

---

## InTransition Episode 23 Alun Probert Transcript

David: Hello ladies and gentleman and welcome back to InTransition, the podcast that explores the practice of content marketing in government. My name's David Pembroke and I am truly delighted that you've given up some of your valuable time to be with me again today as we explore this very exciting practice of content marketing in government.

Interestingly enough ladies and gentleman, over the last couple of weeks we have started to see briefs coming out of Australian government departments about content marketing in government, which is really encouraging because I think the message is getting through that this is their future and this is where they need to take their practice of communication, in order that they can engage with citizens so we can solve some of the big problems not only here in Australia but around the world.

A special hello to everyone there in Washington DC, the biggest segment of our audience is in Washington and they tune in on Sunday night. I'm glad that you're tuning in and please tell your friends so we can continue to grow this audience.

As I do each week, I like to start with a definition of exactly what it is that we're talking about. Content marketing is a strategic business process that involves the creation, distribution and curation of useful, relevant and consistent content which is designed to meet the specific needs of an audience, in order that you can achieve a desired citizen or stakeholder action.

This week our guest is Alun Probert, who is the founder of the GovCom Group but he's also a very experienced government communicator. For nine years, he was the executive director of strategic communications in the New South Wales government and he had responsibility not only for digital policy but also advertising and he looked after and managed the New South Wales government and the New South Wales Premier's websites. And he had all the approvals in the world for advertising campaigns and managing the whole of government media context.

Prior to joining government, Alun worked in the magazine industry in Australia and overseas and was personally responsible for the launch of a number of

---

successful magazines including FHM and OK! in Australia. Alun, welcome and thanks for being InTransition.

Alun: David, thank you. It's good to be here and I look forward to talking.

David: Alun, what's your view? As we sit here in 2015, about midway through the year, looking at Australian government communications at the moment, how well are we doing?

Alun: I think the answer is going to be a bit oblique because lots of government departments are doing lots of great things. I think if you look at the work in particular of the emergency services, they're embracing social media because they're finding that social media listening tools through things like Instagram in terms of people tagging pictures is helping them to do their jobs better particularly in times of crisis.

Look at services in New South Wales and the recent enhancement service in Victoria; it's some really good customer centric work going on adopting new media. Then in the enormous business that government is in Australia and overseas, there are some pockets where things still aren't really moving as quick. I think one of the challenges that we have in terms of helping to accelerate the move is that governments are really big business and of course what works in one department might not work in another.

David: Doesn't that really open up the opportunity for content marketing when you consider that at the heart of content marketing is the identification of the audience that you are seeking to speak to and the ability to then consider and understand and ask questions so as it you're revealing their needs?

Alun: It's impossible to disagree with that and what's interesting for me, is that in my experience, government departments are the quickly adopting modern tools to help them do their jobs better.

As somebody that's kind of got a bit of grey hair and been around this thing for a while, I remember it wasn't that long ago we used to post out questionnaires to people and then have to wait six weeks for them to post them back and then another four weeks to get someone from the data delivery department to tell us what all the questionnaires said. The fact that now it's very simple to be having a conversation with your audience. This for me the widest open door there's ever been, compared to being a marketer as I was 20 years ago.

---

David: It's just the compelling utility of the new platforms and the ability to create or curate content and to distribute content. Why is it that you think though that away from as you say the FMCG equivalence of government, why is it that there is reluctance perhaps or resistance to embrace the utility of this new technology and the ability to create, curate and distribute content?

Alun: I think reluctance and resistance are two interesting concepts and I do think a bit too much time is spent on the sort of bureaucratic problem and I think what we're seeing across governments everywhere, worldwide is where a problem is there to be solved. Whether the group is being formed in the UK or the work is being done in the States but people are enabling digital tools.

One of the problems for government departments is it they aren't historically big collectors of consumer information. I have a little thing I do in keynote speeches where I'd ask you to describe all the different words that people use for the word "customer" in government. In previous podcasts, you've talked about this notion where the government people think they are in marketing. Whether they are or they aren't, the fact is what most government departments don't have a sort of 20 years of tracking data on their users' needs and wishes and wants because there hasn't really been a need to collect that data and it's out of that customer focus; that a solution has come.

If you don't know who your customers are, it's actually still hard to work and in media if you've no idea who you're talking to. I think there's a sort of need, must that drives change. What I see really changing; probably quicker than anything is this notion of putting the customer at the heart of things.

For me what that will bring is a clarity around who you're trying to reach and what are we trying to reach them with, the old "why us, why this, why now" for marketing from years ago. That will help departments to be clearer about the communication choices they make. As we both said, it's already happening in some of those emergency services type areas.

There is a brilliant piece of work being done in New Zealand at the moment where the public have been asked to design a new flag for New Zealand. It's [flag.co.nz](http://flag.co.nz), 1600 people have uploaded a flag design to a government website in last three weeks and how on earth have you done that without social media?

David: It's amazing, isn't it?

---

Alun: It's a 15 year project without social media. Sixteen hundred separate designs and I commend every listener to go and look at that site because it's a perfect example of real clarity in what you're trying to do.

David: Alun, I'll be government department, I've just rung GovCom's Group and I've got you Alun Probert on the end of the phone and we've made a time and now you've walked in the door and I'm saying, "Okay Alun, I got a problem. I know I need to update and I know I need to become more citizen focused. How do I this Alun?"

Alun: That's a question I get asked very regularly so I have a ready answer and I've got two answers. The flippant one is well it depends but the better version is what does success looks like? Those of us who have been around marketing know that that's a very common marketing question from the 1990s but I do find that two often people are embarking on campaigns because of the technology or because of "We've got a website, but we don't know what to do with it."

I find that the first thing that I can do to help a department is to say, "Give me an idea about how you'd like the world to look in 6 months' time? Do you want a dashboard on your desk, telling you what your customers think?" My experiences, that 90% of departments don't. "Do you want one website that entirely extolls your brand proposition of your department and allows you to publish flexibly at any time of day and to respond to people?" Yes everybody does.

The thing that's blocking that is that over the last 15 years everybody has launched loads of website. I think every State in Australia has now admitted that they have more than 3 or 400 separate URLs.

The first thing is I do is to say, "Tell me what success looks like in six months' time." It's a bit tedious but one of the first things I do is I remove the obstacles to doing that which are often legacy systems, government's model, the IT team still having the authority about when something's gets uploaded or not; really some of those things are the best keys for helping departments. Because to be honest, if a department is really clear about what he wants to do and has a CEO backing towards it, then the application of the technology, without making myself redundant is kind of quite straightforward.

---

David: What's your experience at the moment about the evolution of the role of ICT and the engagement with the communication's people?

Alun: Well, I think that's probably the nub of the reason why I left government to setup GovCom because I thought I could do this stuff better from the outside. Both of those roles, the overhead of communications and the head of IT; almost need renaming because that's so different to what they were five years ago. The communication's role which probably was centred more on public affairs and more on sort of producing press releases and the report. The IT role which was about having computers on people's desk and making sure the system didn't crash. There's a new world which neither of those two roles really can specialise in one without the other.

My positioning with all of my clients is it actually it all starts in the CEO's office. The CEO has a point of view about whether they want their website content to be update hourly, daily, weekly, monthly. CEO has point of view about the social media position of the organisation.

It's then the IT guy's job in the most simplistic way to provide the tools to make it happen and the most cost effective, appropriate, safe; all those things. It has increasingly become the communication officer duty to produce content that's compelling and interesting and engaging and in line with the branding philosophy of that organisation.

I think that's the most significant difference about that is that both of those jobs are based on the organisation's communications and branding needs rather than the functional needs of serving distribution of press releases or provision of IT services. It's hardly new roles and lots of brilliant people in the IT area are coming all over to the communications side and vice versa. The best run departments I've seen are those that have brilliant people with both skills in the same room. There are a couple of departments in New South Wales where that's the case and it works brilliantly.

David: What you're saying though is that the answer really is in the CEO's office?

Alun: Well the answers are always in the outcome. There's a big difference between the provision of a tool like Facebook and the content that goes on it and every CEO must be aware of the content that's on their Facebook page. However, they don't need to be the person deciding where it's hosted.

---

David: At the moment though, it's fair to say that the organisation or structures that are in place predominately still have those traditional structures in place and they are by far and away the dominant structure that is still in place?

Alun: Yes. I think the challenge that faces departments is if you start with structure then you build on what you've already got. I have enormous sympathy but not much knowledge of the world of IT today because all I see is IT is 10 times broader than it was 10 years ago and it's probably going to be another 10 times broader in about half an hour or so because it's moving so fast.

For me it's all about organisational structure which says there are some government organisations for which front of mind, top level, customer communication isn't a priority. For some organisations simply having all the information available to access might be good enough. It's not a given that every organisation has to be at the cutting edge of modern communications.

But the point being of course, that the structure of the organisation increasingly has to be designed around those needs. The fact of life is that most organisations are designed around a different model. My experience in the private sector is no different because of the transition from printer paper magazines to publishing magazines online. I'm still not sure anybody's cracked it to be honest, but this isn't straightforward stuff.

You got to keep on coming back to why we're here, what do we do and what are the services we provide to our customers. And for me the phrase that I found myself using most often towards the end of my role in Primary Cabinet; was about improving service delivery; about making things better for people who are accessing our services and whether that's short of waiting times are going completely digital. It is a case by case basis for each of the individual approaches.

As I've said before my worst case solution is that somebody said, "Here's our government department should be run."

David: It's interesting as you're speaking. I'm listening to the language that you're using. Just how important is language. You're not using citizen; you're using customer. Service delivery is obviously well-applied in government because they understand about the delivery of services program, etc. But just how important is language?

---

Alun: Well, this is a personal opinion. I don't think language is ever been more important because everybody's attention spans are shorter. I think in 10 years in working in government, probably one of the things that I had to most adjust to, after 25 years of working in commercial business, was people start off expecting it to be hard.

What I found is just simply by being straightforward about language you can simplify things and almost have a double positive effect by starting off just taking out some of the language that make things hard to follow. All of us just want life to be easy and I think where all of us are consuming more media than ever before. All of the work that I've ever done is been about making things easy to understand.

David: I want to get back to our consulting session. We've solved the problem what we're going to do and we got the ICT and the communications people are talking together and we've got a clear view about what's going on.

I want to get into this content marketing business. What do I do now? I've got all this content laying around, how do I assess what's worth and what's not worth it and what's going to make the cut and what's get publish and what doesn't get publish?

Alun: Well, this is where it all starts to fall into place for me because one of the things that were similar in working in the private sector to the public sector is good times spent on deciding the strategic objectives of the organisation. If the communication plans are aligned to the strategic objectives of the organisation, then the job of the communication department is to choose the best medium for delivering that in terms of what that content might be or what that ambition might be.

The second thing I look at with my clients which is again, another one of kind of hangovers of the modern age is I talk to them about their government structures and what happens if they're going to embark in any kind of interactive media. What happens if somebody makes a comment at 3'o clock on a Sunday afternoon or indeed at the middle of the night if they're inviting open engagement with their content?

I'm always keen for people to get it online; always keen for people to invite comment, as I would put it to start a conversation rather than do some market research. But the first thing I do is I just make sure that the

---

department fully understands that before you take a step into new media; you have to think about how are you going to manage it. Because again, I'm probably saying obvious to me and to people listening to this podcast, but something I found I often come across with new departments, people haven't thought through the fact that actually they can't control what people are going to say.

David: How do you get over that problem?

Alun: Well look, that's often where things are going to a halt because as a consultant, my only position I can take is to say, "You need to be forewarned and forearmed on this because all of my experience is if you try to pre-moderate content in any kind of media nowadays; the number of people contributing will significantly fall and you have to allow open discussion.

In my experience in New South Wales, the last four or five years there has been a large willingness towards that because people understand that you learn through open discussion. And there's less and less fear of someone saying something bad, in my experience people are kind of grown up about forums nowadays.

But what I do is always alert people to the worst that could happen before we start because I definitely don't want to be that person cleaning up the mess after an unforeseen thing has happened because nobody knew it would happen. It's a reality that the world doesn't work from 9 until 5 Australian time. So you really have to have a plan in place.

Having people moderating content through the night is sometimes an extreme situation and again many people listening to this will be very familiar with this, but you moderate the way forums behave with language that asks people to moderate it themselves. So if you ask for respect and you give people clear indications of the sort of contributions you're looking for. In my experience is been that was government departments quite rightly are nervous about the public comment that actually if they can put their nervousness to one side and de-risk it but then an awful lot of magical things happen.



---

David: In terms of building that support through the ministerial offices because the reality of government is that you do need political buy in. What do you do to try to achieve that buy in?

Alun: My experience has been that anything that you're doing that has any risk involve with it, has to be well-reserved, well-thought through and well-explained with a real benefit. My experience has been that when I go to somebody with an idea that has a clear purpose, a clear outcome with the risk clearly understood; then people at every level have an opportunity to say yes or no.

My job in New South Wales Government was not to take up ideas that I didn't believe in myself and I think there's the novice. It's the job of the senior comes people nowadays, to structure something so everybody understand the risk but also everybody understands why it's a good thing to do. I was saying I was hesitating of my answer because what I was going to say is actually I found in the last four or five years in particular, ministers extremely supportive because we're increasingly working with ministers who themselves are people who've come to their jobs through the digital age and people with their own websites, people on Twitter.

I haven't found resistance at ministerial level. In fact if anything, I've found that ministers are keen to use new media because it's such a great way of finding out what people are saying.

David: We've gone through the preliminary part of the process, we've got the buy in, we've alerted to everyone to the risks, we've got everyone heading in the right direction and really going you're really your answers. You keep returning to this notion of the customer and understand the needs of the customer. What's your technique or what techniques do you use to discover those real key insights that are going to drive the content program.

Alun: Well, that's the \$64 Million question. I think the difference nowadays is it you learn every day. It's probably based on a product or a service and so if you're announcing a new service that you've already decided you're going to provide them; that's where your content can invite people to comment.

But more commonly, I'm a big fan of this idea about putting stuff out on public debate and using new techniques compared to, all of us have sat, waited through questionnaires to take a half an hour to fill in. I think the

---

notion of the two and three question, questionnaire is underused and one that I find works very well in government; you're going to ask a couple of questions and then a couple weeks later, you ask a couple more.

With the cabinet of course, some government websites in Australia and probably the same worldwide are getting a million hits a month.

David: Yeah, massive.

Alun: So there's an audience out there. It's not like you're talking to the same person every day.

David: Yeah.

Alun: I think if you look at something like transport info, the transport New South Wales' website; they're basically showing us how to get from A to B. Millions hit a month; if you can have them on pop-up that asks a couple of questions.

So for somebody who's kind of started as marketing life in research, it's almost a dream where you sort of ask two questions a day and two more tomorrow. And then there's a sort of excite guys thing which is that sometimes an idea comes together through a combination of technology and an idea.

There's a brilliant thing in New South Wales Health where people can find out the average weight in time at their nearest hospital so they can make a choice about which one to go to. Based on one's 30-minute drive or be an hour or way till one's 15 minutes' drive, it's probably 2 hours or one's 45 minutes' drive and there's no weight. Those kinds of things then become really easy to communicate because they're compellingly good.

I think this is really where it get enough of it is if you got nothing to say and if you haven't got any way of improving the way people interact with you, well then you have to go back and come up with some stuffs that does do that and then communicate it. I wouldn't reserve regardless of content marketing special in any way other than; if you not got interesting to say then really it's a waste of time saying anything at all. Because when none of us has time to consume more media than we already do.

And a really lovely example I think of the way people consume government media is in New South Wales and the same in every state in Australia, people

---

get a driving license every three years. Now for most people, that's the only time that they interact with government; for many people. Families interact with education website but it's not like a frequent fly's thing. For lot of government websites, people aren't coming back every day.

For me it's about have you got something engaging, interesting that is likely to interest a significant proportion of your audience. From there, the communication experts can help themselves and write the good headlines, find the right media and as one of your previous podcasters had said, "You have no bones what so ever in telling the story 50 times." If indeed there are 50 different channels to tell it through because that's kind of the business we're in.

I think it's almost like the communication is the easy bit once you've line up all of the dots; which is you got a really clear understanding about your customers, a really clear proposition that you want to offer and then a very clear understanding about how you frame it in terms of what outcome you want. From there, it comes easy again.

David: But you still have to create then the high quality compelling content. So you have to be able to write the headline, write the story, take the photo, make the video, and create the podcast. How well do you government is positioned to create high quality content?

Alun: That's also a fascinating question and I was doing some work recently with Gavin Scott as the head of ABC here and he was saying that as government provide him with really good content he's happy to use it across the ABC framework because he's got 24-hour news and a digital channel. And so I think there some areas where there's opportunity for government to publish its own content and produce high quality animations of new transport projects or whatever.

But I also think that the other level, there's argument for producing a 150 words of well written content that makes people go, "Alright! I didn't know that." And to be honest, there's an awful lot of journalist and editorial talent out there.

I personally because I came from the publishing world, I use to surround myself with people who are good writers and let them write good content rather than try and squeeze it through some sort of corporate public sector

---

sausage machine; which nobody really wanted. I don't think there's any different.

I've got a very strong view that public sector market and private sector marketing have never been so similar as they are now because you're competing for attention and you got to be relevant to your customer. Nobody is sitting, waiting for the next pronouncement from a government website.

David: And the final piece of the puzzle, how do we measure and evaluate?

Alun: It's a) the most fundamental thing and b) in the time that I managed government advertising spending, it reduced from a \$100 million to \$65 million over a ten year period because we were finding new media that was more effective, we moved all our recruitment advertising from print onto online, and saved a heap of money but more importantly it was more effective.

In amongst all of those changes that affected all of us, the one principle of marketing that we haven't lost is you have to know what success looks like before you embark on the campaign. Where I see people really struggle is working at how to measure something that they haven't worked out what they were going to measure beforehand. It's simplistic, but common to every single piece of consulting I've done. I encourage people to have a really clear idea about what they want to get out of it. Sometimes it can be the 200 people come and sit on a forum, sometimes it can be that people turn out to an event or sometimes people could vote for something.

You have to create the model for people to show that they've taken part. Downloading documents for example, that seems so one dimension and simplistic, but if your ambition is to get a hundred people to download a document you have to be able to prove it. Thinking back to old media, we had no idea who had seen them, we had no idea whether it worked.

I'm keen on the notion that if you set yourself really clear ambitions about what you want to achieve like people signing up for a newsletter then when you achieve that piece of work, you give it a tick and you move on to the next one. Today, communications isn't about running into the market with \$10 million and do a little bit advertising once a year. It's about 52 weeks of the year, consistently supplying the information that people need and whatever format they need them.

---

Some department offering RSS as feeds to information, some are offering podcasts. So it's all about where do you want to be and if you want 500 people to download your document; then you stall your whole piece of thinking and design around the value of downloading that document. Simplicity keeps output but so little of that thinking goes beforehand.

And of course, we come from the world where we used to test pre and post awareness; did people see the ad or not? If we spent a couple million dollars on television, they haven't seen the ad; I probably don't have a job.

It's always been about and what did they do as a result of seeing the ad. We've never been in a better place than we are today because on our websites, through our engagement platforms, through platforms like Facebook we can ask people, we can get people to tell us what they thought about the ad, they can tell us what they've done differently.

I mentioned New Zealand earlier, I have no equity partnership in New Zealand, but they've got a thing online at the moment saying, "Tell us what you stand for." And people are uploading to a random government website their own words around what New Zealand stands for, all that's happened is New Zealand government have asked the question.

This really sums the whole thing for me that whatever you want to achieve; if you've got real clarity about your outcome and if you got a comfort with the risk; then it's never been easier and importantly never been cheaper to go and talk to your audience. Success is just doing it and then doing more of it.

David: It's fabulous, isn't it? It's so exciting. Every day I wake up, I just get so pumped to be involved particularly in government communications because I'm not matching to the FMCG, the private sector, the consumption stuff but really in government communications it simply matters. If you can get the government communication right; you can actually have a material impact on the quality of life of the citizens and communities that you're engaged with.

Alun: It's a really, really lovely live example and as you say I went from a world of working on men's magazine and women's magazines and stuff that didn't really matter at all to working on the fantastic programs of the Cancer Institute in New South Wales; which is seen the number of smokers in New South Wales dropped from 22% of the population to 15% in the last 10 years.

---

Now not only is that a good thing. It saves the health department a fortune in terms of looking after people with long term illness. As a non-smoker myself it means that the streets are cleaner and the air is cleaner and that's clearly a good thing.

Now all of that has come about through really clear communication, clear policy levers and a concerted effort by the government to reduce the numbers of people smoking in the state. It's the same thing that's happening in every state in Australia because the Cancer Institute is a federated group across the country.

David: I have a thesis that we are coming into the golden age of communications and it's never going as important. It will be almost fundamentally, the most important thing that government does is to communicate effectively because of the change and the way technology change and the way people's habits have changed and the way the fact that everyone is carrying around high-powered computer in their pocket; so you can get a hold of them.

But now, the communicators are going to be the ones that are going to be in control. Would you agree with that?

Alun: I think like most coming trends, it's already happening around us and it's only when you stop and think. For example this morning, in glorious beautiful Sydney, it's raining and I was on public transport and I have a thing in my pocket that tells me what time the next train is. Now that's government communication.

So I'm not getting wet, it's not inconvenient, the train's coming in two minutes time because the app on my phone from the government tells me so. If there was one thing about government communication that I wish everyone understood is that example is what we do. We make that information available so that people catching public transport on an awful morning like today aren't having to stand in the rain. Ten years ago, what would we have had? We had a printed timetable maybe in our pocket or who knows?

David: At best.

Alun: Yeah, at best and that gets wet pretty quickly in the rain. So, it's perhaps a little trite but it's also absolutely on the money which is the massive advances that have been made in delivering those things.

---

It's about making the lives of the people in the state better and it's about doing it together and finding a way. I agree with you. I also think that we're going through a change whereby people are increasingly happy to help the public good and this kind of notion, of the kind of yes is to notion of government as I increasingly I think disappearing into the background as government does better and better things.

I have a personal crusade, with all of my friends on Twitter and every other media to get people to talk about the good things that are happening in government rather than talking about the odd things that go wrong. And I think it would be a terrific thing if we could just all work together to really collaborate on all the great things that are happening.

David: Alun, so much more to talk about. I think there's a massive opportunity and I know in the UK, they've been doing some interesting things in that space, but we have run out of time today. Thank you very much for coming in and sharing your insights and giving us that consulting session; that was really valuable. I know people will have got some great value out of that, I know I did. So thank you very much, you are very kind, very generous with your time.

Another great addition of InTransition. I think we are in such an interesting time for communicators. Thanks very much for everyone listening in again today and we'll see you next week.