InTransition Episode 123 – Angela Sinickas

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 is David Pembroke and thank you very much for joining me once again this week.

Today, we speak to a genuine legend in the communications business but before we get to our guest, as we do each week, we start with a definition of just exactly what content communication is and why it's relevant to government communicators. 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.

There we go, ladies and gentlemen, but as I said, today, we speak to a legend of the communications business. It's Angela Sinickas who is the CEO of Sinickas Communications and since 1974, she has led the charge about measuring results and using analysis to create better outcomes. She is indeed a pioneer of organisational communication measurement and measuring effectiveness having been cited in the Harvard Business Review, the Journal of Communication Management, Communication World, the Reagan Report and anyone who's involved in the International Association of Business Communicators would certainly know very well Angela Sinickas and her reputation. She is now running a consultancy and some of her clients include Autodesk, Barclays, CISCO, Ergon, ING Bank, Verizon, and even in Australia here. She works with Telstra and she joins me now. Angela Sinickas, thanks very much for joining us InTransition.

Angela Sinickas: Well, thanks for having me.

David Pembroke: It's one of those things that you ... And I've been a member of the IBC, I don't know, 20 to 25 years and you've just been plugging away year after year after year talking about the importance of measurement and talking about the fact that it's got to be a foundation of any communication programme. It really only seems to be in the last couple of years that it's caught fire, I suppose, is data. It certainly started to become one of the topics of the day. How has that been for you as a pioneer who's been talking about it for so long to finally see it come into full flower?

Angela Sinickas: Yeah, it's like an overnight sensation that took 30 years to happen, right? What happened to me was a personal experience. I guess if I was religious, it would be like a religious experience. Five years into my career, I was happily working on my newsletter for the Chicago Tribune. I was doing the employee communication magazine for a big newspaper and we got a new president who was an accountant. I had to figure out some way to measure what I was doing because the only language she understood was numbers.

It was painful to start out with because I first moved into journalism so I wouldn't have to take any more mathematics classes, right? But I invented the survey because I had no budget. I worked with our market research department. They were very generous with their expertise and the result of it was phenomenal, because instead of being the editor of the employment magazine, based on the data that I had, the strategy I developed, he created a new position of manager of internal communication. I got two staff people. I got a big budget all during a recession.

I got the measurement religion at that point and I wanted to share that experience with lots and lots of other people. It's not that hard to do and my goodness, the impact it has not just on your organisation but potentially on your own career. That's why I kept speaking about this for years and years before other people had the need to do it.

David Pembroke: But now we're there, now we are at that point when measurement is so fundamental. What have you learned over all of those years that the basic foundation building blocks that people must have in place if they are going to measure effectively?

Angela Sinickas: I think you have to, first, make sure you're communicating effectively because otherwise, you could measure ridiculous things or important things and find that you weren't effective. I think it starts with the way we plan. I'm not talking about the everyday announcements, but if you're going to be working on some kind of initiative that's going to take some time and some money and resources, then I think when we need to plan, we should start with what behaviours are we trying to change.

I think a lot of people have heard the mantra of we need to communicate what ... We need to plan what people should think, feel and do, and I totally agree. But when you're planning, those are in the wrong order. The first order of business is what is it that we need to have changing, the employees, or taxpayers have to do differently. And then, we have to do a little bit of research to figure out why they aren't doing it yet and what kind of information it would take to get them there. Then, it's two types of messaging. It's knowledge which is what most of our executives like to focus on. Give them the facts and then they'll just do the right thing. But as anyone who started or quit smoking knows, knowledge alone has nothing to do with behaviour in its entirety. It's emotions, it's attitudes. That's how we feel about things, how we see ourselves in the context of the behaviour change that can make all the difference.

If we start our planning with the desirable behaviour in mind and then gear those strategic messages to the ones that research tells us will get the job done, knowledge and attitudes. Well, now, we know what to measure because we can then measure those key messages on knowledge, those feelings, those attitudes and track it against the behaviour change in many different ways. I think, really, that foundation starts with the way we plan.

David Pembroke: But it really is as simple as that, that the way that you've outlined it really is. That's quite compelling because it's simple and clear.

Angela Sinickas: And it's not even numbers oriented. At the beginning, it's research which is what we communicators do anyway before we write anything, we have to do research. This just involves talking to some of our target audience members in advance to figure out where they are right now, what misunderstandings they have, what blank spots they have to make sure that we are on track with the strategy we develop. It's a skill we already have.

David Pembroke: Once we have assembled those insights and we've identified those behaviours that we're seeking to change and we've assembled the knowledge and we've perhaps identified those more emotional components which are going to hopefully lead to that behaviour change, what's next? What's the next step we need to take to actually turn it into a programme of measurement?

Angela Sinickas: Well, we need to now start thinking about channels as well, and this is where one place research can be very handy. If you ask your audience for a different key topic, where did they currently learn about it and where would they prefer to learn about it, that actually gives us a great blueprint for the mix of channels we should be using on different topics that are most likely to reach people in a way that makes sense to them. Then, we also have to use our knowledge and experience as communicators because there are certain channels that are simply better for transmitting a lot of detailed knowledge like anything that's written whether it's online or in print, that's great for details so you can go back and access it at some time in the future.

But when it comes to changing people's opinions or attitudes about something, the written word is not every effective. It's really people-to-people communication whether that's a meeting that you have, whether it's an interaction that somebody has with one of your employees, or social media. This is where I think social media have a chance to shine because it's person to person. It's not very good for announcing changes or announcing information because it's such as opt-in kind of thing, but once you've announced the information, getting a conversation going is super.

It's picking the right channels to go with those messages and then when you do your research, you can check to see that people are interested in those messages, they are getting better informed about those messages and that their preferred channels are in fact the ones they are currently using because you're now using the right channels. Those are really four key questions about any major strategy that you're working on, interest level, information level, current source, preferred source.

David Pembroke: In terms of then putting together that measurement dashboard or framework, how many variables should you be or output should you be looking at in terms of measurement given that there is this abundance of sources of information particularly in the digital world that you can ultimately end up measuring a whole lot of things that may not be particularly useful?

Angela Sinickas: Right. There's a lot of ... The things I've just talked about now were typically the things you would learn from surveys, but most organisations can be repeating surveys every month and updating their Dashboard on the topics of communication or the channels of communication by survey.

This is where there are some other things we can do ... Before we get to online usage metrics which are interesting, a whole topic of themselves, there are a couple of things that if you want people to understand something better which you can maybe only measure once a year, two precursors for that are one, make sure you've actually given them enough volume of information, so they have a chance of learning about it and learning about it better. One thing we can measure then is the content, how much content have we been delivering on various topics. Another one is, did we write it in a way that they could potentially understand it? Microsoft Word has a feature, if you turn it on, it will tell you the reading grade level of a piece of copy that you've written.

Now, you can measure that on a monthly basis because you can measure how much content you're delivering on the desired topics and how understandable it is and if it's matching your audience. Those can go on a Dashboard, and even though they're activities, those are the activities that will get the result that you want in terms of information leading to behaviour change.

David Pembroke: Okay. Then, from there, what's the next step? Once we've understood around that volume piece, so is there enough, and then that readability, understanding that effectiveness? Where's our next step beyond that?

Angela Sinickas: Now, you can look at all those usage data that are out there, but I think we have to look at them in a very careful way. First of all, I think if we just look at a click, a click doesn't really tell you anything about the effectiveness of the page people landed on. In my mind, it's telling you a lot more on how effectively you marketed that hyperlink to get people to click on it. We need to look at some of those measurements that tell us not only did they click to a page but that they did read it and find value in it.

This is where it's more useful to look at things like did they share it with other people? Did they request an RSS feed, or if you have an online feature where people can promote or demote stories based on how useful they think they are? Those all tell you that they not only click but they read it and found it useful. I would focus more on those types of metrics rather than just, "Oh, we have so many followers," or we have so many clicks on this newsletter.

David Pembroke: Okay, go on. Sorry. To the next point?

Angela Sinickas: Yeah. Another issue is we need to put these things into context. I see a lot of people just take those numbers that they get each month from usage and track it, but you really can't tell much from that. Just for example, let's say that you're looking at how many people are looking at your internet at work during the whole year? I can promise you that during the months of December, January, and February, you're going to have lower viewers. Lower viewers, fewer page views, fewer visits, all because people are on a holiday. It's not that your content suddenly became less compelling or engaging, it's that they're simply not there. They're on holiday, or during the literal holidays.

One of the things I would suggest for something like that internally is get information from your HR department on how many ... There are different ways of calculating this, but how many, in effect, people were at work that month? Then, what you're looking at is not how many people look at your website or a particular newsletter, but you're looking at what percentage of available eyeballs actually looked at it and then, that's going to tell you a lot more about which editions are more compelling in terms of content and it's not just going to tell you when people are gone.

Similarly, with a newsletter, this works internally or externally. I see a lot of people tracking click-throughs on their newsletter from week to week, month to month. The problem is not every edition of your newsletter has the same number of stories or the same number of potential links because you may have more than one link in the story. What we need to look at instead of just pure number of links per week or per edition, I would say you make it a percentage of how many click-throughs divided by the number of potential clicks that there were. And that again tells you something more useful than just the wrong number of clicks which tells you some weeks, you had more stories than others.

David Pembroke: But it does, again, it seems quite intuitive the way that you're describing this in a way of creating useful insight rather than as you say the volume metrics that are perhaps not particularly useful.

Angela Sinickas: Exactly. I think insight is the key thing. Then, you can get very clever with some of your usage statistics especially if you plan your campaigns carefully. Let's say that there are some online pages you really want people to go to because it's keyed into the behaviour change that you're trying to get. Maybe that is where the behaviour actually takes place. Maybe that's where people sign up for something. Maybe that's where people, they do something online that they used to have to come into a government office for in person before. There are pages that are action pages. That is where the behaviour you're shooting for is happening.

One thing you can do is, in your campaign that includes multiple channels, you could use different versions of the URL in all those different communications so at the end of the month, you can track not only how many people came to the action page but how many of them came from the article you had in the newsletter, or how many came from another page on the website or how many came from the conversation you were having in various social media. If you think about it in advance, it doesn't cost you anything, but you can identify which were the most valuable channels for getting people to start taking the action you wanted them to take.

David Pembroke: It all makes such perfect sense, doesn't it? Why do you think that there has been this reluctance to a dot, this robust practise that you've been evangelising for so many years?

Angela Sinickas: Well, I think there's a couple of things. Sometimes, people just get paralysed when they look at a lot of numbers. One of the things I try to do when I do workshop is I try to humanise numbers. If you can imagine a percentage mark, draw it by hand in your mind and just put like a smile underneath it because percentages are nothing more than people. It's really just telling you how many of the people that you know stand in one corner or another at the party, from one perspective or another on a particular issue. First of all, make numbers more friendly.

The other thing is we are good at visualising many other things. We should also visualise what our numbers are telling us. But when I get a raw data report from a survey, I don't know what I have until I start putting it into bar charts and then organising the bar charts from tallest to shortest within the category of questions. Once I see the visual picture, all of a sudden, I'm seeing a story. I think one of the issues is we get paralysed when we see a lot of numbers and we just stop doing the things we normally do which is trying to figure out what's going on with other things that we're researching and writing about.

I think the other thing is even if people say, "Okay, I'm ready to try some numbers," I think there's a little hidden fear that what if I'm found lacking? What if the numbers show I'm doing a horrible job, then what will I do? I could just let everyone know that for the most part, nobody is doing a horrible job. What they are doing is some things better and some things not as well as they could be done. Really, I think people just have to get used to that idea. I only had one situation where I had to call my client in advance. This was a government. I'll tell you what it was in a minute, where their numbers were so low they were creating new lows in my database of survey results.

I said, "I have to tell you before I send you this report, this is shockingly bad." And she goes, "Oh, wonderful. Thank you so much." I thought, "What the heck?" Well, it turned out that she had been trying to get a full-time internal communication position for this government. It's the whole court system in the State of California. There was no person responsible for internal communication, so everybody was sending all kinds of messages to everybody else with no coordination, nothing. Having low numbers was going to give her the justification to say, "Yes, we need to do this much more systematically," but that's the only time I've seen numbers that were consistently low across the board.

David Pembroke: It's interesting you say that because I was involved in a discussion the other day and I was desperately hoping that the numbers from a survey were going to be dreadful because of that very point, that it need ... Particularly the audience that we were seeking to engage with, I think pretty much like your experience back at the Chicago Tribune, when you're speaking to people particularly at those senior levels, often they are numbers driven, numbers focused. If they see a bad number, they know that there's a problem and they know it needs to be fixed. You're right. I think sometimes, bad numbers can be quite a gift for people working in communication areas.

Angela Sinickas: Yeah. I had another example where the client was ... I gave them the results overall but I also showed them how the results varied for their eight different business units and I said, "You have three business units that are consistently very strong no matter what category of questions we're looking at. They are stronger than the average for the whole company by quite a bit." He said, "Thank you." I said, "Well, those are the only three units that have a full-time internal communicator. The others haven't budgeted for them. You've just given me the ammunition to say, 'If you want better communication, you need someone in charge of it.'" It really can be our friend even when there are some low numbers. It's gives you the justification for more resources.

David Pembroke: In terms of acquiring these market research skills, how important is it for people working in government communications to be able to apply it at baseline level? Because we now have such capability at the ends of our hands with digital technologies. Anyone can whip up a survey and get it out there as quickly as possible and certainly, in many, many government organisations who we work with, everyone walks around saying, "No more surveys because we're absolutely sick to death of ... Because it's so easy to create and distribute a survey, we don't want to ... We've got survey fatigue."

Just that first question, "How important is it for people to understand the concepts of market research and then how do you avoid that overload that seems to be washing through ... I don't think it's just government. I think it's everywhere, that everyone is now able to research and so they're trying to research.

Angela Sinickas: Well, it reminds me of the days when Desktop Publishing came around and everyone could publish a newsletter and there were some horrible newsletters that came out. Similarly, I've seen some really horrible surveys where they've just been tossed off by somebody. Just to give you a quick example, there was a question that said, "To what extent do you agree or disagree that you're receiving too much email?" And by the third of people agreed that they received too much email and the communicator, without really thinking about it said, "Well, I was assuming that people would have too much emails so this just proves it; 33% of people are saying they're getting too much email." The problem was there was another 33% who were neutral on that and another 33% who disagree. What that communicator never learned was how many people are really feeling they're not getting enough or they're getting exactly the right amount.

You have to make sure that when you think you've got your survey developed, imagine if you got positive results in every question. Imagine what you would have learned if you got negative results on every question, and then you'll find out that sometimes you're using the wrong scale or you've worded the question the wrong way. So, you really can't find any actionable results when you get your survey results.

Now, we're getting very savvy about surveys as well. If you've got an audience member trying to respond to a survey and they're seeing a lot of bad questions, they'll stop taking it. That's one of the reasons for survey fatigue. But there's a couple of other things we can do. I could promise you that if you were asked to ask to take a survey every day and every day, you also heard about what changes were being made because of the research, you would never get survey fatigue. We get survey fatigue if we take surveys and never hear about what was discovered or what actions have been taken. I think that's the single biggest problem with the survey fatigue concept.

Others are that sometimes surveys are just too long. Sometimes, we're starting with questions on demographics which are the most boring questions. You want to start with exciting questions just like you do with the good lead on a story. You want to make sure that even if you haven't communicated in the past what changes have been made, when you're announcing invitation to this next survey, if you say, "The last time we did a survey like this, we learned X and we did Y." People will go, "Oh, yeah, you did make that change." You did it because you listened to people. "Ha, how interesting. Well, maybe it's worth my time taking this survey as well."

I think even that last ditch effort to let people know how this type of research has actually made a difference in the past will help them take the next survey. The other thing is, especially with government, you don't have to survey everyone all the time. You can do random samples and get great data. If you know there's going to be four surveys this next year, divide your audience into four separate, identical type, mirror-image random samples and that way, you'll never survey the same person twice of the same year even though you're doing four surveys. There's lots of ways to avoid that problem.

David Pembroke: That's a great point. I think that one about cycling back to people to be able to say, "Thanks for your time. This is what you've told us and as a result of that, we've now taken this particular action and as a result of that action, we have now achieved whatever it is," because yeah, that to me seems like an obvious but often missed. I'm just thinking about my own experience and probably don't do it enough. I think we've done it a few times but probably need to make it as a fundamental part of any survey process that you have to feed back to the audience.

Angela Sinickas: Now that you can just when you're doing a survey, I would say that whenever you're writing about any kind of changes going on, one of the questions we should always be asking the people we're interviewing is, "How did you use audience research in making this decision? Did you do any focus groups? Did you do any surveys?" Because that way, when we're writing about things throughout the whole year and we're talking about some change, we can keep feeding into it and here's how we use audience research to get to this point. People get this idea all year long that actually research is being put to work. Changes are happening and it's partly because of listening to people.

David Pembroke: Now, often, I think probably a lot of our audience will be thinking, "I'd love to be able to do this more. I'd love to have the time and I'd love to have but I'm busy. I'm overwhelmed. I don't have the skills. I'm always reacting on being told what I've got to respond to. The latest urgent thing that's come down out of the minister's office or from the senior executive, and this is all great in theory but I just can't do it." What advice would you have to them in terms of being able to bring this necessary rigour in order to do their jobs more effectively?

Angela Sinickas: I'd say start with doing pre-testing before you actually launch things. And here's what I mean, I have one client where they were making a change to their benefits programme. Typically, whenever they made any kind of change to their benefits programme, the first 24 hours, they would get thousands of phone calls to their human resources call centre, but for this one, our first announcement came by email which is going to followed by brochures and videos and the whole gamut. But, what we did is the day that the announcement was going to be emailed, that morning we did two focused groups to pre-test the email. We made some changes with the help of the HR attorney over lunch, pre-tested the revised version and then we sent it out.

We made 27 seriously important changes to the email. The result was that out of ... What they normally got was thousands of phone calls in the first 24 hours, they got four. Not 400, 4. It started with the change in the headline, the subject line and the first paragraph. That's where we would have lost most people who would have ended up hearing about it as a rumour because they would have skipped saying, "Oh, that's not meant for me. Oh, that's not meant for me."

No one can fit in enough time to pre-test something. Let me just give you another horror story from the non-profit world. This is from a non-governmental organisation headquartered in the US, and their CEO liked to be very chatty and send out emails to everyone saying how friendly he was. One of the things he did is he sent out an email in the beginning of June and said, "As we approach the summer holidays, I just want to greet everyone with blah-blah-

blah-blah." Well, now, you know that summer in Australia doesn't start in June. Well, he clearly didn't.

Now, what kind of impression do you get of a global leader for a global non-governmental organisation if he doesn't know something so basic about half of the world or his employees and users are. Pre-testing, even if you have a panel of six people who pre-tested every email from your CEO, you would have a lot less work to do after the fact fixing things.

David Pembroke: Yes, that again, wonderful advice and I think particularly that example you gave there, it doesn't have to be onerous, but it can iron out so many more bugs and improve that effectiveness if you've just taken the time to test it with the audience before it's released. If we just pull it back up perhaps just in the last couple of minutes before we finish, taking that macro view of the world of measurement and evaluation, yes, it's topical. Yes, it's in fashion. Yes, it's in vogue and we've now got more tools that enable us to be able to do it but what's your view on the current state of measurement and evaluation, particularly perhaps focusing on government?

Angela Sinickas: Well, I think what I'm seeing is that because we do have access to a lot of numbers, we are starting to use them and share them but we're not thinking about what's meaningful and what's necessary. We're just vomiting them all back and so we need to pick through them and figure out what's really important for our organisation. I have one client where one of the things they were tracking was their conversation ratio in social media. They were like shooting for higher numbers each time but the problem was, they're in a very controversial environment and they actually did not have a high conversation ratio because conversation would almost certainly be negative. They were reporting on something that actually was not important to them.

I would just say with all the numbers that are out there, take a look at what really matters to what you're doing, what's going to help fulfil the strategic purpose of your organisation.

David Pembroke: Yeah, and the current state of it though, again, with a lot of these volumes of data that is floating around there, again, those early steps to a bit of practise and process seems to me what you're suggesting is it's about time. It doesn't have to be a lot of time but it's about being more thoughtful.

Angela Sinickas: Yeah, and sometimes, there's data already out there. We just have to go and gather it. For example, you may have tried to communicate something everywhere but it actually wasn't communicated the same way in all markets or in all parts of your organisation. You can just see where the behavioural outcome is different in the place that had a high communication versus low. We did that with our Internal Revenue Service here in the United States. We tried a different way of communicating changes to certain tax law that the call centre people would then have to share with taxpayers who called in. And we found that in the place that they use these new techniques, the accuracy of calls is already being measured by the quality people. This is not something new for the communicator to do, went up over 60%. In places where they didn't use it, it changed not at all.

That was just data that they could easily capture by simply talking to the quality people in advance saying, "When you're checking on quality, could you check for this particular topic for this next month because this is one we're going to be communicating heavily in some places?" It doesn't have to be onerous. We just have to be smart about using resources already available and observing the impact of what we're doing.

David Pembroke: Well, Angela Sinickas, that is a masterclass in 31 minutes. Thank you so much for giving up some of your time today. You sound as if you have more enthusiasm by the day. You sound energised. You sound really revved up by this education sort of evangelism that you're out there always educating, always talking, always pointing out the value. You seemed very energised by this.

Angela Sinickas: Well, and it's not just the knowledge. I really want to share that passion with people and that's the attitude part that unless you feel excited about the things this could do for you, you probably won't really get into measurement in a big way more than kicking and screaming. I'm hoping not just to teach but also to inspire. Thank you.

David Pembroke: Yeah, well, you've certainly inspired me to go back and have a look at some of my practise and really to have another look at it and to get to the best practise. Just in terms of people being able to connect with you, to really not only can they go back and listen to this podcast, I think a couple of times to really go through and get those nuggets that you dropped all the way through that they can then improve along the way, but where else can they get access to your education and your knowledge and your learning? What's the best way for them to be in touch with you?

Angela Sinickas: Well, I have a website. It's www.sinicom.com where I have 150 articles that I've written over the years on measurements. That's an easy way to dip into it and on the same website, there's a couple of documents you can download, white papers, things like that. Then, you can always just shoot me an email and you know, I would love to go back to Australia. I've not been there for about six or seven years, so I'm open.

David Pembroke: Fantastic. Well, let's try and make an opportunity for you to be able to come down under once more. Thank you very much for giving up your time today for the audience. I know the audience will be really grateful, I think, for your passion, for your enthusiasm and for your knowledge.

Just hopefully, I think if people can adopt some of these practise, we can achieve this mission of helping government to strengthen communities and improve the well-being of citizens through effective content communication. We have this wonderful ability now to create and distribute and if we can become very good at that measurement and evaluation, we can just become better at telling stories and better at changing those behaviours that we are all seeking to do in terms of improving our society.

Thank you very much for your time today, and to you, the listener, there you go. What a gift, half an hour with Angela Sinickas, the leader in measurement and evaluation in communication and you have just got so much value from that conversation and I'm so grateful to her. And I'm grateful for you for turning up once again, but I will be back at the same time again next week. So, for the moment, it's bye for now.