InTransition Episode 44 – Jim MacNamara

David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen. My name is David Pembroke and welcome to this week's edition of in transition. The podcast dedicated to the practice of content marketing in the public sector. This week I'll be speaking to a former P. R. Week Communicator of the Year. The Public Relations Institute of Australia's Educator of the Year and a former consultant, professor and author, but before we speak to our guest as we do each week, it's time for our definition of content marketing as it relates to the public sector.

Content marketing is a strategic a measurable and repeatable business process that relies on the creation, cu-ration, and distribution of useful relevant and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a clearly specified audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and/or stakeholder action.

So to our guest, Jim Macnamara is a professor of public communication at the University of Technology in Sydney. After a distinguished thirty year career in communication, he joined UTS in 2007. Prior to his role at UTS, he was CEO of a leading marketing and corporate communication consultancy, Macro Communication. He also founded and headed the Asia-Pacific office of the Global Media Research Firm, international for a decade before selling the company to Media Matters now iSentia, back in 2006.

In 2002, he was named Communicator of the Year by P.R. Week Asia for his research into measurement and evaluation of communication, and in 2012 he was named Educator of the Year at the World Public Relations Forum.

Jim, it's a great career, and thanks very much for joining us In Transition.

Jim Macnamara: It's a pleasure.

David Pembroke: Jim, you can look back. You can reflect because you have been around. You've seen it all. You've seen the changes. As we sit here in 2015, coming towards the end of 2015. What are your reflections on the current state of play?

Jim Macnamara: Well, I think we've done some things really, really well, and the area you talk about, content marketing, I think we're producing better and better content, more interesting content. I think there's a lot of achievements both in public relations as well as other industries like advertising and producing content, but what I've started to think about a lot lately is that it's not just giving people content that is the real essence of communication. The other side of it is people want to talk to us. Our customers, our consumers, our voters, our students, our patients in hospitals, they've got something to say, and I've started to think a lot lately about, well, how do we listen to them?

We produce content. Are we ramming it down their throat? Are we always doing the talking? How are we balancing that with listening? And I think so on that side of the table I'm finding we're not doing so well.

David Pembroke: You have done this very important research on organisational listening, and we'll come to that in a moment, but just in terms of that context. Do you believe that this is a good time to be in the communication business?

Jim Macnamara: Well look, I think any time is a good time to be in the communication business. I became a cadet journalist when I was nineteen. Communication, I mean some of the great sociologists of our time have said that communication is society. If you don't have communication, we don't even have a human society. People don't, I mean, it's what brings people together. Otherwise we're all just individuals like animals running around in the jungle. So communication is a very very exciting field to be in.

Is it a good time now? Well, absolutely, you know, I've got a bit of hot metal sitting on my desk here to remind me of when I started my career, and of course, we've now got collapse of business models. We've got digitization. We've got ubiquitous internet, and we've got whole new ways of publishing content. It's an ever changing field. It needs new skills. It's got new challenges. Hey, I wouldn't be dead for quids.

David Pembroke: But what's your advice as to how to thrive at a time of such great change?

Jim Macnamara: I think there is a few things we've got to do to not only survive, but thrive, and yeah, being in a university, one of the things we obviously advocate here is constantly upgrading skills and knowledge. When you've got a period of great change. All the skills you carry with you are still useful, but new skills are required. New insights. New knowledge is required, and I think if I was a young practitioner starting my career today, I'd be learning as much as I can through practice, but I'd also be doing post-graduate education. I'd be going to conferences. I'd be going to seminars. I'd be reading. I think really increasing our knowledge and skills to be at the forefront of what's happening. To be on that leading edge of the bell curve, not be on the long tail.

David Pembroke: Do you find that that's difficult for people to take on given how busy life is away for people, away from their professional lives, and they do have so many calls on their time?

Jim Macnamara: Well, yeah look, it is difficult. Let's be honest. There's no point saying things are easy. I never found anything that was very valuable that was easy anyway. To put it into context, I'm not preaching from an ivory tower. I became an academic only in the last seven years, but I did a Journalism Diploma. I did a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism. I did a Masters in Media Studies, and I did my Ph.D. as a practitioner. So I obviously put my money where my mouth is, and I

put my effort where my mouth is because what I found when I was a practitioner is I didn't know enough, and I started doing research.

When I started doing research I found that to get that seat at the board room table, to be in there mixing it with the lawyers, mixing it with the M.B.A.'s you needed to really know what you were talking about, and so I unashamedly say to young practitioners, "Look, it's hard. You've got to work and make a living. I work every day of my life or my universities part time, but it's those qualifications, it's that knowledge, it's that experience that gets you into the boardroom where you can really make a difference."

David Pembroke: Now you made your early reputation as an academic around measurement and evaluation. You were very early to that party because you seemed to understand before many did the importance of being able to have the evidence that communication programs were working or not working.

Jim Macnamara: I was probably too early to it because in 1992 I was one of the authors of the International Public Relations Association gold paper on evaluation, and I started CARMA International in 1994 thinking I'd make a fortune very quickly. Not much happened. It was investment of a lot of money and a lot of effort for many years, but it did start to turn sort of in the late 90's and certainly into the 2000's, but I do remember just a little story.

One incident that really hit home to me when I was a practitioner, and I don't think he'll mind being named, but Microsoft was a client. I went to see CEO, Daniel Petre one day after spending a million dollars of his money on a campaign. Daniel said to me, "I want you to go away and write me a report to tell me what you brought to our business. What did you achieve for us?"

Well, I went away and wrote the usual report at the time, you know, list of all the press conferences and all the press clips attached. I took it back to Daniel. He looked at it. He threw it back across the desk, and his words were to me, and I can remember them. He said, "Jim, I don't care how much work you did. I don't care how much stuff you put out. I just want to know what value you brought to my business."

I realised in that moment I could not answer that question. I could report all the work we did, all the piles of clips, all the views and downloads and whatever else, but I did not know how to calculate the value of what we were doing, what the results were, and I guess that's what started me in about 1995, '96, on a road to thinking we've really got to understand research and evaluation.

David Pembroke: Now in terms of that. The principles that you uncovered in that early research. What holds true today in terms of measurement and evaluation and what advice do you have for our audience as to how they can become better at assembling the evidence of the impact and the value that they're creating?

Jim Macnamara: Well look, and the fundamentals are still there. Most people do some evaluation, and we can all evaluate. I mean the key thing is to understand the basic concepts of inputs, outputs and outcomes. It's basic logic model stuff. We all have a lot of inputs: the planning and putting content, good content, together. Then we have a lot of outputs. That's the stuff we, in simple terms, put out. Contents and output, but what we've got to do is we've become pretty skilled at measuring inputs and outputs, but what we're not able to do is to measure the actual outcomes, and we confuse things like engagement or views with outcomes.

They're as step on the way, if people don't look at our content and they don't enjoy it then we're not going to get anywhere, but what do they do afterwards? Do actually make an inquiry? Do they buy the product? Do they trial the product? Do they trust the government more or whatever it is? So I think the big thing is we've got to move down the food chain from producing content and putting stuff out to looking at actual outcomes and outcomes that link to business objectives.

How do you get there, your question? Look you know, I would say to practitioners you've got to know the fundamentals of research. Get your head around data. You know, if you're looking for a degree, if you're a young practitioner, and you're looking for a degree to do right now, don't do P.R. do data analytics or something like that because I think that's where a lot of this information is held. We've got to be able to get beyond the content. We need the content producers, but we need the data analysts. We need the data visualisers to be able to talk management language and link it back to organisational goals.

David Pembroke: Do you find that that is a difficult process for most people who are in the communications industry to understand or do you believe that there are the tools and the shortcuts that they can take that will help them to become more effective more quickly?

Jim Macnamara: Look, it's a good question. It is bloody difficult. Let's be honest. If it was easy everyone would be doing it. Something I'm debating a lot at the moment around the world because I'm involved in the evaluation counsel with the U.K. government and I'm involved in the Association for Measurement and Evaluation as well as I.P.R. committees due to P.R. Committee in the U.S. I'm on all of these committees, and there's a real view that we've got to turn everybody into a measurement specialist. I dispute that view. I think that's not the way to go about it.

We have specialists in digital. We have specialists in content. I think what you've got to do in an organisation. If you're working today in a consultancy or you're in a department or a corporation or a government agency, you have to have a capacity or a capability to do evaluation. That might be one person. That might be a service provider, but you've got to get the capability. Don't try and make

everyone into an evaluation specialist because it does require specialist skills. Not everyone's a good content producer. Not everyone's a good software developer. So I think it's a question of, there are many tasks we have to do. We do have to produce content. We've got to capture audiences in the first place, but evaluation is important. Get the capability in your organisation. Either through a service provider, either through training someone up or a volunteer who wants to learn it because it is a specialised skill, and I think the longer we pretend that it's something that we can take a quick shortcut to then we're always going to be failing in that evaluation area.

David Pembroke: Now, you mentioned a number of resources there for where people might be able to learn more about it. Could you just run through those where people may be able to learn more about those basics and the process of good measurement and evaluation?

Jim Macnamara: Well, there's a lot of industry work around the world. If you start with the industry bodies first, I mean, in Australia the Public Relations Institute of Australia is doing quite a bit, but internationally in particular. There's the Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication, AMEC. It's a specialist organisation. It's done a huge amount of work in developing principals and models. Its membership is many of the leading research and measurement companies. They have global summits. I've spoken at the last two, one in Stockholm, One in Amsterdam, and a lot of their resources are online and it's all free. so, you know, there's one in the United States. There's the Institute for Public Relations which is a non-profit research organisation. It's not a practitioner body. It's a research body. You know, these are free resources.

And then of course you've got short courses in professional development programs and then all the way up to doing professional masters degrees, doing M.B.A.'s, doing executive masters, doing research and statistic studies, and so on. So there are many places practitioners can go. As I said, not for everybody, but I think anyone who goes into the space will do very well in future and every organisation needs to somehow have that capability.

If you don't you're going to be producing content, but there's always going to be that challenge of the question that Daniel Petre asked me a long time ago. Not what you put out, what's the value that you brought to my business?

David Pembroke: okay, that's some great insights there and some great references for people to be able to jot down and pause the podcast. Go to where Jim just advised you to go and have a look and there sounds like there are plenty of resources there and I know the AMEC site. I've been on to it many times before and as Jim says, wonderful resources there. Now, Jim, on this wonderful journey and the distinguished journey and career that you've had. So through the measurement and evaluation you then sort of headed down into organisational listening as you mentioned in your opening answer.

Where did the germ of that idea come from and just tell us the story as to where this started.

Jim Macnamara: Yeah, it's hard to pinpoint it. It's probably partly confessional and it's partly intellectual.

When I look back on my career, we love to say we're in communication and we talk, we use words like "engagement," and "relationships," and "relationship marketing," and I guess as you get older, I was one side of it I was reflecting on my career, and I was thinking of all the client my money I did and I spent and all the things I've put out, and I reckon I spent most of the time churning out stuff, and a friend of mine in the U.K. calls it S.O.S. (sending out stuff). I started to reflect and realise I was in communication, but basically what I did is kept sending out stuff, and every now and again pause to momentarily listen to customers and others, but you usually only listen a little bit just to sort of find out how to target them better.

And then intellectually, I came to university, and I started teaching communication, and we're drilling into students that it's two way, and that social media is about dialogue, and I started to think, you know, in my own career, I don't recall doing a lot of real dialogue or two way and now I'm teaching it. I wonder if that happens. So I decided to do a very extensive study. It was a two year project.

I went inside thirty-six major organisations around the world, large corporations, and large government. I wanted to deliberately look at well-resourced organisations. I didn't want to pick on organisations that were small and short staffed, and I wanted to see all the practiced and processes they did to put out information and equally all the processes they went through to bring in information, and so I looked at customer relations and public consultation. I looked at social media. I looked at research and insights. I looked at P.R. and corporate communications.

What I found in a nutshell confirmed my early experiences, was that eighty to ninety percent of what we say is communication is actually putting out stuff. It's speaking, and we don't do a lot of listening. Now, that suddenly hit me as important because when you do research, and you ask people what they really want, and I've done this in relation to politics. I've done it in relation to customers. One of the big things customers and voters and citizens say is they want people to listen to them, and it suddenly hit me then that maybe we've become really good at one side of the equation, but quite frankly these industries and the book is quite controversial, but it really shows that we are fairly appalling at the listening side, and that applies to governments as well, and maybe that's why, you know, people don't trust government so much, and maybe that's why people don't bother voting and so forth.

David Pembroke: Has it improved at all given the abundance of tools? The social listening tools that are available for people to listen in to conversations either about their government agency, their department or perhaps a brand. Did you pick up or do you believe that there is any sort of improvement now that the tools make it a lot easier?

Jim Macnamara: Well, that's what I would have expected. I mean to be perfectly honest, in the days of mass media it was fairly hard to do two way communication because there's not much two way in television and even newspapers. You've got letters to the editor basically, but social media one would think that this would be truly a revolution, and indeed a lot of people like Brian Solis have been writing about social media is the revolution to two way.

What I found alarmingly is that when you go into big organisations and you look at their social media strategy and you look at even their research and you look at their public consultation, the majority are using social media for broadcasting their messages. They sit on twitter all day tweeting. They have a Facebook page where they pump out their messages. I did a very sophisticated methodology where I did interview with the organisations to ask them what they did. I did observation inside organisations to actually watch them at work for sometimes several weeks. I examined documents, look at their plans and strategies, but I also did experimental testing. I actually had colleagues who anonymously, not anonymously, but not known to the organisation making contact by their website and social media to see how they actually did react.

Seventy-six percent of organisations never replied to a comment on their own website or a question lodged on their contact us sections. So I mean that tells you something is really wrong there. They were not responding on social and they were broadcasting most of the time.

David Pembroke: Did you notice though that there was awareness that they weren't good or they weren't improving or was there just no awareness at all?

Jim Macnamara: That's a really good question, and I'm kind of encouraged by the result because when I was doing this research I started to get very worried that it's fairly critical and that it doesn't show some organisations in good light. So I did de-identify the organisations in the study with the exception of a few that were willing to be named.

When I finished the report, I had a number of large U.K. government departments. The U.K. government allowed me full access to the government, and I warned them that I had some negative findings, but they invited me to the cabinet office in Whitehall to present the findings, and I did, and I must admit I was very nervous that day in May of this year. I thought they might run me out of town; send me packing back to Australia.

The head of government communication got up and said in the cabinet office, "This is an issue we've got to come to grip with. No wonder our citizens our disengaged. We're not listening. We've got to learn how to do it better." And I'm actually pleased to say the U.K. Government is giving me more research funding to go back and do more work with them, and then following that, I was invited to number ten Downing Street. So this research has been quite remarkable in that I was invited into number ten Downing Street, and then recently Sir Martin Sorrell the head of W.P.P. stood up in [Europecom 00:21:24] at a major conference in October and said that this was a challenge and that the advertising and P.R. industry had to address.

So I think that it's crept up on us. I think what's happened is we've all just got carried away. We love producing stuff. We love building campaigns. Our clients often judge us by how much stuff we put out, and I think we've got caught up in a trap, and we haven't sort of stopped and thought that often the best way to engage someone is to listen to them.

And I tell simple stories. I say to people, "Go home to your families. Go home to your partner, your kids and just talk all day and see how the relationship goes. It doesn't go so well. Try the opposite. Go home and do a lot of listening and you know what, things go a lot better for you." And I think we're being caught up in a trap. We've come to associate communication with speaking. In our culture we're a very verbal society, and I think we've got to stop, take a big deep breath and go, you know what, and one of the best ways to engage our stake holders and our publics is to listen to them.

David Pembroke: And so, how do you do that? When you sit down in front of Alex Aiken or David Cameron and they say, "Okay, Jim, we get the bad news, but how do we fix it?" What do you say?

Jim Macnamara: Well, I've written three-hundred-and-eighty-six pages in a book on this, [crosstalk 00:22:45] in summary.

David Pembroke: And what's the book called?

Jim Macnamara: The book is called Organisational Listening: The Missing Essential in Public Communication, but in a nutshell, the central point of the book and the research report is to say that we, in communication whether it's marketing or corporate, we build what I'm calling an architecture of speaking. We're very good at creating resources and skills and technologies, very sophisticated architecture for speaking on behalf of the organisation. What I simply said is, "We need to match that. We don't stop doing that, but we need to match that with an architecture of listening." And I've called it that deliberately because I want to conflict with the view or argue against the view that you can kind of add on a bit of software or something and all the listening is done.

An architecture of listening in my view has got eight key elements and very simply is that you've got to have a culture that's open to listening in the first place. If an organisation doesn't want to know what its customers or stake holders say then it's not going to work.

You need a culture. Then you need policies. You need structures and processes for listening. Who's going to do it, and how do they do it? Then of course, you need technologies for listening. There are lots of tools out there. Whether it's social medial, public consultation or insights type research.

Then you need skills for listening. We've got great skills for producing content and speaking, but we need skills for listening, and then the eighths elements I've said is you need articulation of listening, and that simply refers to the fact that in a big organisation, the listening may occur with field staff. It may occur with a researcher, but that information has got to travel through the organisation. If it never gets to management, then it doesn't matter. So I've sort of said that there's got to be ... you've got to engineer listening into the organisation. It's got to be designed in. Hence I'm calling it an architecture of listening, and what I'm sort of working on now is starting to really experiment and test some of the tools and technologies that can be used. Everything from very simple consultation techniques and listening posts all the way through to sense mapping methodologies and big data analysis and so forth.

David Pembroke: If there are, and I shouldn't say the easy things to do, but some of the simple things, what's the first thing to do or the second thing to do? What are the couple of things that people could do in terms of developing this architecture?

Jim Macnamara: Well look, really yeah, it's a good point. I mean you start with the simple things. So first of all take social media. Everyone is into social media. It's social. It's not corporately owned. It's not government owned. It's social media. So the first thing you should do there is by all means use it to distribute your messages, but a big use of social media should be listening. Monitoring in, listening to what people say, learning about their concerns, their interests, et cetera, and then engaging in a two way dialogue. So I think social is the most obvious one.

The second most obvious one is research, but I'd appeal for more open ended research. We tend to do research to find out the things we want to know. You know, do you want a green one or a blue one? Well, what if they don't want any one, and I think open ended research is research that you go out and you ask people some questions you want to ask, but you also invite them to talk about things that concern them, or what they would like to see the organisation doing. So good interactive listening social work. Some open ended research where you give people, you know, including qualitative comments where people can talk. These are just some of the basic things we can do.

And then of course, public consultation for government is very important, but they tend to do that very narrowly. You know, they call for submissions, and

who write submissions? Well, it's usually only the professional organisations and big lobby groups, but in England I was doing work with the government there to say, you know, they were talking about a major infrastructure project that was going to affect many people, but they hadn't got outside of London, and I was saying well, what about outreach? You need to go out. Go out and talk to some of the communities. They haven't got the time to write to the government. Get out there in the field and talk to people. So those are just some examples.

David Pembroke: And what about this notion of risk though? Particularly in public sector organisations that if we open a two way dialogue someone might say something that we don't like? Someone might say something that embarrasses the minister and therefore we're best off just closing it off rather than being sincere and authentic.

Jim Macnamara: Yeah, well of course, the social media world has really brought this out into the open. I think in the past we sort of turned a blind eye to it and pretended it never happened. The reality is today that if we don't join in the conversation, the conversation will go on anyway. So those people will be saying what they want to say without us. The only difference will be, we'll be ignorant of it and won't be able to defend ourselves.

So I think the risk issue is overblown. It has to be managed clearly, and the sort of things I have also talked about is, you know, you've got to have some level of moderation. In any online sites you've got to have rules of [inaudible 00:28:04] and that's quite acceptable. You've also, you know, you do need what I'm calling a resilient organisation. An organisation that is prepared to take criticism or to take feedback. That's the key to change, and I think we do need mature resilient organisations, and the bottom line is in risk assessment, if you don't listen to people there's a lot of evidence suggests that the risks are much higher. Eventually you'll have protests or blockades or people walking away. I mean we're seeing this in politics in the United States 35% of the citizens who are eligible to vote, do vote. That's a third of the population. What does that say about democracy?

In the U.K. we had one ward. In Central Ward in Manchester where twelve percent of eligible voters voted, and in Australia we've got compulsory voting, but we still had the highest informal vote in history in the last election. So there are a lot of people, particularly young people, who are in simple French terms, pissed off.

Now, the more then disengage the bigger the risk is for government downstream. You end up with hung parliaments. There's even suggestion that the disengagement of youth is one of the underpinning reasons for radicalization at the moment. So I think risk assessment, and risk is a good issue to bring up, but my argument would be the risks are greater if you don't listen to your customers or your voters or your other stake holders. If you don't listen to them the risks magnify over time, and they can be much, much greater.

David Pembroke: Well, Jim, very sound advice to all of our listeners in terms of giving advice in their organisations and then setting up this architecture of listening that Jim refers to in order to draw from those communities that you're seeking to engage in order to create and add value to the community and to the citizens through or to whom you are serving through whatever role that you may have. Now, Jim, please, if you might just give me the name of the book again, and what is the best way that people can learn more about the book, more about the research and more about you?

Jim Macnamara: The book is called Organisational listening: The Missing Essential in Public Communication. It's published by Peter Lang New York, but if you type in organisational listening and Jim Macnamara, their web address is very long or just type in Peter Lang Publishing and my name, and you'll get the book. It's up online already. Coming off the presses, I think, this week.

David Pembroke: Thank you to you, Jim, for such a great interview there and so much insight about the context of communication measurement and evaluation and this notion of the architecture of listening, and I'm going to buy that book, and I'm going to read it on my holiday over January here in Australia.

So we come to the end of the first year of the In Transition podcast. We started back in March, and what a bit of a journey. I'm not sure what episode we're up to. I think it might be forty something, but thank you audience wherever you are. I know you listened all around the world, but I'm delighted that you decide to tune in each week and listen to many of the great communicators from the public sector around the world, and as we continue this exploration of content marketing and how we can all improve our communication skills so we're more effective and we can add value to the citizens that we serve, but also to the communities within which we work.

So thank you so much. It's been a real thrill to do it. I really enjoy it. I'm going to do it for a long long time, and we will be back in February. So I look forward to re-joining you then. Please have a very safe and happy Christmas, and we'll look forward to seeing you all again in 2016. Bye for now.

Speaker 1: You've been listening to In Transition. The program dedicated to the practice of content marketing in the public sector. For more visit us at contentgroup.com.au.