In Transition episode 25 - John Sheridan

David: Well, hello ladies and gentlemen wherever you may be listening around the world. My name is David Pembroke and thanks again for joining us, InTransition; the podcast dedicated to the practice of content marketing in government.

I'm very pleased to be with you again today and I have to say that I'm having so much fun bringing you the insights and the wisdom of some of the most interesting people in the world of content marketing in government.

Some of you might not be aware but I spent 10 years as a reporter for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in both current affairs and sport. And one of the things I really, really loved about that job was the role that you got to talk to people every day. And that's what this podcast is all about; it's conversations with interesting people.

And today, I've got a real treat for you; a great character of the Australian government. But before I do introduce my guest, you know what's coming, it's definition time. Because while content marketing is an old practice, it's a new name and it's fair to say that people are still familiarizing themselves with just exactly what it is.

And one of the other issues for a government audience is the word "marketing." Marketing is considered by many to be something that the private sector does in selling things, products, goods, and services. But as we all know, the challenge of selling the benefits of ideas, decisions, policies, and programs to citizens is fundamentally at the heart of the work of any democratically-elected government. And as we know in Australia, it is perhaps the current government's biggest challenge.

So to the definition which is an adaptation of the Content Marketing Institute's definition of content marketing and that is, "That 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 a desired citizen or stakeholder action."

So to today's guest, I promised you a character and here he is. Mister John Sheridan, the Australian government's chief technology officer. Now there is much that we will explore today with John, including the growing importance of the link between government storytelling and information technology.

	But before we get to that, rather than me go through the John Sheridan story, John, why don't you tell us the part of history of how it is that you got to be here today?
John:	I'm very happy to. The story starts I think with working in the army for a very long period of time, 22 years. At the end of that work, I moved sideways into defence in to the public service. I continued in the Defence Science and Technology Organization for a couple of years, six years I think, all up in uniform and out.
	And then I went to the defence senior executive service into IT. I worked there for a couple of years. And then in 2008, came across to finance to work in the hall of government IT area where I've really stayed since 2008.
David:	What did the life in army teach you?
John:	I think it teaches you, first of all, that there are reasons to follow processes and procedures but they are really a guideline, the boundaries in which you can work. There's lots of room in the army I think for using your initiative for checking out new ways of doing things, for exploring options and doing that sort of stuff.
	Those things are actually really encouraged in the army. And I think the ability to do that, knowing of course that no one joins the army without the notion that they'll have to do what they're told, but within those broad boundaries, there's lots of scope for doing things and I really liked that. And I think the public service can be very much the same.
David:	Were you always interested in technology?
John:	Yeah, I built my first computer unsuccessfully when I was 12. And I learned a lot about project management, soldering, a range of procurement, a range of issues like that.
David:	And has it been that real passion that's real passion that's driven you, that love of technology, that's driven your career?
John:	So I really like technology but I mean, I've been lucky in my career both in the army and the public service to have really good jobs pursuing what I like doing. And I've been passionate about all of them, I don't think I've ever had a job I didn't like or a subject to work with that I wasn't passionate about.
David:	But now, what a job that you've got now. You are the chief technology officer for the Australian government, tremendous job.

John:	Well, it is. I think it's a very good job and I particularly enjoy it. It has lots of scope for doing a range of things. The way that the CTO role is dining different organizations and in dating different governments, varies quite considerably. My job concentrates around providing hall of government services in IT, things that all departments might use, and also procuring things centrally so that all departments can get the benefits of aggregation of demand and economy of scale and things like that.
	So it's a slightly different job. For example, in the CTO in the US government who's an advocate for technology as a relatively small staff and he's the advisor to the president.
David:	Okay, let's jump right into this. Why don't technology people like marketing people?
John:	We like to be like everybody else.
David:	What do you mean by that?
John:	No one likes marketing people.
David:	Right out, let's unpick that. Why? What particular parts of it--
John:	So I'm really against generalizations.
David:	Okay.
John:	There are people who work in IT and increasingly these days, they might not have started in IT and they might not have finished in IT. So I don't think the notion that you can be identified as an IT person is a particularly strong one. I really like the Big Bang Theory but we're not all nerds. It's just not like that.
	People use IT increasingly all the time now. If you look at the way--I've got three kids, 19, 21, and going on 26. You look at what they're doing with technology, they have the same interest in technology and they use it as a tool, just as you or I would drive a car. Now some people know what happens under the bottom of the car, some people know to put petrol in and there are a range of people who don't even know that, but they're still able to drive them and things like that.
	The attitudes that people have to technology today is much more than it's a tool. As you mentioned the notion of being held to do your own content in a little studio like this with technology, empowered by that. It's almost as an aside, the things that you can do on it, on an iPhone or an Android phone or something like that today.

That amount of computing technology that's available to people who don't need to understand IT is enormous and I think that's useful to realize that there are these whole way of working through technology that doesn't require you to be an IT person precisely.

David: But perhaps, I suppose that what I'm trying to get at is that marketing storytelling function within government and technology. Increasingly, they're going to come together because marketing will become a technology business or it increasingly a technology business.

But there seems to me anyway a bit of tension and it's not just in the public service, it's just everywhere that there seems to be perhaps a lack of understanding that the ICT people don't quite understand what the marketing people are doing and the marketing people really don't quite understand what the IT people are doing. And therefore, there's a little bit of a disconnect as we move down this path being all driven along by technology. And therefore, perhaps we're not working as effectively and efficiently as we need to as we take on this great gift of technology where we all can be publishers and we can all create content and go direct to the audiences that we're seeking to engage.

John: There's no doubt I think that we can always do things better in terms of efficiency or effectiveness. I think most people in business these days, whether it's government or outside government realize that just about every job is a selling job at some time or another. You're always going to be advocating for a policy that you believe in or an organization, arrangement, or a change or a disruption. You're going to have a role in selling your story. And a lot of that is about marketing in a positive sense I think, not in some of the negative connotations that you might see in other circumstances.

So all those jobs are involved in those things. And as I said, I think some of those lines becoming a bit blurred as a consequence of that, yes. Can we learn from space list in particular fields? Yeah, of course we can.

David: How well do you think technology is being propagated across the public service as a way of being able to help the government to tell its story?

John: So I think there's a whole range of use of technology, from very simple things to very advanced things across government. I think, you wouldn't be surprised to hear me say that I think, government and the public service does its job very well. There are demanding circumstances of it, there are things one has to do in order to satisfy the executive government, the elected government of what needs to be done, and things like that.

But I think technology plays a good part in working across those things. Now, the nature of technology that the cycles of change that are involved in it, the notion. You can be aware of your mobile phone, the chances of it being changing every year in terms of it being updated or something like that, really drives these pressure for new technology.

And indeed, referring back to marketing for a moment, you can see how sometimes, that marketing can confuse people because they can be selling the latest shiniest thing sometimes when it's still being assembled in the factory, wherever it is. And people can be asking why haven't you brought this or why haven't you brought that in?

Well it might not be the most effective and efficient use of public money to do some of those things. Some things can work for some considerable time. And I think we see that in terms of priority selling across government to make sure that we make appropriate technology decisions and employing new technologies at the right time, not just at the first opportunity.

David: What's some advice that you might give to the marketing and storytelling people across governments not only here on Australia but around the world? What are some of the things they need to understand about the changes in technology in order that they can do their job better?

John: Well I think, I'm a bit loathe to give advice to people generally about these sort of broad subjects. But the first thing I'd say is, first of all, recognize that people like you, marketing people in other companies in other technology companies, are doing their best to sell their products. And in selling their products, maybe they're harping them up just a bit.

And maybe some of the real things you read in the business news, business magazine, in the airport lands, some of the things you see in technology websites, things like that, may just be overplaying the good and underplaying the bad in terms of doing things.

The question is, I think, well what can you be using technology for? There are new opportunities everyday in using technology. The notion of, and I think it's a good one, of being your own publisher, the notion that government, for example, is in a position now to, instead of the old prices of the minister's office releases a media release, which then is absorbed by journalists and they write a story around that, may pick the bits they like out of it and stuff like that and produce their own content. And the public get to see that and really see the media release itself.

Now of course, that methodology has changed. And government, both ministers and in the public service and departments, have an ability now to

use, well actually, social media channels to get that message out undiluted by the buyers, that's good or bad of the reporter, in the middleman.

I like the analogy that says in the sort of 70's and 80's, we did a lot of work in the public service. And we've been across the world in pulling out middle management about saying, "This is a bunch of people who aren't adding particular value, even that we can now reporting strings that runs right up to the executive and things like that." We don't need that middle liar.

Now I think, to a certain extent, that sort of journalism, middle liar, that doesn't provide--doesn't add value, if you like--but all provide some sort of undeclared buyers. That liar, there's still a certain extent not necessary for government in order to get its message out now. And that provides all sorts of new advantages that we didn't have previously.

David: And what are some of the challenges that we're taking and making best use of that particular gift of being able to go direct?

John: Well the first is the obvious, the notion of going to something directly means it reduces the number of steps there are to catch the mistakes. And I think that's probably the obvious one. What do we know about what gets reported generally? You don't read the news to hear good stories about government. People don't come to government websites to enjoy themselves or those sorts of things.

They're going to government websites for a service and they want that service as quickly as they can get it. They want it very, very clear. They want a great user experience and I want to go and get on with their lives. What that sort of notion that you'll get this in-depth discussion or something going on isn't going to occur in that way.

So you need to craft your message in government very carefully to make sure that you're hitting those points, that you understand what it is that you're doing. When mistakes are made, you need a mechanism to cover that mistake and think, "Well, okay. Yes, we made a mistake, what have we done about this? We've done these things immediately." That's the way it goes.

And you need to realize, of course, that it's much more likely that those mistakes are going to be reported than the 99.9% of the time that you're doing good work for the public.

David: How well do you think the Australian government, in particular, are doing that at the moment; taking this opportunity to go direct?

John:	Well, so I'm going to talk just about what the public service is doing in that regard clearly. But for the avoidance of doubt, I'm not talking about what the government in the sense of administers or anything like that is doing at all.
	So I think the public service is increasingly using these things to get the message across and to contact people. There are some really good examples in the Department of Human Services where dealing with social media has allowed them to get the message out to their clients, citizens, stakeholders, however you want to do it, in a range of ways.
	Hank Jongen, the spokesman for DHS, is a great user of social media. There are some really good Facebook pages run by government organizations to get those messages across and to tag those sorts of audiences. And I think we're seeing that increasingly.
	The number of Twitter accounts there are in DFAT for example, not quite one per embassy or something like that, I don't have the exact number in my head. But there's a lot of network and people using that to get messages out about what's going on, the things that they're responsible for, and how to send those messages out to their client groups. And there's a whole bunch of things like that.
David:	And I watched you in a podcast, you mentioned, I think it was the Australian Bureau of Statistics. I think through the last census, they've done some great work.
John:	Yeah, since 2011.
David:	Yeah.
John:	Which is up running again, that Twitter account.
David:	Yeah, great.
John:	Putting out good stuff, yeah.
David:	And tourism Australia, fabulous. The platform that they've built and the way that they use content to engage people is fabulous. You know, really, really world leading.
John:	We say all the time that their sites get the most Twitter responses and things like that. They're doing a great job.
David:	Yeah. Okay, just to sort of waving ourselves back towards the sort of technology campaign and again, trying to talk to the audience now about

getting them to understand how important technology is to marketing as people increasingly want personalization, they want better services.

Marketing automation is a massive issue that's emerging not just in the public service but everywhere around the world. What's your views about marketing automation and how it will be integrated into the processes and the technology processes of government?

John: I think the interaction between sort of marketing, data, or about your potential clients and the use of technology to move those things around is really quite interesting. The notion of your favourite online bookstore, knowing what it is that you buy and being able to send you emails to say, "Well you might be interested in this."

Now, there are people who clearly don't like that notion. They see it as a bit big brother-ish and stuff like that. But, gee, I don't know, it suits me. For example, we're seeing examples now, I think, overseas where there are billboards, electronic billboards that can actually pick up the passer-by and say, "Hey you in the black Mercedes, wouldn't you rather be driving an Audi or something like that?"

Those sorts of things and that notion of content changing to make the users is a really interesting one. Now the challenge, I think, for marketers in that regard is given these technology resource, given this ability to quite personalize things to that, how do you manage that without running into these progress issue? Without making sure that you've done things the right way?

There's a famous discussion in this area of the chain store, the department store in the US town who sends the brochure out to this family about things that women in their second trimester of pregnancy might need to a 15-year old. And the father goes in really mad with the store, store's really upset, comes back a week later and says, "Well actually it turns out you know more about my daughter than I did."

This notion of using that big data affect to see trends in customers, to see what people do, if they buy this, they buy that, this is what motivates them to do things, this is what attracts them. There's an enormous amount of potential to get that but we have to balance this and the government has to particularly balance this need of privacy and reasonableness, avoid intruding unnecessarily into people's lives around those sorts of things. So it's a delicate balance.

David: Yeah, it's a tricky one. How then do you manage that? What's the framework do you think to manage that?

John:	Well, so we have, this is in my area of expertise, but the Australian privacy principles that govern what government does and indeed government would help on to other organizations to as well. But govern what the public service does are at about how we use data for those for a whole range of things.
	What you can do with data, what access you have to give to people through data, how they might be required--might want to verify it and test those sorts of things. So there's a range of rules that are really quite clear around what can go on in that area.
David:	Yeah and just in terms of data, and I think for a lot of journalists, storytellers, marketers, mathematic, you're in that business because you're probably not sort of mathematically inclined. What's your view in how to sort of get better at trying to use the technology to find those insights that are going to allow you to create better content?
John:	So I think there's a category that we see more now of. Three or four years ago, you'd hardly see little of the data journalist who might be reporting on those sorts of things, who's able to take some of the open data that we provide online through data.gov.au and make, draw conclusions about that, make assumptions about what's occurring and where the government is spending its money, for example, or what's happening in particular areas and make sorts of decisions around that.
	Now, is there an easy answer to doing this yourself? Maybe. There are lots of sources of available open data for things, but of course, some of these, not in a government sense so much but in the sense of what organizations might want to protect these particularly important to them, there's stores of data that are very important to them.
	And I think you've got to recognize that some of that's not going to be accessible. I mean, it may will be that that store of customer data is the equivalent in the 2010's or whatever the decade we're in now, is that you might have got when you're buying the good will store now, I mean 2000--in 90 or something like that. That notion that this is new form of good will that you're tapping into and it's a very valuable resource.
David:	Just in terms of--just maybe perhaps draw your attention away for a moment from domestically and what's happening here in Australia, I know in the UK, there's been a massive transformation project in the public service across all sorts of areas. In your particular area of interest, what's your views on what's going on in the UK and do you believe that they are leading the way?

Because I certainly believe that in the storytelling communications space, they've made enormous steps forward in the last few years. But would you see it as the same way in the digital technology space?

John: So if you look at what the government digital service, what Mike Bracken and Liam Maxwell have done over there, they've certainly changed the way that information and services are being presented to the public. They've also, as it happens, being empowered to do a lot of work in saving money in terms of IT and things like that.

Something that frankly, in that sort of money sentences, the Australian government was well ahead in that regard. We didn't have a lot of the issues they had with expenditure and procurement. But putting those aside, this digital space, the notion of addressing what it is that people want and providing it to them quickly is very important.

You might be familiar with the notion of the bounce rate on websites. The question is, how long are people on the page for, what are they doing, and things like that. So one of the stories early on in the work that was done in gov.uk was recognizing though the analysis of data, through looking at what happens, that a lot of people were coming to the site and searching for the VAT rate, the GST tax rate.

And they discovered this and said, "Well okay, we've got some of the people search the net, we'll put it on the front page." So if you go through the government site to find the VAT Right. There it is, blinking right in front of you. Got it, right, I've got that. I'm off.

Now you know what dwelling on the page, you don't have to search or anything else like that. It's there, it's this notion of providing the service, giving the people what they want in a really good user experience, and moving back out again. And I think that's fine.

Most people aren't going to be coming to government services and I think the government at the UK guys realize this. Browsing from the top down necessarily to find something, they're going to type what they want into their favourite search engine, they're going to come in laterally in a site in order to find that service or that information, they want to get that right away and go back out again. And I think that's the sort of lesson we're learning about that.

David: Yeah, and in terms of adapting, learning from the UK, will Australia be following that model, do you believe?

John: Well we work quite closely with our colleagues over there. We've exchanged lots of discussions, I've met Mike and Liam several times here and there and

talked them. We talk on the phone to them and via email, stuff like that, regularly. And a lot of my colleagues are doing work in this area as well.

So it's clearly something that the government wants us to do, it's pre-election commitments around digital services and digital service offerings are very clear. And we're all working to improve those things.

David: Fantastic. Okay, so what's next? What's the sort of focus for John Sheridan and his team over the next, say, six to twelve months in terms of technology and perhaps in terms of technology as it relates to telling the government story?

John: Yeah, so we're doing a lot of work in Australia.gov.au at the moment. We have the beta site up that people can go and look at. We've put that platform and I guess we're doing a bit of a deep diving to technology now. We moved Australia.gov.au onto the Drupal open source web content management platform in 2013. We then moved it to the public cloud in November 2014.

And we're expanding the what we call Gov CMS which is a hall of government, not mandated, but a hall of government content management system based in Drupal in the public cloud that allows agencies to get their websites up, better looks after the security for them, looks after the accessibility for them, gives them, helps them with the sort of areas of user experience and things like that.

And that's making a big difference, we've got ASADA is one of the client agencies doing the preliminary work us now and we look like in February being able to open that offering up quite widely for government agencies.

David: Exciting times in technology. It's exciting times in technology. John Sheridan, thanks very much for coming in and being InTransition today. Really appreciate your time and thanks very much.

John: Thank you.