
InTransition Episode 86 Bert van Loon & AJ Huisman

David: Hello ladies and gentlemen, and welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that examines the the practice of content marketing in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke coming to you from the G2 Expo Hall here at Content Marketing World. A couple of guest today, two guests in fact, which is going to be great, and we'll have a fantastic conversation with them. Two of Europe's leading content marketing strategists. Before we do, as we begin the show each week, we start with a definition of just exactly what content marketing is.

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.

That's what we're talking about ladies and gentlemen. If you're interested in that and if you're interested in talking or listening to two of Europe's leading content marketing strategist, stay with us, because it will be a great show.

Anyway, joining me are Bert van Loon, and AJ Huisman from Fast Content in the Netherlands. Thanks gentlemen for joining me.

AJ: Sure thing David. Nice to be here.

David: That's AJ. Bert, if you can come to me a bit closer. Welcome to you as well.

Bert: Yeah, absolutely. It's great to see you here every year almost.

David: Isn't it a great though that we have been coming for so long to build out these community, Bert. Just tell me, what's the story about things in Europe at the moment.

Bert: We really think that ... We did some research last December about maturity of content marketing in Europe and compared it to the U.S., because obviously marketing pros and the Content Marketing Institute do this research every year, so we have a benchmark. Both of qualitative and quantitative research, we found out that, basically, there's a real maturity difference. Roughly, to summarize it, the north half part of Europe is one to two stages following the U.S., and the southern half is on three to four maturity stages. It's a really a difference in maturity, knowledge, and scale of practice.

David: Okay. The potential is there obviously, as we see here at Content Marketing World. It will grow. What are you going to be doing in the next 6, 12, 18 months to start to mature the practice?

Bert: That's basically the idea behind Content Marketing Fast Forward to a project we launched with Andrew Davis in the Netherlands, and it started basically as a joke over

dinner once in Amsterdam, to do a little conference and it grew into a second little conference, and then a larger conference this year where we had Joe Pulizzi, Doug Kessler. It's really about education, events, teaching, inspiring, and really helping practice forward educating.

David: Okay. The other part of this double act is comedy act, is in fact AJ. You in fact were telling me that you've taken the big step out of the professional services area, where you are leading the development of content marketing practice there, and you're a part of the Fast Forward with Bert.

AJ: Yes, absolutely. I have spent the last 20 years or so in corporates being the marketing director of a law firm, the content marketing director of a large American consultancy firm in Europe, and I thought at one point we need to go faster, faster than these larger corporates can do now. Let's do it on my own at first and start my own consultancy firm, and hooked up with Bert a few years ago. We became friends and now we launched our Content Marketing Fast Forward platform with events and expanding that into training as well to accelerate growth of the content marketing knowledge in Europe.

David: We're starting to see this improved understanding, and this improved uptake of content marketing. Obviously, one of the key challenges is convincing the C-suite, the executive, that this is the future. This is where they need to invest. In terms of that, how do you shape your arguments and your discussions with people to say, "This is the way to sell it into your organization."

AJ: Yeah, absolutely. That's one of the key points of selling it into the C-suite, if you will. One of the most important parts is actually proving that this works. Proving that this works will help you a little bit if you use the wonderful Excel route. If you do it via marketing automation even more, then you can prove that this actually can work for you all the way up to bottom line results and getting clients into the door.

That's one important part. If you are trying to get this off the ground and you cannot really get some buy-in from the C-suite right upfront, you can start with the front-runners that are people in your office, or in your firm, or your organization, that are already doing this and taking them, facilitating them forward. You hit the ground running instead of asking people to join you who have not been doing.

The last tip I would like to give is launch a pilot. Launch a low risk six to eight months pilot so you can buy some time to get some results in, and that's something that everybody would agree on, is, "Let's do pilot. Let's see how it works."

David: Okay, Bert. Just to the broader conversation and topic and observation of content marketing and where the state of content marketing is, I think day one finished yesterday, and the big takeout for me is really the message coming through loud and clear is that content marketing is about quality. It's not about quantity. What's your views on that emergent theory that's really coming all the way through the conference at the moment?

Bert: I think we see it from the data. The early movers had the advantage that it was little competitions, so then the game was really producing a lot of content. Search engines reacted, audiences reacted. It worked on social media. Right now, both technology and audiences are getting used to a lot of content. Of course, as Mark Schaffer says, there is that famous content shock that he predicted.

Now, it's really about more quality both in the content and, or course, in the distribution of the content. I think that has been a point which is missing a little bit in the conversation. It's not only the quality of the content. Still, if you have wonderful quality content and you hide in the cave of your offices, it will never move. It will never work. It is the quality of the distribution, the promotion with partnership, paid, et cetera.

AJ: I think Andy Crestodina said that yesterday. It's not the best content that wins, but the best promoted content that wins. A bit of both, actually.

David: Yeah. That's right. It's got to be worth someone consuming the content, so it adds value. That notion of relevance is absolutely key to content marketing, because people have such choice. They can apply their time and attention anywhere they like. You got to make sure that you create that high quality content. AJ, how do people do that? It's an easy thing to say, but how do they go about making quality content?

AJ: I think it all starts with a basic understanding of your audience. Too often, we see people actually in their own little ivory tower producing content on subjects that they think that their audience really, really likes, but they didn't bother to ask them. It's so strange, and it baffles me that that still happens. It's so easy, because we all do events and what have you. Instead of just asking what the temperature in the room was, ask what's on people's mind, and there you have your next blog post. It's so easy. It's a low threshold thing to do, and people forget about it. That's the basic thing; know your audience.

David: Bert, from your point of view, what's the best way that once they've got that insight, then how do they create something of quality?

Bert: Quality of content?

David: Yes.

Bert: Like AJ said, it's understanding the audiences. Also, the form and formats of the content, we're moving into more visual. We're moving into video. Video is becoming more and more accessible from a financial point of view, from skills point of view. Technology is really helping there. Moving up your content to the next stage and making it attractive for people.

I think, especially, you're in the nonprofit, in the government scene, we're not waiting for messages of the government. We have other things to do. It has to be attractive in its form, in its content, short, maybe funny even, and humor sells. Really looking at the form and format of the content. We're from the government, so we can't be too funny, but this is actually an interesting thing.

The issue is, and I do say this regularly on the podcast, is that there is no law written down anyway that government content needs to be boring, it needs to be wrapped up in legal ease and impenetrable so that people can't get through to it. Ultimately, what government is trying to do is to help people. Let's bring them along the journey.

Anyway, it's a slow burn and we will continue to work through that. It's good fun. I like working in the government sector, as people who listen to the podcast know. We're about 78, 79 episodes in now. There's always lots to talk about, and it's always great content to think about in government, because it's so rich. There are rich places to get so much information. There are so many people in government that can create content. We'll come to that in a moment, because I'll be interested in your views.

AJ: They are already in the knowledge transfer business. Why not make it a little bit more attractive? There's no actually, as you say, no law against being boring. You have to be creative and think about ways how to convey your message in a more creative way. Let's keep it to that.

David: Yeah. If you look at the word creative, we quite often think about design and high tech design. Basically, government, it's like explaining to your mother which has to do, or your brother, or your best friend. If you take it to that lower human scale, it becomes much more natural in a way.

AJ: That's exactly what Jay Baer said the other; your message needs to pass the mom test. Thus your mom understand what you're actually saying? That's a good way to start thinking when you create content.

David: It's interesting though. Within the government space, this is a big transition for people, because the way communication is being setup over the years is for the old model. It's media buying. It's advertising. It's public relations. It's working with ministers on talking points, speaking, organizing those media opportunities. This is really about adopting a publishing mentality. If you're turning up regularly in the places that people are, giving them that content. It's a slight ... It's not a slight change. It's a vast step change in the way they have to organize themselves and go about it.

What advice would you have for organizations as they're starting to ... So they get it. I understand it. Everyone's out there. We can go direct. We can create that content. The skills deficit is in place at the moment. How do people go about acquiring that publishing mentality so that they can take on content marketing?

Bert: I think you're addressing two different point. One is skills, and skills go through training, practice, et cetera. More important thing is the keyword mentality; creating a culture of content. Creating a habit. You only can develop a habit, a good habit if you have a high frequency. Building a little bit of an agile process, where you have to have early day meetings, stand up coffee, and think about the next subject. Which post will we create today?

It might be contradictory to the quality over quantity statement. From a process, and organizational, and cultural organizational culture point of view, I think it's necessary. I know, AJ, that you have that at practice in the law firm. It's about getting people the habit of, "Okay. I have to think about content. I have this content. Which subjects can we develop? What can we do with existing content?" Et cetera. Straining frequently at a high frequency.

David: Okay. AJ, Bert makes a good point, that you did come out of a legal environment where you've had most recently been working in content marketing in a legal organization. I imagine the challenges are very familiar and very similar, and so we've done it this way forever. Now, we've got to adopt it another way. How did you go about that task of trying to encourage people to become part of the team?

AJ: If you think government is tough, try working with a few hundred lawyers on a day to day basis to get them producing content. I did that for quite a few years.

David: Okay. You are well qualified then for this, because, again, in government, say, in the policy area, as you were identifying before, that's the business they're in. They're in the business of the knowledge creation and transfer business. The content is there, it just needs to be packaged and purposed and everything else. It's a very similar challenge. How did you go about that?

AJ: It's definitely a similar challenge, it is very high knowledge intensity environment, so you have to get that knowledge out of these people's heads. That's inspiring and evangelizing your message and your vision of content marketing that is facilitating on a large scale. These people are already producing content. They're making presentations. They're doing all kinds of stuff. If you take that rough diamonds, if you will, and you rework it and say, "This is something that I made from your presentation. Can you really take a good look at it if it's still legally correct and do a little editing on this?" Then that will help.

It inspire, like Bert says. What I did, for example, every other week was getting a few lawyers into a room for 20 minutes, giving them a stack of financial times and saying, "Well, you have five minutes. Find the subject that you didn't your blog post on and find a subject for your partner that you could do a blog post on together." That really works. It opened their eyes and said, "Can it be this easy?" "Yeah. Can it be that easy?" You have to inspire, and facilitate, and work your way forwards.

David: The issue for mine then, and this is this notion of scalability and being able to build a best practice engine so to speak. You just mentioned that you would then go and do the work. It's really about trying to get-

AJ: No. No. No, I didn't do the work. I said to them, "Find a subject, and then you can do that blog post." It's just like triggering them to find a subject of how to write, or when to write a blog post, or what subject on. Then they actually have to write it themselves. We facilitated that obviously to get the things moving. They had to do that themselves, because, like you say, it's not scalable. I don't have a team of 20 people writing stuff. It's

all about the mindset. Like Bert said as well, get the mindset going, "Okay."

This does not have to be an article on something in 2000 words. No. It can really be a poignant blog post, a really short and sweet one of, let's say, 200 words. Let's start with that and elaborate on that. That's the mindset that they need to adopt, and that works really, really well. Also facilitate the writing skills. Get a journalist or a copywriter onboard. Explain to them the basic principles of good writing, and then accelerate from there.

Bert: I would like to add one thing if you really want to create a mentality and a culture of content, especially that senior management, I suppose in government that would be senior officers, create a risk embracing culture. In general, we have a risk of risk culture. You copy what your predecessor did and do it more or less the same, because that's risk free.

As we discover new grounds, you have to have a space where risk is normal, you are allowed to make a few mistakes. Of course, it should be structured that it can't really go wrong, but there's nothing wrong in having a post that didn't really workout. People shouldn't be killed or fired over that, because as soon as that culture is there, the risk of risk culture, you will never move forward to something new.

David: I think it's like ... This is government globally, is it's changing. This notion of digital transformation is on everybody's lips. They're not immune from the changes that are coming. I really think it is about this notion of building confidence and, really, for the content marketing evangelist in the organization, it's doing exactly as you described AJ, that you can go in and say, "Look. This is the way that we can work through it. This is the way that we can put the program together, and let's start with, again, as you said, a pilot project, where we start to produce, get our cadence right. Get something happening. You don't have to shoot the lights out. It might be once a month.

Again, in these big government organizations, there are lots and lots and lots of people who are very talented and very skilled, but perhaps they've just never put their mind to the fact that this is the new opportunity that technology enables them to be in the publishing business. It's all data happens, but it is this cultural thing.

AJ, what else can people do to try to get these culture into organizations?

AJ: Just start. Just start, and be inspired by the people that are in front of you that actually facilitate you to move on, and begin with the end in mind. Begin with something that you already have done, or at least are trying to do and see what else can we do with this. Then you can see from that point on that you can actually get that blog post in if you are in a creative mode. Maybe add something else to make it into a series, or to do something else with it, to stretch and bend it in more shapes than one.

I would advice just start and do something now, and don't be daunted by the impulse abilities, but be inspired by all the possibilities that you can achieve.

David: Look. I think in the government and public sector area, there's no doubt in my mind that content marketing approach is the future. It will be the way that organization ... It's not just government. It's everybody. It's every organization on the planet that will be organized to publish their content. I think there's nothing that I've seen anywhere in the last 10 years that would convince me otherwise that we are not exactly heading down this path, and we just need to become better and better and better at it.

How do you get inspired? Where do you get your ideas? Where do you stay on top of information? Who are you listening to? Who are you talking to that's giving you information, that's helping you to become a better strategist?

Bert: I think I can't be really original there. We meet here again in Cleveland. For instance, really, one week in the year that charges you for the other 51 weeks. You have all the talent here, all your authors, all the experts both from a consultancy and expert side, and agencies side, and from line management, people that are really in the trenches.

This is a great place. I don't know of any places where it's really about government content, but I would say marketing pros in Boston is a really [inaudible 00:19:22] other opportunity, mainly in B2B, so that it might be less interesting for consumer, communication, and content marketing from a government perspective. Of course, when we look at podcasts, obviously Joe and Robert really hit the mark every week.

AJ: Also, other podcasts that you can listen to. I have a daily commute of about an hour back and forth, and I listen to podcast, obviously on content marketing, but also on more adopting and agile approach. For example, the Tim Ferriss Podcast, or Mitch Joel's podcast on Six Pixels of Separation, and all kinds of podcast that inspire me on a creative level. Look at websites, obviously, and reading blogs of really creative people. Maybe also on psychology, because content marketing also is a large part psychology. The likes of Dr. Gialdini, and that sort of podcast, or blog post, or audio books that you can easily digest, is very, very helpful for me to be inspired on getting my content marketing game and that of my clients to the next level.

David: From your point of view, we're a couple of days in now. What's caught your eye in terms of things that you've thought, "Ah! Okay. That's a good point."

AJ: I think that there are a lot of good points obviously. Like Ann said yesterday, "Ask yourself with the content that you're producing, "So what? So what?" It's a classic example of the five why's. Why is that important? Why is that important? Why is that important? You drill down to the really core point of making your USP, if you will, your unique selling proposition.

What struck me as well is that there's a lot of marketing automation going around that we don't see Europe that much on this high level that will obviously, at one point, to take across the pond. Really facilitating and helping you to content marketing planning, to content marketing automation and that sort of stuff. When you scale it up, especially in government, I guess, you have a lot of information, you have a lot of people working on in the same project. You need that being automated. Otherwise, nobody else, or

nobody knows what the other guy is doing and it's going to be, "Man!"

David: Yeah. There's no question that these are vast organizations in government who have vast amounts of information, so automation is going to become critically important. From your point of view Bert, what have you seen? What inspired you? What was your aha from yesterday?

Bert: Maybe something I haven't seen and I'm missing in the entire market place. It's really information and events about content marketing for non-content marketers. We've all seen, maybe, the training, like finance for non-financials. I think there's a real gap in teaching about content marketing for people that don't produce content marketing, but at a senior level, you'd have to take decisions about the go for projects, about hiring tenant.

Non-content marketers have to understand what content marketing is all about. I think that's a gap, and that's what we're missing. Maybe not at this conference, but it should be more in the general space, I suppose.

David: Now, you've hit on a very, very, not sore point for me, but it's an important point. I think the problem for content marketing at the moment is that we're pushing on the wrong door. We're trying to go in through the communications areas, and in government, and big organizations, the communications people are not the people who have the influence. We've got to come in through the other door, which is your chief financial officers, your chief information officers, your other senior people who really need to understand the business case, or as I like to refer to it as the content case, so they can understand it and see it in a way that makes sense to them.

We need to start talking about content marketing in the terms that they understand, so when we're speaking to them, we're speaking in their language. Their language of governance. Their language of risk management. Their language of opportunity management. That's the big change.

Bert: I think in general, what we see is that we don't do that, and people in government don't do that in work in general. They do it when there are elections. People in government, politicians, understand the content marketing game, because elections are a complete marketing game, and they do understand it right then. Once elections are gone, we go back into sending mode, broadcasting mode, and think that people will be waiting for our messages.

David: That, again, is a big ... That's political communication, government communication. Certainly, I think that's the lesson that's coming through, because there's no doubt that it's one of the single most important things that government has to do is to communicate. They tax, they regulate, and they've got to communicate, and they've got to do it more often than just four or eight weeks, every four years where they'd come around and say, "Hey!" Because people won't be there. They won't be paying attention.

There is this wonderful gift that they now have to be able to explain to people on a

regular basis, "This is our policy. This is what we're doing, and here's some information." We can tell that great story.

AJ: Yeah. The thresholds of getting into a dialogue with your clients, or the people that you're trying to convey your message to is really low now. I think government, especially, can take a hold of that and work with that. Maybe it will take a different mindset, again, of people wanting to be in the dialogue on a constant basis, and that come from years of just pushing folders through the door and say, "Well, listen up. You need to take care of your pension, or whatever." I think that, again, we'll be ... Like you were saying, another mindset that has to grow on them in the next few years.

David: Yeah. I think at the end of the day politicians like to get elected. If they-

Bert: ...one of their objectives. Yes.

David: They won't get elected if they don't treat people with respect. The only way that they're going to be able to build that trust and that confidence, and heavens knows we need it, with all of the digital transformation that's going on with inside organizations, the impact on the digital technology on the world in terms of the dislocation of jobs and everything else, we need to have a dialogue between government and the community so people can come together, because we don't need anymore disharmony, should I say, because we got enough challenges as it is.

AJ, what's next for you over the next ... Give us the next 12 months for you.

AJ: The next up for now as my top priority is my talk this afternoon here at the Content Marketing World.

David: What can we look forward to there?

AJ: We can look forward into getting inspired and get some ammunition if you're work in professional services firms. I feel their pain, I've been there for the last 20 years working with lawyers, accountants, and what have you. Getting some pointers there to get people to the next level.

Basically, the next few months, Bert and I are working on our global domination plan for Content Marketing Fast Forward. No pressure there. Now we're really getting a platform off the ground on the European level and inspiring content marketers and non-content marketers to become content marketers. It's all about the mindset. It's all about the inspiring and evangelizing over our message, and we would like to do that through education a little bit more. Now, it's only events. We'd like to be on a three year path of educating people all across Europe.

David: What about for you Bert? You'll obviously be working hard with AJ. You won't be slacking off, I hope. What are you looking for?

Bert: That's really, really fun. My big project is to finish a book that's almost finished, called

the Agile Content Marketing Roadmap. It can be found on contentmarketingroadmap.com.

David: What was that? HR?

Bert: The Agile Content Marketing Roadmap. A six step process of how you develop in an agile format your strategy and keep it up to date every time and time again.

David: Okay. When can we hope that we might be able to see that?

Bert: I know that Ann Handley says writing a book is like a birthing a Volkswagen. I talked to her yesterday and I have said, "You should have told me the model as well, because it's not a beetle." The book will be ready to go to print by Christmas, and will be ready as the first gift for 2017.

David: I'll put it on my ... Christmas-

Bert: I'll send you a copy.

David: I look forward to seeing that. It's an exciting time. It's interesting you just said there about the global domination platform. This is a wonderful thing about the world that we're in now, is that you actually can have a presence globally. Like this podcast, we have listeners all over the world. It's very niche. It's only for people really who are interested in content marketing in government and the public sector. That's all who's ... Niche. There's no doubt. You're super niched down, and you can build an audience. If you get out there and you create the content, have the conversations, keep turning up. This gets published Tuesday, 2:00 p.m. every week. There we are. We send it out to the world, and it's building it and building and building and building an audience.

AJ: Absolutely. It's like Seth Godin says, the difference between a marketer, and a really, really good marketer is showing up. I think you're doing a great job there.

David: Yeah. Again, I'm sure that you guys should start ... If I could give you the encouragement to try a podcast. It's so much fun, and there are so many people you can talk to. Look. This is three mates sitting in a corner of the expo hall, chatting about something that we all love, and you can do it every week. You can find people who want to talk about stuff.

AJ: I'm not a little bit worried that you're actually to peak at our global domination plan, because that's exactly what we're going to do in a few months time.

Bert: Chapter 2.1.

David: All right boys, thank you very much. We're starting day two. I'm really looking forward to some great keynote speeches here today. I will come and stick my nose in and have a listen to you AJ. Bert, when are you speaking?

Bert: I'm speaking on moderating the advances classes with Ann Handley and have a lab tech.

Be there.

David: Okay. We'll make sure we turn up to those as well. To you ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for tuning in. Again, this is very exciting. If you are listening, next year, pencil it in to come to Cleveland. You will not regret it. I've said that to so many people over the years, that it is so worthwhile coming here. We all come. We gather as a community. We are all great friends. We have a really wonderful time.

There is so much fun under the leadership of Joe Pulizzi. He's created this wonderful global community where we come here, we learn together, we laugh together. We argue together at different times. Had a couple of good solid discussions last night. It's really a great fun. Isn't it? It's a really great fun to come to Cleveland, isn't it? We're in Cleveland, Ohio.

AJ: Definitely. I wouldn't think a dream of it for seven years ago, I guess, to be here all the time. I was a speaker here in 2011, so Joe asked me to come over and do a talk for 500, 600 people, and we're not over 4,000. This has grown. People have an appetite for it. I totally agree, be here in Cleveland next year.

David: Okay. Bert, a bit of advice for the audience.

Bert: Come over, and get knowledge, and build your network, because I think that's one the huge opportunities. You meet people here that are friends, and the content marketing community is really generous and sharing a lot. Apart from learning from experts is building you a network for day to day consulting.

David: Okay. Fantastic. Ladies and gentlemen, what a great podcast that we've just had. Great conversation with two wonderful people, and great strategists, and really leading the path there in Europe. All of you who are listening in Europe, and there are many, many of you, make sure that you check in to Fast Forward, because, again, there's an opportunity here to start to build out a community. All you people working in government, get involved. Start the learning. Follow AJ, follow Bert, and to start to make this contribution, because the change is going to happen. This is the thing. My advice to all of you is that this isn't stopping. This isn't changing. We all have to get into this publishing mentality. We'll have to learn, and it's all test and learning. We're all learning as we go.

Anyway. Thank you very much for joining us once again. I will be back next week, probably with another podcast from Cleveland, because this is ... I can grab everyone I like, which I'm doing, and having some great fun doing so.

Anyway, thanks again for joining in. I'll see you next week. Bye for now.