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## InTransition Episode 79 – Grant Titmus

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome once again to In Transition, the podcast that examines the practice of content marketing and government. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks very much for giving us just a little bit of your time this week to look at the practice of content marketing in the government and the public sector.

We've got a great guest today, a former journalist, a distinguished former journalist, which is interesting because really, I think it's the journalists who are really going to rule the world in the content space that we're all moving into. We'll come to that in just a moment.

As we start each week as we do with the definition of what content marketing is 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.

To our guest today: Grant Titmus is the principal of the Melbourne division of Red Agency, a marketing and communications consultancy. Grant has over a decade of experience in media relations and communication. He recently ran the "Never Leave the Kids in the Car" campaign for the Victorian government's department of education and training. I really want to dig into that case study a little bit later on in this interview. Grant also previously worked as a journalist for both the Age newspaper and the South China Morning Post.

Grant, thanks very much for joining us In Transition.

Grant Titmus: No problem. It's nice to be here.

David Pembroke: Grant, the journalism schools that you acquired in your career, how useful have they been, as we transition to this space where content is so critically important to all communication campaigns?

Grant Titmus: I think, David, as you mentioned in your intro there, the writing skills that come with a journalism career are invaluable now as we look to have more content, whether that content is a written content. We used to write opinion pieces. Now we put them on a website and they call it a blog. That hasn't changed. A lot of it is the channel has changed. I think there's a whole heap of things we do from running events now. It's a really wide and varied job that we do now. The things that I think now, also, the multiskilling of journalism. Some days I would be interviewing a prime minister. The next day I would be interviewing a cricketer. I think it's a little bit the same in PR. No two clients are the same. We can jump into a diverse range

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of skills there.

David Pembroke: Just in terms of those writing skills. I know we're moving into this very visual age of communication, but would you agree with me that writing skills are so fundamentally important? If you can write clearly, it reflects, to me, that you can think clearly.

Grant Titmus: I definitely think that's the case. We still write a lot of information today. We don't write perhaps as many press releases, but sometimes we need to write what you'd probably call a press release just to get down all the facts and figures and even the narratives that we actually want to put across to a journalist if in fact that's what we're doing to pitch that into them. It's fundamental. It would be interesting to understand what is being taught in the schools and other sorts of things about how to write.

I know with a lot of my staff here, and I've said it to them before that I've probably in my journalism career written or rewritten 40 or 50,000 pieces of material whereas somebody in a PR firm today may well only be writing 2 or 3, 4 media releases a week. I think having that sort of background is absolutely vital. Your point is correct in that it shows being able to think clearly and all sorts of things. Yeah. Definitely is a skill that everybody should have.

I still think it varies greatly across what I can see, particularly in the CVs that I get and in a lot of the students that I have come in show me all the potential employees show me their portfolio and media releases and things like that. I say, can you actually show me the first draft of your media release? I'm actually not that keen on seeing a media release that may have gone through four or five iterations. Just interested in seeing how they can write is obviously part of what we do here at Red Agency is to have a test to see whether people can write.

David Pembroke: Yeah. What's the difference between good copy and bad copy?

Grant Titmus: (laughs) I think it's getting to the point quickly. You need to be able to tell something quickly. If we're, a lot of the information we have today, particularly if we're pitching into the media, if they're getting 1,000 unsolicited emails a day, it's pretty hard to get a cut through if you've written quite a long email to a particular journalist to entice them to do your story. We keep ours to a minimum, even maybe if you count, you need to be able to get that information across in one or two paragraphs. They just don't have the time to read all the information about the background of perhaps someone that you might want them to interview or the article itself or whatever the story is. I think that's definitely something worth noting.

David Pembroke: It is that point also, isn't it, in the age of the feed, if you're going to stop somebody, you're really going to have to stop them straightaway. You've really got a headline and an opening paragraph. If your content is not doing the job at that point, there's every chance that you're going to, people are just going to scroll past.

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Grant Titmus: It's true. It's the same with what we put onto some of the social media channels. With everybody with their Facebook feeds, if you've got a three minute video, probably no one's going to watch that unless it's very compelling. It's what we call snackable content where it's something that can be looked at quickly and easily and shared. That's, if you can get people to share your content, that's hugely beneficial from our perspective.

David Pembroke: In terms of that the skills that you want to see in someone, obviously there's that notion of writing that opening para which is really the invitation to go further, that invitation to, wow, I can't really wait to see what else is here in this article, because that opening paragraph or that headline has offered a promise and has delivered it, so I really want to jump into it. How else, then, do you go and keep it interesting as the story gets a little bit longer?

Grant Titmus: That's really interesting. A lot of people write their media releases based on process, as in, the process that we went through to get our app to do this or whatever it was. People aren't really interested in a lot of the process. I don't need to know how the pistons in my car work for me to enjoy a driving experience. I don't need to know the process. It's all about telling me what is in it for me, initially, and then the benefits that I would derive from that. I must admit, I find it, when I first started journalism when I was 17, I sat opposite a guy who could type amazingly quickly and get a story across. I always wondered how you would, how anyone would learn to structure a sentence or a story. Over the years, it just seems that you do it so often that it comes, I don't know if naturally is the right word, but you develop that skill over time.

It's a hard thing to be able to teach. They do say a lot of things come with experience and writing does come with experience. A lot of people that we're seeing today have written novels, have, are writing their own blog, all those sorts of things which are multiskilling them as well.

David Pembroke: Yeah. In terms of advice that you would give to people, what's the best advice that you ever received as a young journalist about writing great copy, writing great content?

Grant Titmus: It's really interesting. When I started in journalism, I started when I was 17, I had some really good mentors. Some were very strict going back in those days. It was very different. I used to have to use a typewriter, there was no Typex. We used to have to put carbon paper between each of the pieces of paper. One sentence per piece of paper. If it was 15 sentences, that's an awful lot of work you have to go through. That made, from my perspective, that made you concentrate very hard on what you gave to the night head or the chief of staff at the end of the day, that what you gave him or her had to be pretty much correct, because to make the changes was actually a very difficult and long process. You wanted to get it right the first time.

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The people that I had mentoring me back then, one was very, very harsh on a lot of the younger people, but that was the way it was back in those days. It was a very strict regime. I think you learned very quickly to write as best as you possibly can. The input that I got from a lot of the subeditors back in those days helped me improve as a writer much, much quicker than perhaps without their expertise and guidance in doing that.

David Pembroke: What were the most common mistakes that you were making that they were pulling you up on?

Grant Titmus: Again, I think it's more writing about the process rather than actually writing about what's in it for the consumer or for the person that's reading it. If it doesn't jump out at you quickly, that's something that they used to harp on to us. A lot of the times because it was one sentence per page, often I'd have the right information there, but they would manipulate the pages around. I suppose that's one easy way of doing that back then. They would put them in the right order. Sometimes I had the right information there but it just wasn't in the right order. I remember doing that to a lot of my girls a few years ago. I said, you've got all the right sentences, I just happened to cut up a media release and put it in the right order. She said it scarred her for life.

David Pembroke: (laughs)

Grant Titmus: She still remembers it having said that. I ran into her in a restaurant the other day, and she mentioned it to her husband. It's always had a lasting impression on her.

David Pembroke: I know the experience is funny. I go back to my times as a reporter at ABC Current Affairs Radio here in Australia, and exactly that point of writing with blotting paper and making sure you had to do it right the first time. When I first started, my mentor at the time was a guy called David Ford. It took me six months before they let me on air, but every day I went to work I had to go out into the streets to create a story and bring it back to him. I still remember trembling everyday taking those stories in to David Ford and thinking, have I got it right, haven't I got it right? It was great training. It was harsh, but it certainly taught me. By the time I got on air, I was in pretty good shape. It was that notion of being, as you say, telling the story. What's in it for the audience. Thinking audience first all the time is the way that you can really create content that's going to resonate.

As a journalist, how have you managed that transition across from journalism into the world of public relations and now content marketing?

Grant Titmus: That's interesting. I suppose I was a little bit different. I started to do a little freelance work because I didn't start at the Age until 5:30 at night. I was on, as the chief subeditor we didn't start until quite late. We'd finish at 12 o'clock, a little bit later sometimes. You concentrated a lot of work in a very short period of time. Then, I would go home and go straight to sleep. Most of the others would have a few drinks and those sorts of things, but I would go straight home and get up quite

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early in the morning to take my wife to work. I'd then have all day to myself.

Rather than do nothing and do a little bit of training and things like that for exercise, I applied to a three-line ad in the Age that somebody was looking for somebody to do a little bit of content, so I started to write a little bit of content for them. I remember the first day sitting in Port Melbourne, I was given a computer and a floppy disk, and I didn't even know which way it went in. Considering what I'd come from as a journalist, it took me a while to actually get used to that, but then the transition was quite slowly. As I moved up the rungs at the Age, I sort of did a little bit, only small parts of it.

Then it got to a stage where I needed to make a decision to whether to continue on in my journalism career or turn to PR. I decided maybe 12, 13, 14 years ago that that's what I would do. I sort of had transitioned, I don't know, I sort of just flicked the switch. I don't know why I went into PR. I must admit, I think, both jobs have their challenges, but I think PR, public relations or communications, you need to think a lot more. I had to make a lot of decisions when we were at the Age and things like that, but the decisions were a lot about all the information had come in. We just needed to make decisions about where it should go, putting headlines on it and all those sorts of things.

In PR there's a lot more things. We have to pitch for our work, which is standing up in front of a lot of people, pitching an idea, whether it's a creative idea or a content idea, running events, it's, there's a lot more different components to it, so I think it's along ... To answer your question about the transition, it can be, I found it quite easy in the end, but I do know a lot of the journalists I've interviewed, particularly out of the Age over the recent years about how they would like to transition because they've taken the redundancy as the numbers in the newspaper industry have shrunk. I think there's a lot of jobs for ex-journalists out in the marketplace because of those writing skills that we spoke about before.

David Pembroke: I think the point that you make is a very good one, but what you don't get as a journalist, and I know this was my experience in the ten years that I spent at the ABC, is that you don't think strategy. You're thinking about the story and you're thinking about the content and what's in it for the audience and you're creating that piece of content. As a strategist, and as a content marketer or working in public relations, the content is but one part of a much broader plan which is all about achieving either a government or a brand or a not-for-profit's ultimate business objective. How did you learn and acquire those skills of strategic thinking that has enabled you to succeed there at the Red Agency?

Grant Titmus: I think they're the hardest skills to learn. I've had some really good teachers over the years that, mentors over the years that have shown me particularly about writing strategies. You're right when I was at the age, once I knocked off at 12 midnight, that was the end of the day. The next day would be a whole new day. It was very short-term. I wouldn't know what was happening the next day because I didn't create the news. When we look at campaigns now, sometimes by the time

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we'd create the idea, pitch the idea, actually get the idea to be executed can take several months for that process to take place. It's not an easy thing.

We have a mentor program here at Red Agency where we get a lot of the account managers, the mid-tier management being able to look at strategy and let them understand how it works, why it works. Obviously, we now have a lot of tools at our disposal to get us some insights into a particular company, industry, or business. We then need to look at what strategy falls out of those insights. Then, out of that strategy, we look at what tactics we may introduce.

David Pembroke: Interesting. You mention there a mentor program. How important has that been to the development of your people and therefore, the achievement of your success there at the Red Agency?

Grant Titmus: We think it's amazingly important. We have offices in Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane, and it tends to be that we don't have the mentor and the mentee in the same office. We like to spread that around so they can talk to somebody outside of their own office. There may be issues they have within that they would like to share with somebody else or just to talk about. There are also life skills that they talk about, it's not just all about work. We put a lot of effort and time into a mentorship program. I think it's really important for any business to have mentors. I'm not quite sure how, I often get together now with some of the other agency heads, just on an informal basis. We just talk about the things we have to do, about hiring and what the work is like and is there any sector that is doing particularly well or not so well? Those informal catch-ups are just as important and they're sort of a bit of a letting off steam or sort of a mentor program as well.

David Pembroke: (laughs)

Grant Titmus: Often we all have the same problems.

David Pembroke: Indeed.

Grant Titmus: A lot of them are human problems, in getting the right people, first of all, attracting the right people. Then, keeping those people when a lot of the 20-somethings would like to travel overseas. We understand that. Go and work in house because it might offer some different skills. Obviously, working at an agency, part of the attraction of working in an agency is that you do get a lot of multiskills, whether you're running events or doing content or social media skills. It's, we obviously are a good breeding ground for people with lots of skills. We find that all the agencies are finding it hard to keep our people for longer than three or four years.

David Pembroke: Are you finding that there's greater collaboration among the agency heads that you're speaking to? Do you think that's a change in the way that the world is working now, that we're reaching out a lot more? That that notion of hard-nosed competition, very narrowly focused, it's sort of winner take all, that we're really seeing a softening and a change in the way the economy is developing in this

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content and communications base?

Grant Titmus: The catch-ups I have with the other agency heads, they're basically non-competitors to ours, so I feel I can speak quite freely. One of the girls is from a consumer agency, so we, looks after a lot of the fashion and things like that which we don't do. I'm more than happy to share a lot of information with her. I must admit, I do go to public relations council meetings or communications council meetings and I see some of the people that we've pitched against. Sometimes we've won, maybe sometimes we've lost, and I've always looked at them and said I wonder why you won that piece of business and we didn't.

There's, I think you get, once you've been in an industry a while, David, you get used to having the people around you and who you can share with. I know a girl that's got six people working for her. She asked me the other day about being a bit of a mentor to her because from a business perspective, she's a small business owner. She's got the hiring and firing decisions to do, she's got to win business, execute that business. Then, there's all the running of that business as well. She was just asking some more advice about running a business and if she wanted to exit what would happen and if she wanted to grow what would happen. What were the ceilings for her. There's no one answer to all of that.

David Pembroke: No. Indeed, there's not. If it was easy, everybody would do it. It is quite difficult running a business. Anyway, that's good to know.

Listen, in terms of government, this podcast is directed very specifically at government and public sector communications. What's your view as somebody who does work in the government space and someone who's been around a while, how well are government adapting and changing to the transformation that is being driven by technology?

Grant Titmus: That's a really, really interesting question.

David Pembroke: And you have to answer it.

Grant Titmus: They're obviously a little slower in reacting. I also think that they'd like to push the envelope but are a bit reticent. I think there's a lot of levels of government that people have to report to, obviously, and they try to second-guess what the person above them might like to say and what the person above them might like to say. In regards to the Never Leave Kids in Cars campaign, we pitched quite a lot of different ideas that none of those ideas were actually executed. They were probably a little bit too creative for the government at that particular point in time. It was a really interesting campaign, but it's just one of those things.

David Pembroke: Was it frustrating for you, or did you accept that that is just the nature of the beast, that there is that risk averse culture, perhaps a lack of accountability when you look at it when compared to private sector. The clients, and government is different. It has to be different because of the way the government works. It's not the same as

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the private sector. How frustrating was it, and how did you overcome those frustrations?

Grant Titmus: I'll probably give you an example in regards to that. As part of the Never Leave Kids in Cars campaign which was to, it was about people not leaving their kids in cars. Not those that forget and leave their children in cars as they do other things, but it was about getting to parents who park the car in a hot street, leave a couple of the kids in the car while they run in and get the bread and the milk and a few other things. We were targeting those people. We had a big debate internally with the government. We filmed a lot of things before we had our launch event. One of those things was the breaking of the glass to get a child out of the car. We went backwards and forwards with the government about whether we would do it live and what that looked like.

In the end, we decided to film it ourselves. We put several GoPro cameras in the car so you would actually see and hear what a child would hear and see. We filmed that. It was very loud, I must admit, from inside the car once we watched the footage back. That was a really big issue about whether we would do that live or mod at the actual event. Even we'd filmed it, and were able to provide that to the media on the day. There was an issue about whether we would give them the footage. The government was a little concerned about the whole vigilante component and whether that vision would encourage people to, who walked past and saw a child in a car and would break somebody's window. There was a bit of concern whether it would lead to that. That's an example of, I don't want to say it's a frustration, but it was just something that we needed to work through.

A lot of the people we were working with were a little bit concerned about whether we would do that or not. As I said, the minister, the deputy was an acting premier at that particular stage. James Merlino turned up, and the first thing he said, are we going to break a car window today. We've gone through quite a lot of toing and froing in whether we'd actually do it or not, and he was obviously quite comfortable in doing it. We didn't actually break it on the day, because we'd already done it and given that coverage to the media which saved everybody a lot of time.

David Pembroke: How did you go about solving that problem, when you think about that whole issue about what was the problem that you were solving? It sounds to me that you were quite narrow in the audience that you were seeking to influence, that it was parents who were, as you say, probably not thinking about it as an issue, and who would never think to go to the casino or whatever and leave their kids in the car as you know we've had those stereotypes over the years. What was the identified problem that you were seeking to solve?

Grant Titmus: It was, I think the statistics were, and I'm going off the top of my head, but in December last year, and we ran this program in January. In December, there were 214 incidents of the emergency services being called to get a child out of a car. That's a lot of kids getting out of the cars considering that's only the ones that are



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reported to emergency services, and not the ones where a passerby or even the individual themselves has had to get a child out of a car. That raised, that was a big issue for those particular people. That sort of led us to look at how we would actually launch that "Never Leave Kids in Cars" campaign in general.

It also came about because the New South Wales department had also run quite a successful campaign with Matt Moran called "The Unconventional Oven." That has since won quite a few awards in raising the profile of leaving children in cars. It is a big issue. It's still goes on to this day. It's not so much, it's a bigger problem in summer, obviously, but it's an issue virtually all year round, not only just in Victoria but in New South Wales, and some of the warmer states, obviously.

David Pembroke: I imagine it's a problem globally, really. What did you find for your insights? What was it that people were thinking when they left the kids in the car? Were they just thinking, oh, they'll be fine. I'm only going to be a minute or two going into the shops to pick up as you say the milk and the bread?

Grant Titmus: Exactly. If you've got a couple of children, and mine are a little bit older now, so I don't have this issue, but one is often in a booster seat or a car restraint and the other child is often not, so it's actually getting the children out in the most appropriate way without the three year old or the four year old being left on the side of the footpath up to his or her own devices while the mother or father goes back and gets the other child out of the car seat. It becomes, it's quite difficult when you're only rushing in for the bread and the milk and you'll only be 30 seconds, but leaving the kids in the cars, we do know that kids heat up three or four times faster than adults, which is a massive issue. I know after we ran the campaign, we also, through social media, there was a lot of people that posted through social media channels about pets as well. That was an issue that we hadn't-

David Pembroke: That's a good point.

Grant Titmus: Even really looked at in this, but there's a lot, and pets are even greater affected because they don't, they only sweat through their tongues. There are massive issues for all of us. It was a bit of a wake-up call I think for everybody. The day after we ran the campaign on January the 14th, January the 15th was a 40 degree day. It did ram home the fact, and there were 14 people the next day that had left their kids in their cars. It's an ongoing issue, and it's a difficult one to change, but one that we obviously need to address as a community.

David Pembroke: You did use social. Why was it that you thought social was the best way to get that story out to people?

Grant Titmus: Because the government had no social media channels, we decided that we would use Tribe. They were in their infancy in those days. It's Jules Lund's business that he's created. We really liked it for this particular campaign. We used 30 influencers, 21 through Instagram, 5 through Twitter, and 4 through Facebook. The way it works is that we put up the fact that we would like a particular target audience. In

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this particular case it was females 25-45. We put up what we would like to see them post. They would come back to us and say here's a photograph of myself with my child. This is the pledge that I would make to this particular campaign. I'll put it on my Instagram which has 125000 followers and it'll cost you X.

We can go yes or no. We might have gone back and said, we see you've got more on Facebook. What would it cost for us to go back, for you to post this on Facebook? They would then come back. It's a bit of negotiation in that particular respect. We find it amazingly successful because we see what they're going to post before they post it. The fact that they have a potential audience of 2.8 million people, from a government's perspective, we could also measure how successful it was. We can tell them that Instagram was easily the most cost-effective where the highest cost per engagement was \$1.37 for example, but most were around six cents to 28 cents.

From a PR perspective, it's amazing that these tools can get quite granular in their detail from a measurement perspective, which we very rarely in the past have been able to do that. We could, through advertising value equivalent of what a particular piece might cost in the newspaper if it was advertising, but that's sort of our public relations institute has asked us not to do that. That would have been five or six years ago now. We needed to look at other tools. I think social media has enabled us to do that much, much greater than we've ever been able to do that before.

I think when somebody needs to justify, whether it's government or private, when they need to justify an expense in using a PR agency, this makes it a lot easier for us to be able to tell them how many people they've reached and the actual cost of it.

David Pembroke: No question. I think, very much the future is mathematics and being able to have the numbers. As you say, previously the numbers have lacked credibility, that advertising equivalent, whereas nowadays there is so much more availability of numbers that we can use to suggest to people or report back to people that here are the signals that we are getting from the investment that you are making that are hopefully downstream moving towards that behavior that is solving those problems that certainly government is looking to influence and change behavior of people.

Grant, thank you so much. Great story there about never leave kids in cars. Thanks so much for giving us a bit of your time today. Where is the best place that people could learn more about Red Agency and be able to get involved with you?

Grant Titmus: We've obviously got a website that ranks quite well. It's [www.redagency.com.au](http://www.redagency.com.au). They can also find myself on LinkedIn or Twitter for that matter. There's plenty of opportunity there to get in contact. Over the years, I've interviewed a lot of people because sometimes we look at who we might need to replace. If I've seen a few people over the years and I can come back to them and go, look, I know you were looking for a job. I didn't have one for you at that particular point in time, but now I do. Do you want to come work for an award winning agency?

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David Pembroke: That's a good idea. I think that's good for people. If they're thinking that they might want to give Grant a nudge, there you go. There's an offer of an opportunity. As Grant says, it mightn't happen tomorrow, but to work with one of Australia's leading public relations and content agencies, audience, there's an offer that you should take up from Grant Titmus from the Red Agency there in Melbourne.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for joining us In Transition. Another great interview, and some great insights there. I really enjoyed the advice that Grant gave us there early on, particularly in the interview where we were reaching in an understanding about get your story out quickly. Get it out. Make it compelling, and grab people's attention as quickly as possible. In this day and age, where everyone is fighting for the most scarce of resources, which is people's attention, you really have to have that impact early. Some great insights there from Grant Titmus from the Red Agency. Make sure you do get in contact with him, because I know they will get results for you.

For another week, thank you very much for joining us In Transition, and we'll be back again at the same time next week. Bye for now.