dynamic story telling on top of it.

So that, yeah, it is about consistency and then knowing when it's time to raise the game into storytelling the government is consistency with a little more direction.

David: Have you got any other examples there of, that's a great example. How about you give us, share another example of one of your clients and the way that they're using storytelling and basically taking on this opportunity which content marketing is, is to really be your own media company to create, curate and distribute content going back to that definition at the top of the program that's aimed at engaging and informing to driving citizen action.

Scott: You know I have a lot of great examples. There's really fun examples in local government and regional government. And I would use one from Southampton Council in the UK has been really consistent, very good design, very consistent design and very consistent messaging around the events going on in Southampton.

They've done a very good job of measuring that people who are getting the messages that are sent out are actually showing up to the events in greater numbers. And by creating that sort of connection with the content marketing they have going on, you know, both informing people but also provides more dynamic content. More detail on the events picture story and other things.

And then by measuring that storytelling and that drumbeat information is resulting in more people showing up at the events. It has created real momentum for their organization and investing more in content marketing in other areas in Southampton and some of the areas that they've expanded into like generally in volunteers, the city clean ups, that kind of thing. So they are a very good example.

And we see really good examples in our park services which in the States here is managed at the state level. We work with the park services which we call the Department of Natural Resources at in over half of the states that have major department in that area. They've been very good at using information about fishing and hunting and parks and other things and doing a really good job with that but they're complementing that with actual like fee-based services that they want to come out.

So they have a real need to drive people to buy fishing licenses if you go and use the parks. So one day, you'll see them sending out messages with the fish or a record fish or a hunting trophy or something. And a couple of days later you'll see them promoting that there a lot of extra openings in a particular park because that they want people to buy fishing licenses.

It's that sort of sensitivity between storytelling and then knowing when to really push people towards a particular transaction or objective. That to me it's the most impressive thing we see with some of our clients.

David: Yeah, it's the Gary Vaynerchuk 'jab, jab, jab, right hook' theory isn't it? About value, value, value and then hit people with an ask. I think it works just as well for government agencies as it does for business to business or business to consumer clients. I think there's some real value in that.

Again, I love the way that you're putting the emphasis on measurement and evaluation around the programs that you're putting in place because you really do have to have that structure in place.

If in fact you're going to be able to develop the numbers that you can walk upstairs and sit down around the table and have the argument with the people who've got their hands on the budgets.

Scott: Yeah, I heard somebody recently here. There's been a lot of emphasis over the last of couple of years in again in the two countries we're doing the most work in, the UK and the US. There's been a lot of emphasis on apps and agility and technology. Creating things fast, getting the doc and running fast. I heard somebody who's been involved in that movement say that they're moving from apps to ops, applications to operations.

And for GovDelivery it's been a move from publicity to programs. And when I say programs here it means you have a program to promote fostering. We're going to help you with that. I'm not interested in sending out. I really am not in this work to help the secretary of an agency get better publicity for a one time announcement on a fostering program. We're doing the work to actually get more parents signed up for fostering.

I just been really excited when our clients transitioned from thinking of what a digital marketing, digital communications content marketing; when you move from thinking about that as a sort of overhead function that's associated with PR to thinking about it as an enabler to your mission and to your programs, you're winning because you can get budget, you can expand, you can get support and ultimately you just get better alignment in the organization.

So, it is, in measurements at the heart of that, you have to know what you want to accomplish and then you have to measure it and you got to engage your organization in the fact that those results are meaningful.

David: So, what is your advice? Because again that's another great insight because I think it is fair to say that the content marketing drive is going to come through the communications area in the first instance. But the success is as you say being able to integrate it as part of the day to day delivery of the value of the program which is obviously looking to either strengthen a particular part of the community or improve the well-being of a particular group of citizens.

So what's your advice to people as to how they do they drive it closer to that program area so the program people can see that this is really valuable, this is really useful for us. And it's not just a job for their communications people and the graphic designers and the others who were just over there in the publications area.

Scott: I hope, I'm going to try to come up with some simple advice because to me this has become one of the most important skills for a communications professional is how to explain their work and their alignment with their colleagues in a way that resonates so that they can get the support they need and so they can be of real value.

I think it starts with a very simple shift from sort of talking about communications as a function to looking at programs and finding out what matters to them.

The best communicators we see in the public sector will walk into a program office and instead of saying when do you think the next press release or how can I help you with your newsletter or what are your communications need? They say, "What's going on in the agency and what are the five most important things you need to accomplish this year or today or next week?"

And that's not a communications question but the fact is in most agencies within the government, if you ask that question you will find out what matters the most and in more cases than not you will actually find out that communications and building a better audience in a more engaged citizenry will actually help advance the program or the office or the department toward their goal really quickly.

So, if you put it, you ask the big question what really matters here and then you align communications against it rather walk in there and saying, "Here's how we can help you from the communications office." Did that makes sense?

David: That makes perfect sense. That's a really good tip. So let's just run through that again. That's, what is it about is going and asking the simple question about what is of value to the program area. It's not what I can do for you, it's what, what is your need. And as you say, what will tumble out of that is the need then, as you say, to build and engage citizens and build and engage an audience which therefore how do you that? Well, ultimately you're going to do that by being consistent, by understanding what that audience needs and creating that content that answers their questions and adds the value that those program people need in order to deliver their service.

Scott: That's right. You know, you're aligning against and it's so easy to do. So, if you are a marketer in a private sector it's so easy to do this because you're walking into the

sales department or the CEO, the Chief Executive and you would say, "What do you need?" And they say, "I need revenue." And the marketing team says, "I can help you get revenue."

There's a lot harder job in the public sector. Then you have to go in and there's a more provocative kind of process, more integrative process because I think we noticed from working in a public sector that a lot of times there's a global legitimate debate about what an agency or an office or a city needs to accomplish in a year.

And you might ask this question five times and get five different answers. So, we got to kind of go around and find out first what's the consensus on what are the three most important things here and then as a communicator I propose on how to achieve them.

David: Okay. So that's tip number one. What's tip number two?

Scott: Tip number two is I think articulating the sort of constantly elected we talked about that as the communications funnel, the results funnel and how you can measure results. So in the private sector everybody is used to thinking about this concept of the marketing funnel. You get the people interested in your product and then you drive a certain number of them down the funnel until they actually buy your product or your service.

In government, once you know what's at the bottom of the funnel you can start to align the metrics. And then, you set expectations with people that, "We're not going to measure your metrics only. We're not just measuring clicks and opens. We're measuring results." How many people buy a fishing license or how many volunteer.

And if you have set your objectives then you can pitch this funnel concept with folks and then you set really tracking number one, how many are you reaching on this information and number two is the content we're putting out actually driving people from awareness to action in the way we need to.

And you just hammer over and over again on the metrics behind that funnel and how they result in the objective everyone agree was important. So it's really about that funnel concept and then measuring results against them.

David: So, if we say then, and I like that one as well again, we're going back to metrics, we're going back to measurement, we're going back to making sure that we can prove that our content marketing, be it at video or audio or stills or text, graphics distributed across whichever channel we decided was the appropriate way. We've set in place our objectives and what we're going to measure here and we're putting in place basically the evidence which is going to build more credibility hopefully in the eyes of the people who are delivering the program.

But let's say that we've now successfully done that. We've asked the questions and we've understood exactly where the pain points of those program deliveries areas

are. And I've said, too, okay, yup that sounds like a pretty good solution for us around the content marketing. We've had the discussion then around the metrics and we've agreed on what they are.

How then do we go about creating that type of content if indeed we haven't done it before? If indeed we've come from an area that are used to graphic design of printed publications, producing talking points, producing frequently asked questions, producing media releases.

How do we go about acquiring the skills and the cultural change that needs to take place to take us from being a service organization to being a publishing organization?

Scott:

You know that is a terrific question. It can be a fairly long transition but I think it happens in a few phases. The first thing that seems to work well for our clients which again you know there's a big variety in the public sector so you're dealing with everything from the police departments, the public health, and the local park and everything else in between, the Department of Defence, they do a vastly different organizations with very different kinds of content and story that are already built up within them.

But the first stage we see people taking on is just looking at the content they have today and starting to just slice and dice it a little bit so making it a little more digestible in more modern channels.

I'll use an example. We have this agency I just talked to a couple days ago that spend a million dollars a year producing a magazine that goes out to 6,000 people to put magazine and it goes out I think monthly to those folks.

So, I would argue that maybe that's not the best return on investment. But I started to look through that magazine that they've been creating. It looks very traditional and everything else. But if somebody with just a small amount of sophistication in digital channels will be able to cut that magazine into pieces and use it really well in the digital arena.

So, that's one example. It's just kind of looking at press releases, looking at pictures and other things that are already resident in the organization and just starting to use those things in a few different ways and trying them out.

And if you put metrics behind them, you don't have to be the most creative design person in the world to be successful. All you do is you start putting your toe in the water, trying some different things, cutting up the content you already have, see what's successful and then double down on the things that are generating the most interest.

So, for me it's, you know, skip your toe in the water first and then measure and iterate. It's the new way of doing business for almost everybody and government can take that same technique and with a lot of success.

David: It's interesting you say that a couple of episodes ago we interviewed Jason Miller from LinkedIn and he has this approach what he calls the big rock approach to content marketing. And effectively it's about producing exactly that with big rock pieces of content but then how do you break up the big rock into its component pieces. And then, which particular channels do you then distribute parts of the content that you already have in place. And then, how do you sustain a program around the big rock.

I think the opportunity for content marketing in government is such that there are just so many great stories that are sitting in government that are just waiting to be unlocked and told in a way that people want to receive them. And I think they'll take the content as long as it's produced in a form and distributed through a channel that in fact they want to consume that content.

Scott: That's right. You know, it varies as you suggest. We do this work on a massive scale. So we've been doing this work for a long time. We're very good at helping our clients build their online audience. And we now have a 100 million people receiving updates through our system from government. And we see across those 100 million people and it's at 30,000 new people on average signing up every day across our thousand clients.

We see, we have the data, we know people are interested on what government has to produce and what government has to say because in many cases, the incredibly relevant information and we'll actually find that when we come to our clients, it's interesting that if you're within an organization sometimes you think, "Gosh I wouldn't want to put that out there. Who's going to be interested in? Who's going to be interested in a flu map? Or who's going to be interested in this?"

Well, it might seem like everyday news to you sitting on Center for Disease Control. But very often there's a very large audience for this content and that a valuable audience if the agency is willing to put its toe in the water.

And the other thing is I think the agencies overthink the design standard they have to reach. Nobody expects government agency to design an email or a video like Victoria Secret might or like a major retailing another major retailing night. Government can just go out there without a picture or somebody fixing a road and say, "You know here's a guy who worked fixing your road with your tax dollars." And that can be a very popular content marketing piece. It's a lot different than a super model.

David: Exactly. I think the other point around this is well as, my big theory is really around the world. We're getting so narrow now. People are now curating the content that they want to see around these specific interests and needs and wants. And so therefore the broadcast age is over and we're now very much into narrow cast and I think that really suits government because often in government the communication is very narrow because it is going to a specific niche audience.

And therefore, understanding who that niche is and then giving them what they need is a real opportunity to connect and to be able to create value for the government and to create equity out of the decisions and the money that they spent.

Scott: That's right. And the mission is vast. I think if you spend time sitting in a City Government Office, you can over invest and trying to think through every target audience you might have. And the before all of these, before the internet, before all the expansion of all these digital tools, I think the government spent a lot of time with this analysis paralysis wondering how to communicate. The mayor's office wanted to control everything and sort of phenomenon we have here anyway.

And now, all we have to do is get back, get those online properties out. Get a small presence going in YouTube and Twitter and other things, keep people up to date in the most relevant information going on and then let people actually, when you can, let them self-select.

So, we have a number of organizations we work with that they put up – they let people sign up for updates for example by email or text message. But the most important thing in doing that is select them choose in a very specific level what topics they are interested in so you get those narrow cast sub statements that we've moved people from like the city update to my neighborhood crime report and that's a very different type of information.

David: Yeah. Very interesting. Well, congratulations on all your success and your leadership in this space. This is a, it's been a great conversation. I know it will be of real value to the audience. Because again, this is a very narrow audience that we're talking to, people are interested in content marketing in government.

Listen, just before I do let you go I want to be respectful of your time, the language and the description content marketing in government, do you find that there is any pushback around this word marketing? Because often I hear people say to me, "It's marketing. Government doesn't do marketing."

Well, government does do marketing and I'm in fact not going to change the language at all. I'm not going to change the description. I think we really need to align our efforts around the fact that content marketing is the strategic business process and it's relevant if your business to business, business to consumer or if you're government to citizen. It's exactly the same thing. It's just got a slightly different purpose.

So do you see that there is any pushback there in the areas that you're operating about government being involved in marketing?

Scott: You know I've seen some pushback. I've seen a little more acceptance about that over time and I commend you on your commitment to it because I think there's no – unfortunately, there's no better word for what we're trying to do.

Marketing is a bad word in government. And we're just, we're defining it too narrowly as sort of marketing in products like books and widgets and whatever because I'm not marketing, I'm not helping our clients market products or new pair of shoes. We're helping them market vaccines and fostering programs and better programs within the schools and we need your kids. We're marketing things that can help people change lives.

And to be honest we haven't found a term that makes as much sense to people as marketing. We're all so used to being marketed to. Maybe we feel like over marketed to.

But we actually walk our clients through it and talk to them. They fully embrace it. I think if you were standing up in front of a group of a hundred people, maybe it's got to maybe this kind of connotation and someday maybe we'll have a new word. But I think we just have to call it marketing and then explain. It's about marketing things. We talked about calling government to make lives better for more people. If we're using marketing to accomplish that objective, I'm proud to use the word.

David: Yeah, exactly. And the mission of our company is to help government strengthen communities and improve the well-being of citizens through effective content marketing.

One of the other things I think there's a benefit of from a government point of view to a private sector point of view, that if we align our efforts around a particular process and a description of a process, then it's going to be easier for people who've worked in government for a while so then go across to the private sector and say, "Look, I've been working in content marketing. I've been marketing vaccines," as you're saying before.

So, I think if we can get some alignment around the terminology and some acceptance about what it exactly is, then I think we'll be in much better shape and there'll lots of benefits too. Not only the clients in government but also those in the private sector as well. So, there you go.

This has been a rave to finish off the program so ladies and gentlemen, there you go Scott Burns for GovDelivery doing amazing things there in the United States and in the UK around content marketing and government.

Really understanding what the audience is looking for. Those unpicking questions that Scott mentioned I think, real value there and the measurement and evaluation and always putting yourself on the hook for some kind of objective measurement so as that you can build credibility around the efforts and the investments of taxpayers' money. And that's what we're talking about, we're investing tax payers' money so you have to go the extra yard to measure and evaluate how effectively you are spending that precious resource.

So, Scott thanks very much for joining is InTransition. Good luck with GovDelivery and expanding and continuing to move wherever you're going next. And thanks very much for joining us InTransition.

Scott: Thank you.