David Pembroke: Well, hello ladies and gentlemen. My name is David Pembroke and welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that explores the practice of content marketing in government. This week we head to the city of Bryan, Texas to discuss how they're using content marketing to stay in touch with and engage with citizens.

First, a bit of news: The InTransition podcast is currently featured on the new and notable section of iTunes in the government and national sections. We've jumped form number 76 to number 19. So, thanks a lot and please keep spreading the news.

And just so you know that where your fellow listeners are tuning in from, our biggest audience is in Washington, D.C. followed by Canberra, Australia and then London. We have listeners in Singapore, France, Canada, Germany, China, New Zealand, and Fiji. And I think I know who that is in Fiji so Jordie Kilby I'm pleased to know that you are still tuning in.

So, thanks everyone. We really are delighted with that. And I can assure you that we've got plenty of great guests lined up for the weeks ahead. Someone actually said to me the other day, "Well what happens when you run out of things to talk about?" Well, I know that you know and I know we will never run out of things to talk about as we look at the practice of content marketing in government. And particularly as we all journey through this transition, as we start to use the gift of technology to get ourselves into the media business and to start to publish regularly around content that engages with our audience.

So as we do each week, we start with a definition, which is an adaptation of the Content Marketing Institute's definition of content marketing as it relates to government communication. So content marketing is a strategic business process that involves the creation, curation, and distribution of useful, relevant, and consistent content in order to meet a need of a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen or stakeholder action.

For this week, our guest is Gina Florence from the city of Bryan in Texas. And Gina joins us now, welcome and thanks for being InTransition.

Gina Florence: Thank you so much for having me.

David: Well Gina, before we jump in to this discussion today about just exactly how you are using content marketing to engage citizens, can you tell us a little bit about the city of Bryan and your role there?

Gina: Absolutely. So the city of Bryan, it's actually Bryan College Station. It's two cities that make up one community and it's the home of Texas A&M University, which is a very large university in the States.

David: Yeah, I know all about it. Very big football team.

Gina: Oh, yes sir. We are nestled between Houston, Austin, and Dallas Fort Worth, so we're really right smacked in the heart of Texas. And we are a small community; we have about 85,000 residents here.

David: That's in Bryan or is that both College Station and Bryan as well?

Gina: That's specifically Bryan. The two cities together probably have about 180,000.

David: So do you have to look after the interest of the students in terms of your communication or you're very much looking to the interest of the people who live in Bryan.

Gina: Both, because we do have a lot of students that live in Bryan and one of the things that we expect of the students is to be a good neighbour. They're here for a short period of time before they move on to somewhere else. But a lot of them will come back. We have found that many of the graduates of A&M come back to the area when they retire or they come back to further their career or their education, so we try to build a relationship with them from the get go.

David: Looking at your background, you've worked in the private sector, you've worked for national associations and now you're in local government. What are the differences in terms of communicating and engaging with people?

Gina: Well, the big difference is that in the e-commerce world, you're definitely looking for ways to convert people and to monetise everything that you do. With non-profits, it's not always about monetising. It's really about engaging and getting them to feel passionate enough to take some kind of an action.

Sometimes that is a donation, sometimes it's calling a congressman, something like that.

And both experiences actually have taught me a lot and have served me very well in the local government because you are, one: trying to sell people on an idea that maybe you don't need to monetise as far as getting people to pay money, but you want them to have enough faith in the services that you're providing so that when they pay their taxes, they understand where their money's going.

But you also want to engage them and keep them coming back to the city for more information and sometimes to get involved in city programs or attend town halls and public forums and anything of that nature. So you're really taking the best practices from the two different entities and merging them into how to really maximise your impact at the local government level.

David: Okay, so let's go back to the day when you first started this new job in the city of Bryan. When you walked in there, what was in front of you and what have you done between then and now to stand up a content marketing program?

Gina: We had an old website that was in the process of being re-designed. It was very hard to use, it was not mobile-friendly, and you couldn't really figure out how everything was laid out. We would have information really broken down between departments and it was not user-friendly at all.

So if somebody came to the site looking for permits, they may not necessarily know which department to go and find that permit in. What we did was we launched a website a couple of months after I started and it is very mobile-friendly and it also allows us to add in content.

We started looking for ways to group information in a way that made sense for people. For example, if you wanted to volunteer with the city, before you had to know exactly which department you wanted to volunteer with and know that they offered volunteering. Now, we have an area where if you want to volunteer, you can go and read all about the different opportunities.

We take some of the more complex areas of our level government and we try to consolidate them into a way that really makes sense. We did something where we took all the different summer programs that all the different departments offer such as libraries, parks and recreation. The police department actually even does a junior police academy over the summer

which is free for high school students to come in and learn what it's like to be a police officer.

We packaged all of that together in one easy place and we started writing content about it and started promoting it to really drive people to understand all the different programs that we offer that they may not have known about. We've really taken our approach leaps and bounds and we're looking for more ways to promote what we do in ways that really resonate with our local citizens.

David: Now that audience-first approach that you've adopted there is obviously based practice and it sits at the core of all effective content marketing, that really core understanding of what does the citizen need and want to know from us as opposed to what we want to tell them.

How did you go about convincing other people within your municipal council that this was the right way to go and that they perhaps needed to think much more about putting the citizen at the heart of communications as opposed to at the end of what a department or branch may want to talk about?

Gina: Well, we started very small. We launched one article just to see how it would go over. I got the article approved and it was really promoting programs. I had several requests from different departments wanting a press release and I took a different approach and wrote it as an article that I could share across all of our social media channels, that we could do more with to help spread the message.

Once we did that test, we were able to take numbers the link was clicked on, it was retweeted on Twitter, it was liked or shared on Facebook and have that data to go back and say, "This one worked. I think we can do more."

We've really been able to build off of it; our website traffic year after year has been growing but even from the old website to the new website, in months that have been historically low traffic months for us, we are seeing a steady increase and a lot of that is attributed to these articles that we've been writing.

David: I like that insight that you have started small and you proved to them the value of what you're doing as opposed to going in and saying, "Hey, listen. Let's boil the ocean and let's throw everything out and start again." So that was a key part of the success obviously; justifying the area where you did have

some success and you could demonstrate measurable success, which then obviously moved people to say, "Yeah, okay. Well let's try something else."

Gina: Absolutely. And everyone was very hesitant; local government, especially in the small government. They weren't really sure what I meant by content marketing so it's really been kind of changing the way that people view what we put out and how we market ourselves. It's not just typing a press release and hoping that the local media wants to run it. It's now: We have to go out and kind of gain our own audience and bring them to us and keep them engaged.

David: I think often when people think of those website redesigns, reorganisations, big website projects, often they're such big projects. They can be very awkward, they can be very difficult. What sort of insights can you give people around website redevelopment in terms of some of the steps that they should take in order to have a successful website redesign, particularly in the age of mobile first?

Gina: Well I definitely think it needs to be a mobile-friendly website. It needs to render across whatever platform you're using, whether that's a laptop, desktop, tablet, iPads or other tablets, and your phone because people now do access the internet from their phone or their tablet more so than they do on laptop.

So when you are especially looking for a city government, a lot of times you are in that moment. Let's say there's a street that a pipe broke. You may not be at your desk so you need to be able to access it from your phone so that you can find out the number to call or way to report it online.

I think you also need to take into consideration that a lot of people would rather shoot an email or a text to their local government instead of calling and being transferred around because that's always a frustration. You don't want to call the wrong department and be transferred around two or three times. And we really, at the city of Bryan, try to take any phone call regardless of it's your department or not and get the issue resolved than forward it onto the appropriate department.

The other thing to really think about is making sure that you have a platform that is easy to use, easy to update, easy to add content. Our first website, we couldn't add any content to it. All that we could really add were press

releases, it just wasn't set up to account for any type of content to be updated regularly.

I think just knowing how people use websites will help in the redesign. Anytime that you can consolidate information and have there'll be fewer clicks because again, if you're using it on a phone, you'd rather scroll down as opposed to continue to click through navigation.

So I think those are some key elements to keep in mind, it's where can you consolidate information, put a couple different pages worth of information onto one page, so it's all right there.

David: How expensive was it for you to engage in this sort of re-engineering of the city of Bryan's website?

Gina: Well we have a Web master on our team that really did the primary redesign of it and we use WordPress. We did a custom template with WordPress so it wasn't designing it from scratch where we needed a lot of developers. But we did have the help of our IT team to make sure it's secure and everything is stable and to update the servers. But we had one person primarily responsible for the website redesign.

Our graphic designer helped with the overall look and feel of it to keep it in line with what our brand look is for the city. And more than anything, it was time-consuming more than costly. It took many months of going and meeting with the different departments and making sure that we had the latest information from them that we could consolidate in a useful way.

David: Now, are those different departments that you're working for, are they now publishing their own content into their own areas of the website or is it still being funnelled through you as that central coordinating point?

Gina: As far as the content goes, it's being funnelled through me. Many times I'm coming up with ideas based on what I look at analytics, what are people looking at, what pages are people going to, and then looking at those pages and seeing where can I create a story, how can I make this easier to understand, why are people coming here, they're looking for information on recycling and maybe we need to come up with an article on all the different ways to recycle and what we recycle at our centre.

We have a do-it-yourself oil change centre and we have a tyre recycling program as well. So putting all that information into an article and we're using the analytics so a lot of it is looking at the data and then going to the different departments and getting the information and writing it in that approach.

David: Is your plan that at some point, that you will train people in those different line areas so as that they can publish their own content so that they can do their own content marketing?

Gina: Yes. In fact, we've just started reaching out to different departments to see who's interested in it. And so, we're starting off with those that have an interest in it, that even if they don't think that their writing is up to par, if they could kind of get the skeleton work done, then we can go in and make it sound correct with grammar and editing and all the stuff to fine tune it. But at least they can get the ball rolling.

           And we are starting to some from departments that are interested because they really do want their departments promoted and they see that it's working for others.

David: And the passion of those people is infectious and contagious, isn't it? You can see that they really love what they do and they want to get it out there. I know in my experience, you find some wonderful storytellers amongst people who may not be notionally communicators.

           But I think it really is so important that we start to look across our organisations for storytelling resources and not just think we've got to jam everything through this sort of stovepipe of communications area and they're the only ones who can tell the story.

Gina: Of course, because they are your best brand ambassadors. They do the job day in and day out. They know what people are asking them; people that call into their departments, people that catch them on the streets. Solid waste department is out, they tend to interact with people on the streets. As they're collecting the garbage, people will talk to them, people ask them questions.

           Through this process, I've learned so much about our local government. I've learned that our solid waste department, if you are elderly or handicapped and need help rolling your trashcan to the curb, our solid waste team goes out and will roll it to the curb for you and then after they take your trash, they'll

roll it back up to your house. And that's something that a lot of people didn't know but we were able to tell that story through content marketing.

David: Yeah. It's just wonderful, isn't it? You can almost see videos, how to roll your trash can and here's Jerry who's been doing it forever, and so for many years. Here's the top five ways to get your trash can to the curb.

Gina: Exactly. So we really are trying to capture these stories from people that really do love their jobs or they see some of the pain points that residents have. If they're having problems accessing a particular form, if they're having problems finding the right department, we want to make it as easy for them as possible.

David: Okay, let's just drop back into a day in the life of Gina Florence. Give us a bit of insight as to how that all works.

Gina: Oh, gosh. So there's a team of four of us in the communications marketing department. My primary job is all the communications. I handle all the press releases and the media contacts and the social media. And we also do some writing for a local utility magazine.

So there's a lot of stuff happening in one day and it's really about coming in and looking at what's the priority and sometimes the priority changes from one moment to the next because the media will call and we'll need to schedule some interviews. But I always have a content calendar going or at least an idea of what I want to run and when.

And I try to go around it, I meet with a lot of the different departments and try to get stories from them and find out what's going and what can we share. And I'm now starting to get a lot more involvement from other departments. They are interested in writing, they're interested in being involved on social media to help again build these brand ambassadors.

But a typical day, I could be writing two or three or four different things from a press release to something for a website to an article that'll be published in this little magazine. And then on top of it, trying to look at the analytics and figure out where our traffic is coming from, what they're looking for, and if there's any issues that I see that we need to hurry up and resolve.

If people are going to one page and bouncing off of that page really quickly, maybe we have it described incorrectly, maybe we need to figure a better way

out so that people are getting the right information that they need on that piece of the website.

David: We'll come back to that I think in a minute, just as to exactly how you go about using your analytics and how your analytics are set up so you can gather those insights. But I'm interested in this engagement with the media and where that sits in terms of your priority.

My own approach to content marketing actually includes the media very much as part of our content marketing approach. We look at it as an offline channel, it's been there for a long time. Certainly media organisations have built very large online audiences so they are still very influential. But in terms of priority, where did I sit for you?

Gina: Usually when we write an article, it does get sent out to media and it's a great story pitch for them. But a lot of times when I'm getting the media calls, it's for something that's happening immediately. They are trying to run a story that evening, usually about an issue in the city. Whether it's something going on with their city council or a new program that's going out or something like that.

So in that regard, we try to get it handled and resolved as quickly as possible. And then now, since we have been sending them all these articles that we've been writing, they're now calling me, asking for story ideas. And so, we're now becoming a little bit more engaged and developing longer-term stories for the media to go out and really promote our city.

If it's something urgent that they're trying to get on the news that day, it takes first priority. If it's something that they're looking for longer term, then we have a good working relationship and we go back and forth. But I do consider this part of my daily job, whether or not they're calling for that story in that moment.

David: Yeah. And in terms of sending off those stories, you're presenting them not as media releases as such but you're presenting them as straight stories.

Gina: Exactly. And sometimes they won't really run with the straight story that we did but it will give them an idea and maybe they want to go follow our solid waste department and see how they interact with the customers, especially those that need the assistance with their trashcans. So it gives them ideas and a different angle to look at how the city works.

David: There is just so much content tied up in government, isn't there?

Gina: There really is.

David: It's just so phenomenal how many stories you could probably put together not only for the media but to distribute through other channels. How do you make judgements about priority; what's first, what's second, what's last?

Gina: What's first tends to be what is coming up, what's time sensitive. So, summer programs, right now we are really in the middle of promoting everything that's coming up this summer that people need to get registered for. So, stuff that is very time sensitive tends to be first.

The next tends to be what people are searching for, stick us back to using the analytics. What are people coming to our website? What are they looking for? How can we make it easier?

And what is last, just kind of the stuff that we think should be told that maybe hasn't been told yet. And while it may be last in the priority, those actually tend to be the best articles because that's the stuff that people don't even know to go looking for.

David: In terms of those analytics, let's just jump into that at the moment. Give me some insight into exactly how you go about your analytics; how are they set up, what are you looking for, and how do you draw your insights out of your analytics?

Gina: Well we use Google Analytics for our website and what we do is we really look at what are the pages that are most visited, how many unique visitors came to that page or came to the website, how long are they spending on the website. There are certain pages where we have what we consider our FAQ or our frequently asked questions. We want those pages to have a very minimal time on the website. They're coming, they're looking, they're getting their answer, and they're going.

But in other pages, we really are trying to help keep people on the website for just a little bit longer and we link to other related contents that maybe they'll bounce around. And they're interested in one thing, they'll go to another. And we're really just looking to see in those instances, are they spending the time on the site to read, to click through other links?

We've been tracking all of our links that send you to other pages internally as well as those links that send you to external pages. We have an online registration system. There are parks department and we're now tracking, if you come to the website looking for information on our park's programs, if you read about it on our website and click to go sign up, we're tracking that.

And if we see that people are going to the parks registration but their registration numbers aren't up, we look for how can we maybe explain it in a way that makes people register to really fill in that gap. It may be that we explained it but they didn't know that they then had to go and sign up and pay. Maybe we need to do a better job at explaining that.

And so we've been looking for any of those little tweaks that we can make and keep on improving our website and what we produce to really help spread the message.

David: So using analytics obviously to inform the content on the site and how it's organised and how it's arranged and how it's being consumed. But are you also using analytics to validate this approach, to present information to your bosses so as they're understanding just exactly the impact that you're having?

Gina: Correct.

David: And how do you go about that?

Gina: We produce monthly reports that we send out that have all the information as far as our web analytics; how many people came to the website, what are the page views that month, what was the bounce rate. But then we also take what our highest articles were, what our highest Twitter engagements were, what our highest Facebook posts were, and we really compile it into one report so that they can see that not only are people coming to our website and finding information that they need, they continuously come back and they're sharing our content across social media channels.

So it's been a great way for them to see the bigger picture, that it's great to put the content on the website, it's great to share across social media and to make videos, but how did all this tie together and just see that it all works cohesively together.

David:	And by the sounds of things, you're having quite a bit of success. Is that helping you perhaps to bid for more resources to strengthen your content marketing program?
Gina:	We are trying. We are in that budgeting process right now but no, I will say it's a double-edged sword because they also see that we're doing great with the resources that we have. So we keep trying to tell them that we could be doing more with more resources and they're just very impressed with what we've been able to do in a short period of time.
David:	So if you had more money, what would you spend it on?
Gina:	Another person.
David:	Okay.
Gina:	In all honesty, get another person that could really help facilitate a lot of the writing and to really be that liaison between our department and the other departments. I think that would be a great asset. Or if that wasn't the case, then honestly, I'd use the money on Google AdWords. We've been running a little bit of campaigns on Google AdWords to promote tourism and a little bit of economic development, and that's been very successful as well so I'd like to do more of that.
David:	And what about video? It's obviously the big mover, going to be massive growth in video across the web over the next--well, for the foreseeable future. How do you build in a video component when there's you, the graphic designer, the web master, and one other person? How do you go about creating the concept?
Gina:	He's our video and photographer. So we do have an in-house videographer that produces probably four to six videos per month minimum, in addition to filming all of our city council meetings and taking photos everywhere. So we are really looking at not just increasing the quality or increasing the quantity but really increasing the quality of the videos.
	He does a great job but we're looking at capturing local residents. We know that whenever we use them in our videos that they get shared more because people do like to share with their network when they're in a video. So we're looking up really how can we get more creative and how can we incorporate as much of the local community as possible and get out of our small studio.

David:	It sounds like you've got a great, well-balanced, multi-skilled team here, isn't it? You just really can't afford to have someone who doesn't have loads of skills as part of your newsroom there in the city of Bryan.
Gina:	Exactly. So we are very talented but that we each kind of have our own specialty that we work on. And then we all brainstorm together so we really do complement each other well.
David:	Okay, let's get some tips out on the table for people who are listening to think, "Well, this is a real, great, best practice example for us to be able to follow." So let's go through and look at some of the things that you really are the not-negotiables to get a content marketing program started within a local government area? So, how about you give us two or three of your best tips?
Gina:	Anything that you put on your website needs to be shareable. Don't just send out press release to your database, make it be on your website as well because those are great keywords. And don't rely on the news media to be the source for your own press releases. I think that's a good one.
	Look for the really compelling stories to be shared. We had an instance not too long ago where one of our guys on the street, he was fixing a drain and a woman came outside of her house to pull the trash out and he noticed that she was really cold. And it turns out that she didn't have any heat and it was a really cold day.
	So he called our public works dispatched, he contacted our community development team who was able to help reach out to a lot of the local non-profits and bring in a space heater and blankets to really help this woman get through a couple of really cold days. And that's a story that wouldn't have been shared without a program like ours, when we really went out looking for stories and looking for those moments to really captivate our audience.
	I would also look at making sure that your website is mobile-friendly. If it's not mobile-friendly, Google is now penalising even searches from people on mobile phones. Make sure that when you do write content that you grab a lot of the keyword-rich words and put them together so it really helps improve rankings because then more people will see you, especially if you're trying to bring attention to a new program. And I think that's more than two.
David:	That's fine. But just in terms of those keywords, I know people understand, yes, we've got to make sure that we have those keywords there, but really,

you would agree, I imagine that it's important that while those keyword's featured, but you really do need to make sure that you're writing for a human, not writing for a robot.

Gina: Exactly. And there's a way to deal with that, incorporates both. So, you want to make sure that you are using the keywords in a way that makes sense and is appropriate. You don't want to just be throwing in keywords that don't relate to the content.

David: And what about headlines?

Gina: Oh, headlines are very important. I come from the for-profit world and one of my responsibilities was marketing. And I used to test subject lines all the time. So there's a lot of little tips and tricks that I've picked up over the years and how-to's and list with numbers really do gain a lot of attention; four ways how to do this, four ways to do something.

          So we look for those and I'll write a list of about 20 different headlines before I'll publish to see which one I like the best. And sometimes we'll try it one way and the next article we'll try something a little bit different, see if that impacts it.

          I would love to be running a little bit more AB test but we don't really have that luxury currently. We don't have the amount of audience coming to our website on a day to day basis to AB test a headline on one story.

David: Yeah. Okay, got that. All right, well listen, we could go on and on and on. And as I say, there is always going to be so much to talk about. I think this distribution is another area of interest, collaborating with third party sites, do you any of that in terms of the content you create; getting it out from your own platform and getting it elsewhere where the audience may already be?

Gina: We're working on that. We definitely have some local partners that are sharing our content and we're looking to expand on that. That's kind of the next step that we're taking. This year was really about proving it out, next year it's definitely going to be about optimising and how to take what we're doing and expand our reach.

David: All right, Gina. Well listen, thank you so much for spending a little bit of time for us today and I think everyone listening out about, I think, today could

really sit back and think such a practical guide as to how to assemble your newsroom within your organisation.

I think what the city of Bryan can teach us is that you need multi-skilled people. You need someone who's got the web skills, who's got the video skills, who's got the photography skills, the multimedia skills, the graphic design skills, you need the writers, and you need to be curious.

I think one of the great insights from Gina is she loves to go and talk to people and she seeks those insights. She'd want to talk to the people who she's working with who are out in those citizen-facing roles where they're understanding and they're discovering what are the questions that are being asked.

Because if you can know the questions, you can create the content and you can satisfy and meet the needs of those citizens so they come back again, which is really the basis of content marketing. It's to continue to create that useful, relevant, valuable, and consistent content. It has to be consistent, this is not one-off. This is day after day after day.

And Gina gave us some great insight there about her content calendar. Yes, she gets blown off course like everybody who works in government communications. We can never anticipate what is coming down the turnpike. Things are always going to change, things are always going to get us moving in different directions.

But if you have the anchor of that content calendar, you know that you can have your base line of your story continuing to tick away and tick away and tick away and delight those audiences so as that you are really meeting the needs of the community, so you're strengthening their community and you're improving the well-being of citizens.

Gina Florence, thanks very much for joining us InTransition. Good luck to the Texas A&M team in the next football season. I'm sure you'll be very successful. And enjoy the rain and the beautiful season over there in Texas.

Gina: Great. Thank you so much for having me.