
David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and thank you for joining us.

Today, we get the perspective of someone who has worked in corporate affairs for a long, long time and has had a distinguished career in that field and has now got a really interesting job in the way that they work and tell their story, not just to the federal government here in Australia but really they've got a need to tell that story more broadly throughout the community. So we'll talk to him in just a moment.

First, as we do each week, we start with the definition of just exactly what content communication is. So, content communication is a strategic, measurable and accountable 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.

So to my guest today, it's Simon Westaway, who's the chief executive officer at the Australian Livestock Exporters' Council and he's held that position since 2016. The Australian Livestock Exporters' Council represents Australia's expanding \$2 billion livestock export sector, which is part of the nation's \$18 billion red meat-supply industry. Now, his path to being chief of the Australian Livestock Exporters' Council is through corporate affairs, and he has held a number of roles as a vice-president at BHP Billiton, the giant Australian mining company; at Tourism Australia; at Jetstar Airways, which is a part of the Qantas Airline Group here in Australia; and also with Medibank Private.

So as you'd expect his skills are in government relations and media, corporate and financial communications, public policy advocacy and also strategy. He joins me in the studio now. Simon Westaway, thanks for joining us on InTransition.

Simon Westaway: Geez, David, thanks for the wrap.

David Pembroke: (laughs) So listen Simon, let's go through that. How did you find your path into corporate affairs? What was your journey to those first jobs that you had?

Simon Westaway: That's a really good question. I grew up in the Hunter Region, obviously in New South Wales. I live and reside in Melbourne and I now hold a job in Canberra, so I'm very much a sort of a future example of the way we go about our work these days.

I was always interested in the media as a young guy. I was probably more interested in the sports pages and the business pages than I was in the front pages, but I've always had an interest in media. And as, I guess, I started to grow up, more around why issues emerge and why they occurred and the way people responded. We always had ABC on at home growing up, ABC radio, and I guess...

often you see... I think I was probably the only kid in my class whose parents actually had the AM programme on each morning before we headed off to school. And I'm not saying that they were svengalis but I think it actually made me get a bit of an awareness what was going on in the world and my family did a lot of charity work and the like, in terms of overseas countries. So I suppose I always had an exposure to the global village and I guess I was always interested in the way the media operated and the way it worked and the way issues were shaped. I found myself, a few times probably, cursing the radio or the TV or the newspaper from what I read and thought, well you can either be an observer or a participant, and I guess I chose to become a participant. I actually am a trained journalist and for a period I was a radio journalist out of the Hunter Region. But I guess I like to manage and solve issues and get involved in issues so I guess ultimately I found myself after some time working for a number of politicians in the political sphere or they moved into corporate roles. I guess the journey has sort of gone from there.

David Pembroke: OK, so it's interesting that you came via that journalism path to issues management and solving problems because the media has changed so dramatically. So through your career, obviously you've been involved in all sorts of things, what are the biggest changes that you're seeing now in terms of the importance of being able to shape a story, to earn the right to get people's attention?

Simon Westaway: Yes, good question. Obviously the mainstream media has changed significantly. The role of print has obviously declined. You could argue the role of TV and radio, in terms of just debating issues and the way issues are discussed has probably changed a lot as well. Obviously the rise in online, the role of social media, good, bad and indifferent... I mean all of the channels have changed significantly.

In some ways I think you can argue that the empire's fought back. We - organisations, individuals, companies, entities - have been able to better control and shape their message than they've ever had. You've got a complete suite of communications channels that you can utilise at your disposal. You can actually get your brand out there and people are actually going to buy into your story and not necessarily go through the filter. In a way, I think that's been... I think it's actually as big a change as much around the rise of social media and the decline of some of our traditional platforms in this part of the world and abroad. So that, I think... ethically, I have a bit of a think about that sometimes. I wonder if that's necessarily... have we really... is that the circle that we've really wanted to go in and that's the way we've wanted to become?

Probably the other couple of insights are that there are a lot less specialist media than perhaps there was around back when I first started out. I was very fortunate; I don't have an aviation background but I got involved in airlines. I worked for a regional airline called Impulse Airlines and then had the chance to later on in life get involved in the Qantas Group through the Jetstar project and

so I spent... add some tourism time that I did... I spent probably 12, 13 years in my working life in corporate, in the aviation-tourism sector. It's a wonderful, amazing sector and obviously it's very interesting.

I guess I've seen the way that the role of brand and the way that things are shaped and so forth and you get involved in a lot of issues... But to my point, the aviation-tourism sector had a lot of specialists, but as I sense even in more recent years, it's a lot less specialist sort of writers, commentators, opinion makers and shapers in that type of sector and yet that's a sector that's quite dynamic and it has a lot of marketing dollars associated with it. So you come to sectors such as the red-meat sector I'm now involved in - there's very few specialist media now involved in that.

I think that's probably some of the... I guess some insights of the 20-plus years of... I'm looking at the parapet in terms of where I see some changes.

David Pembroke: So in terms of that opportunity, to be your own media organisation, how do you address that opportunity as part of the CEO of Livestock Exporters' Council? How do you best take use of that?

Simon Westaway: Yes, great question. I guess I had one of those sliding-door moments in my career when I was finishing up at BHP. A lot of us after the South32 demerger, the Billiton vehicle if you like, or elements of the Billiton part of BHP were put into a new vehicle and I guess I had an opportunity to think about where to take my career. I'd been very interested in industry bodies, which is why I've ended up where I've ended up.

I guess to your direct question, I think it's about an organisation no matter big or small, it's about looking at how they present and how they reflect it in terms of the communications that they have and the presence they have. A lot of people look at an organisation these days mainly through their website or perhaps their social media channels, maybe the odd appearance by a CEO or an executive of something... Not every organisation advertises, obviously. So you need to think about the way that you're presenting and what are the building blocks. In a way I think it's a good, refreshing thing for every now and then an organisation to have a good look at not only what they are and what they do, but how they actually say it is and how they reflect is actually really important.

In the case of my organisation, we do some really interesting work in an industry that not everybody supports and it's not really what you support or don't support, but the way we were projecting ourselves and the way we looked and felt is different to what people understood us to be. So I guess I'm taking our organisation on a journey now around putting, I guess, a bit more of a face to the industry and a bit more logic, and an argument around how the industry operates rather than focusing on the systems or processes, which I think a lot of people have liked us to focus on and perhaps hasn't best framed us.

David Pembroke: How then are you going about that in terms of developing a plan? Is it the social channels? Is it video? Is it getting newsletters out there? Is it making sure you're still in the media, or is it all of those things?

Simon Westaway: It's a bit of all of those things. Live export trade is probably not the hottest media topic or if it is, it comes with a lot of inherent biases from many commentators, as well as obviously critics on both sides of the fence. We probably take a more cautious approach to mainstream media engagement. I guess I'm hopeful in this role that I can change that and we can get more involved in more discerning debates and have an opinion and not have the issues of an incident back in Indonesia in 2011 or in Vietnam in 2015/16 shape the conversation.

But I think for an organisation like us we basically had a platform that we were working off and what we needed to do was go through and look at: what is it that we do, and how do we represent ourselves? It's not about what we do, it's how we represent ourselves, and for me what I've done is I've really looked at the way we presented; reshaping our brand guidelines and we're about to redo our website. We're getting our communications channels much more aligned so that we're sending out a common message across a number of different channels.

I think one thing that people need to be aware of is each of the various channels the communicator has, that he or she has, at the control panel now... you're actually potentially talking to a lot of different audiences but you got to be very careful that you don't, in talking to different audiences don't, sort of fall for the trap of saying things differently. You need to be very consistent in your positioning. Perhaps though, from a style point of view, you may present it in a different way.

David Pembroke: Now resourcing is always an issue for most organisations be you a government communicator, be you in a national association. There's not just bodies lying around everywhere to be able to take advantage of it as much as you would like. So how do you go about defining and allocating resource to this particular function?

Simon Westaway: So that's a good question. From the building blocks, from a planning business point of view, you've got to put a business case around why you need to do these things. It's a lot of boards, management teams... are very interested in media marketing. It's something that everyone has an opinion on whether or not it's exactly shaped in a great deal of strategic rationale is another point. You've got to have a strategic position and a strategic reason for why you're doing what you're doing. That requires a little bit of planning but it also requires the rationale around it. It's also about aligning your communications be it in marketing above below line or in terms of your earned media or reactive media, it's got to be aligned to the overall strategy of the organisation as well.

Resourcing's a huge issue and it's not that corporate affairs or the public affairs function is underdone. In fact, arguably, there's been a lot more investment in this field than it has had in the last 10, 15, 20 years. In fact you see many surveys, like the PRs outnumber journalists four or five to one now in a lot of industries, and on any type of snapshot. But the resources though do come a little bit thinner where I think organisations are quite comfortable to find a comms manager or a comms adviser or perhaps allocate a little bit of money to update the website or update their internet at some point but they don't... I don't think play a longer term strategic sort of game around ongoing funding or an ongoing build of the brand or the entity or the framework that you're trying to put forward.

I think a lot of organisations I observe struggle a bit with that. You see teams come and go. You see activities come and go and perhaps I think some organisations have missed the boat the bit around are probably best funding it, which I guess probably the gist your question.

David Pembroke: But this is the point I suppose isn't it? In that maybe perhaps corporate affairs, public affairs, communications has really failed to make the business case. And therefore, hasn't been able to align the value they create with the business objectives of the organisation and therefore not speaking in the language of the senior executive means that you're not going to get funded.

Simon Westaway: Well that's right. You're already, off the bat, you are in most cases you're a cost centre, not a profit centre so we're in revenue centres. So being a cost centre means you're always at the mercy of bean counters and when times are good, teams grow or funding's there; when times are bad, and often that's when corporate affairs actually comes into its own during the bad times or the big issues, is when you actually need the additional feet on the ground and the approaches and the strategic communications approach that you're going to run. But often that's times when you've got lesser amount of people around you.

I think corporate affairs... it's a difficult one because many people have a view on this. I guess I've had a view and been asked a few occasions now and I've got some grey hairs so I maybe I can buy into a bit more. I think we don't do work around our ROI, our return on investment. We don't do enough work around what value we provide. There's some pretty simple measures out there, even maybe a media monitoring firm, without giving too much of a plug to the likes of Isentia, you can do a snapshot on an issue and run it over 50, 100, 250 mentions across a range of platforms, get a scope around a positivity or neutrality or a negative view of how you've managed an issue. Then you can actually provide a level of weighting in terms of what type of value that created or didn't create or wasted for the organisation.

I think in some cases our work, in not being proactive enough, we're actually missing opportunities to help better leverage better leveraging. So I think here

we haven't done the best job at that. I don't know who's to blame for that; I think it's partly the operatives but I think it's also partly we haven't probably tried to buy into enough of the strategic stuff. We've let human resources take over parts of our roles. We haven't probably fought hard enough intellectually about the value that we provide.

Yeah, it's a good a question. I think you know, with the decline of traditional media, that's probably had a bit of an impact on the way corporate affairs, public affairs functions now run in many case.

David Pembroke: Yeah, it's interesting you say that because recently and we've featured it on the podcast over the last few weeks, the WPP - the global holding company the big messy they've advertising holding company - did some research around effectiveness of government in public sector communication. They found this very point - that it's not valued by the senior executives. But I think really it's the communicators - it's us - that we haven't knocked the door down. But I think that's getting easier now as we move into the digital platforms; measurement of the activity is a whole lot easier than it's ever been before.

Advertising equivalents you know is always been a bit of a ropey measurement. Is it really worth that or not worth that? So I think we can do better and we must do better if in fact we're going to be able to grab the share of the budgets that we need because I think the other point that I make often on this podcast is the increasing importance of communication given that everybody is now carrying around a super computer in their pocket. So everyone we need to connect to is in fact connected. So therefore, the communication role becomes even more important because they're there, the people you need to get to. So it's really just a matter of how you tell that story through what channel at what time in what form that hopefully is going to capture that attention that will then ultimately lead people to behave in the way that you would hope them to be.

Simon Westaway: Yeah, spot on. I think there's a few things... I mean we haven't as an entity if you like corporate affairs or public affairs of even broader structures rather than small micro companies or micro organisations one of the bigger structure. We haven't done the land grab very well. We haven't tried to take over IT's turf. We didn't really take on the HR debate that was going on that HR should have comms. I've seen and lived through a few different models where people in communication, HR and communications, communications and IT ... you're now seeing communications mould into legal in some cases because you look at models, be it Boston Consulting Group, McKenzie's, the different corporate advisers, and there was a period there where a CO could have 10, 11, 12, multiple reports and therefore communications snugly fit within that model, through to that they needed to have a small executive team, group ex-cos and then have a larger doer-bee, vice president, senior executive manager types, EGM types, and sitting in underneath whatever the superstructures were and that's where communications has got folded in.

Now, I don't know if we should really be dictated to by the likes of a BCG, or a McKenzie but I've worked with these people, they're much smarter than me, and there's rationale behind it. But I haven't seen the corporate affairs... and I've been part of a few sort of debates and even got involved in IABC and those type of bodies to try to see, was there any intellectual rigour to try to drive these forward? And I didn't really get a lot of it. There was a lot of us talking about what we thought was important to each other but not really thinking through the where we're going. And you're spot on - I think communications is becoming more critical, not less. Yet, we may not have the amount of media that you needed to be managing or looking after but it should be part of a broad corporate affairs team. It should have a number of different planks to it. It should have ownership of all the channels not ownership of some of the channels and then it should ownership in strategy.

David Pembroke: Yeah, no question. Now, what about the behavioural economists? You turn around three times and they've snuck in the door and they're sitting at the top table and the communications people are still outside (laughs).

Simon Westaway: Well, it's a struggle and well jumping over here it's a struggle because... I've got to be careful what I say here because I've been in some organisations and their corporate affairs structures have changed and evolved over time and I've been part of a participant in those and not a participant in those but yeah, you've got to ask yourself: Is having the corporate affairs structure sitting in underneath the chief legal officer or the general council, does that necessarily give you the best communications output, um, outcome? You look at it through the lens of legal ends for risk lens or governance lens over perhaps an issue management lens. That said ,the issue around materiality, consistency of voice, if you're a part of a listed company... it's extremely important.

There's a celebrated case going on now with Murray Goulburn where the CEO was saying one thing to one audience and saying something different to the market, and yet in a way that's not cricket and obviously well that matter will resolve the way it resolves. But I guess the point taken is that communicators can also have the licence to do whatever they want to do in the current world, particularly of all the different channels and the fact that you can be exposed quite quickly in terms of saying something inconsistent to what perhaps you said previously or what you're saying differently to perhaps a different part of the organisation.

David Pembroke: So where to from here? Let's just say that problem gets solved and this is not just in corporate, it's not just in industry associations, it's in government departments and agencies as well where communications has got a prove its value if indeed it's going to get that seat that it deserves, I believe it deserves, at the top table particularly as digital transformation continues to make communication more important. But let's say that that problem's solved. What sort of capabilities and skills do you think that people need to have to be able to create the best value for their organisations?

Simon Westaway: Yeah, it's good question. I think you want smart people. I think intellectually you need people to be pretty cluey. I think gone are the days where... and I think it's shame, the communications degrees and the like in a very high TR or equivalent score to get into these. So you got clever people that are going into those organisations.

I think though, you also need ... I think we need obviously, IT saviness is extremely important. I don't know if we need a bunch of coders but certainly we need people that are creative to be able to develop content or develop activity. I find actually it's interesting, many of us perhaps are very good at writing something or managing a narrative or something but we're not necessarily clever at actually pulling the whole strategy together or being quite clever in the way that it's framed or why we're saying this because this is the reason that we're saying it, if you're following my logic...

We're not good at putting the plan on the page perhaps as well as the management consultant does. Within and for and around many management consultants, they have come up with and use the playbook... getting a bit controversial here... it's a very good playbook but it's all about the plan on the page. It's the CEO's always looking at the top of the trees, always looking for those top two or three sound bites, and we kind of keep forgetting that they've got to those key roles but they've not necessarily had communications as a key part of the reason that they're there. All of a sudden, comms is now a huge part of what they're about, but they come at it very differently perhaps from where we come at it. It can be a great marriage but it also can be almost a divorce if you don't get it right.

David Pembroke: So in terms of your views on influencing politicians and how you can use communication to do that, what's some of your advice around shaping a story and shaping a narrative in such a way that it helps you to advance your cause?

Simon Westaway: Sure, it's a good question. I think it's probably different in the states and obviously in the local council municipalities compared obviously to say in Canberra with the 220-plus MPs up on the hill, but I think if you're a part of an organisation that's trying to influence you need to be talking to the politicians through the platforms that they watch, listen to and read. So keep in mind - and I've worked for a number of federal politicians, admittedly in the younger years of my life - but they get bombarded no matter what political colour they are, no matter where they come from. They get bombarded with all sorts of issues, matters. They're getting bombarded all the time but they also have some clear channels of where they get a lot of their information from, which is as I understand... Radio National has some cut through in the way that MPs pick up their information. Obviously, the traditional print media still has cut through with federal MPs because of the driving issue of the day and that sort of thing.

There's arguments that the AM programme, for example, and then of course you've got your key talk-back radio people, which people argue, are they still

powerful? But for some reason the Neil Mitchells, Allan Joneses, and even the Ray Hadleys of this world seem to have more than influence and perhaps their audience would justify...

David Pembroke: Yeah, the audience numbers... it's often unusual when you think about it. To see the numbers and to see the demographics of some of those numbers and then you equate it to the influence and the impact...

Simon Westaway: So in the narrative point of view I think clearly, obviously national organisations have to think this way, small organisations don't but clearly it's trying to talk into platforms and forums that MPs are buying into and dialling in and out. They've still got mobile phones like everybody else and obviously looking at a whole bunch of different things. I think the other thing is in the engagement with MPs is, I think a lot of people fall for the trap that MPs are rather ignorant or they're not interested. In many ways they just don't have the time. So therefore you need communications with ministers or backbenches for that matter needs to be really clear concise. The handout perhaps is a one-pager or two-pager, which is interesting to look at and it's factual. In some ways, that is as powerful as the 15, 20 minutes that you might get with an MP talking through a particular issue. I was taught at a very young age that the power of the one-pager – both physical and digital - is a very important one.

David Pembroke: You raise a point there around visual communication. How important is visual communication for you to be able to achieve the objectives of the-

Simon Westaway: I think visual is absolutely key. I'm a terrible drawer or artist. I try to think visually and I read visually but I don't have that skillset. But I think visual is terribly powerful. The plan on the page... We used to joke at Jetstar the good old slide nine, which showed how the Jetstar model worked and it was a bit of an in gag but we used to often say in meetings with an MP, "Go on, show 'em slide nine" and we kind of all joked about it afterwards but-

David Pembroke: That's all they needed.

Simon Westaway: It's all they needed. Particularly when you've got time-poor situations and trying to get a message across, the visual ... the power of the visual is always critical. I think again it probably comes back to us as communicators is do we have if you're a leader, who do you have in your team that can deliver you that visual? Who is it that's running your website? Is it the techo (excuse the colloquialisms) that's fallen into the role or is been playing with computers since he or she was six? Or is it someone who's really thinking creatively about how that website works?

I think that's been a bit of a win I think in corporate affairs in more recent times, there has been more of a merging of the digital platforms in with the corporate affairs function. I think that's a good win. We need to talk about the benefits of that. I don't know if we're doing that enough but then I've been out of the

corporate for a good part of 18 months, two years, so perhaps I'm a bit ignorant there.

David Pembroke:

OK, well, Simon Westaway thank you very much for coming into speak with us today on InTransition. Some great insights there around the changing world of communication and how best to shape our message and take advantage of the changes that are really here. That I think really positioning communication as a far more influential lever for organisations, be you government, public sector, national associations to understand it and to use it as a strategic weapon in your arsenal in order for you to achieve those business objectives.

So thank you very much to you Simon and thank you to you the audience for coming back once again and listening to my conversation today with Simon Westaway. I certainly appreciate that, but for the moment I'll be back at the same time next week. So it's bye for now.