
InTransition Episode 74 – Jenny Muir

David Pembroke: Well, 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 I am thrilled that you are joining me today because we have a very good guest, as we do most weeks. We have lots of interesting people on this show, and I know that you will be really engaged by the insights that we're going to hear today on InTransition, but I will come to the introduction of our guest in a moment, but as we start each week, I do think it's so important that we understand just exactly what content marketing is as it relates to government and public sector. The definition, 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. If anyone asks you about content marketing in government and the public sector, that is what we are speaking about.

Now, to our guest today, Jenny Muir is the general manager of Primary Communication, a strategic communications agency based in Australia. Jenny leads the campaign advocacy, government, and stakeholder relations team, and throughout her career, she has worked with many public sector organisations including the South Sydney Council, the New South Wales State Government, and the Australian Human Rights Commission, but also, very importantly, earlier this year, she was elected as the national president of the Public Relations Institute of Australia. Jenny Muir thanks very much for joining us InTransition.

Jenny Muir: My pleasure David.

David Pembroke: Jenny, congratulations. That's a very big job that you've taken on. Not only the day job at Primary Communication there where you're extremely busy delivering programs for your clients, but you've taken on the additional honour or should we say, burden of being national president of a volunteer organisation.

Jenny Muir: Thank you, and thank you for recognising, I guess, the breadth and depth of the gig, as you say. I think for Public Relations Institute, we've been around for 65 years, but like many of your listeners will have in a day-to-day reality, the profession of public relations and communication has expanded considerably. Depending on who you're talking, but as our definition, like you have just skilfully given a very specific definition of content marketing, we currently recognise more than 1200 job titles.

David Pembroke: Wow.

Jenny Muir: Well, yeah, and I guess that's because people are quite creative with their job titles and getting more and more creative, but specifically that pays respect to the diversity that now exist in our profession. I call us a profession because in my

professional experience and many, many, many of our members and our colleagues across many areas, we sit at the senior executive leadership table. We're often sitting around, sharing a boardroom table or a meeting table with legal counsel, with financial counsel, with people that welcome that expertise. That's why I'm very specific ourselves a profession, but I guess the role of national president is a very, very privileged one, or I feel privileged to also be leading an organisation and a profession that is going through such radical and exciting change.

David Pembroke: It is indeed that, radical and exciting and challenging and everything else. From the top of the mountain there where you sit as national president looking out over your minions, what do you think, where are those challenges, and where are the opportunities, and how well are we coping?

Jenny Muir: Okay, so when I took on this role, I was determined to bring a program of change and of front footedness, of PR and comms really embracing their role as strategic communicators and leaders. There are still some challenges in some legacy misunderstanding of what we do, the value that we deliver, the skill sets that we have. I think to a small degree that's a little bit of a build this house problem, that we're always helping others to understand their messages, and a little bit sometimes we leave our own, the promoting and advocacy of our own stuff to last, but I'm determined to turn that around and we've been making really good inroads into doing that.

I guess, in a nutshell, we have a really strong opportunity to build up the understanding and awareness and, I guess, recognition of our diverse profession through recognition, education, and awareness, so education and training, advocating for ourselves as a profession through our codes of conduct and the structures that we use. Essentially, every communicator, regardless of which organisation they stand in, and I know that many of your audience is part of the public sector in a variety of roles, they should be proud of the contribution that they make. They're often the quiet people in the corner toiling very late into the night, depending on how close to policy and ministerials, the decision-making they are, and obviously ... Most often, they are the ones that are the key architects of thinking in language, and they're the ones that are the litmus test for how it's going to play to the very specific audiences that they're trying to influence. I think right at the core of it is what our bread and butter is influence.

David Pembroke: Now that answer is a treasure trove, I've got to say. There is a lot of stuff in that that I do want to unpack one issue at a time.

Jenny Muir: Sure.

David Pembroke: I suppose this first one is communications has, and certainly in government and public sector in my experience, has not been valued particularly. It's seen as almost a service provider, end-of-the-line, create this for us on the way out while the policy people do their thinking at the big table. How can people manage that transition from, here we are, yes we can create great service delivery for you, but

our greater value is how we can create, as you very eloquently described there, that notion of architecture of both thinking and language and creating that value? How do people get to that point where they're able and accepted by their legal colleagues and their financial colleagues as people who are deserving and worthy of a seat at that top table as opposed to just the service providers at the end of the discussions?

Jenny Muir: Okay. Big question but I'm happy and pleased that I can answer it. The Public Relations Institute and on behalf of its members and the broader profession, because we advocate for all, whether they're our members or not, and we hope that, obviously, by what we do, they become our members because they recognise that value proposition, but 3 things for you.

Australia and the Public Relations Institute's model for research, measurement, and evaluation is now held by AMEC at an international level as the global benchmark for one of the best models for research, measurement, and evaluation. That has been 5 years of work. We are talking comprehensive tracking and the ability for people in the public sector who work in the PR and comms roles, right across the list of these titles, if they adopt and learn how to use those measurement tools, then their ability to have a conversation about their value because immensely enhanced. You can put on the table and say, "This is your return on this investment, and we're no longer a resource that you think of as last. We're a resource that you should include as part of your initial thinking before you move on anything." That's one tool.

The second tool which is coming down the pipeline, and thanks to our ACT president and our ACT council and team who will be representing it to the public sector in Canberra and doing a lot more work for that, we have a professional framework. The professional framework is the first time that the PR and comms profession has a blueprint for tracking and managing your career development pathway. Behind it sits a comprehensive, competency matrix that is mapped to the AQF. That tracks your career and all of those different competencies, hard skills, soft skills, and all of that from undergraduate right up to 25 years of experience in the profession. All of the public relations programs for professional development and training will be mapped to that, so that's a lot of work that rolling out over the next 12 months.

Then thirdly, that the advocacy broadly of the value that PR and comms professionals can play is often only really understood in the eye of a storm. When the crisis hits, everything hits the walls, and the PR and comms person is called in to strategise, to stand in front of the hail of bullets, and all of that kind of stuff. We've got to get out of that discussion, but it's also an interesting time to start having a conversation about value, because sometimes in some situations people only can understand value in the middle of crisis when you are about to help them out of trouble.

David Pembroke: This is a pet topic on this subject, sorry, on this podcast that I often like to talk to

people about and get their views, because one of my theories is that the transformation that we've seen in terms of technology, which means people now carry around these supercomputers in their pockets and in their purses, and they have joined up the worlds, and through connectivity, everyone who we need to reach and influence and engage in order to achieve our business objectives are essentially on the grid. How big a change is that in terms of providing an opportunity for public relations professionals to be able to create value in contrast to where we used to be in the age of restricted channels and restricted connectivity?

Jenny Muir: I think your answer is inherent in your question, is that technology has given us extraordinary freedom and influence and power. It has connected to the volumes of audiences that we have always dreamed of connecting to, but in saying that, the measure and the level of discipline that we now need to have in the way that we plan and disseminate information and the speed in which we need to do that requires a whole different type of resourcing. You cannot ask the same headcount inside your department or your organisation to respond in this new world order, because the volume and the speed will drain them immediately, and you'll end up with quite exhausted and non-productive human resources in your comms and PR people. While tech has given us extraordinary connectivity and influence, I would caution and I ... In my day job, I work very closely with mental health and well-being agency around the making sure that everybody doesn't get fatigued. We're starting to see a level of fatigue coming to professional communicators that we have never seen before. The only comparison would be war reporters and journalists that work the frontline.

David Pembroke: Okay. That's interesting. I hadn't really thought about that, but that does makes sense, because as you say, the volume, the discipline, the speed, the requirement to be always on in order to service the needs of the audience who you're seeking to reach and influence. This also moves me to probably my next theory that I've got that's coming out of this change in technology is that the skills of communication and the skills of public relation are really going to have to be distributed and democratised in organisations. It's no longer going to be just the purview of the central comms area, that you are actually going to have to put those skills much closer to the citizen in order to deliver the services that they'll be looking for. What's your view on that emerging role of public relations professionals as sort of being the strategists and the experts but the actual doing being distributed throughout an organisation?

Jenny Muir: I think that's the reality actually. Unless you're a multinational corporation, like we're seeing some incredible investment in internal resources within organisations both corporate and government of the like that you're getting a headcount in your comms teams of over 50 to up to 100 people who are solely responsible for all of the touchpoints so that the organisation is keeping control. Essentially, they're building their own newsrooms that are on all the time. We're seeing some of that, but obviously, that carries an incredible line item in your budget if you want that headcount. I think what you're suggesting is probably more likely to be the norm.

That is where everybody within your customer service teams, your customer contact centres, your marketing teams, those that are your heads of business, if you're looking at an organisation, all have and are trained in being able to use this digital platforms to engage with whomever their stakeholders or customer base is. That requires an investment by the organisation in training, and an awareness of the how to manage tone and content. Tone is everything, and to really adopt an authenticity that the organisation can sustain because it's live. Everything is live.

David Pembroke: Indeed. Now, it's that very point, again, I like to focus on, this notion of education and training, and this democratisation of the skills that are going to have to be built into organisations and that communication is going to become everyone's responsibility, not just the comms areas who will become increasingly those architects of the thinking and language, if I could borrow your description, which I actually will take. I will give your credit for it, but I think I can use that in a few presentations because I really like the way you put that.

Jenny Muir: Happy to give that to you.

David Pembroke: We'll take that, but education and training, how do you see that happening into the future? Obviously, the PRIA will have its education and training, but the demand will be so large, won't it, if you consider that this change will need to take place in so many organisations.

Jenny Muir: Yeah. I mean, I'm thinking of a case that was I'm aware of at the moment where an organisation has an ANZ footprint wants to build a leadership voice, and it wants to use its executives of ... There's 50-something of them, I think, when it was recounted to me, and they want them all to have a voice around insights, a voice around their expertise, about the area of expertise. They want to use them to advocate and connect out and build very large communities proactively and also, once you do that, you put them in a position of being, I guess, as you're calling it, live. Now, to do that, you need to train them one-on-one, because they all have their individual quirks. I mean, any of your listeners who has had the pleasure of training a boss or a CEO or a secretary of a department or even a minister on speaking to media or delivering speeches and the like knows the effort that has to go into that kind of scenario.

If you distil that down to every executive with a phone in their pocket or in their handbag, then yes, you're right. That does that take time and effort, but if they get it wrong, the consequences can be enormous. Not only does it hit the organisation's reputation and needs, as you say, the architects to reach down and take hold of the problem and fix it, but in some cases, it can hit share price. It can hit major issues of public interest. You go carefully, but I don't think that you can say, "No, we're not going to do it." I think that you're kidding yourself if you think that you can stay in a bubble and control it all. I think by the sheer fact that you've got devices in everybody's hands, on every lap of every toddler, then you're going to need to embrace that.

David Pembroke: Do you think that there is an understanding, an awareness, an acceptance, indeed an appreciation within the senior executives, either of public sector organisations, government organisations, or indeed private sector organisations of just how fundamental this transformation is, and are they ready and able to make the changes in terms of resourcing, in terms of training, education, and everything else that they're going to have to invest in order to become effective in the continually evolving and changing digital age?

Jenny Muir: Look, I think that there is an understanding, and I'll use examples that'll be hopefully relevant to your listeners. Firstly, I'd like to say that in a crisis situation with any organisation, all roads default back up to the architects, and a discipline must be embedded within anybody that any employee or anybody that has a role that's speaking to any customer, so-called, or any audience. In a crisis, the leaders get changed, and then they will be re-briefed as to how they behave and it needs to move quickly, and the architects need to be very quick on that. I'll put that in the zeitgeist, but I think that you've got some good examples of, when I was preparing to chat to you and your audiences, in Canberra, in the federal government, who have embraced and done it in a measured and managed way, and it's been quite effective.

I think that the ATOs pivot in the way their strategic approach to communicating to all of their very diverse audiences has been impressive. I know that significant investment has been made both internally and with agencies and external resources to make that work. I'm sure many in your audience have probably personal and professional experience in that and how that's come about, and it's probably not been as smooth as it's looked on the outside. It never is, but you never show somebody the way sausages are made, but that's an impressive turnaround for a department and an agency that's enormous. To do that, it is something quite interesting to watch.

To a smaller degree, I think that the War Museum's, Australian War Museum's, handling of the ANZAC Centenary has been extraordinary. I think that it has had this beautiful touch. It's personal. It's been moving. I think that it's raised awareness of things like the humanity that sits inside the heart of war and conflict by making it personal and making it as an individual thing as well as wrapping the large key messages of centenary and all that around it. It's been quite an impressive thing to watch an organisation like them do, so kudos to those team. I think that that connection across social media and the use of digital has been quite extraordinary. I'm personally a fan of watching the roll call come out every day from all of the celebrating each return serviceman story. I think it's a really lovely touch.

I think that, I mean, what you probably, and there's lots and lots to be probably said but not for this moment, what's going to be learned out of last week's census scenario with ABS has quite an extraordinary amount to tell us in how to and how not to prepare for a major campaign and communication piece. It is a really stark example of how connected your citizenry is and how readily they are prepared to

feedback to you.

David Pembroke: When things don't work.

Jenny Muir: When things don't work, yes.

David Pembroke: Yeah. Just to take off a thread, we'll go down this lane of creating personal vulnerable content and being able to tell a story in an authentic and a personal way. It's often very challenging for government and public sector organisations to bring that real human element into the story. When you're consulting with clients, what sort of advice do you give them, and have you got a few examples, perhaps, of where you've been able to guide a public sector client down this path of being more human, more real, more accessible in order to achieve a better result?

Jenny Muir: Sure. Okay, so with my day job hat on, we do quite a lot of this work, particularly in the mental health space and social wishes space. We've noticed particularly over the past 5 years, 4 years probably, the use of what we call in the mental health sector, the lived experience story is powerful beyond belief. Getting that to sit right with all of the, sometimes the structures and restrictions that often happen within a department or an agency is attention that is worth going through, the process is worth going through because the return on that kind of investment in that authentic storytelling is so powerful. Particularly, if you're trying to do things like advocate, raise awareness, and connects with an audience around their experience of something. Particularly, if the issue is around de-stigmatisation or changing people's understanding of something but sometimes a little bit hard for people to appreciate. Authentic storytelling is a very powerful tool.

David Pembroke: What if you offend somebody? What about the risks, Jenny?

Jenny Muir: Okay. Yeah, everybody often is more wanting to raise a flag on the risks. If your communication piece, if you have sat with somebody and ask them to tell their story, and you've not meddled with it too much or put excessive amount of production around it because the authenticity is key, then your audience will connect with that, and the risks are inherently quite low if the authenticity is real. I'll give you an example of this. We worked on a campaign for the Human Rights Commission, which was around trying to help young people understand their role as a bystander to cyberbullying. If you're sitting on Facebook or Snapchat or Instagram and watching a friend get bullied online, don't sit there passively, chime in. It was around trying to give time real life examples of what's that like.

There're two ways that you can use the authentic first person story. You can use it to inform the development of your campaign from the beginning and have the people who the issue is about involved in the development of the campaign. That's one way, and that's a very powerful way because it's based in real experience, and then if you'd have the ability, you can pull that experience all the way through the outputs and the materials and the storytelling. Sometimes you don't have that opportunity, but it's very powerful if you do.

David Pembroke: Indeed. Indeed it is, and we could now go down the path of a conversation around content and the ability to be able to produce, distribute, curate, et cetera, et cetera, but I do want to want to be respectful of your time. I think what we will do is into the future get you back and get some more of these insights for the benefit of our audience so that they can understand more about this evolving process and this evolving role of public relations professionals as they get closer to the senior executive, as they get perceived more for their value and the strategic value that they can create in organisations, which I think is only increasing by the day.

I know that there are so many skilled storytellers out there and strategists and language and thought architects out there who are doing great work every day, not only in the public sector but the private sector as well. I don't think it's going to be too much longer before the credibility of the profession is going to be seen as a must have when they begin any sort of discussion around problems that they are seeking to solve.

Listen, Jenny, just maybe a bit of an ad for the Public Relations Institute of Australia, how best could people get involved, get online, and sign up to become a member of the organisation?

Jenny Muir: Okay, so firstly, membership is ... Your professional membership is only a couple hundred dollars per annum, and for that there's so many benefits that you get that are inherent in the organisation's deliverables to you, but in the public sector, we're working really carefully and closely to be able to tailor things for you, particularly in Canberra. We are aware that you have some very unique requirements, and we're working very carefully to deliver those quickly for you. If you don't want to become a full member at the moment, I'd encourage you to become what we're calling an introductory membership. That's kind of like being a friend of the Public Relations Institute. You get some discounts and benefits from the networking events and the training events that are held in Canberra at the moment and around the country, but you don't get all of the benefits, but it's a nice way to put your toe in the water.

PRIA.com.au is your very simple address. Google will help you as well if that's needed, and I guess what I'd encourage you or your listeners to do is to just have a bit of a think about what they can do to connect and build networks with their colleagues, because, I mean, I know. I've been there where you are all sitting. It can sometimes be lonely and sometimes you feel like you're pushing it up a mountain, but find ways to connect with your colleagues because, believe me, they will share more stories and you'll feel like you belong to a very, very connected community.

David Pembroke: Yeah, and I'm fascinated, and I think next time we talk, I'll be interested to dive a little bit more into these mental health pressures that we're starting to see take hold as the expectation and requirements of delivering value in the new world arrive and become real everyone's life. I think that's a really interesting conversation to have at another time.

Jenny Muir: We're happy to have that. We have just finished some research across the whole profession on the mental health and well-being of the profession. I'll be happy to bring that data to you.

David Pembroke: Okay, so when might that be available?

Jenny Muir: That would be ready in about 8 week's time, and the PRIA will be developing masterclasses for PR and comms professionals for self-care and as well as being aware of the power of the communications and the impact it has on people around mental health and well-being.

David Pembroke: Okay. Fantastic. Okay, well, considered that booked. I will find you in about 8, 9 ... Well, I'll give you a little bit of time to settle that down, but maybe in 2 or 3 months times, we'll sit down and go through that, because I think that will be of massive interest to our audience, not only here in Australia but around the world. That should be great. Jenny, thank you very much for your time. Again, a great episode of InTransition ladies and gentlemen. I did promise you value. I have delivered it once again. Thanks very much for tuning in. If you are on iTunes or Stitcher and you could give us a review, that's great. If you want to register for contentgroup's newsletter, come to contentgroup.com.au. If you've got a suggestion of anyone you'd like me to interview also, info@contentgroup.com.au. That would be great, but otherwise, I'll speak to you next week and have a great week until then. Bye for now.