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## InTransition Episode 18 - James Mathewson podcast

David Pembroke: Well hello ladies and gentlemen, wherever you might be listening, and welcome to InTransition, the program that examines the practice of content marketing in government.

Now, as we do each week, I'll start with an adaptation of the Content Marketing Institute's definition of content marketing as it relates to the government sector.

Content marketing is a strategic and measurable business process that relies on the curation, creation, and distribution of valuable, relevant, and consistent content to engage and inform a clearly defined audience with the objective of driving the desired citizen or stakeholder action.

Today, our guest is James Mathewson, the program director of Global Search and Content Marketing for IBM. James, thanks for joining us InTransition.

James Mathewson: My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

David: James, before we get into the detail of content marketing and the way you do things at IBM and your views on how governments can use content marketing, I wonder if you might just take a few moments to take us through the journey from night editor on the Minneapolis Daily all the way through now to running the global part of IBM's business in global search and content marketing.

James: It's a long story but sure. When I was at University of Minnesota, I was studying for a PhD and it became clear that academia and jobs were evaporating and it was going to be a tough road, so I started exploring the alternative career of journalism.

Working in journalism, I did the daily. I was an intern at Computer User Magazine. I pursued a professional degree in scientific and technical communication at that time. That Degree led to my getting the managing editor job at Computer User Magazine. And a month after I got that job, the editor quit so I had the good fortune of becoming editor-in-chief of that magazine right away. I did that for six years.

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It was a monthly publication. We had 33 local editions around the United States. We had, at its peak, two million distributed and we had a website with 1.5 to two million unique visitors a month.

When we started the website we had zero visitors, so the thing I'm most proud of is we built that audience up and we built a model for delivering our content that was really unique and different from most magazines which, at the time, was published. It was a monthly magazine they would publish what they had in the publication. We started doing pre-sorted blogs and a lot of interactive content. Actually, the content that we built on the website started to inform what we did on the magazine and it was kind of a cool thing.

I went from there ultimately to IBM to become the editor-in-chief of IBM.com where I lead the standards organisation for content quality and helping especially marketing produce higher quality content for audiences. In the process, it was clear that our number one problem was that we were creating a lot of great content but our audiences were not finding it. I built a lot of search courses, search education, search enablement. And in the process of doing that work, I published my first book which is "Audience, Relevance, and Search: Targeting Web Audiences with Relevant Content."

It was unique at the time and it's still, I think, relevant today in that it changed the formula for search. It didn't just produce good content and then optimized. It was all about learning the audience, learning what they needed based on the intelligence from search engines. You learn their queries. You learn how they use the search engines, and mining that information, you build content that they're interested in based on that information.

David:

I'm fascinated, I think, certainly to dive in to this connection as to how you use search to drive relevance around audiences and also to explore with you the content strategy side of your expertise as well. I know that you've spoke recently at the Intelligent Content Conference because I think that's an emerging and, particularly for governments, increasingly important part of content marketing - is to understand how do they organise, manage, govern their content.

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If I might just before then ask you a question about how valuable have your journalism skills been in building your career and the successes that you've had.

James: I think extremely valuable, mostly the idea really of being audience-centric. You know in journalism, you always continually think about the audience if you're writing and producing content. Don't bury the lead, things like that are just essential and effective. Really, nobody's a captive audience really in - when they're reading journalistic stuff so you have to always be serving them and thinking about them constantly.

That approach, which is somewhat unique in marketing, or at least it was new in marketing when I started working in this field, is that's really the most valuable thing that I learned in journalism, but also the idea of the copy has to be built. You have to do it. You kind of get into a factory model of a concept and I guess what I tell my son is if you want to do anything well, you have to do a lot of it.

You can't just say that "Oh, I'm going to start writing. I'm going to be a great writer right away." You have to write a lot and build it into a practice and the discipline of it. In journalism, you're forced into that discipline. You got to produce something every day or every week or every month that is high quality that meets the audience's needs, that is compelling and so forth.

David: How difficult was it for an organisation like IBM to understand this importance of the audience and to be able to create content for the audience as opposed to the more traditional approach which was to talk about the company and their services and what they were good at and what they could do?

James: I think it is difficult. I can say that we're not a hundred percent there in our transformation going from what I call "inside out" to outside in to thinking in terms of the audience and their needs first. It's ingrained, especially in marketing, in advertising that you want to form a unique, compelling position and you want to push it into the market and you want people to - you want it something that they pick up, that it's yours. It's your branding. It's your name. It's your whatever. That is just the way that marketing has been done for forever.

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The idea of learning the audience's information need and building that and developing a relationship with them based on meeting their needs and being there for them. It's brand new. Like I said, very difficult but all we do is we continue to do it and we continue to build results and it's really results-driven. We're able to, based on those results, demonstrate over and over again to all executives in our company that this is the way to go and more and more executives all the time are getting excited and enthused about this new wave in marketing. The transformation is well on its way but we're not a hundred percent there yet.

David: Okay so let's look at the way that you are able to produce those results that is getting the import and the buy in of these senior executives. How are you linking search and content marketing?

James: The main way is so we have, really when you talk about audience, you have to understand, first of all, is there's a lot of different audiences that query information, query for information, related to stuff that we sell or our partners that sell stuff, so we have solutions that they're interested in and we learn who that what those audiences are, who they are, and what is their information journey?

What we call the "journey map" of all the different test points where they need to learn stuff in order to do their due diligence to make intelligent purchase decisions and really it's about learning that journey and what are those steps and then providing that information based on that journey. There are really hundreds of journeys. They're not just one buyer. There's a buyer group and they work together in teams and they have to learn that group and how it works and so it's really getting deep about what they audience - who the audience is and how they work together and what is the information they need to make their intelligent purchase decisions.

If you provide that user experience that makes sense, that flows, that it's easily findable and so forth. You drive the results because you're giving them what they need.

David: In terms of that, how do you then, or what tools do you use to discover those insights that's allowing you to create the content?

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James: It starts with Google Adwords actually. The keyword research part of it is all about what is the monthly demand for a given phrase and you learn the demands in the different parts of the globe, different countries, different languages, and you develop an understanding of the nomenclature of, the idiomatic ways that your audience uses the language in these different areas. These are the building blocks of the concept.

There are other things that we can use. We use social media metrics and so forth listening to add richness to the data that we have, that we get from Adwords. Then, you plug that in to your content planning process and you start building the content and you measure it to rapidly prototype and build content. You have to release the notion that it's going to be perfect on the first go-round. You produced something that works pretty well but there's always room for improvement. You measure it, reiterate, you continue to build, and you develop a science of content marketing based on what's actually working for your audience.

Once you start attracting them through search and start engaging with them in your - on your site, you could develop the sort of science of it and over time, it takes time, but over time, you will do a better sense of what they need and you just need to refine over time.

David: What sort of skills do you have on your team?

James: Well I have a lot - it's not traditional in marketing either that you would have as many technologists as I do. I've got, for example, I have one person here who's got a PhD in linguistics and all she does is build anthologies which are taxonomies where you're focusing on the relationships between values and not the values themselves.

I have lots of people who majored in library science and master's degrees in library science but they learned information systems and retrieval and findability systems at a very deep level. I have data scientists who all they do is basically mine the raw data from Google and they try to understand exactly which words - sometimes you can have, for example, a lot of demand for a word but it's not really relevant to your audience, so kind of understanding what the relevance is in addition to the demand, so I have those sorts of people.

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Of course a lot of writers and editors, people who have deep journalistic backgrounds in understanding how to build content that can meet the needs of the audience, and then SCOs, they're the last piece. The people who understand search and the way Google works in a very deep way so they know how to build crawler friendly-sites, how to build algorithm-friendly sites, and ultimately, how to build human-friendly sites because that's really who we're trying to serve.

David: Could you give me an example perhaps of a program and how you might go about a particular task around introducing a service into the market place.

James: It's a little - let's say, as an example, we have a new service that we acquired called "Cloudant" which is basically a database service company. Basically, you can build databases that are cloud-based and quickly adapt and adjust them in sort of a big data environment to whatever the needs of your business are.

So we acquire a company like that, we have to bring them into the fold of yeah we've got sites that are outside of IBM, they're already have sales, they have marketing, they have everything that they need to be successful. We wouldn't acquire them if they weren't, but the idea is then how do we draw them into the IBM fold in a way that we're not breaking anything that they're already doing, but we're actually enhancing their portfolio and the way that it fits with IBM's portfolio in a digital realm. It's extremely challenging because the not breaking thing part, it's just difficult but it's basically IBM.com, our domain has a domain authority out of a hundred out of a hundred. We use the Moss Scale.

We have a lot of strength behind the domain. If we can basically take the digital content that they have and build fresh cages in IBM.com and transfer and really redirect the pages that they have and they're, say, Cloudant.com into the IBM.com site, they actually increase their search rankings and they improve the way that their content is interwoven into other related content in IBM.com so that the customer doesn't really see them as this separate company that happens to have been acquired by IBM, but really is part of the IBM fold and so over time, about six months or so, the transition happens really slowly but eventually, we have a service within IBM.com that works and is growing faster than it would

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inside of IBM.com and also interwoven into the other services that we sell.

David: Increasingly governments around the world are taking this gift of technology to publish their own content on curated, created, and distributed content through their own platform, be they third-party channels or their own channels. What advice do you have for government as they step down this path? Because as you say, IBM, an innovative company, a global leader, you're still wrestling with getting it right. What would you say to governments who are perhaps not as sophisticated in a way that they're using this opportunity at the moment? What are the simple things that they could do to get started?

James: Well I guess the first thing I would do is to do an audit of what you have. The reason why the Content Marketing Institute's definition starts with curation is because you can create this - it's easy enough to create a lot of content but if you create a lot of the same content or duplicative or similar content that the user doesn't understand the difference between it and other things, you have lots and lots of the same thing. It only confuses the user and it also clogs up your site. It confuses Google. It confuses whatever search engine you care about because they don't know which one of those pieces of content is the most valuable for a particular topic or question.

I would say focus on - build that audit of your site and try to understand what you have. Then, you try to learn your audience and build a model of what content they need. If you just overlay what your audiences need to what you already have, they'll find that there's a lot of connections there but there are also a lot of gaps. Gaps are your opportunities, so focus on those new opportunities, those fresh opportunities for creating content, but otherwise, focus on curating content for those things where you have identified audiences needs and you have content that already exists in your environment that you can use.

That re-use part is a little bit tricky because the kinds of content government create, and we have this problem in IBM, are these big monolithic white papers or reports of some weight and it's difficult to force a user to read the whole thing to get whatever nugget of truth they're trying to get out of it.

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One of things that - the second piece of advice that I would say is try to build smaller, related, re-useable components of content that can be collected together for specific audiences rather than trying to build these large monolithic things that are trying to be all things to all people, or at least all things to a lot of your audiences.

We live in a world where users are, in this case citizens, their cognitive misers. They don't want to have to read a whole big long white paper, whatever, report to get the one paragraph out of it that is most relevant to their needs. They just want that paragraph.

If you can develop a system where you're building small, re-useable components, and connecting them together for specific audiences, you're going to serve those audiences much more effectively than if you try to build things that are all things to all people.

David: How then do you go about the task of making decisions as to whether or not the content should be explained via video or audio, stills, text, or graphics?

James: That's a really, really good question and it's hard to give a one-size-fits-all-answer. I think that it starts again with the audience that certain audience members are more interested in videos and some, based on their other habits, and are more interested in audio. The one thing that I would say is whatever you do, there should be a strong foundation of text that if it tributes a video, then you have to produce something that has a transcript, or where the text can be used in mind and that enhances your searchability, your findability.

The way that we do it in IBM, and I don't know if this is exactly applicable to governments, but we tend to think that video and podcasts content at what we call the top of the funnel where people are just trying to learn and discover about the topics of interest and then as they go down their journey, you can more and more granular in what kind of content so maybe the next step would be a case study. The next step would be a trial or demo kind of content. Eventually, you get to the point where they're ready to put something inside shopping cart and we can test the different types of content at different stages in the cycle in the user journey to understand which ones tend to work better and which stages but that's really kind of the way - like videos are very good for awareness.

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I think, in governments, awareness is a big component. I'd say, in general, if there's one type of content that is ascending very rapidly, it's video content. The kind of style videos where an expert explains some deep truth in an accessible way.

David: With the management of the content program, once you've got it up and running and it's going along, I'm interested in your views on how do you manage the governance of those programs and how do you set about trying to make sure that relevant content is established and that whole governance hygiene issue around your content is maintained overtime. Is it your website doesn't become clogged up with a whole heap of out of date content?

James:

I think this is the really the larger the organisation, the more difficult its challenges. It's a huge challenge for IBM and for the larger the government, I'm sure, or the government agency. I would say that the first thing is you need that audit to understand what you have and it needs to be segmented or organised in a way that you can quickly understand where the gaps and overlaps are. That's the first thing. There are tools that can help you do that, but that's really the first thing. The second thing is that for IBM, we have two main types of content. We have what we call Evergreen content which is basically, as I mentioned, you mine the search queries of your users and you build content that matches the questions that are implicit in those queries, at least answers them, and those queries don't change much over time so you're basically adjusting this evergreen content.

Then we have a lot of campaigns where we'll sponsor a sporting event and we'll actually build a technology. Like for Wimbledon, we'll build the technology for measuring all kinds of things about tennis and then that becomes part of an advertising campaign and there's content related to it and that has a discrete beginning and an end. You have to have very clear expiration dates on contents so it's no longer - when that even is done, it's gone. It's just may be goes into an archive or something but basically that's another part of the cleanliness thing is that a lot of the content that you might find on your site is just out of date or old, stale.

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You have your long shelf-life content and your short self-life content and you have to make sure that you tune your system so that there's an expiration date on the short shelf-life stuff.

David: Just a final question. As we look to out to the next 12 months, what do you see as the major opportunities in content marketing and how are you going to position IBM to take advantage of them?

James: Really, the main one that we're working on right now, I sort of alluded to, is what we call structured content strategy which is all about breaking up the content into small modules and reusing those components as you would, I assume you don't know programming that well, but basically it's object-oriented content, if you will. Because you do it in this way, you have small modules that are tagged so that they're each self-aware. They have their own - they can live by themselves or they can live in a collection, or they can live in multiple collections.

Those are the things that you store and then you conserve dynamically to users depending on their information needs. That's the first thing, but how do you know, in a granular way, what their information needs are? This is in using pixels and cookies and things, tracking them in a way that you're not really gathering their personally identifiable information, you're just gathering some of their behaviours, you're understanding them on a behavioural level, and you're serving the content that they need when they need it.

You're not serving content that they've already consumed which is one of the challenges that we have is that they keep coming back to the same page and it's the same content. That's not going to be relevant to them more than once. How do you do it in a way that is dynamic and personalised and what we call in IBM, one-to-one marketing. Tuning the system in a way that actually works like that, that's really the major challenge that we're getting worked on in the next weeks and months and years.

David: Sorry, and I will just throw in one more question because you did allude to it there around the issue of privacy and I think the sensitivities in government around privacy are obviously very keen. What's your sense about that as to how far government can go in terms of tracking and cookies and other things?

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James: I'm no lawyer, and the laws are quite complex and varied across the world, like in Spain, it's extremely delicate, but I would say that there are lots of things that you can track that are not at all personal. You can build a fingerprint of a user based on what plug-ins they have in their browser, and every time that really distinct set of plug-ins they have in their browser visits your site, you can say "Okay, I think this is the same person. This person has the same interests."

There's no name and there's no date of birth or any of that kind of stuff. It's just technology. This is the technology that somebody's using and based on that technology that they're using, this is the information that they might tend to be interested in. There's a lot of that you can do that strips out any of the - basically autonomises the whole process and yet serves them the information that they need. The one thing that I would say though is it isn't just legal, it's also user-preferenced. If you're a little creepy in what you serve them, they're going to go away, so you have to be delicate. It's as much about what their preferences are based on how they react to personalised content and over personalised can feel a little creepy so you have to be careful with that.

David: Alright, James Mathewson, the program director of global search and content marketing for IBM. Thanks very much for a really fascinating conversation today. Really interested in the sophistication of the program that you have put together there at IBM, and I know for our audience, they'll be intrigued by those insights, so thank you very much for being so generous with your time and thank you very much for being InTransition.

James: Thank you.