In Transition Episode 16 - Matt Fenwick

David Pembroke: Well, hello, ladies and gentlemen and welcome back to InTransition, the podcast that explores the practice of content marketing in government. My name is David Pembroke and thank you very much for giving us some of your valuable time 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 a 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.

This week we're back home in Canberra to take on one of the biggest issues in Content Marketing and that's writing. In my opinion, it's the single most important skill for all content marketers.

Clear writing suggests clear thinking and we can always improve the way that we write through practice and technique. Joining me today in InTransition is writing expert, Matt Fenwick from True North Writing. Matt, thanks very much for being In Transition.

Matt Fenwick: David, thank you for having me.

David: Matt, writing is really at the core of effective communication. To be able to write well is to be able to express your thoughts clearly. What are some of the basic tips that you like to pass on the people to improve their writing?

Matt: I often say that I don't have a lot of complicated intellectual property. Everything I know could be written on the back of an index card. It's actually the doing that's a hard part and keeping a few really simple things in mind.

Number one is it's not all about you. Particularly in government, we often tend to write out of what we know we write about things sort of familiar to us and that are important to us but so often we forget about what the person sitting at the other end of the internet connection is going to want to know about.

One of the things I often do with my clients is just to say, "What are the questions that your audience wants to have answered?"

This is a really beautiful technique because you can use it in two ways. You can use it firstly to plan content. If you write content that answers questions you know that's going to be relevant. You can also use it to evaluate content.

If people out there, maybe they've got a document that's been through a few hands and it's time to go a bit cross eyed with it, they can just take a step back and look at the key sections and go, "What question is this particular section answering?" If it's not answering a question, then perhaps it might be worth getting rid of it.

Stepping outside of that self-orientation is a huge one and that's a lesson that I'm going to be continually reminding myself of for pretty much as long as I can hold a pen.

David: Matt, that's a great insight but how hard is it for people to actually get out of their own perspective and jumping to the skin and the mind of the conversation that might be going on in someone else's?

Matt: It's actually really easy and it's also incredibly hard. The reason it's hard is this concept I just came across recently and it's called, "The Curse of Knowledge," which is a beautiful title. I'll tell you how it works with a short scientific study if I may?

David: Sure.

Matt: Imagine that you've got a room and in that room there's a table and on that table is a little can with M&M's written on it. We get a little kid maybe four or five and we bring him into the room and we say, "What do you think is inside that can?" What did I say?

David: "M&M's."

Matt: Okay and then we opened it up and we find it's actually pencils.

What happens next is we bring another little kid into the room and we asked the first kid, we'll call her Mary. We'll say, "What does this other kid," we'll call him Steve, "think is in that can?" Mary will say that Steve thinks, "It's pencils." That means that Mary isn't able to imagine what it's like not to know that thing.

Where it gets really cool is if you ask Mary, "So when we brought you in here what did you think was in that can?" Mary will say, "Pencils." Not only has she forgotten what it's like to be Steve, she's forgotten what it's like to be Mary from five minutes ago.

This research which reproduces this for adults but the studies are way more boring and way more abstract so I like the one with pencils. But the thing is and I noticed from myself, we like to think that we have magical insight into other people's minds. This has been a really, really hard thing for me to let go of. People out there listening will no doubt acknowledge the truth of what I just say it for other people but they'll go, "Yeah but me, you know, I know how it is."

It's about like it's grasping that counter-intuitive insight. What you believe about what you know about other people is probably incomplete and then we go to the start the question of, "How do you get pass that?" I know now David you're really be going personas.

Back from my days in government when we had a communication strategy, you would always see some kind of audience identification there but it was often done in a really abstract kind of way. It might be just stakeholders, end-users of X program. And there's some really interesting research around this where I think it comes out of Microsoft, where they found that if you actually create personas and use those in your communications development it becomes a pretty good proxy for the actual direct data from the end-users.

The point is that if we use those personas then we stand a decent chance of being able to overcome that curse of knowledge but if we just set it out in a nice boring strategy document you're not going to get that same insight.

David: What you're saying is that there's a degree of humility in all of these in writing in the sense of discovery and being able to set aside what you believe to be the truth in actual perceived of the truth.

Matt: Absolutely a hundred percent. Ego is one of the least useful things for a writer to have. If you think everything that you write is awesome then you lose a capacity for that kind of mature criticism that we all need to polish up our writing but then equally if you think your writing is terrible if you hung up on, "Oh I'm not a good writer," then you lose your opportunity to improve.

When I'm coaching people on writing I was like to get out of sheet of paper and I'll draw a line and at the top of the line I'll put William Shakespeare and at the bottom of the line I'll put a peanut and I'll call it my continuum of writing ability. The point is that none of us is Shakespeare, I know I'm not. Now his place will be performed while the ink was still wet, so that's how good he was, but all of us fall somewhere on that continuum. And the question is not, "Do you need to be a fantastic writer?" It's, "How good does your writing need to be to achieve what you want to do?"

David:	But really what you're saying is the writing will be effective if indeed you are answering the questions in the minds of the audience that you are seeking to influence.
Matt:	I think that word effectiveness is key and so often how writing gets talk about and how editing gets done. It's a very red pen kind of mentality and I've done tons of workshops, attended workshops back from when I was in government and often they would focus very much on the final points of misplaced modifies and passive voice and all of that does important but it can obscure some of those fundamental questions of, "What do you need for your writing to be effective?"
David:	What you're really suggesting by the sounds of things is before you go near a keyboard, before you go near a pen, before you need to go near anything you might have to pick up the phone and ring somebody and ask them and talk to them about what is it that they want to know about and perhaps to discover the language that is used by that audience to describing fact what it is that they need to know.
Matt:	Absolutely. This is one thing I like about working with private sector clients when I say to them, "What questions do your end-users have?" I'll often be able to talk to the sales guys who will know it direct or often they'll leave and just give me the number of someone – a client that I can just talk to myself. One of the things I'm paying a lot of attention to is, "What is people's emotional state when they're engaging with this product or service," because the whole language that you use when you come to writing will be very different depending on what that emotional state is like. Often when I see people make the switch from government to writing for marketing they try and go straight for the direct sales style of writing where it's by now –
David:	Benefit selling.
Matt:	It's benefit selling but it's a very superficial kind of benefit selling where you think of you used as many exclamation marks as possible that will make your writing automatically more exciting whereas if you talk to the end-user or get as close as you can what you find out is the detail benefits. It's not just getting peace of mind, it's say if you're looking at the NDIS it's know that you'll be able to receive the care that's right for you so we can really dive into the problem and get the level of detail that we need for effective copy.
David:	We're gone through the process, we've been on the phone, we've spoken to somebody potential persona of the people that we're seeking to reach. How do you then assemble those insights? Obviously, yes, you're taking the

temperature of the emotion, you're understanding the language but how do I then take those insights and turn them into useful copy, useful writing?

Matt: That's a really good question. It's really helpful to distil what you've learned in some form before you go straight into the writing process. And the kind of distillation you need will depend on the level of complexity. If I'm just writing some kick starter copy for someone I might just jot down a few notes. Conversely, if I'm doing a whole messaging plan for someone then we're actually going to have a messaging document that's done as a first step before we put pen to paper.

The other thing that's really, really useful to have is a bit of a template for the type of content that you want to write and the reason for that is that it makes it easy for us because if we know, "Okay we need to start by clearly describing what we're talking about, we're going to have a few headings, we're going to hit the detail a bit more here," that means that a lot of decision to make for us but it also means that if you're a government communicator and you're going to be putting out more complex content it means that let's say your website is going to make sense as a whole so all of the pages about similar things looked the same. That means people can grasp it much more easily though it's like the difference between driving in France and driving in UK. Now when you switch countries there's a little bit of adjustment so if you spare your users that kind of mental effort then your content becomes more transparent.

David: Design is an interesting fascinating part of all of the way that we communicate and we'll come to that I think a little bit further down as we get into the interview a little bit further. What about mirroring back to people after you've gone and got those insights? Do you then come on perhaps assemble a bit and then go back to the people and say, "Look, these are some of the things that I've heard from you. These are some of the language." Is this sort of quite effective? Do you go to that level of detail in pursuit of clarity to try to then mirror back to them what you feel that they've spoken to you about?

Matt: It depends upon the project but certainly if I'm using direct transcribed interview then I'll always go back to the person I talked to and that's not always easy. I did a project for the National Council of Churches few years back on public awareness campaign. I was talking to a Sudanese refugee formerly homeless man but in every case there was I guess an ethical responsibility not just an issue of clarity but if I've taken their experiences, taken their story, written it up and effectively distort it so it flowed. I need to take it back to them because that's making sure they're still empowered in the process. The really funny thing was when I did it to the formerly homeless guy corrected my spelling and grammar so he was on to it.

David: We've got those insights but now I want to get in to the process of it sitting down and getting ready getting prepared because again writing is just so fundamentally important. What tips can you give to people once they've gone through this exploratory focus? They're now getting ready then they're good to go. What do they do next?

Matt: This is beautiful term that writers often used. I'm going to call it Dodgy First Drafts. The actual word we used is slightly different but this is a PG audience. The beautiful thing about doing a dodgy first draft is that you're just getting your ideas down. There's no pressure to be good you're just creating something you can start with and where I see most writers struggle is when they try and write word perfect copies straight off so I get more dodgy first draft down and I always –

David: And is that just the stream of – you're just trying to get it and just whack it down as quickly as you can to get it out of your head get it on to the screen.

Matt: Yes, I often do it by hand. I'm 37 which I tell you just because that's sort of that dates me so I learned to write by hand and in by the times that you need all these computers and I started drafting on computer but then I found that when I switch back to doing it by hand everything just flowed a lot more easily. If I showed you one of my first drafts it would have arrows and squiggles and unfinished thoughts and that's okay, that's what we want.

I'm one of those people that writes to discover what they think so I might even need to go through a few rounds with that probably the one tip I'll throw in here as well as it's often good if you just do a sketch of your content. Don't try and write the whole thing just write maybe the first couple of sentences for each paragraph and then it will also help you assess if it flows properly and then go away from it. Give it a rest because one of the things that happens when we re-content we've written we're not actually reading what's on the page we're reading what's in our brains. It comes back to that curse of knowledge thing that I talked about so if you can come back to it the day after or even a few weeks after that.

I've just finished writing a book and being able to come back to that after a couple of months off I've noticed things instantly that I was able to improve. Come back to it and when you're doing that second draft that's the time where I'd be getting at the computer keyboard and it's time to put something down on paper. Then it's a matter of refining it and here is where it's really good to know what your bad habits are.

I like to think that the thing that makes me a professional writer is not being able to do the William Shakespeare and churn out the perfect copy. It's

knowing what my personal bad habits are and knowing how to fix them. For me there's things that I need to be conscious also when I'm going back through my draft I'm looking at it and I'm seeing if I've done those things.

The other thing is if it's a client project I'll always get someone else to look at it for me. I'm lucky enough to have a team of editors and writers that I'll bring in for different projects. It's about having the humility to go guys tell me what you think if there's something that maybe doesn't quite ring true for you then let me know. And it's when you've got a version that's as good as you reckon you can get it in the time and resources you've got that's when we do that final polishing like the copy editing.

David: But I can imagine some people sitting out there now thinking, "Oh, I just don't have the time to do this. I'm under so much pressure I've just got to get it out because they're not looking for beautiful perfect cover. I just don't have time to go through this process." Is that a useful or relevant excuse?

Matt: No piece of writing is ever perfect it's just done. The key here is that though you're following these process will actually save your time because if you're trying to write something that's perfect straight off then you're going to be agonizing over particular phrases and you're going to be coming back in correcting yourself. Whereas the key here is that every stage that dodgy first draft, that rough draft, that refining – all those things are actually done quite quickly. It'll happen perhaps over slightly longer period of time but you'll get more out of your day if you do it that way.

David: You're suggesting really that almost for every piece of writing there is a format and a structure that you should follow to get an outcome.

Matt: Absolutely. One of the hardest things particularly if you're a bit of a creative like myself is realising that structures help. It's like what we're saying before around the page layout if you've got a process that you can follow that actually makes it easier to be creative because you're putting your energy into really nailing that tone or finding exactly the right information. You're not worried about that basic structure.

David: We've got through the process, we've now produced our final copy after we've had someone edit and is it important that you get a second set of eyes to have a look at what you do?

Matt: Hundred percent because we come back to again the curse of knowledge. We've invested time in writing it so two things – we are going to be blinded to some of the errors that we might have introduced ourselves. I'm really good at picking errors in copy that other people have written, my own – no way.

I know that's not something like in deliver a good result on so I'll bring someone in to help me. Absolutely important to get someone else in to look over it for you and that can be anyone from a colleague. Often it's good to get someone in who hasn't been a part of that project so if you're in government, finding someone from another team who can come in and give you those fresh pair of eyes.

David: I think that's really useful advice that people do take a good hard look or get somebody else to take a good hard look because often there's real value that people can bring to that. And really we need to look no further than the traditional practices of the major media companies that's what sub-editors are for, that's their job is to make sure that the copy is presented as effectively and as clearly as possible. As you say the guys who sit on the backbench are there for that particular purpose to make sure the things are okay but something that is also equally important and perhaps becoming more important because of the visual web is design. What's your view about design and how you can use design to improve the impact of your writing?

Matt: That's a brilliant question and you can actually date a website by how well it uses design. If you're looking at websites that we've done maybe five or more years ago you'll just see one long stream of copy. You can just tell that the designer hasn't been engaged in the content creation process or as if you look at a lot of particularly a lot of business websites you're seeing some really innovative combinations of imagery and design elements.

The critical thing is that content has instant design process and vice versa. The way I often do it when I'm working with complex projects is I would do a rough white frame of how I think the page should look and that's literally just a skeleton diagram. I might draw up on a page or mark up in some software and I then send that through to the designer. The benefit of having a content perspective on that design is that you know how much space you're going to need to tell a story.

If you just have a design later approach that goes right through the project and then it's handed over to the perhaps to the agency themselves to fill it in. They're often going to be constraint and they're not going to have room to give the important information upfront and then the pages that are deeper in that major website are going to be just that text stamp that we look at. The really effective websites I see are ones where the design and content are integrated right throughout the site.

David: What about writing for mobile devices? Is there such a thing?

Matt: There's a whole developing field on this. There's a couple of rules if someone's writing for the web and one of them is make it short and make it shorter again. If I could give one bit of advice to people out there on how they can make their writing better it would be limit your sentence length to 25 words or less. That's even more true on mobile because with mobile you're dealing with diminish screen state. You're dealing with fractured attention spans.

If your website and if your content is written properly, but at the really high end you'll actually have dedicated content that's created just for mobile but if we're going back a bit from that and maybe don't quite have the budget to do to complete a different sets of content, what your web content should then be is scannable. That means that you have headings which breaks the content up into digestible chunks such as if people are scrolling through it perhaps on their iPad or in their mobile device they can get a gist for what that content is about.

David: Okay, we're through to the process now we've got a delighted audience sitting out there, sitting on the bus on their way home perhaps consuming your content. Is there any other tips that people perhaps that you may have left out so far that people should consider in in that creation process?

Matt: There's one I really like which is using relational language. When we work in government we tend to be really abstracted from the impacts of our work. What happens is that comes through in the language that we used. Say, the Department of Innovation is pleased to announce this initiative. The department will release further information that comes to hand. That has a bunch of ways in which that hurts your content. It's harder to read for a start and it's colder.

David: I don't care what the Department of Innovation thinks. What's in it for me?

Matt: What you can do is if you just change that to "we" and your language so we will release further information that comes to hand. It becomes much easier for people to process.

David: Is it more important now to understand that what actually what you're writing about is what the benefit perhaps it's going to be to that particular person in the audience as opposed to X-Y-Zed announces that blah, blah, blah?

Matt: Well, it's two things – using relational language that's a technique though we can use past when we're editing our content. I always like to apply the "so what" test. When I'm doing some content I actually have an editor persona in my mind who's a cranky 17-year-old and I'm imagining standing there with arms folded going "So what?"

You go, "The Department is pleased to announce its initiative," and then he says, "So what?" You go, "Well that's going to mean that you're going to have free Wi-Fi access in civic." And you imagine that he's had a really bad day so he goes, "So what?" again and it's often when you ask "so what" two or three times that's when you actually get to the need.

David: It's get to the audience to discover that need going back to the first point that we said about getting out of yourself and getting into the minds and getting in of the conversations that are going on in people's heads so as if you're answering those questions. They asked, you answer.

Matt, fantastic, thank you very much for the insights. A lot in that, a lot in the advice that you've given the audience they're going all the way back to that first point that really it's about the audience. Get away from yourself, get away from your knowledge, get away from this curse of knowledge and really spend some time to think carefully and to then think clearly about what needs are you responding to and what things are you're answering then get started.

That's another big piece of advice really is that once you've got those insights and once you've really understood the audience and the need of the audience that you really just have to get started it's never going to be perfect. It's going to get started it's going to get finished it will never be perfect. Thanks very much for sharing a lot of those insights thanks for coming along and thanks very much for being InTransition.

Matt: Thank you David.