

InTransition Episode 59 – David Marshall

David Pembroke: Well, hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that examines the practice of content marketing in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and I'm delighted that you've been able to spare another half an hour of your week to stay with me today as I go through what will be a fascinating interview with someone who's got a lot of experience and has done a PhD in Government Communication. Before, as we do each week, we'll go to the definition of content marketing as it relates to government and the public sector. Content marketing is a strategic, measurable, and repeatable business process that relies on the creation, curation, and distribution of useful, relevant, and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and/or stakeholder action.

Well, to my guest today, and he is here in the studio here with me. I will declare an interest early on, I've known David Marshall for some time. Dr. David Marshall has over 25 years' experience in the media. He started as an on-air personality on local radio but then moved to become general manager of radio stations in Adelaide, Sydney, and Canberra. He then moved to the position of Chief Executive of the Canberra Tourism and Events Corporation where he worked on major events for the ACT government. He's now the Director of Talkforce Media Communications Strategists where he works with government and private sector organizations around Australia in media training and strategic consultancy.

In 2015, David completed his PhD in Communication and Media Studies on Prime Minister John Howard's Media and Communication Operation. David Marshall, thanks for joining us InTransition.

David Marshall: It is a pleasure, David. Thank you.

David Pembroke: David, a PhD in such a specific area must have been a lot of work.

David Marshall: It was extraordinary. In fact when you start on a journey you don't realize that you're going to commit seven years of your life to this project. I interviewed 86 people. Many of them were Howard's senior cabinet ministers through to press gallery journalists, departmental secretaries, commentators, a whole array of people, so the journey itself was fascinating and I enjoyed every minute of it.

David Pembroke: Now just for our overseas listeners, of which there are many, John Howard was the Prime Minister of Australia from what?

David Marshall: From 1996 to 2007.

David Pembroke: 1996 to 2007. What did you learn from your PhD?

David Marshall: The overwhelming learning was how critically important good communication is and consistent communication to the success of a prime minister. I think when you look at what's happened over the past, say, four to five years in Australian politics,

and even what we are experiencing through the Turnbull government, one can understand the importance of communication and the implications if communication ceases to exist with the electorate.

David Pembroke: In terms of that though this notion of consistency, how do political officers and the bureaucracy that supports them achieve consistency when there's always another issue, there's always another shiny object, there's always another reason to be talking about something else?

David Marshall: Well, it takes discipline. This is where, for example, Prime Minister Rudd would often through election campaigns and at other times issue almost three major statements a day. The press gallery journalists were saying to me, you start to dissect what happened at 9:00 in the morning and suddenly at lunchtime you have another issue. Then late at night they hit the evening news, there's yet another one. This is where you dilute the message dramatically. The Howard government over that 10-1/2 years were very disciplined and their strategic approach to communication allowed them to stay in office for that length of time.

David Pembroke: In terms of being strategic, how did they go about putting together their strategic communication plans?

David Marshall: They had a very, very well-oiled machine within the Prime Minister's office. When Parliament was sitting they had leadership meetings every morning. The focus of those leadership meetings were on dealing with the media and also on question time. Those two particular issues shaped the way the media and their communications would unfold for the day. This was religiously followed. They had a very good Press Secretary in Tony O'Leary. They had some outstanding spokespeople like Howard himself but also Peter Costello, very capable ministers, very good on their feet, able to articulate quite complex issues in simple terms. The strategy was in fact to talk as much as possible to the electorate rather than be governed by the logic of the media, if you like. In other words, they were very determined that they were going to get their message out to the wider community.

An example of that is Howard's use of talkback radio. I asked Howard at the time, what your strategy was, and he said, "Well, it was the use of talkback radio because I could talk over the heads of the press gallery and the commentators, directly to the audience." He used that technique throughout his entire prime ministership and I might add, very, very effectively.

David Pembroke: Now would you say, obviously this is some years ago now since John Howard was the Prime Minister of Australia and technology has continued to transform the way that we can communicate and the channels that we use, so would you draw a parallel then to the way that politicians could potentially use social media to go over the heads of the media to go direct?

David Marshall: Look, John Howard was a politician for his time. In 2007 social media was just starting to emerge. Now with the proliferation of media channels you're quite right

because ultimately communication is communication, and it's the simplicity of the message and what people want to take from your policies, if you like, is critical. Now to give you an example of this, one of the departmental secretaries said to me that he would present a policy to John Howard. Howard would say, "Look, I really like this policy but I can't sell it to the electorate. Go back and rework it." The department head said to me, "This would happen often on several occasions to the point where Howard will either say, 'You've nailed it, let's go with it,' or, 'let's drop it. Good policy but I cannot sell it so let's not take the time to try and explain something which is almost incomprehensible to the electorate at large.'"

David Pembroke: By saying, "I can't sell it," means I can't explain it.

David Marshall: Can't explain it. Howard had this very unique ability unlike as his departmental head said to any other politician, he was saying that Howard had a filter, a communications filter through which he would look at policy and determine whether he felt he could go on to talkback radio, for example, and convince the electorate that this was an appropriate way to go, an appropriate policy to support.

David Pembroke: When you spoke to John Howard, did you ask him about this filter and about the way that he used to assess policy in order to try to break it into a form that could be communicated?

David Marshall: Absolutely. I mean he was very forthcoming on the fact that he used talkback radio and did it effectively, and found that he also used talkback radio, according to a couple of the press gallery journalists, as really an electronic focus group. He was getting feedback also from the electorate and from the commentators about how a policy was being perceived. This is very, very smart politics because it's politics at ground level. I think today the difficulty of communicating policy is quite apparent because just the recent superannuation changes, for example, they're quite complex to the point where people just quite don't get it. That's one of the big issues.

I can give you another very quick example, Brian Owler, who was head of the AMA, the Australian Medical Association, made a comment the other day about the government's home health policy. He said, "I am a brain surgeon with a PhD and even I cannot understand this policy." Now that's a classic quote, if you like, of how complex policies have got and the challenge the politicians face in communicating to the wider electorate.

David Pembroke: Isn't that the challenge though? Isn't that the job of both at the bureaucratic level and at the staff level and the politicians themselves, is to really take these complex matters and distill them into such a form that they can communicate them clearly and effectively? Because I think policy has always been quite complex, it's just perhaps they're not spending enough time to render them simple and then to deliver that message with that consistency and discipline that you spoke about a bit earlier on.

- David Marshall: That's so true, David. The dilemma is that when talking points, for example, go to a minister's office, the talking points quite often are summaries of the policy which again is to be articulated...
- David Pembroke: That's not very helpful.
- David Marshall: They're not thinking about the fact that they've got to turn those talking points into digestible communication dot points which the public will actually understand and respond to. Now there's a big difference in that, and I've gone through this with thousands of people over the last few years, and it is very challenging for a lot of policy developers to actually transpose what is a complex policy framework into something which is easily understood by the majority of Australians.
- David Pembroke: What's the best way to go about doing that, because I think that is probably for our listeners, probably something that they have to do quite regularly, is that notion of transformation of the policy and all of its integrity and complexity, and then moving it to the point where, okay, well, this is what can be said that doesn't undermine the integrity of the actual message but actually gets it to the point where it's like, okay, I can understand that, and therefore, I can react to it and behave in a particular way, which is ultimately what you're trying to do with content marketing.
- David Marshall: Exactly. The way to do it is to think about what is in it for me and put yourself in the shoes of the audience. It's a change of thinking and the way you view the messages you're trying to impart. Now a good idea to actually as a filter for this really is to prepare some talking points, for example, and give it to somebody who has no idea about this policy and say, "If we said this, can you understand what I'm getting at?" It's pretty basic fundamental stuff but it's a very good filter for people to understand that in order to garner the support of the electorate you need to think like the electorate, and as you know, everything in politics is local and that is a very good way of just determining whether you're going to hit the mark with the message or whether it's just going to be lost, if you like, in the plethora of other messaging.
- David Pembroke: It's interesting you say that because as part of the content marketing process after you've answered the question of why, so why are you starting it, and then understood the what, as in the objectives, the third step of the process is really around that audience piece which is really trying to use the principles of design thinking and strategic planning to unpick the audience and trying to understand not only their issues as it relates to that particular policy but trying to understand their lives a bit more broadly.
- What are their issues? What are their wants? What are their needs? What are their pain points, and to try to communicate with them at a much broader level but certainly to dive into that space, so as you say, that you are putting yourselves in the shoes of the people you're seeking to engage with before you take the step of understanding, well, what part of the story am I going to tell, what's the language, what are the facts I'm going to use, how is it going to be understood by that

audience, and then you move through the process as we go through. It's good to know that if you're doing that content marketing and you're focusing on the audience that that is the place that you really do need to get those insights which is going to help you to put together these programs that are going to actually work for you.

David Marshall: The other interesting thing you mentioned before about social media, the idea is of course that your messaging and style of messaging must match the platform. Now a classic case if you look at mainstream media, if you're going to go onto The Project or the minister's going to go onto The Project, if you don't fit the format of the show ...

David Pembroke: Yeah, The Project, again for our guests overseas, that is a, what, sort of a news and current affairs program, light sort of thing, a bit jokey.

David Marshall: It's light. Light, comedian involved with it. They take a light look and a very concise look at news of the day for an hour from Monday to Friday from 6:30 till 7:30. It's a very good program, however, if you're going to appear on that, you can't be a policy wonk who gets out there and tries to explain things in detail. It's not going to work and you will not get another shot. You've got to be lighthearted and you've got to think about the audience which is predominantly an under-35 audience. The same with any other platform, if you don't reflect the platform and the style then you are not going to be successful at communicating whatever you want to get across. It's so fundamental but people miss that point.

David Pembroke: Now listen, you have a very successful business in the media training strategic planning side of this communications caper, what is the difference in the advice that you give to government compared to the advice that you give to people in the private sector?

David Marshall: Well, quite often the advice is similar but there are distinct differences. The private sector, thankfully, can work very quickly, and particularly in a crisis situation where you need to respond without thinking for three days about what you're going to say, makes it quite enjoyable to work with these sorts of companies. We're talking about again making statements, holding statements, if you like, if a crisis arises, keeping people informed, getting legal advice, of course, but not necessarily agreeing with every piece of legal advice that you're better to say nothing, because that, in my opinion, is the wrong way to go in many cases. You can always say something. Government of course is different because they take time to consider things and quite often there's a political dynamic to everything they say.

This is the challenge, I think, for politicians right around the country, they're always thinking about the politics. That in itself can inhibit a clear message. I have extreme admiration for people who work in communications in government because I mean it's one of the most challenging environments to work in, with an enormous number of constraints, and with a political dimension as it is sometimes massive ramifications. You don't get that complexity necessarily in a private sector

environment.

David Pembroke: Do you think that that focus on politics and always thinking about the politics, does it completely undermine the ability to communicate effectively or obviously as you mentioned with John Howard, he was able to strike that balance to be able to be clear enough to inspire confidence and inspire behavior.

David Marshall: Howard was very consistent right throughout his entire political life. He knew where he stood on every issue, he was a very, very good media performer, he immersed himself in the media to the point where he'd get up early in the morning, he'd go through the papers, he'd go for a walk, he'd come back. He'd listening to ABC Radio, our current affairs program in the morning, AM. He would read the papers at night, he'd watch television. He was a constant consumer of media. The other element that Howard had was an incredible memory. He was across the briefs of all his ministry as well. You could go on to a current affairs program like the 7.30 Report on the ABC here in Australia and he would be bombarded with questions but the press gallery and some of these commentators said to me that you very rarely ever caught him out.

His knowledge was absolutely extraordinary. That in itself was an interesting dynamic for a prime minister. The other revelation was that, and Kerry O'Brien a former 7.30 Report anchor said to me that you had to ask John Howard every question. He would very specifically answer the question and that's it. All right, and so because he used to practice as well extensively before he went on these programs, which is to his credit, and he would always analyze through his media team, his performance as well. Now I say to my private sector clients, you know, the Prime Minister would practice before he went on 7.30, and they'd be quite amazed because quite often, and you may find this too, David, people will think they can wing an interview.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

David Marshall: When you're talking to very, very experienced journalists with an enormous research arm to these programs, you've got to know your stuff.

David Pembroke: Yeah. Listen, just summarizing some of those things, we talk about knowledge, simplicity, consistency, discipline, feedback, practice. Do you get a sense that someone like a John Howard would have been just as successful in the current environment as he was when media was completely dominant in terms of communicating that story and that message?

David Marshall: I think in mainstream media, yes, I think definitely. Where I think the government of the day would perhaps be challenged more so would be in the social media environment. It's certainly even when you compare John Howard and the Kevin Rudd election in 2007, Kevin Rudd who became Prime Minister was very much tweeting, sending selfies, all these sorts of things he was doing, and he would go on late night comedy programs which John Howard tended to avoid. He fitted and

looked like really just a younger version of John Howard. It was a very, very smart campaign. I think the style and the youthfulness of politicians now and their ability to actually seize opportunities on social media and not even age because our current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is a prolific social media consumer and user.

That initiative does pay, it certainly pays dividends. There is no doubt about that at all. However, you've got to have the messaging to go with it in order to again ensure that you're communicating effectively with the public.

David Pembroke: Just a shift again back to one of the things we mentioned before, you do a lot of media training, so what's the most common challenge of government communicators when they communicate? I know you mentioned complexity there before, but how do you go about fixing that problem and train them so that they get the skills that they need to be able to communicate effectively? That could be for a politician as much for a senior spokesperson in a government agency.

David Marshall: Well, the biggest frustration spokespeople have is that they've got to be succinct. Being succinct is incredibly difficult when you're trying to explain a policy which does require a degree of explanation, that you find you're cut off after 30 seconds if you're on a talkback program, because people think, well, they're losing interest. It's a heck of a challenge. Again John Howard made the comment that the weekend Financial Review and Weekend Australian were probably two of the most influential papers because you had time at least to explain what was going on. In the social media web sense you can go on and you can read the policies in detail if you like, which I don't know how many people actually do, the mainstream parties unless you're particularly interested in political tragic to do that.

Again I find it very, very challenging, and what those people that I work with, they do have difficulty in trying to be concise and trying actually to really highlight what are the key things that those people watching or listening would want to know.

David Pembroke: Would you describe that as the key skill, being succinct, or if that's not, what would be the one skill for a government communicator that you would like to be able to develop?

David Marshall: Simplicity of the message. I think basically that is what is needed because when you look at the changes which have been proposed in this last budget, because the government itself haven't been out there, and commentators have said this just recently, haven't been out there enough over the past few months explaining these things, when you're suddenly hit with it, you've then got to get your mind around it. Even now talking to people over the past few days about the superannuation change, people are still extremely confused, when in fact it should almost been the fact that you explain things well in advance or at least come out and have a blitz on explaining things simply in this environment now. Unless we can understand it, well, what's the point?

David Pembroke: What's the most effective way to develop that skill?

David Marshall: It's only practice. It's practice and we're very fortunate in this country, we've got some very good government communicators out there, media teams who are doing fantastic work in this environment. Ultimately they can put suggestions forward but our political masters are the ones that are going to actually front the media and have a social media presence. It's how they want to interpret what's been given to them which is the challenge, because again if they're not prepared to take advice, and some of them aren't prepared to take advice, and this has been the bane of people like myself and I'm sure yourself over many, many years, but you give them what you believe is the right advice, it is the right advice, you believe, and so they can take it or leave it.

What ultimately I think it boils down to is if the government's not making inroads and not convincing the electorate, then there is obviously something wrong with the messaging.

David Pembroke: In terms of developing the strategy that then predates that activity, you were mentioning there before that consistency and that discipline, what aspect of designing a communication strategy do you find the most difficult when you're dealing with your government clients?

David Marshall: It's trying to convince them I think to look beyond the obvious. Because we sit down there and we talk about, "Okay, if this happens then we're going to have to do this or that." You think, "Well, hang on, there's a lot of other dimensions you might want to consider here. Why don't we just sort of map them?" They have a lot of difficulty thinking perhaps a little bit more broadly about where this should head because their whole mindset is embedded in the policy and what is driving that is often instructions from a minister's office, for example, on how to deal with the media, how to deal with strategy and so forth. Everyone's trying to do the right thing, there's no doubt about that, it's just trying to simplify things, trying to have the courage to look a bit beyond the norm and then mapping out a strategy so there should be absolutely no surprises.

David Pembroke: Also it sounds like judging on a couple of your earlier answers, really the way to get around that is to go towards the audience and seek to understand your audience better and what they're looking for in order for you to communicate more effectively because through that sort of empathetic understanding of their lives and who they are and what they need to know, you're probably going to get a bit closer to finding that right message.

David Marshall: Well, that's why they do so much polling, and focus group research and so forth is critically important in shaping a lot of the way the government will communicate. That in itself is absolutely critical, I think, in this day and age. The difficulty then is transferring what the focus groups say into how you communicate a policy overall on the social media platforms as well as mainstream media, and because there's such a proliferation of media now, I mean who would want the role of trying to get

a message out when people in itself are disengaged from politics in many cases, and then trying to explain complex policy issues to an audience which are saying, well, basically all I want to know is it going to impact on me?

I don't smoke so I don't care about the cigarette tax. It doesn't matter to me, I couldn't care less. If I've got superannuation, I care. I've got a negatively geared property. That I care about, tell me how that works.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

David Marshall: It's all about what's in it for me, isn't it?

David Pembroke: Yeah, it is, it is. Well, that's, what do they say, that's the only radio station people listen to, is WII FM. Listen, just quickly before we do wrap up, you also know a lot about presentation and presentation skills, and I know a lot of our listeners are always looking for those tips. This has been a great podcast because there's been a lot of information that they can take away, a lot of principles that they can apply when they go to think about that next strategy or think about that next explanation document that they're going to send toward their political masters, but what about presentations? Some people have that pathological fear of, "God, I can't do it." Why do presentations fall flat or what are the challenges about making a good presentation?

David Marshall: With the people I work with, the content that they have, much of it is very good, very inspiring and so forth, which is great. The style of presentation is what lets them down. It's really practice, rehearsing, watching very good presenters, thinking about body language, and thinking about making it interesting. I've gone and worked with people that have given me their presentation and they say, "What do you think?" I'll say, "Look, there's too much information in for a start-off." This is another thing, information overload. Simplicity is the key there as well.

David Pembroke: Again, yeah.

David Marshall: It is also thinking about how you make it entertaining, if you like, almost in a sense so the audience maintain interest in the presentation. You do that through a number of techniques from using very effective Power Point if you're going to do that or the movement, your gesturing, your voice, the use of your voice.

David Pembroke: What's your view about that sort of move to just an image, no words, just an image, and you tell the story through the imagery, are you a fan of that?

David Marshall: As part of a presentation I like imagery. I use a lot of imagery and I recommend anyone that I'm training use lots of pictures. These days of having dot points on a Power Point slide, it's pretty average. It's not going to really entertain anybody. Presentations are really a form of entertainment. When it's all said and done, people sit down and they say, and the same with training, okay, tell me, tell me what I don't know and tell me how are you going to make a difference to my life

but do it in an entertaining way. It's tough.

David Pembroke: To do good presentations, yeah, but the slides have got to go with, as you say, the body language and the voice and everything. Again it comes back to practice, doesn't it? Really it sounds like your advice to people is don't be scared and start, and get out there and do it, and don't do it once, do it as many times as you possibly can.

David Marshall: Well, I say to people, "Practice in the room you're going to present in if you've got the opportunity to do it." For a presentation to a conference I'll be rehearsing at least six times, half a dozen times, out loud as well, making sure that I know the subject back to front, because then when I'm presenting I want to focus on my style of presentation and not the content.

David Pembroke: Right. Yes. You've got the content covered and then you're ready to go and put on that show.

David Marshall: Yeah. Otherwise you're going to be nervous because you're thinking how am I going to get through the content, but practicing absolutely beyond anything else will help overcome nerves and hopefully give you a better presentation style.

David Pembroke: Fantastic. Well, David Marshall, I think a lot of our friends in the States they talk about value bombs that you get through different podcasts, and I think today we've had plenty of those. Some of the ones I'll take away, knowledge, why John Howard was a great performer, because he knew his stuff. If you're going to make a presentation or if you're going to put information forward, you've got to know what it's about. When you put it forward, it's got to be simple. It's got to be in a way that can be clearly and easily understood. Once you've got that message you need to be consistent and disciplined in terms of how do we tell that story over and over and over again in different ways.

Be prepared to always seek feedback. This is something that's sort of starting to becoming a bit of a theme of not only these podcasts but certainly the work here at contentgroup, we are now obsessed with feedback. We try to get it all the time about everything that we do so that we can improve and we can get better. Practice, style, rehearsing, body language, if you're going out to make a presentation, understand that it has to be at its heart entertaining, and our communication in our presentation need to understand what is the audience looking for. That is a fundamental building block of successful content marketing and certainly successful communication and presentations as well. David Marshall, thank you very much for spending some time with us today here in Canberra, Australia. I really do appreciate it.

David Marshall: It's a pleasure.

David Pembroke: To everyone listening out there, thanks very much again for your time, and we'll be back again at the same time next week. Bye for now.

