
InTransition Episode 82 – Ian Rumsby

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that examines the practice of content marketing in government. My name's David Pembroke and thank you once again for giving up a small part of your week while we enjoy a conversation with a very experienced and talented communicator. I'll introduce you to him in just a moment. As we start the program each week with the definition of content marketing as it relates to government and the public sector. Content marketing is a strategic, measurable and repeatable business process that relies on the creation, duration 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. There we go, definition out of the way.

My guest this week is Ian Rumsby, the chairman of Weber Shandwick Australia and a chief strategy officer for Weber Shandwick in the Asia Pacific. He currently leads the firm's business operations in Australia and has responsibility for Weber Shandwick's strategic development and marketing functions throughout the Asia Pacific. Previously, he was managing director of Weber Shandwick in Australia between 2002 and 2006. During that time, Weber Shandwick became one of Australia's most awarded public relations agencies and was recognized as a centre of excellence within the firm's global network of eighty-one officers. He has a wealth of experience in communications and he worked throughout Europe with one of London's largest public relations firms before being transferred to Sydney back in 1998. Prior to that, Ian had spent three years as a commissioned officer in the Royal Navy and the Fleet Air Arm where he trained as a navigator and a pilot respectively. Ian Rumsby, thanks very much for joining me InTransition.

Ian Rumsby: It's a pleasure to be here.

David Pembroke: Ian, I'm intrigued. How did you go from being a navigator and a pilot to getting into the comms business?

Ian Rumsby: I think that's a question I'm still trying to resolve myself to be frank with you. I think going into the Royal Navy after university is one of those opportunities and one of those choices that perhaps retrospectively you'll appreciate it more than necessarily you did at the time. It provides not it wasn't just an enormous amount of fun, but there really are some of those principles of leadership that had developed there. I know that sounds a little bit cliché but it was certainly a honing ground in many respects for what I came to learn and have to develop as my career progressed. I think the leap from that into industry came a day and interesting time I worked in the parliament sector between working in the military and stepping into public relation space as well. There was perhaps a slow transition from military life into city street. Nevertheless, it was one that you will appreciate came with this challenges.

David Pembroke: Sure. What was some of those lessons that you learned? You mentioned leadership, but what else did you take out of that military sort of background that it served you well over the years beyond just the leadership of lessons that you do obviously learned the thing in the armed forces?

Ian Rumsby: I think what you have to appreciate is when you come out of officer training, certainly in the Royal Navy you step straight on to a ship and you're carried away, far away often into some interesting parts of the world shall we say. You're surrounded by a group of people who may not necessarily have stripes on their own but certainly have far more experience than you. Many of those people would have been at sea for thirty years and what they don't appreciate is someone stepping on board who pulls rank. I think when we look at our own industry, we recognize in respect to the learning experience was well perceived seniority in an organization.

There are many, many people in our team who understand and comprehend some of the complexities in what we do far better than anyone leader and obviously, the digital social spaces, one true example of that. I think what I learned from my time in the military was the need to respect experience and the need to respect process as well, regardless of whether you actually care for the individual or not. That understanding of people's experience and your ability to apply that experience in behalf of your organization or the body for which you work, that for me I think was probably one of the biggest lessons I took out of that.

David Pembroke: It's intriguing that you say that because I was listening to a podcast yesterday, and I can't quite remember the name of the gentleman who was speaking. He was making the point around in the comms business at the moment where all set upon by changes and technologies and platforms and tools. It's very, very difficult to keep up with it. The point that this particular gentleman was making was that it's the people's skills. It's the softest skills that are really going to be the important skills in the next little while that as automation replaces some of the more rudimentary functional tasks in their lives that really devalue that we're going to be able to create in the organizations that we worked for. It really going to be coming from those sort of intense personal skills. Would you agree with that?

Ian Rumsby: Yeah. Absolutely. I think there's a lot of people who perhaps understandably are concerned about artificial intelligence, if we want to call it that and the direction in which that's going. You look at the research that comes from out of a whole bunch of schools and organizations that look in are and commodity based clearly the ones that are in the firing line as it were. It's those roles which require interpretation of information, synthesis meaning which are where I think we have real strength and where I think we can take a grasp with this technology and use it as an enabler.

Most important to all of that is once we have artificial intelligence, we have not yet moved into a place where we've created artificial consciousness. It's that consciousness which is a very human trait. It's a trait that exists particularly in our

industry and more broadly in the creative industries as well. It's that that really will make the difference between those organizations that are able to progress I think in a way in which they plan to do. As long as artificial consciousness is not developed, we're all relatively safe.

David Pembroke: Do you think there is that appreciation yet at scale in big organizations be they government or corporate? Do you think there is a realization yet of the importance of those soft skills, those communication skills given that for example, it's a theme that I return to regularly on this program is that my theory is that communication is now far more important than it's ever been, given the ambiguity of the mobile experience, be that the phone, the wearable, etc. that is changing. The role of the communicator in the organization is now far more important than it's ever been in the past. Probably to return to the original question is, do you think there is that realization and appreciation as yet?

Ian Rumsby: I think it's very difficult to be too generic on that. In some organizations absolutely there is an appreciation of that and they see that really as a means if they can grasp that and take a degree of ownership of it, then they can become a bit of a category leader in their own sense. There are of course other organizations that simply haven't. I think when we spend time with organization's plans or not, it becomes fairly clear that you have those who are lagging and those who are really trying to create benchmarks and set the change. The reality however is I mean, I never raise an option to simply wait and see what's happening and what the future might look. There's this all concept of, if you want to change the future then you better invent it. I think more and more organizations are recognizing that it is not good enough to be a fast follower.

If you look at Tumblr versus Instagram, if you look at Amazon versus every single retailer there is, organizations that simply tried to match or reflect or mimic successful business models in this more technically driven environment are organizations that quite frankly will begin to fall away. I mean, perhaps that's on the commercial side. On the government side again, it depends between federal, between state and certain departments are far more effective in this area. I have to say that more often than not, it is the role of leadership as we said earlier, to embrace the thinking of those often more junior people within the organization and help them begin to set the tone of the direction of the company and how it deals with some of the technical evolution and digital advancements as well.

Those of us who've been around a long time can sometimes be guilty of thinking that we have clarity on direction and answers. Very often that clarity sometimes sits within the very centre of the organization as well. Different organizations, different areas of government are dealing with this differently. I think time is already beginning to tell that those that are trying to think ahead and be bold and in some degrees experimental in their communications. They're the ones that are beginning to win.

David Pembroke: What sort of advice would you have for the communications people who are trying

to bring about change, who are trying to convince their leadership and demonstrate to their leadership the real value if they can be shown more initiative, if they can be more agile, if they can be more experimental in the way they're going about in trying to connect with citizens and stakeholders? What sort of advice would you be giving to those communications people as to the best way to demonstrate that value to leadership?

Ian Rumsby: I think clearly that the easiest way is to provide some level of example of where it's working best and what tends to grab business leaders attention is when the competition is doing it better than them and having results as well. The first step really is to try to provide context, not in a sense of scare mongering but more in a super positive opportunity based approach to the benefits of adapting certain forms of technology or communicating in other ways. The other really important part of that is to give ownership as well. That might sound like that's hardly strange concept in giving ownership to your own leadership on these sorts of things. I think business leaders need to be part of that decision making process that they need have a sense of ownership and involvement really from the beginning which allows them to carry a change to approach through. For me it's about context, very often competitive context but it's also about giving the leadership to the degree of them, ownership of the approach too.

David Pembroke: In terms of ownership, are you talking about participation for example? Are you talking about trying to encourage them to start to publish some blogs or do some podcasting or creating video?

Ian Rumsby: Yes, to some degree but that's selective. I think it's about ownership of a strategic approach as much as anything else. When it comes to the executive group or leadership group being perhaps more of a flag carrier for the organization in a digital landscape if you're going to call that or socially network landscape, then there are a whole range of considerations on that. I think what's more important and what business leaders are seeing now and communicators particularly is that there has to be a very clear connection between the individual brand and the organization's brand as well. CEOs for example are far more visible that they ever have been and anything that they say clearly is going to be communicated more broadly, more swiftly and done a criticism, positive comments and other such things in a short period of time across the whole range of different markets.

It's important to understand the motivations of seeing a leadership. Those motivations I think need to be, not just about their own organizations but in some degree, around their own personal philosophy if you want to call it that. That might sound a little bit highbrow but I think you'll appreciate. We talk a lot certainly last year around the concept of purpose. I think individual purpose and particularly senior executive place a very important role in the organization's purpose and the direction it inevitably takes as well.

David Pembroke: It's interesting you raise that around purpose of this comeback from a conference in the states. That was really the theme Finding Your Way. Why is that important,

that leadership and organizations understand their purpose?

Ian Rumsby: For a number of reasons, I mean I think the priority in some regards this days, getting clarity on what it is that they actually stand for and what it is that they are trying to do. That becomes a real beacon for the organization. This goes way beyond community contribution or some of the most of traditional CSR type responsibilities. This is about what gets people out of bed in the morning and to coin them in some scenic praise. I think what organization is beginning to appreciate now is that the only way that they are going to be able to deal with the increasingly complex issues that they face particularly in a world of which we were seeing exponential growth. We have really normal challenges associated with understanding what the future might look for and planning for it.

To be able to deal with those sorts of issues, you need to do really two things. One is to attract individuals, talents to your organization that are going to help you resolve those issues. Second is to form partnerships and allegiances with other organizations that share similar values. Now, purpose in my humble opinion is a real driver and motivated for those organizations or those individuals to alongside of your business as well. Purpose can make a significant contributory factor to the organization, what it stands for, some of the decisions that it ultimately takes. Particularly importantly, it really helps to define the nature of the relationships that you've had with people who work for you and work with you as well.

David Pembroke: Is what you're saying that that given these changes, given the transformation, the increasing complexity, do you believe then that purpose is even more important now than it was, say five years ago because of the changing circumstance?

Ian Rumsby: Yes, I do. I absolutely do. It doesn't supersede anything else. It is perhaps another layer. The reality is we are dealing with organizations are far more visible than they ever have been. Their values set and their behaviours that they set and establish for their own organization are very much from display. I think that purpose brings clarity to an organization and the decisions that it ultimately makes. Those organizations that lack a clear purpose and seek simply pursue commercial game, I think those organizations face challenges.

David Pembroke: Now listen, you spend a lot of time both here in Australia but throughout the Asia Pacific talking to people, going inside organizations and seeing what their issues are. From a communicator's point of view or communication's point of view, what do you see is the biggest challenges today for organizations to ensure their effectiveness?

Ian Rumsby: I think I had answered and touched on this a little bit already. I mean, I think organizations that are proving themselves to be successful are beginning to deploy an open architecture structure. That means that they are looking within their own business to see how they can better deploy their own people, rather than simply trying to attract new and different talents to the organization. For example, many organizations, most of organizations have a human resources function. I think what

we're going to see for a lot of organizations is a shift to something which looks more around human potential rather than necessary human resources. The difference being that you create functions within an organization that are better at deploying people to identify or resolve a particular issue. That play a different role for the right job functions, and that's just one particular example.

It speaks to a broader issue that I think these companies and brands are struggling with and that's how that they better connect their own functions in effect. I think in a public relations industry, I think historically, we sort of sat outside of the marketing function in some organizations and historically, sort of sat by the buying line and watched some really cool and interesting stuff happen and we tend to be last cup of the ranks sometimes. That's changed and that's important not just for our industry but the way in which organizations deal with issues. This growing need and ability of organizations to better connect the functions that they have within their own business not just communications functions, I think that that is an inherent challenge for them.

We have these sorts of discussions and a lot of focus tends to be on what's happening externally; the speed and pace of change around them, the impact of whether it be particular trade agreements or whether it be a political and social issues, whether it be what happens when a sports company creates a speed factory in Europe and over the course of the next three years 250,000 Vietnamese women will lose their job. I mean, these are all serious issues. For organizations however, the ones that we talked to and worked with it a moment, I think a lot of their focus is beginning to shift within their own organization, and to think how therefore can we adapt to be able to manage more effectively what's going on around us.

David Pembroke: Looking a little bit further into the future then, how would you describe the role of communication evolving within an organization? Do you believe that it will change from that centralized function and be more dispersed throughout the organization, so that the capability will be distributed rather than centralized?

Ian Rumsby: I think the centralized function will still remain and it will remain in the sense that it plays a particularly important role obviously around perception and reputation as well and therefore, is going to play at their more important role in the centralized board function of the organization. However, I think that particularly for larger organizations, the fact of the matter is of course, let's say 10,000 employees are all incredibly important and powerful advocates for the organization and with their own network, their ability to contribute to the views, perception and reputation at that organization I think are certainly far more important. It is for that reason that communication is a function is likely to cascade further through the organization and perhaps it is now. Whether that means certain organizations create a communication's function for different departments, I really don't know. I don't see that as a trend but I certainly see the recognition of the role of employees if you will as communicators as changing too for the benefit of all the three.

David Pembroke: What about the role of content? What do you see happening with content?

Ian Rumsby: I mean, content obviously is there was this rapid evolution of development of content in many respects to fill the gap because of the proliferation of channels. I think content is becoming and we've seen this really in the last six months far more visual and video has been around for a while now and that it's important. The challenges for organizations is about creation of content that is relevant and meaningful to a very different audience group. Most importantly and this is I think where a lot of companies are challenged here is the distribution of that content. There is that sense of and we see this certainly on agency side and a lot of our competitors if you will are quite rightly creating better content, introducing production facilities into their services which has been happening now, I guess for the last five years or so. The challenge is to how they effectively distribute that content into through which channels, into which networks and how that content is then used.

For me, it's not so much about the content itself is always grounded in storytelling. There's certainly visualization of that story telling that we've seen over the last six months or so. I think now the focus is how do you distribute that effectively?

David Pembroke: Do you think that challenge of distribution will become even more important as the transformation continues to pace?

Ian Rumsby: Yes, they do. There are other elements which I think are particularly important as well and not to part the distribution issue. Distribution and content development are all grounded in one thing and that is your understanding of your audience. That audience is deeply complex now. You're really dealing with segments if you will rather than demographics. I think that's given for most people. I would like to give you an example if I may and I think that there is you know, this continues to be and in so much conversation around circle of millennials and many assumptions in different markets and similar assumptions that we're dealing with this group of people who are almost in a perpetual state of adolescents if you will.

I think when I talk to those in that age group, I think I realized that we couldn't be more wrong. I mean, I have the luxury privilege certainly of running a program with twenty of our best and brightest people from across Weber Shandwick and some of our sister agencies. We take them away for three days in the most men are in discussion and debate and discourse around a particular topic. We do it nation, we've just started doing that in Europe as well. It's a fascinating exercise hopefully for them, certainly for me. I think that what we're dealing with that particular group is a group, a collective of people who are searching for their meaning and their role in the world. I don't mean that in sort of overly philosophical way. It is a real sense. If you've got teenage kids, you know what I mean. It's a real sense of ... Okay. I can't afford to buy an apartment.

I'm not sure where I'm necessarily going to get a job for that particular one. I have the tools available to be more entrepreneurial than the previous generation. What am I going to do with that? I see certainly a real sense of an urgency to contribute

not just in a social context, but to contribute commercially and in a range of other ways. Looking back to what we're talking about content and around distribution as well, my view is that our understanding of audiences through quality data analytics, through quality research is what is going to determine our ability to create and distribute content that has real impact.

David Pembroke: On that optimistic note, that is a great way to finish the conversation this week. Thanks very much for your time here. I think there's great insights there. Obviously, you are very optimistic about the future in the role of communication in organizations particularly in government. I think it's an interesting point that you land on at the end there around this urgency to contribute. Ultimately, what the government is trying to do is to strengthen communities and improve the well-being of its citizens and stakeholders. I think it's a fertile ground for government to take advantage of perhaps and to tell stories that can engage and motivate people so they can achieve the behaviour that we need in order to achieve those times.

Ian Rumsby: Absolutely. Optimists win always.

David Pembroke: Fantastic. Thank you very much. Listen, just before you go, what's the best way for people to connect with you if they'd like to read more, listen more, connect with Weber Shandwick and perhaps give them some assistance with some of the problems that they might have.

Ian Rumsby: They can reach me through webershandwick.asia or webershandwick.com.au. All my details are on there. I'd be very happy to have to continue the discussion with anyone who chooses to.

David Pembroke: Fantastic. Thank you very much and to you the audience, thank you once again for tuning in. A great conversation there with a very bright person who is doing some great things here not only in Australia but throughout Asia Pacific and really getting inside organizations and understanding what those challenges are and obviously, very optimistic about the role that communications can play to add value to the organizations that we work for. Thanks again for giving up a bit of your time this week and we'll be back at the same time next week. Bye for now.