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## InTransition Episode 67 – Bob Pearson

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that examines the practice of content marketing in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke, and thanks for giving us just a little bit of your time this week to spend with us as we speak to someone who is really going to give you some insights that are going to be of real value to your work, but as we do each week, we start with a definition of just exactly what content marketing is as it relates to government and the public sector because it is important that we do understand just what it is in these very early stages of content marketing.

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.

To our guest today. Our guest today is Bob Pearson who is the president of the W2O Group, a group of 3 marketing and communications companies. Prior to working at W2O, Bob was the Vice President of Communities and Conversation for Dell where he developed their first global social media efforts, and before that, he was Head of Global Corporate Communications for Novartis Pharmaceuticals.

Bob recently wrote the book “Storytizing: What's Next After Advertising,” and he’s also written a book called “Pre-Commerce,” which examines similar sorts of topics. Bob is also a frequent speaker on digital marketing at the Syracuse Center for Social Commerce, and importantly, for this audience, he also speaks at the US State Department’s Marketing College. Bob Pearson, thanks very much for joining us InTransition.

Bob Pearson: Yeah, it’s my pleasure to be here.

David Pembroke: Bob, listen. Storytizing. I’m intrigued by it because it really is about what’s next after advertising, but is it the time yet to read the last rights to traditional advertising?

Bob Pearson: That’s an interesting way to say it. Yeah. No, it’s an evolution that’s in progress. If you think of the traditional PESO model, Paid, Earned, Shared, and Owned, we all knew that we grew up in a world where advertising was number one. We then revolved around that to figure out how our campaign could be done. The big change is occurring now because of technology and the use of analytics is we can see exactly who our audience is proactively. We can actually identify who we want to reach, and then we can align with them in many different ways.

Because we can do that, earned and shared media are becoming far more important than ever. Owned media can actually be introduced via earned and shared media more effectively, and paid media can be used more strategically. Advertising definitely doesn’t go away. It’s always going to be important, but it will

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be used much more strategically and much more as a way to take earned and shared content, and help it actually extend its life and reach the right people.

David Pembroke: What are the skills that communications teams, particularly in the government and public sector area, are going to have to have to make the most of this transition is taking place?

Bob Pearson: Yes, so we talked ... For example, the US State Department. We focus on the fundamentals most of all which is, "Do you actually know who your audience is? Do you know the behaviour you want to occur? Do you know the content that you really should deliver, and why? Do you know how you will distribute it?" That type of thing, but I get down into basics like the world, despite looking like it's so big and there's so much data all over, it's actually very few people, for example, who really drive shared conversation.

Do we know the top 50 people who are driving the majority of shared conversation? Do we know the top keywords that are actually aligning what we talk about with the story we want people to reach? It's things like that where we have to like stop for a second, make sure we don't make the world too complex and say, "What are those smaller actions that are highly focused that we can take to allow us to get our story out to the right people?"

David Pembroke: What you're encouraging people do is really to be strategic about their communication before they start doing things?

Bob Pearson: Yeah, exactly. If you think of like ... Take Twitter as an example. If you look at Twitter, people for years have always been wanting to just expand how many people follow them on Twitter. What I say is, who cares? What really matters is, who are the people that actually will move your content? Think about Twitter like it's Reuters. Can you follow the right people, so when you say something that's relevant, you're going to improve your reach 20%, 30%, 40%? That is not a quantity game at all. That's a quality game.

David Pembroke: How do you go about trying to find the right people and try to understand who those right people are?

Bob Pearson: Yeah. Today, the most sophisticated way is to use algorithms where we can see exactly who actually drives conversation or who shares the most, and you can see that in order mainly because you can identify human behaviour, and then built algorithms around that human behaviour, but if you have none of those tools and you have zero money for your budget, you can still look at who is actually most important to you.

Most organisations ... We get into this with the government. If you have no budget, at least look at who actually is moving your content and telling your story well, and then look at who follows them, and see if you can see some superstars in there that really like what you're talking about, and then follow them, and keep doing that

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and see ... Let your audience actually take you to the next audience, and you can ... Anyone can do that. If you have the money, you can get very sophisticated, but many people don't have that, so that's where we often start.

David Pembroke: Okay. In Storytizing, you raised this notion of this idea of audience architecture. Can you explain that to me a little bit more?

Bob Pearson: Yes. The way that we got into this is actually a neat story. A couple years ago, we were sitting around and complaining to ourselves how Google really will never be efficient enough and that we really need what we call "custom search." In other words, whatever audience you care about, you should be able to search just that audience and know what they're doing, but that didn't exist, and so what we did is we started looking at healthcare as an example, and we built something called In Digital Life where we indexed all medical providers, and then we matched them up with their registration number and then their online profile.

So then, you can start to see what are all cardiologists saying, or what are all oncologists saying, or what are nurses saying, and how do they interrelate with each other, and that became the foundation for what we call "Audience Architecture," but it's basically ... If you're in the movie business and you're putting out another Harry Potter movie, who are the people who like all the past Harry Potter movies? Where are they? What are they doing? What time of day do they go online?

By tracking the right tribes of people, you can actually see exactly what it is that they want, so you can align with them. That's the essence of Audience Architecture is understand who your audience is, proactively identify who they are, whether it's B2B or B2C, and then understand what they want in terms of content, video, images, time of day, all that stuff.

David Pembroke: How much time does it take to do these effectively? Now, I know ... Obviously that's, how long is a piece of string, but how much time can get you a good result?

Bob Pearson: Yeah. One of the reasons I write books like this is we're looking at what people are doing today, but we think the majority of the world will do is say 3 to 4 years from now, and so right now, it's not mainstream that people identify the audience, but it's completely doable to do that. At the very least, if you take a B2B audience ... For example, in technology. People will say, "I don't know how to reach the B2B professionals in technology. How do I reach the people who are security experts or related to the cloud?"

The reality is you just start dissecting who those folks are. What software languages do they care about? What security issues do they care about? If you go from left to right and you figured out all the topics that they care about, you have a basket of topics that can then lead you to the right people. If you put an algorithm against that, of course, you can get very precise, but again, even without an algorithm, you start to break down how few people you really need to reach in each area to make

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a difference, and that's a scene we see over and over again worldwide is that there's very few people that really make a difference.

David Pembroke: Right. You said it really is this narrowing, so this notion of broad or big doesn't really matter. It's just the ones who are essential to your business who not only will share your content perhaps, but will also behave in the way that you want them to behave to achieve the business objective that you've outlined.

Bob Pearson: Exactly, and you mentioned government business earlier, so it's ... That's absolutely true, what you said, and then the other thing is if you have an issue that's ... Let's say you have a nemesis that is coming at you even harder than you are. Actually, you start to look at, how do you reach people who are influential outside of the zone where everyone is talking? I'll give you an example of this without giving ... It's nothing to do with specific work, so I don't get in trouble, but let's just say that Mr. Putin was making a lot of noise about something, and it was about the Ukraine.

A lot of that conversation occurs between Russia and Ukraine, and people crowd each other out with the noise. If you actually look for people who are advocates of, in this case, the Ukrainians worldwide, you can start to see who has influence by topics and countries that are unrelated to where the noise is occurring, and you can start to crowd source positive content back into the market more effectively by doing that, but people don't usually think like that. They usually think about like hand-to-hand combat. "If someone is coming after me, how do I come after them?" I always think of Judo like why you use someone else's power and actually turn it against them.

David Pembroke: Are these skills data science skills that you're going to have to have as part of your team as you start to take advantage of this ability to create and distribute content?

Bob Pearson: Yeah, great question. I'm a big believer that the original fundamentals that we learned as communicators or marketers are just as important as they've ever been, so you have to have the fundamentals, but you do need to have a knowledge of data science, so you understand how to think in a way. You may be instructing data scientists to give you what you need, but you understand how to do that. Yeah. I think that does help.

An example of this would be like with content, what we see is ... From doing this many times. We've done this type of work like thousands of times, and you see ... When you look at a marketplace, the content that a given organisation may be putting out, it may be 60% to 70% of what the market actually wants, but that other 30% to 40% is not on at all. If you actually are looking at the market correctly, you can see what content your audience actually wants, and you can get closer to 100% of what they're looking for.

That makes a big difference in content. A great creative or a great communicator talking to a data scientist can have them figure out what you need, and then you do the campaigns that are going to make content marketing super successful, so that's

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why ... I think it helps us all become better professionals.

David Pembroke: Yeah, indeed. The power of it is incredible compared to where we were not so long ago.

Bob Pearson: Totally.

David Pembroke: How fast do you think these change is taking place, and how quickly do people need to be starting to think about retooling their approaches to take advantage of this gift of technology?

Bob Pearson: I believe it's something that everyone should be thinking about how they do it now because when you have technology allowing you to do this today, you really have to think twice and say, "Why would I prevent myself from knowing who the customers are who drive share of conversation? Why would I not want to know what language to use to get people to reach my story that I spent so much time figuring out how to do well? Why would I not don't want to know exactly which channels my customers are in to reach them more effectively?"

When you start to think of what's possible, you realise, "Okay. This is ..." You can't do everything in one day, but it's a multi-year effort to say, "We're going to change," and we see the best organisations ... They just do that. They just say, "Okay, got it. Let's go." Part of that is part of the essence of the Marketing College with the State Department is ... Awhile back, Ed Tazzia and Kip Knight put this together, and then asked a bunch of us to join them as "professors" to really start teaching the fundamentals of marketing and communications, and then how it applies in the digital world. We teach this to embassy spokespeople, and consulate spokespeople, and members of many other functions within the state worldwide.

David Pembroke: Yeah, but in government ... Again, this perhaps ... I'd be interested in your experience or observations of government and public sector, but the notoriously conservative organisations.

Bob Pearson: Yes.

David Pembroke: What could be a couple of steps perhaps that people could start? Where are the easy places to get going?

Bob Pearson: Yes. I look at the government really just like a regulated industry. If we work with a pharmaceutical company or a bank, they have a lot of regulatory laws that they have to follow, and so it slows them down, and you have to think about how to innovate differently. A government is the same way. It may not be that there's ... The regulations. Although, that's some of it. It's also just the inertia that is slower inside a government to move things.

What does that mean? It means that you do things like, what if you build a library of content in advance that you can get approved, so when you can see the

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marketplace evolving, you have more content that's already approved that you can put in the market more quickly that is aligned with what people are doing, or what are all the things that you can do that are really zero-risk that anyone could be doing?

In other words, when I think of like the Twitter example, I think of it like a ... If you're building a media network and the government body or a company is thinking like a media property, you say, "Okay. Am I following the right people in each channel, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, et cetera? Then, if I am, am I providing the right content in order to tell our story together?" Anyone can do that. Regulations have nothing to do with that, so I always look at like, "What are all the things you can do with zero risk? What are the things you can do with very low risk? The things that are longer-term, okay, we'll get to those next year."

David Pembroke: Okay. That's really good advice. I think that to just pick up those tasks that are ... no one could object to because it's not going to be a problem, but then, how do you sell the message up the line? How do you then get that message up to those senior executives and through that senior executive layer up to the political layer where they can understand and appreciate the benefits that this can deliver to their particular program, or service, or regulation, or regulatory organisation?

Bob Pearson: Yeah. Again, a great point, and it's ... Without saying anything that I get ... I've got to be careful, I guess, in any specific details, but I don't think governments are any different than companies in this regard in that if you can train and teach the top leaders of an organisation, you make a difference. If you don't, then you don't. One of the things that we ... I consistently say in any kind of training is if you're training the people who are on the frontlines and they can get better at what they do, that's great, and that definitely helps, but you have to ... The bosses have to be trained too.

The bosses just can't say, "I'm on board. Let's do this." I don't find that that really works, and so we're always pushing to get higher level involvement, higher level knowledge, broaden out the reach. Government moves slower that way where companies will say, "You're right. Let's go train 500 people worldwide, and let's go make this happen."

David Pembroke: Yeah. Look, I think the slow movement of government, there's a purpose to it really.

Bob Pearson: Yeah.

David Pembroke: You don't want it to operate like a private sector organisation.

Bob Pearson: Absolutely, absolutely.

David Pembroke: In terms of getting the attention of those people again, I get that, but they're notoriously busy. We've got so many things to do. I've got so many people wanting

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to get a share of my time. So many want to get my attention. What's some advice that you would have to people in terms of composing an argument to them or a convincing argument that would get them to think, "Okay, that is worth ... I don't know, an hour, 2 hours, 3 hours of my time?" What is the best time of the day to coach senior executives?

Bob Pearson: Yes, a couple things in there. One is when people are not seeing why they should do something from a digital standpoint. One of the more effective approaches is to actually do a landscape analysis that shows who is telling the story for the topics that the executive or leader cares about. What I find is when you can say, "Here's who's telling this story. Here's who's influencing the reputation of what you care about, who's defining the issues that you care about," what they often realise is they don't know any of these folks or they know very few of them, and so the real ...

Then, the follow-up is if you're comfortable allowing other people to form your reputation without you, that's great. Nothing to talk about, right? If you would prefer to be involved in shaping your own brand or your own reputation, we need to do something, and that's usually enough for any leader to do exactly what you just do. They go like ... It's a laughing moment to say, "Okay, this is silly. We got to do something about that."

The other thing I find is nothing better than getting executives involved in ... of any type. An example would be, let's say, you're trying to do outreach in a certain country for a certain topic. Why not do a guest blog series over time? Nothing extraordinary, but have that leader reach out to people they know to do Q&As, or to do, "Ask 3 questions and get 3 answers," or feature one of their friends on their blog, and you start to bring the community that you're trying to reach into your community. By bear hugging that community, they of course usually love that, and then tell all their friends, so you start to integrate your reach or expand your reach more, but it also gets more personal. Like anything in life, when things get more personal, we'd pay more attention.

David Pembroke: What you're suggesting though, okay, is to really assist those executives to grow their own reach and influence by demonstrating their expertise and sharing the information and knowledge that they've acquired many, many years?

Bob Pearson: Yes, exactly. Exactly, and what happens naturally with leaders is they will then start to look at this more closely, and they have their own ... If they're not as digitally savvy, they may have a very unique view of what they think the world thinks of them, and then you can say like, "Well, this is actually what the world is ... really believes in what you have done," and they realise, "Okay. This is not only important for the brand or reputation work that I'm responsible for, I have a role in this. I have to have a bigger voice in order to move that needle." When that happens, then you have a great ... future great leadership, but it doesn't always happen. Big organisations of any type, not everyone is going to do that, but you get enough people doing it, others pay attention.

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David Pembroke: How do you find those who are perhaps a little bit more predisposed to learning and to getting involved? Any tips around how you can identify where to start?

Bob Pearson: Yeah. This is where I'm going to go back to my Dell days as an example. We had a lot of ... Our leaders were great, very smart, and busy just as you said before. What I found is if I went to the middle of the organisation and asked people if they would participate, they were hungry, and they wanted to, and they would commit the time. Once they started to do that and participating online, and people were liking what they were doing, the leaders above them wake up to go, "Hey, what about me? How come you didn't ask me?" It's like, "Oh, I didn't know you were interested. Why don't you join us?" I found that a little good old-fashioned craftiness can wake people up and get them going. It works, and it went up.

David Pembroke: Away from training and back to this notion of the use of tools, what suggestions might you have for the audience about the tools that they should assemble and the tools that they should be using to try to gather these insights into the audience around the content and the distribution that they're going to need to engage themselves in?

Bob Pearson: Yes. One of the things I try to do in Storytizing and also in Pre-Commerce is focus on what I call "Intellectually-Scalable Models." What I would encourage people to do is if you're Head of Communications is ... as an example is to really think through that it is that you need to be looking at. A great example would be a dashboard that people look at, and I always joke around like, "Most dashboards show you a lot of stuff, and you have no idea what it means." Yes, you can read about your organisation. You can see it, but you don't know what to do about it. There's no actionable intelligence that you're getting, so stop looking at that stuff and start to think, "What do I actually need to follow, so I can be smarter?"

I'll give you an example of this. It could only be that there's 3 channels that you need to be looking at for a topic. Follow those, or you could say, "I'm going to identify the top 50 people that matter for me on a topic, and I want to look at what they're doing every day because they're actually driving the market, so I want to look at them versus all the other noise." You can do that. This day and age, as you know, with Sysomos or Hootsuite or Sprinklr, or many tools where if you can just tweak it enough, you can actually just get what you need and cut out all the noise, but the key thing is try to focus on what it is that you really are going to learn from.

David Pembroke: In a general sense, what do you think of the things that people should be looking at to give them that best understanding of the distribution of the other data that's helping them to uncover those insights around the content that needs to be created?

Bob Pearson: Yeah. When we talk about that, there's 5 fundamentals of media efficiency that I always go back to that we found continue to work over the last 10 years worldwide. One of them is what we just talked about, which is make sure you have



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actionable insights so you can act on when you need to and stop nothing short at getting there. The second is the talent. You're in the talent business. Know who is actually telling your story, and know who is influencing those people, and ask yourself if you're actually forming the right relationships with them. Also, are you building out the next generation of talent?

A great communications person is thinking through, "Who are the next 10, 20, 30 people who really aren't bored with what they're doing, but they're not famous enough yet, but we're going to help them get there because we're going to basically completely shape our ecosystem?" That's the second. The third is language. What are the actual keywords, and there's usually not more than 15, that you can use that will align people with your story?

The fourth there is content, which I talked about, making sure you know what content really matters, and then the fifth is channel. If we look at social media, there's only 10 channels of social media, so everything fits into one of the 10. Basically, people usually heard internet active in more than about 4 for any topic for what you care about, so don't worry about going everywhere. Just worry about going to the channels where people hang out. I find that those 5 things end up centering you on doing the right thing and not getting distracted by the latest squirrel that flew by.

David Pembroke: What are your views about offline communications, things like events and say traditional public relations working with media organisations?

Bob Pearson: Yeah.

David Pembroke: Still important to you?

Bob Pearson: Very important, but in a different way. I think what we always knew about events was they could be great. They're exciting. They get people's attention, and that attention goes away as fast as it comes, and so what we can now see with analytics is that's absolutely true. Whether it's an advertising campaign launch, or a big event, or a press conference, they usually have like that one big day where everyone is paying attention. It might be a little longer than that, but usually, not a lot.

Here's the thing that's really cool. What we see is when you catch people's attention, they're wide awake. Your audience is awake. If you give them relevant content that's not news-worthy, you can extend that conversation for weeks and even months, and we're seeing this over and over again that if you know who your top 1% or who create content, but more importantly, your top 9% in the 1-9-90 model, the people who will share content if you give it to them because they love what you do. If you give them video Q&As, a slide deck, a tweet, a whitepaper, and it's on the same topic, they will keep talking, and sharing, and talking, and sharing.

There's a content elasticity that we are still learning about, which is critical to

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expanding the power of communications. In the future, we'll know, "Okay. This topic like will go for a week. This topic will go for 3 weeks. This topic is endless. This topic, no one cares about," and so you can start to see then how to tweak your campaigns. That leads to what we call "Agile Campaigning," which is, how do you wake up a market, but then keep feeding it appropriately forever after?

David Pembroke: Okay, that's a great insight. What about PR media?

Bob Pearson: Yeah. It's absolutely important. I think that you have a broader view of media. What we see, again, through doing this quite a bit is that if you have a financial topic, you have ... or a government topic where it's like a consistent topic that people are going to talk about, yeah, you may have more journalists covering you, and it may be a consistent group that is clearly listening to what you say, but for the majority of topics, that's not the case, and you have a mix of just normal people, bloggers, journalists depending on the topic. It's other industry experts, and so understanding that mix is really important.

More importantly, what we're seeing in media relations, which is really key for PR, is we can see who influences who. In other words, who influences a journalist? If you ask them, you know the answer. They'll say no one, but if you actually ... Right? Because it's not possible that anyone could influence them, but when you actually look online, you see there's, of course, a lot of people influencing them, so you can see that it might be a subject matter expert here. It could be a physician. It could be an NSA expert, and then you start to see who you need to work with to influence.

Media relations is actually expanding in its breath in terms of how we do it well, but a lot of companies and organisations as you still know and government as well, they still go out to the traditional journalists and try to get them to write traditional stories, and then they high five because they think they did their job. That's really just the very beginning of the process.

David Pembroke: Yeah. Yeah, indeed. Just one final one before we go because we're hard up against time. Could you give me some examples just going back to that point 1 that these 5 fundamentals, these actionable insights?

Bob Pearson: Yeah.

David Pembroke: If you could just give me an example perhaps of what a handful of actionable insights might look like.

Bob Pearson: Yes. Let me give you some ... We've done a lot of work in the movie industry over the years. I won't say the movie, but one of the ... I'll just tell you what it is, but ... Yeah.

David Pembroke: We're in Australia. We're a long way away, so don't ...

Bob Pearson: Yeah. No, but it's like when you look at like Harry Potter, for example.

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David Pembroke: Okay.

Bob Pearson: You know how many people love Harry Potter, and there's only ... In one of their key countries for Harry Potter, there's only 43 people to drive the majority of share of conversation, yet there's millions of people talking about it. If you go out to the influencers and allow them to carry content sooner, then you actually have more impact on the audience than if you go out with traditional direct mail, or emails, or things like that. Now, why is that? The reason is it's far more relevant when an audience gets to inform itself than if an organisation informs for it, and so when you look at like rates of interest, they're not like 1 time better. They're like 10, 20, 30 times better. It's not even close, and so that kind of thing, we see all the time. That's an example.

David Pembroke: Yeah, I know. Fantastic. Listen, Bob. Thank you so much for sharing those great examples and your wisdom that is in Storytizing, and before that, in Pre-Commerce, so I think that a lot of people will be now going out and buying both of those books I think because the insights there will really help them to start this transition really to get themselves moving and to start to take some of those actions that you have mentioned, so they can improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of their communication, but listen. For the audience, what's the best way for them to be able to stay connected to a lot of the work that you've outlined for us today?

Bob Pearson: Yeah. The best way is ... My Twitter handle is @bobpearson1845. That happens to be the year that Texas joined the United States, just in the side, and then also, you can just go to our site, w2ogroup.com, and we have a blog there called "Common Sense." We have a lot of great interviews on there and everything else, but I also want to compliment you. I think what you're doing is great. I love the fact that podcasting is really becoming a strong as ever, and it's ... I appreciate the opportunity.

David Pembroke: Yeah, Bob. No problem at all, and thanks very much for that, and we enjoy it like I love having these conversations of ... I've got pages of notes sitting in front of me now, just scribbling things down as we spoke. I've been in this business for a long, long time, but whenever you speak to people like we do on this podcast, you always learn. There are always things that you've never thought of before, so thanks very much for being so generous with your time. Good luck with W2O and everything else that's going on.

Bob Pearson: Great. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

David Pembroke: Okay, everyone. Thank you very much for your time again this week. That was a very, very useful interview, and I'm sure that you will take so much away from that. As I said, like so much in that for me. Just incredible amounts of insight, so have another ... I reckon that's worth a couple of listens. If I were you, I think I'd go back as I will, and go and have another good listen to what Bob has got to say.

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I'll certainly be going to W2O a little bit more, looking at Common Sense, following Bob, and getting through a little bit more of the Storytizing book. I've got a little way through it, but I've got a bit more to go. Actually, I haven't got Pre-Commerce, so I'll go back and buy that, but anyway, there you go. Listen. Thanks, everyone. Thanks for being with me again this week. I look forward to a bit more of your time next week, so just for the moment, bye for now.