
InTransition – Episode 41 Chris Rottler

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to another episode of In Transition, the podcast that explores the practice of content marketing in the public sector. My name is David Pembroke, and I'm thrilled that you joined me again today as we discuss this absolutely fascinating subject of content marketing in the public sector. Today, we are going to really dive into an area, which I know many of you are absolutely fascinated by because this is part of what we have to get our heads around in terms of analytics and being able to measure.

Before we get to our guest, it's definition time. Content marketing is a strategic business process that involves the creation, curation, and distribution of useful, relevant, and consistent content. It's designed to meet the specific needs of an identified audience. The objective is to achieve a desired citizen or stakeholder action.

Our guest today is the Head of Digital Analytics at the US Peace Corps, Chris Rottler. Prior to Chris working at the Peace Corps, he was Vice President of Digital Strategy and Analytics at Weber Shandwick, a Digital Consultant at Booz Allen Hamilton, where he worked across a range of public sector portfolios. Chris joins us today from Washington, DC. Chris, thanks for being in transition.

Chris Rottler: Good to be here, David. Thanks for having me.

David Pembroke: Chris, this is the great challenge, isn't it? Analytics and being able to measure the value of the content that you are able to create. Where is your starting point for how you measure and evaluate the effectiveness of communication programs?

Chris Rottler: Great question. We start by establishing what we call "smart goals." It's not really a new concept. It's used in a lot of academic sectors, but it's just assuring that your goals are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound in the context of the marketing communication initiatives that you're doing. It starts there, and then it ... an organisation needs to identify key performance indicators that connect to those goals in order to really assess the effectiveness of the initiatives that you're rolling out.

David Pembroke: In terms of putting in place those smart objectives, those smart communication objectives, how do you link those to an organisation or policy objective that may be driving the whole of the communication program?

Chris Rottler: Yeah, sure. Here at the Peace Corps, our goals are fairly simple. We send out volunteers into the field around the world, so attracting applications from college students and people who are interested in volunteering abroad is one of our main objectives. In that sense, that's an organisational goal that we can simply link to our marketing communication and the customer journey throughout our website and our online engagements.

David Pembroke: Looking at that big overarching objective, and that's pretty easy to understand, how would you then start to break down some of those communication objectives driving back to that north star of being able to get more people signing up to the Peace Corps.

Chris Rottler: Right. First, it's about segmenting our audiences, and then developing content that's tailored to them. In terms of measurement, the way that we do it in terms of our marketing communication, we categorise all our content. It's important to categorise the content. I think through the categories when developing our editorial calendar, our monthly and weekly testing plans. We typically categorise our content through three buckets. This allows us to see what content categories are performing best each month in relation to the key performance indicators that we're tracking and systematically test different components and optimize the content with each category.

David Pembroke: Okay, so just give us a bit of an insight into what those categories are.

Chris Rottler: Right. One broad category is really content that drives awareness of the programs that we offer in the field. Another category is really action-oriented messaging, driving people to certain sections of our website and to apply to the program, and then we have a miscellaneous category that we highlight events and different other things.

David Pembroke: Really, those categories are around audience behaviour?

Chris Rottler: Exactly.

David Pembroke: Okay. Your process for segmenting and understanding your audience as you're starting to develop these specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound objectives, what does that look like?

Chris Rottler: There are different ways that we go about doing that. We conduct traditional qualitative research, quantitative research, but what's becoming interesting is the more advanced analytic approach is to advanced audience segmentation. This is used in more behavioural data in conjunction with demographic and psychographic data to really understand the underlying clusters of audiences that we have and to really get a fuller picture of who these segments and how to tailor content to them.

David Pembroke: Chris, just as we discussed that sort of demographic and psychographic analysis and using advanced analytics, can you give us an example of something where you've applied those particular techniques or tools and that something has been revealed to you that you perhaps weren't expecting?

Chris Rottler: Yeah, so we had access to publicly available data set that got the Census Bureau here, and it's essentially data, demographic data of zip codes in the United States. Essentially, what we did was we used that data and ran some advanced

data mining algorithms. Specifically, some unsupervised clustering algorithms, and what that did was really cluster the zip codes into similar clusters, and then we conducted the same algorithms again to identify sub-clusters out of that. What that did was we were able to identify four distinct clusters. Essentially, what the data set included was a lot of demographic data that made up those zip codes, and what we're able to do with that is essentially more effectively target some of our digital advertising and that sort of thing.

David Pembroke: Wow

Chris Rottler: I want to say that specific insights were surprising because there are a lot of different variables in that data set, but we got a fuller picture of who we're trying to target, which was very insightful for us.

David Pembroke: Yeah, and it sounds like then the benefits around undertaking that particular process were better targeting, so perhaps saving of budget because you were better able to meet the needs or better to target or identify who it was that you were talking to, but also then, really probably understanding a little bit more deeply the needs and the wants of the people that you're actually trying to reach out to.

Chris Rottler: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. It's really the efficiencies that we saw on the front-end. In terms of budget, just getting a bigger bang for that investment, right? On top of that, we always conduct various types of testing like A/B testing for messaging, so that on the backhand, when we're trying to have these audiences convert in some way on our website, we're finding efficiencies there as well.

David Pembroke: Yeah, right. Just going back to this process, at what point do you start doing this mathematical analysis? Is it right up the front when you're starting to explore that audience side of things where you're really trying to take that deep dive into the audience?

Chris Rottler: Yeah. It's actually throughout the lifespan of a campaign really. You can use these more advanced approaches in the discovery phase of a campaign. You could do more ... we haven't done it here, but I've heard a lot of organisations do more predictive analytics throughout the implementation. Obviously, there is optimizations that you could do running statistical models to get a bigger bang for your buck when the campaign is ongoing, and obviously, in the evaluation stage, there are other techniques that you could use there. The analytical processes, it's through the entire lifecycle of marketing communication campaign.

David Pembroke: In the time that you've been working in this area, how big a change has this approach made to the way that you go about setting up the campaigns that you implement?

Chris Rottler: It's huge. For me, it's been very recent. I joke about it, but I think my job is really to implement the scientific method into what we do here. It's a lot about culture change. It's changing and tweaking the mindset of marketing communication like establishing a hypothesis and research questions, and controlling variables throughout the process, so that you could really see the causality of the messaging you're developing, the timing of publication, et cetera, et cetera. It's that process that really helps us be data-driven in terms of the marketing communications.

David Pembroke: Again, just going back to this process, so we've understood what those organisation and policy objectives are, the north star that they were driving towards, and we've set through some communication objectives in relation to the various stages, be at the input stage, the output stage, the organisational impact. As you're diving into the audience, I'm really keen to understand and get a visual picture of how big is your team? What are they doing? How are people tasked, and how long does it take to start to dive into the statistical analysis of the audience?

Chris Rottler: Yeah. We're not like a lot of global brands. We're fairly centralized in terms of content production, training, and the measurement, but we do have staff at some of our regional offices who focus on marketing and communication, but have a better sense of their specific regions and audiences. Here at headquarters though, we have a pretty robust team since most of the production is done in-house. That includes traditional press, so we have writers, editors.

We have a pretty significant digital team that includes social strategists, videographer, photographers, email marketers, and a more traditional marketing team that focuses a lot on branding and advertising. We also have a web team and myself, of course. We also have other staff are sprinkled throughout the agency that leads with us and the department that they're situated in. It's a fairly robust team.

David Pembroke: How closely engaged are that ... the production team, the writers, the editors, the other people, how closely aligned are they to these statistical analysis processes that you're running? How readily are they able to get access to the insights that you're generating?

Chris Rottler: Yes. I think our lens of analysis we use has different time horizons depending on what we're looking for. In terms of the team and their connection to the statistical analysis, they're not so concerned with the actual analysis. They are more concerned with designing a framework or following the framework that we've designed, so that we can do this analysis.

Being a large government agency, our team is fairly nimble. We're able to ... like I said, it's dependent on what we're actually analysing. If it's an ad hoc campaign or if it's our ongoing strategy and tactics, we have different time

horizons in terms of analysis, and reporting, and how we'll react to that, but we try ... especially for large media buys like an ad hoc campaign, we typically look at it on a daily basis and try to pivot as necessary.

David Pembroke: How hard is that within a government agency to be able to be agile and to be able to respond to the signals that you're getting from the analysis?

Chris Rottler: It's a loaded question, David. I think typically, it's not that easy. The culture at Peace Corps is, based on my experience, very different from a typical government agency, and so for us, it's ... like I said, we're very nimble, and people are thirsty for the data, and that analysis, and be more systematic at what we do. I'm not sure if that's the case across government, but I know there is this tsunami of desire to be more data-driven here in the US.

David Pembroke: Yeah, and I'm sure that ... and it doesn't surprise me that people are looking for the validation of some of the content that they're either creating or some of the distribution decisions that they have made as to whether or not they were right or whether they were wrong.

Chris Rottler: Exactly.

David Pembroke: You mentioned this framework that you've developed there at the Peace Corps. What does that look like?

Chris Rottler: Yeah. As I said, we initially start off with goals that are measurable or smart. As a team, we identify the key performance indicators and the metrics that we're going to use to determine if we've achieved these goals, or if we need to pivot, or tweak our strategy, or tactics, or whatnot.

David Pembroke: Give me some examples. Perhaps, are they around maybe retention or reputation.

Chris Rottler: Yeah, it could be. Whether our goals are to increase brand awareness X percent or motivate potential applicants to apply, we select KPIs that map to those goals and to the social platforms or the tactics that we're using.

David Pembroke: Okay.

Chris Rottler: For example, on Facebook, a KPI could include engagement rate, reach, or some kind of direct response. Again, dependent on what our overall goal is.

David Pembroke: Okay, right out. That's the front-end?

Chris Rottler: Yeah, that's the front-end. Like I said, we categorise our content into three buckets. This allows to see what kind of categories are performing the best each month and relate to those KPIs that we're tracking, et cetera, et cetera. We

established testing schedules, so our team designs experiments in conjunction with our editorial calendar and reviews results on a monthly basis.

What makes pure A/B testing on social media platforms challenging is not being able to randomly sample from population and the lack of control over the variables that can impact the content affecting this. In order to mitigate the lack of control, we try to standardise our test, so that some variables are the same such as day and time of publication et cetera, et cetera. It's far from perfect, but we found this to be a "good-enough approach." There might be ways to control more variables through paid promotions or whatnot, but those tools are not consistent across the social platforms that we're using, so it's a good-enough approach in terms of the level of analysis that we're doing there.

Then, we collect and clean the data. On a lot of the social platforms, data is what comes out. You export the data, but it's ... you have paid, and you have organic all meshed together. We want to measure apples to apples, so we clean it out and separate the two, and then benchmark post-level progress against our historical data, and then we analyse. When we're analysing results, we listen to the data, but understand limitations of the methodology. We have different levels of analysis to understand how things are playing out month to month.

At a high level, we look at the effectiveness of the content categories as a whole in relation to each of the KPIs that we're measuring, and to do this, we conduct statistical tests to see if the overall difference between the categories is basically significant. This tells us directionally how the categories are doing and helps us design experiments to optimize the content within lower performing categories. Also, to derive the size from content in higher performing categories. We also look at content at close-by-close level, analysing the results from tests, but also content that wasn't tested, but performing above benchmark. All of these insights really help fill our optimization efforts. After that, we just repeat. It's an ongoing process.

David Pembroke: Yeah, but interestingly, the sophistication that you're detailing there is really best practice in the whole process, isn't it? You really have developed a system there that is way ahead I would imagine of most people who are listening to this podcast who are trying to even get started with setting smart objectives.

Chris Rottler: Yeah, yeah. You know what? I don't want to take credit for this. It's like a framework that's ...

David Pembroke: Why not?

Chris Rottler: It's a framework that's been used for a long time. It's just the scientific method tweaked to what we do. That's all it really is. It does sound like a lot. It is a mouthful, but really, the more systematic we've gotten, the easier it has become to design more unique content. Once the culture changed and people approach their work with this type of mindset, it became very easy.

David Pembroke: Okay, so it wasn't that hard for the people there at the Peace Corps to transition from that traditional, more softer skills, qualitative skills, creation skills to be able to incorporate this scientific method into the way they do things?

Chris Rottler: I want to say it was easy, David, but I'm looking at it now in hindsight. Yeah, during the process ... like I said, they don't really deal with conducting the statistical analysis. That's my job and my team. They're more focused on just following the framework. That in and of itself isn't that difficult for them from what I've seen.

David Pembroke: I imagine the inputs to them would be, as you say, much more simplified. Perhaps dashboards which enable them to see how things are performing.

Chris Rottler: Yeah, exactly.

David Pembroke: What advice would you have then for people who are very much at the beginning of this journey around embedding a more scientific method into their communications program? What advice do you have?

Chris Rottler: I think first is to get the buy-in from senior leadership. That's incredibly important. I think it's important to pilot this. I want to go about this designing an entire framework for every strategy, every tactic that a department is using, but test it on maybe your social media, content marketing, maybe your email marketing, or your paid digital, and to show the results from that. Make your case, and to expand it to the "enterprise," right?

David Pembroke: That's the starting point. Say you've got the buy-in from the leadership and you've been able to get a pilot project approved. What are the next steps after that?

Chris Rottler: It's designing the framework. You could follow a similar framework as this. What I've done is I've developed quite a bit of training material for each of our team members. A lot of in-person training, but also, ensuring that you started your storefront, and the analytics are measuring your website, and all of your marketing communication is set up properly. For instance, like use of UTM codes, making sure that's standardised, et cetera, et cetera.

David Pembroke: Okay. In terms of advices to where people could perhaps learn more about either your framework or some other inspiration around other frameworks, or learning more about applicable scientific methods, what are some of the resources that people could get a hold of to do a bit more reading and a bit more thinking about this particular adaptation of their particular area?

Chris Rottler: DigitalGov is a publication that is published out of the General Services Administration here, and they have a lot of thought leadership best practices. I contribute to that blog quite a bit. I would just search for marketing analytic

resources, A/B testing resources, yeah, and help designing smart goal-related campaigns. There's a lot of material out there.

David Pembroke: Okay, so there's a lot of stuff out there that people can really get their heads around to start to begin this transition.

Chris Rottler: Yeah.

David Pembroke: Just to go back into the framework, I'm intrigued about designing these experiments. Again, this is the scientific method that you're talking about and A/B testing. Again, just describe exactly what a typical A/B test might look like for one of your campaigns.

Chris Rottler: Sure. I think it's easier to describe A/B testing in relation to landing page optimization. That's where it started. Essentially, you have two variants of messaging or whatever variable you want to test. Let's say you have two landing pages, and you just want to test which one performed better in terms of driving conversions or whatnot. Essentially, what you'll do, you use A/B testing tool that will sample the population of traffic you're receiving on that website to each of these pages, and it will determine a winner statistically.

Essentially, what you'll do then is just drive all the traffic to the winning page, and theoretically, you will receive X number of more conversions, right? This process has been used in email marketing. It's used in digital advertising. In the framework that I designed, it also scales to social media, but social media is a little different because the platforms themselves aren't designed to really sample from populations, which is why I created this framework, so that we could control as many variables as we can. It's not perfect, but it's good enough for us. It shows how we're doing in relation to our benchmark historically.

David Pembroke: How often would you run these types of experiments in a typical week?

Chris Rottler: Our testers were designed in conjunction with our editorial calendar, which is designed or developed every month. For social or content marketing, we'll throw up a couple of experiments a week, and the reason why it's slower for content marketing is that we have to control the day and time that we're publishing this because don't want to test similar content different days. We want to make sure they're similar.

For social, a handful of test a month. Email marketing, we're just getting into that, but that's where we could conduct multiple tests a day if we wanted to, depending on the size of the list that we're sending things out to. For ad hoc campaigns like paid advertising on our digital channels, those tasks could be daily.

David Pembroke: All right. In terms of then your reporting, where does that go to within your organisation? How are you taking this very valuable information and creating

improvements? Who do you talk to, and in what way do you communicate this information?

Chris Rottler: It depends. If it's like an ad hoc campaign, it's reporting that's going to the person that's empowered to tweak the strategy, or the tactics, or the budget. We have more frequent routine reporting that goes to senior leadership in the agency just to see how things are doing. In terms of experiments or results from experiments, that goes to the manager who has that power to use the data, make data-driven decisions.

David Pembroke: Just how popular are the reports that you're producing?

Chris Rottler: The ad hoc campaign reports are very, very popular. I think the routine dashboards are ... that we send out on a monthly basis are well-received, but I want to... those reports aren't super data-driven. They're more of a descriptive analysis of what happened the month before.

David Pembroke: Yeah, but I can imagine though that people are getting so much more information and relevant information through your process than they ever were able to achieve in the past.

Chris Rottler: Yeah, definitely. At least in terms of marketing communication. There are a lot of departments here who want to take this approach or these types of approaches to a lot of the other stuff we're doing. Even more specifically, workforce analytics and that type of stuff, so we'll see. There is a lot of appetite for making data-driven decisions for sure.

David Pembroke: Yeah. In terms of just those overarching benefits, when you look at it, and when you put your head on the pillow at night and close your eyes, and you think to yourself, "What have I achieved today?" what are some of the real tangible benefits that you're able to commit to yourself that you think, "Yeah. Okay. I did some good work today?"

Chris Rottler: Yeah. I got into the government because I wanted to work for an organisation that was mission-driven. With that said, we ... as a government employee, I consider myself a steward of the taxpayer dollar, so the more I could get out of every dollar we spend makes me happy. I get really excited, and I like to nerd out on the more advanced analytic approaches like data mining, predicting, and stuff. The more I could do that in the work I do here, the better.

David Pembroke: It's wonderful, and it is the future. There's no question that this, the scientific methodology is going to and depend the way that we communication in the future, and all of us who are in this business really have to get our heads around it. I know it's foreign to someone like me. My background is in journalism. I'm a storyteller, a writer, and I wasn't good at math.

This isn't what I'm meant to, and I probably speak for most people that it's challenging, but I don't think we've got any choice, do we? Other than to really put the bit between the teeth and really try to understand it. Now, the other thing being, I suppose we don't really have to be scientists ourselves, but we just have to understand how the process works to a degree, so that we can improve the way that we do our work.

Chris Rottler: Exactly, David. Let me tell you a little story. I started my career as a journalist as well. There's hope for everyone if I could do it.

David Pembroke: In that, were you always interested in math and science?

Chris Rottler: I had a very similar mindset as you. I like learning new things, which is why I was attracted to journalism. I was a contributor for the Associated Press. I got a staff position here in DC as a writer. When I got to journalism, the field was changing, and I saw how powerful content marketing was. It wasn't called that back in the day, but I saw the needle shifting or moving, right? I got into digital strategy, developing digital marketing communication campaigns, and just the plethora of data that I was receiving. The writings were on the wall for me, so I went back to school, and I gradually learned statistics to the degree that I could get by and develop this type of things and test this type of stuff.

David Pembroke: You actually went away and did some additional education in statistical methods and other things?

Chris Rottler: I did, but to be honest, the application of what I do doesn't require the knowledge of developing algorithms or knowing how to data mine huge "big data sets." Fairly, it's a simplistic understanding of statistics, and the scientific method will take you a long way in marketing communication I think.

David Pembroke: Okay. I'm inspired, and I'm going to go out there and do a bit of multivariate testing, a bit of A/B testing on landing pages. We'll see how we go. I'm trying. It's really an interesting development in my career is to just like ... I just got to get into this, and I can see the value in speaking to you, and listening about your framework, and that process that you're moving through from setting those smart objectives, and then really just understanding, as you say, the scientific method. It really doesn't have to be that complicated. We can apply it, and the value is there.

I think that's the big take out from this is that the output at the end of the day is that we're going to be better at our jobs, we're going to get better results, and we're going to get better outcomes for the people that we work for. In the end, ultimately, strengthen communities and improve the well-being of citizens, which is the game that we're in content marketing in the public sector.

Thanks very much, mate. I really appreciate your time. As I say, you've inspired me to get out there and learn a little bit more. I'm sure that there's probably

some people listening to the podcast who are probably reaching for a stiff drink, thinking to themselves, “God, where do I start?” but I think you’ve given us a really good pathway.

Thanks again for those referrals as to where we can get that additional information, so people can go and start to learn about this very, very important. It’s the future of marketing communication and content marketing. Thank you very much for joining In Transition, and thanks very much to everyone for tuning in for another week. A great podcast this week with Chris Rottler from the Peace Corps. See you next week.