
In Transition Episode 17 - Brody Dorland preview

David: Well, hello ladies and gentleman and welcome to Episode 17 of 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 join me today.

Content marketing is a strategic business process that involves 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.

Today's guest, I will declare an interest and I will tell you a story before we get going. It was probably about three and a half years ago. We are trying out our methodology around content marketing and we have a very important client who we pitched the idea to them. They were keen for us to do it.

About seven, eight of the way through the process we realised that we had some serious problems and I have to go to the client and say, "Look, we are in trouble we can't work it out on this stage but we need another week to find a solution for you Sir so we can get the right answer."

What we did or I did, very late one night, was to jump online and to try to find somebody who had the answers for me, who could really help me develop a methodology so I was able to deliver the ultimate outcome. And I came across this very, very smart bloke called Brody Dorland and he joins me on the line.

Brody, how are you mate?

Brody: Great intro David. It is a pleasure to be here, sir.

David: Did you remember that panicked phone call?

Brody: I remember it very well actually. On my side, it was like, "Okay this crazy guy from Australia sounds like he's got himself in a little bit of a pickle." Certainly, the subject matter was right up my alley. All I could do was try to provide as much guidance as I can, at least after the outcomes of the project I think it worked out okay.

David: It certainly did and I spoke to them the other day and they're delighted with the process, they're delighted with the outcomes and they're continuing to content market effectively and really engage the community that they're looking after.

But I supposed what that takes me back to is really the understanding about content marketing that it really is a strategic business process. It's about thinking through all of the various elements as opposed to just doing something.

Brody: Absolutely. I've listened to several of your past shows and even going back to the very first show with the London government and the communication folks you've interviewed and the Oasis process. I really appreciate that thought process in general and knowing that there has to be so much thoughts and strategies put into everything that a communications team and an organisation in general is going to be doing to engage their audiences. You really have to put a lot of thought into it.

David: In terms of that, how do you when you're engaging with people, discourage people from the doing to get them back to the thinking?

Brody: Well, sometimes it's an uncomfortable conversation. Often times, I remember back to my agency days when people would walk in the front door. They just want a website or they just want a new Facebook page or something very tactical in nature.

You just have to look right back and square the face and ask them why: Why do you want that? Why do you feel like you need that? Why do you need a new website? What's not working? What's broken?

Often times, we're not having the effectiveness in our communications or your revenues are down or whatever. The pain point was or certainly there are many levels of pain as you walk through an organisation but I think at the end of the day, you have to have that hard conversation with them and really help them understand that it's not all about them.

It really is changing the focus and certainly with all the digital aspects and the way the marketing in general and practices evolved with the digital side. So much of it is controlled by the consumer and by the audience. With them being in control, we need to step out of our very selfish objectives and realise that it's really what they care about not necessarily our selfish objectives that we just want to pound down their throats.

David: How well understood do you think there is that it has changed so much? That we've really gone from a world of difference to a world of reference and that people are now in control of the information that they receive, the education they receive, the entertainment they receive on the device and in the form of their choosing?

Brody: It's a tough question because I think you've got certainly folks within organisations that get it but often times you'll find folks at the higher levels that still have a pretty solid agenda that is more self-serving. But then, at the end of the day, our revenues are declining because you're not engaging the costumers the right way. That starts to change some perceptions and there's some realisations that might need to happen or a 'Come to Jesus' that needs to happen in order for everybody to get on the same page and really understand what the landscape looks like today.

I'd say also there's a big variation in the sophistication level between different industries, government probably being one of them. I'd certainly very much appreciate the role that you're playing in this government niche. I would say, government, like some other industries that are a little bit more behind the curve, really need more help whereas the world that I'm living in now, like the tech world, it's so focus and the sophistication level is so high.

We have all kinds of tools and we're constantly trying to gain more audience inside to put out really good stuff that is as valuable as we can be. We try to be completely unselfish and just throwing out all kinds of value just to make sure we're building good relationships and building trust.

David: But it's interesting though in my view around government communication and content marketing in government is that it's really made for government communications because the citizens and stakeholders need to know and want to know what governments got to say.

Government now has the opportunity to go direct to create the various assets that people can consume in order for them to strengthen their community or improve their well-being or make some progress on whatever issues is it they're interested in.

Brody: Yup. I'm sure you remembered back when we started working together on that specific client project, the kind of audience persona exercises that I walked you through, introduced to you and then you basically took that group through it. I think it becomes obvious when you take a group through that process and just the questions you asked, the way that you start to position the strategy when you take an audience first mentality, the gear starts to turn pretty quickly. When you have a very clear understanding of who the audience is and what they really care about, then it really starts laying the foundation of what you need to go execute going forward. I'm sure you remember that well.

David: I do remember it well and as I say I think it delivered an enormous value to that client and many clients after that as well.

So you had been a teacher really of content marketing and you are one of the world's foremost authorities in content marketing. What are some of the key things that people need to understand to get themselves started along the process of effective content marketing?

Brody: Not to beat a dead horse in terms of audience and persona development but I really feel like that's one of the key first steps. When you really understand exactly what they need, what they care about and how you're offering relates to that, it can solve problems, be the Excedrin for their pain; that really starts laying that foundation.

But from there, understanding even their demographic, psychographic, their mediate consumption habits, their social consumption habits, their search habits, all of the different ways in which they might go about researching for a product or service or wanting to go where's the most likely places they're going to go to look for information on either the product or service or offering that you have.

When you start to understand where those pockets of activity would be; then arranging your strategies based on those different channels and making sure that you're at the right place, at the right, with the right message; then that's when really rubber starts to hit the road. I feel certainly from a business's perspective, if you're selling a product or a service, when you understand the journey that that audience or personal or buyer is going to go through and some of the very key points in that journey; that might be a fork in the road.

They're going to go down a path, they're going to make a decision eventually and there's a journey and all of the things that they might do to get down that path, if you can influence with content that journey and help them take the next step each time; then things really start to happen for you and you're so more likely to actually at the end of that road have built a level of trust and educating them along the way that there's no reason why they wouldn't do business with you or wouldn't work with you in whatever capacity.

David: What do you find as the most effective way to get those insights?

Brody: A lot of it is just talking with people; talking with the end customer, the end audience. Survey tools would be a good start. From Marketing 101, both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

On the quantitative side of things, putting out surveys, using survey monkey or something like that. Putting a good survey together to understand the types of things, what they're process looks like if they're going to be doing research or making a purchase decision, those types of things on your offering or something related to your offering.

Then on the qualitative side of things, whether it's a good old focus groups or just even activating your sales team, customer support team, any audience advocates. If you got folks within the organisation that are regularly talking with your end audience, putting a script in their hands that says, "Okay. Yes, we just talked about this." Maybe it was an issue that this person had. But, "Do you have a few minutes just for me to ask you a few questions?" and just take some notes on their experience and kind of curate all of those responses into a more qualitative type of analysis and review.

Another thing I mentioned, you can't just assume based on your personal experiences in your world. Often times we would come into a client situation, whether be a government organisation or a manufacturing client or whatever. We would sit down and ask them about what their audience needs are, what they feel their audience really cares about.

It's one thing to get the responses from the client themselves and their perception of what the audience needs are but it's a completely different thing when we actually are sitting down and getting all of those needs validated by the customers themselves. Often times, you find that the client was actually wrong.

Again, kind of going back to qualitative and quantitative research that really validates the needs and perspectives of your audience and then that lays the foundation of everything going forward.

David: Okay, so we've got the insights. We're happy that we've got a really clear sense and a narrow sense and we built a persona that rolls all of those elements together. What happens next?

Brody: Kind of going back to the oasis analogy, I don't know if you would necessarily, if the "a" comes before the "o" if you will?

David: Yeah.

Brody: But sometimes it does because sometimes the audience research helps to frame your objectives. But I would say, the objectives pieces is the next and I think there's a balance between your organisational objectives. The things that you guys have coming up in your organisation; the things that you need, stories that you need to tell. But then, making sure that you can bounce that off of what the audience will actually care about.

I think that's the interesting part in where the strategy comes in because you might have some very specific objectives and agenda or set of narratives that you're trying to portray but if the audience doesn't give a rip about any of those. How much time and resources do you put towards really pushing those

things out that the audience won't care about? Or do you need to make sure you go find the audience that will care about all those things and have a very niche strategy for just that piece?

It may be kind of works hand in hand, but your objectives are certainly crucial. With your audience as defined, with your objectives nailed down, then it leads into that strategy piece where I think a lot of it then starts to boil down to the specific things that are going to be done, the specific channels that you're going to start supporting.

What would be the best delivery mechanisms for the content you're going to put out or whatever form it takes? But then the form, what type of content does it need to be? Or does it not necessarily need to be content, maybe it needs to be things like events.

There are all kinds of different forms of communication but certainly on a content marketing side, we want to think specifically about; does this need to be blog content? Does this need to be news releases? Does it need to be social? Does it need to be video? Does it need to be slide share presentations?

What is the ideal format that would be most conducive and would resonate the most with the audiences? And certainly the topics that you're using, the key words that you're using; all of that stuff is important and all needs to be laid out within your strategy so at the end of the day, you've got individual channel strategy: here's our blog strategy; here's our PR strategy; here's our social strategy.

And there's certainly things across like holistic, strategic things that you're trying to execute across channels from an integration stand point, integrated strategy but you also might have very targeted strategies based on the uniqueness of some of these different channels. Does that all make sense?

David: It certainly makes a lot of sense but it also sounds like a lot of work.

Brody: Well, yeah. I've always said that content marketing is a team sport. You do need a team of people. Certainly, if the volume of content isn't that large, if you're a small business, this doesn't have to be as daunting of a task but it can be if you take on too much.

I think, in the early days, even working in the agency world, working with smaller companies and trying to help them execute some of these things, we learned early that you don't want to bite off more than you can chew. You want to figure out your first and foremost, what are the best channels, the top channels that would give us the best chance of reaching the largest number of folks that are key to our success? And let's maybe start small.

The issue we ran into is: social was coming on big, this was back in the mid-2000. Social was coming on big, we knew email marketing was still very important, websites were getting huge, blogging was starting to really catch on with things like word pressing and we get small business into this new content marketing program that had just all kinds of things in it and all kinds of new channels to support. And certainly, we would set them up with a really good plan and strategy but if the sheer number of people and number of hours that they could throw at us, because of the times they have day jobs. It became something that just wasn't sustainable.

I think that was definitely a key learning. Either if you got a smaller team or a smaller set of resources, pick something that you know you can do well and sustain. But then if you have a lot of resources, you got a bigger team then you can certainly start to branch out and really start hit it hard with some of these different channels.

David: But, whatever you decide to do, you really have to be consistent, don't you agree?

Brody: Oh my gosh! That consistency is so underrated. Joe Pulizzi always loves this analogy, you think of yourself as a traditional publisher, a magazine publisher and over the years you have developed this magazine, it lands on people's doorsteps every month on the same day.

Overtime, if you build up that consistency, people love that. They grow to love whether it's your blog, whether it's you email newsletter, whatever it is, if you're doing it consistently and the content that you're providing is very valuable, they grow to love that and they rely on that, whatever the frequency is. But if one month, someone opens up the front door and your magazine isn't sitting there, "What the heck?" "What's going on?" And then they pick up the phone and they call the publisher, "Hey, where's my magazine?"

If you're doing it right? God forbid, if you happen to miss one of those weekly newsletters or a weekly blog post that you've been consistent with and you've grown up that audience and you've built that trust and all of sudden you missed a day, and you get phone calls, like "What happened?" Then that's when you know, you're doing it right.

Most of the time, people just they don't even get close to that because they maybe go strong for three months, six months, maybe even a year and then the idea start running short and they don't have maybe the level of accountability that they needed, they don't necessarily have the top down mandate, maybe the data is not necessarily showing blockbuster

engagements right out of the gate. And they just start to stall, that's the last thing you want to do.

David: But how do you overcome that?

Brody: I would say, there's many aspects. I think if you're an organisation, I think making sure that you understand the notion that the programs that you start to implement using an email newsletter as an example. If you're doing it right, you should start seeing steady growth in your subscribe based, in your click-through rates and those types of things. Certainly, it's important to understand the metrics that are involved in each of these different channels.

This is key, setting realistic expectations for the growth of those things and knowing that overtime you're building trust, you're building an audience that is going to serve you in the long-term. It's not the audience that sees one ad that you put out in a magazine or a newspaper and if you don't continue that ad, the impressions are gone. So you're continually building that audience overtime.

The blog scenario comes to mind, if you start to think of your content as an asset and you're continually creating assets that are going to pay dividends overtime and everyone's on the same page in terms of the long tail effectiveness of this, again that's key. Then you're going to start seeing those dividends come in overtime, from search results, search traffic.

A good example, back in the day, we worked with a sock manufacturer and we did a fun promotion on Shark Week. The scary channel they do their Shark Week once a year and we did a fun video because they had some shark socks. We just did a blog post, fun video, promoted their shark socks and we put it out one year for Shark Week.

That was about three to four years ago and we had conversations with this customer on-going and he tells us a story that every year, people come back to that Shark Week blog post for the shark socks and the shark socks sell out every shark week because of that blog post that we wrote like four years ago.

David: Yeah right!

Brody: That's an example of the asset mentality. You create a piece once and if it's a good evergreen type of piece, then that could pay dividends year over year over year in perpetuity. Now, compare that to a quarter page ad that you put in a newspaper and you spent a few thousand dollars on. Once it's done, it's gone.

There's definitely some education that has to happen internally to start getting in this mind-set, understanding the mentality of content assets and that's really at the core of content marketing. I think it's very important to get that point across at all levels of the communication's department under the organisation.

David: What are some of your other best tips around that implementation phase? Consistency is obviously one of them, but what are the other things that people need to do to ensure that they're going to implement their plans effectively?

Brody: I think setting up some irregular editorial schedules and that certainly gets into my world today with DivvyHQ being an editorial counter solution. I think when you have a good understanding of the cadence that you need to maintain for the different channels. You've got your email channels and how many emails are we going to send out either each week, each month or whatever that frequency is? How much blogging are we going to do each day, each week or each month? How much social are we going to do? And really set some good frequency standards and then make sure that we're planning properly to fill the caddy with enough ideas so that we never run out of good stuffs to feed that frequency.

You certainly hear often times with different content marketing experts out there the notion of "feeding the content beast." Well, certainly you don't want to create a beast that isn't sustainable but once you create it, you set that cadence, you do want to maintain that consistency so that the core tips are making sure you set up the ideation and planning processes within your organisation, within your departments so that you're consistently filling the caddy, filling the parking lot with good ideas that can then be planned. You sit down with your editorial team on a frequent basis; also making sure that you're consistent with your planning efforts.

And you're taking those ideas, converting them into the actual stories, much like a newspaper would. Sitting down in a wareroom everyday figuring out what's going to go on the newspaper the next day. So much of their success and their ability to get out good content in the newspaper every day is just their planning processes. Knowing that there are different people that are in charge of different area whether it's in the newspaper setting or there's people that are in charge of the different areas of an organisation maybe in the government side.

All the different programs and topic area's departments, who are going to be the main editors responsible for feeding new ideas into those different channels or sections of the newspapers. And making sure we plan accordingly,

we sit down on a regular basis to plan that, to feed the editorial calendar, make sure it's filled with good stuff and we have our production processes in place to get it done by deadline.

David: Do you sort of get this sense though sometimes for a lot of people, this is such a big and fundamental change in government communications, what you're suggesting is really every government agency, government department can become their own media company, should they say choose?

Brody: Yup.

David: But, the distance from where they are today to this reality that you're describing is so large, how do bridge the gap? How do we get from one to the other?

Brody: Yeah. I think, there's definitely small steps that you can start to do out of the gate. Small experiments with smaller teams, to start to paint the picture of what could be. You take a small program and you make sure that you start modelling the development of that program around the best practices of good content marketing.

So you get good audience insights, good strategy around it, a good channel plan and you go execute that on a small scale with a smaller team and make sure you got some good metrics and good evaluation components to the overall process. So that at the end day, hoping that that program is very successful, you can take around and kind of turn that into a case study, that then can be sold up to the organisation.

See what we can do with a small team and this amount of resources and we've kind of test it out how the process works and kind of what the strategic model needs to look like. We can take this and now start to scale it up to program B and program C and program D. Yes, we're going to need some more resources but we can also pull people that are already within the organisation that might already be working in this area. But we're going to kind of retool them and certainly understanding that people might be at varying levels of ability to be able to be retooled.

But I would say, for the most part, a lot of the people within these organisations are professionals. They're definitely is development potential, continually learning about the new processes, the new best practices that are out there. Most of the time, people will probably be open to learning new things, growing, getting more mature and sophisticated on the new things that are coming out in this kind of fast evolving world.

Most of the time, you're probably not going to have too much trouble getting some people involve once you have kind of a good experiment under your belt and you can start working that up the food chain.

David: You have already alluded to it in a small way but it's that measurements and evaluation and just how important that is. What are your insights around measurement and evaluation?

Brody: I think it's key to understand, even on the objective level, at the front end of the process. What is this thing? What is this program look like if it's successful? What is success look like for this particular program? And how to do we work backward from that success point? What are the key performance indicators, you're kind of using a marketing term? What are these key performance indicators that would show us if it's successful or not?

And so from those key performance indicators, depending on how you're implementing this particular program, the channels you're using and what not. Can we build those key performance indicators into a set of metrics that we will evaluate on an on-going basis? The metrics help us to determine how we're doing on those key performance indicators and then at the end of some time period, it's always good from foreign objective to be SMART. Definitely marketing 101: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bound.

So at the end of a certain time period, let's evaluate that program and see how we did and if you've thought about that in the upfront of the process and you've put all of the different tools in place to track those metrics, to keep tabs on the KPIs, at the end of the time period, you actually should have some hard numbers, some hard data that will tell you how you did. If you wait until the end, if you go through and you start implementing something and you're already ways down the path before you realised, "Hey, we should be measuring this." Often times, you're already too late. You haven't put the right tools and mechanisms in place to get the metrics that you need. Understanding what those metrics are earlier on the process are key. Making sure you have some smart folks that are keen on technology and data and understanding how to put some of these different tools in place.

One of the exercises I remember, we went through with this particular government client with you, was the notion of "Key visitor tasks" because part of that project was a big website rebuild. We know that, okay, for target audience A, what is the key visitor task that they want to perform when they hit the website? And can we build pads within that website that have some sort of action that is scorable at the end of that path.

If we start scoring all of those and keeping track of that data, we can start to amass a set that is actionable datum. It's actually going to tell us, "Okay, how did our content perform? What was the percentage of people that started on this path? How many of them actually completed that path which gives us an idea of the content performance? And how relevant that actual path was to begin with?"

So those types of mechanisms I think are huge. There are obviously all kinds of tools, some of them which I alluded to you last time. Lots of analytic tools out there and you definitely need to get some of those in place as you're getting going.

David: And one of the great tools is Divvy and the Editorial Planning.

Brody: Yes.

David: How are things going at Divvy? One of the world's leading editorial calendaring tools.

Brody: Yes! Things are going really well. Back in May 2014, we did a complete rebuild on the application. We basically launched our 2.0 version. Really, it was out of the last several years of learning.

We launched the first version back in 2011 at the first content marketing world, actually. That was definitely a kind of a prototype. Using the prototype to really learn how to make a content planning and workflow platform as simple as we can get it and intuitive, easy to use but also very powerful to try to automate as much of the content process as we can and really try to spark adoption across an organisation. So that everybody is working on one hub: the planning on the hub, the producing on the same hub, their storing ideas within the same hub.

No matter whether you're a content producer or you're higher level executives, it just needs some visibility into what's going on across all of the different departments or content programs, content initiatives. They just want to have some visibility or some line of sight to be able to audit and inventory some of the things that are going out across your organisation. Those are some of the biggest pain points that our customers were really facing.

Certainly, the new 2.0 platform was more focussed on the enterprise side of things, so much larger companies that have very large teams that are often decentralise, very siloed and even across the world, different teams spread out everywhere.

Red Bull is a great example. Red Bull has 50 different content teams across their different geographic markets. Working with Red Bull corporate to develop a structure that would facilitate all of the content effort across all of the different Red Bull teams but then working individually with those individual teams like Red Bull Australia, their content team and helping them to not only facilitate their process to really get a handle and get organised around their content just to support the Australia area of the Red Bull site but then also being able to have some visibility into what some of the other teams like the US team or the Austria Team, the UK team, what they're also working on and being able to share assets across those different groups.

These are just things that were just so hard to do in larger organisations and so we've taken all of that feedback over the years and built a solution that really fits the bill.

David: A final question, you're sitting there, you're looking into the future, and this is radical discussion for a lot of people. Who still well and truly back in the preparing media releases and talking points and we're doing advertising and we're posting our own content on our own channels but perhaps not distributing them through third-party channels at this stage. What do you see happening in the next few years as the sort of Internet things takes hold, the cost of broadband falls, the speed of broadband takes up, where are the changes going to be?

Brody: Oh gosh! If only we had a crystal ball. That's really though. I think the whole Internet of things; I can't even fair them at this point, all of the changes that are going to come.

I think of an example where my water filter goes out on my refrigerator and my phone buzzes because my refrigerator is pinging me, sending me a push notification and I can push one button and easily look, while on my phone be reviewing my water filter options; whether it's through Amazon or someone has a good blog site revealing all of the different water filter options that I can buy with a click of a button.

I can only think that content only gets more and more important. I do feel like, There's been a lot of discussion over the last year about the notion of content shock. I've sure you've heard some of those discussions. And the notion that there's just so much content out there, there's no way people are going to continue to consume as much content as they are.

But I think as technology continues to advance and change, I think we are going to continue at least at similar level if not more. Even consuming more

content because the technologies are just going to continue to improve and the speed of which we can consume things is going to continue to increase.

I think at the end of the day, content is not going away. Certainly from my perspective, it's only going to get more challenging from a branch perspective, from an organisation's perspective to be strategic and as relevant as we can be and build the right inputs and outputs so that content is being fed.

At that moment of inspiration when I just got pinged on my phone and I need a new water filter. Are you going to be the blog post that helps me understand what my water filter options are? If you've done things the right way, you have the opportunity to be that but if you are sitting on the sidelines, watching everybody else produce content or thinking that, "Gosh! There's so much content out there. There's no way I can breakthrough all this noise." Well, you're probably going to be behind the eight ball right at the gate. That could be a challenging situation.

David: I would imagine so but I don't think that this strategic process of content marketing even as it becomes the world changes more and more. I think the strategic process and the outline; I think the tools and the technologies will change but that thinking and that commitment to the understanding of the audience, that doesn't change. And I think it gets narrower and narrower. I don't agree with content shock because I think there may be content shock at broader macro levels.

Brody: Yes.

David: But I think down in the niches, there's nothing like content shock. Content famine in fact.

Brody: I definitely appreciate what you're doing with this niche podcast going after the government folks. I think that's something that you guys have really keyed in on and I think the smart folks, the smart organisations are going to be building very specific content, platforms, properties, initiatives that are going to continue to get more and more targeted because that's where they're going to find success.

It's just not going to go away. At the end of the day, people are people. They have a need a time. They have a very specific thing that they're looking for and the more relevant you are to that specific need at that moment, the better opportunity you have to engage with them. And that's just marketing 101 and that's never going away.

David: Well, Brody Dorland, you've saved me once again.

Brody: I'm glad to do it.

David: Thanks very much for joining us, InTransition. It's a great project so far, we're getting lots of great feedback and I think people are starting to understand that this process, this strategic, measurable, accountable business process. And that's what it is; it's nothing more than that.

We've going to try to get people to sort of get over the hang-up of marketing and marketing is not the business of government, when in actual fact it is. But it is a strategic, measurable, accountable business process that if you follow steps that Brody outlined today, you're really going to get some great success. You're going to get that understanding of the audience. You are going to become more relevant and you are going to measure. You going to be able to measure the impact that you're making. And therefore, as we spend very valuable taxpayer's dollars, we can account because we have the accountability, we have the framework that comes as part of content marketing.

Brody, thanks again mate. Good luck with DivvyHQ and I'm sure that the Red bull project sounds amazing and will be a great case study into the future and all the best.

Brody: David, thank you so much. Hope to see you at Content Marketing World this year.

David: I'll certainly be there. Thanks very much.