
InTransition Episode 21 - Richard Spencer podcast

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, my name is David Pembroke and welcome back to “InTransition,” the podcast that explores the practice of content marketing in government.

This week, we’ll talk social media with Richard Spencer, the Head of Digital Firm, Isentia, Australia’s largest media monitoring agency. Richard is also the head of Two Social which Isentia’s specialist social media agency.

But before we come to Richard, we’ll start with the definition as we do each week about content marketing as it relates to the practice of communication in government.

Content marketing is a strategic business process that involves the creation, curation and distribution of useful, relevant, and consistent content in order to meet the needs of a specific audience, in order to achieve the desired citizen or stakeholder action.

Richard Spencer joins me now from Sydney. Richard, thank you very much for being “InTransition.”

Richard Spencer: My pleasure.

David: Richard, before we jump into your views on social media in government and content marketing in government. I wonder if you might be able to give us a little bit of the back story of where you’ve come from, what you’ve done, and how it is that you are now running social media for an organisation as large and as influential as Isentia?

Richard: Absolutely, I started my career not in social and digital marketing but in traditional marketing too many years ago to mention, and probably in the late 90s as the internet was starting to become a thing for organisations began a transition towards digital marketing rather than the more traditional sphere.

I have worked at a range of different organisations around the world within the content traditional marketing until social media started to become a thing probably about five years ago for organisations here in Australia. I then made a bit of transition into that space.

David: in terms of that transition, what lured you towards working in social media?

Richard: I think it was the extension of what I like about digital marketing originally, that it closed a lot of the gaps between the marketing team and the customer. Social media took that one step further and took all the kind of agents and middle men out of the equation and made it the connectivity between marketing and communications absolute.

David: Having now been involved in social media or in content marketing with government for a number of years now, what's your view of how mature the practice is in government at the moment?

Richard: I think the practice in government is as mature as it is realistically across the board from a commercial perspective. I think that there are a couple of excellent examples in both the public and private sector of organisations using social media to derive significant results. But in the most cases, I would suggest that in both private and public sector, we're still in an early adoption phase for social media.

David: In terms of the barriers that are keeping us in that early-adoption phase, what do you see as the challenge for organisations to adopt social media or content marketing in order that can be more effective in their communication with citizens?

Richard: I think there are a couple of different things, not least is speed of change within the context of the channel. As in common with everybody who works in the space, we spend quite a lot of time trying to stay up-to-pace with what's new, what's happening, what's interesting, what's developing, what could be the next big thing. We find it very hard to stay in touch with that all of the time. So if you also have a day job to do and have multiple clients at larger organisation, it gets really hard to keep pace with that. That sometimes can limit thinking because thinking within the context of organisations is hard to stay at pace with current developments, so that's certainly a factor.

Not the least, the ability for organisations to be honest in terms of what's an interesting conversation to have with their audience. It's all well and good for organisations to cover about what they have to talk about. Most organisations find it a bit more difficult to try and relate that into a

conversation by determining what their audience might like to talk about so that can be a limiting factor for sure.

David: When you're having these conversations with clients and sitting across the table and trying to explain to them the latest innovation, the latest change to technology be it mobile or be it increased broadband speeds. What are the sort of basic elements of effective content marketing that you try to impart to them to give them the confidence that now is the time to start and that waiting for perfect is really never going to arrive?

Richard: Yeah, that's really the point. We would try and take jargon out the conversation as much as possible and try to equate social media marketing and content marketing back to its intrinsic levels which effectively is just having a conversation with somebody.

For me, social media is the facilitation of the conversation, content marketing is the topic. If you can get it down to the intrinsic values and terms, it would be easy for people to get their head around that.

I think we, as marketing communications professionals quite like a bit of jargon. If we can take that out of the mix and make it simpler for executives to understand quite often that can certainly help people understand the opportunities.

David: Do you think that people are really coming to it a lot faster through this early-adoption phase that you mention because of the change in practice in communication that they're seeing outside of their jobs? For example, in the way that their children perhaps maybe using it or the way that they may be engaging in brothers and sisters, friends and relatives, and others?

Richard: Yeah, it's interesting dynamic in that sometimes I think that can be a benefit and sometimes it can be a hindrance. It can also add to the problems with regards speed of change. If you're talking to an executive with teenage kids, the way that they will interact via social media, and in fact, the channels that we used to communicate with one another are distinctly different to the ones that realistically most organisations are ready to engage through.

Equally, the speed communications and the instant gratification requirement for an individual using a social channel is again very difficult for organisations even pro-actively or reactively through customer service

channels. It's something that most organisations are going to find it hard to react to if it's not properly resourced.

I think it can help in the right circumstances but equally, it can provide or can extend fear of what those barriers to entry may well look like from an organisational perspective.

Equally, as we get our head around some of these things, organisations shift and change so if you see we can take Facebook as good example The way that the organisation engages with brands or organisations versus the way it engages with individuals make the two actually quite a different experience. If you're bringing only an individual experience to the table sometimes you have to kind of re-learn that particular application or that particular channel before you can offer organisational benefit.

David: If we accept that there is an inevitability around this change in communication; the adoption rates of smartphones are such that everybody is on the grid and really the challenge is how do you activate that connection and therefore create the relationship to build the trust that then allows you to either market the benefits of a policy, a program or introduce the details of a regulation. Where do you see that tipping point coming if in fact it is going to come? What's going to be the tipping point that really takes us past that early-adoption phase that you've identified and into the earlier stages of the curve?

Richard: That's an excellent question. I wish I had an excellent answer for you. We should really be already be at that tipping point, in my opinion where it's carving social media content marketing out and having developing strategies in isolation from other communications or customer service channels is a bit of a laugher anyway.

We should be realistically be there; seventy-five percent of all new phones sold in Australia are smartphones. The opportunity to communicate in that dynamic are many and varied and most organisations are really picking up on them.

I really honestly don't know where that tipping point will come and what it will look like, but arguably we're already passed it. So then it's going to be: how do we shake off the lethargy and change the way think. Change the way that we communicate and change the nine-to-five mentality of the

way we communicate and stop thinking Monday-to-Friday and start thinking seven-days-a-week? Some of that may well be driven by the individual rather than the organisation so it is possible the tipping point may well be that organisations will be interacting, kicking, screaming whether we like it or not. Sad to think that that might be the case but it may well be.

David: I tend to agree with you that the pain is going to have to come before a lot of people move, but move they will. There's nothing more certain than that.

But when they do move, how then do you give people the awareness that the conversations that they're going to be involved in are not so much going to be about what they want to talk about as much as they need to be about what their potential audience wants to know about and wants to hear from them?

So managing that shift from; "This is what we want to tell you," to "What do our audience want to hear," how do you go about managing that transition?

Richard: I think that's the difference between excellent content and banal content. and it's the difference between an organisation that grasps the logic of content marketing versus one that's using the phrases because it's the latest phrase to use.

For me, it's first as an organisation we spend quite a lot of time workshoping that process through the organisations as we work with them to go from the kind of broad, hierarchical view of communication messaging and content to one that is much more collegiate in terms of using and working to spread that for you. I guess working through that with an organisation to help them develop the understanding that they're using a social channel of any description or content marketing at a base level.

If that content isn't being networked and shared then they're really not using the real power behind the channel they selected. Getting people through the process of understanding how that works, what works better, and what doesn't work and breaking down core messages that the organisation would like to communicate into how that message would be interpreted by an audience. What elements of that message and by what

audience type are actually more likely to be interesting, usable, consumed, engaged with, and shared rather than the ones the organisation is more comfortable producing.

I think the huge sways of content are effectively so uninteresting has been produced for the Board of Directors rather than the audiences that are being looked at.

David: Can you give us some best practice examples that you have been involved with government clients. Where you are seeing really innovative, thoughtful, clever engagement with citizens by particular government agencies.

Richard: We weren't involved in this particular example but this one we've used a number of times to illustrate how simple it is to do in many respects, and that's an example from the twitter account from the Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS). They're very good at this, it's very interesting how they integrate statistics into relevant conversations and contextual conversations that would allow that statistic to be more interesting.

The example is around the Channel 7 television show "House Rules," a couple of years ago the the census jumped on the fact that the winner of the show would have their mortgage paid off. When the first winner was announced it jumped on and tweeted using hashtag associations in search of the show, how many other people live without a mortgage was just short 2.5 million people which is a stat I only know because the census did a really good job of integrating that in the conversation.

I think there are ways of making information relevant and contextual without going hugely out of your way. From an organisation perspective you start thinking about what information you want to communicate and when and where people want to talk about it.

What was particularly good about the example was that it was eight o'clock on a Tuesday night when the winners were announced by Channel 7, it was twelve minutes past eight on the same night when the Census Bureau were involved or integrated themselves into that conversation.

Many organisations would begin to identify that at around nine o'clock the next morning when they got back to work and a good 13 hours too late. Some of it is about timing, but most of it is about relevance and context,

and I think that's a pretty good example for the public sector organisation that thinks around relevance and context as much as what it wants to communicate itself.

David: It's a long journey, where a lot of communications organisations within government are set-up for engaging with what it is a traditional media cycle, which services a minister's office. The approval processes that are in place, to this new real-time newsroom mentality of being able to move quickly and to be able to meet the needs and capitalise on that context.

How do you manage that journey? How do you start people moving from the left-hand side to the right-hand side and what sort of advice could you give to people as they're starting to think "Look, we know we've got to move. We know we've got to change but what are some of the simple steps that we can take which are going to help to build confidence in our senior executives that we can actually take-on this opportunity and create real value for the people who we're seeking to serve"?

Richard: The first thing for me is around trust and there are a number of organisations, public and private sector around Australia who don't the people who work for them. Realistically, if you can't trust the people who work for you, you're in a pretty tough space when it comes to social media marketing.

We still have lots of examples in the public sector of organisations where they don't allow access to social channels during working hours. It's ridiculous in most cases because everyone's carrying access to social media around with them in their pocket, purse, wallet, or in their desk.

The productivity argument of not giving people access to desktop platforms is kind of destroyed by the fact that most of us are using our smartphones to access these channels anyway. That's one of the first big issues in that the public sector needs to address, they need to begin trusting everybody who works for the organisation.

Secondly, I think is a very honest appraisal of where the organisation is currently at with regards their comfort to having a conversation. It seems to be an all-or-nothing mentality when it comes to social media to a certain extent within the public sector; either we need to leap-in with both feet

and just smash right into there and start a chat roulette of conversations to see who we go or literally nothing at all.

There are clearly a number of steps between those two extremes that organisations can use to work themselves through a learning curve. A genuine assessment where the organisation is in terms of their ability to communicate and converse with stakeholders is a great idea. Then a rolling plan as to how that can be improved, if improving that has a real organisational benefit attached to it.

David: There is that connection, of being able to tie the output of your content marketing, social media marketing to a particular business objective that is likely to get the attention of the higher-ups who can then understand; “Oh, ok, we’ve now got X number of people who are either signed up to an email newsletter or they are spending more time on-site or they’re downloading some of the assets that we’re creating,” do you see that measurement is really the path to trust?

Richard: It could certainly help. One of the things that drives measurement is the fact that social media was that it was seen as a free medium for a long period of time. That dynamic is clearly changing, but the fact is has never been free, however it’s becoming much more resource-intensive channel.

That’s making most organisations develop much more robust monitoring and measuring techniques to determine whether or not the resources they are applying to the channel are working as well as they might in any other advertising, marketing, HR or customer service channel that they’re using. Therefore, beginning a much more serious conversation.

The other thing about that is that as you start to spend more money on a particular channel it has to actually deliver against a core objective rather than a “who’s clicked the ‘Like’ button objective.” I think you’re absolutely right, that if these techniques and channels don’t drive an organisational imperative, perhaps they’re pointless. Associating them back to essentially what the organisation is trying to achieve in the real world is the only reason you would use any particular additional channel.

David: Also there is that need really for a new set of skills, so how do organisations go about acquiring the skills within their communications team so as they

are able to be more accountable and more effective with the time that they're putting into their communication?

Richard: I think we actually have these skills. It's just whether or not we choose not to use them. If you're in best school in the world and you're in marketing and communications and you find a hard time to have a conversation with somebody you're arguably in the wrong role. Realistically, using social media is like having a conversation and the accounts and channels that do it best – organisation or individually – are approachable human, realistic, well-structured, and well-thought through basic conversations. The ones that don't are kind of corporate messaging that is too stilted and too formal, and unrealistic.

So I think within the context of marketing and communications we have these skills. Whether we choose to use them or we are too hamstrung by the way it worked previously is a different argument.

David: But do we have the skills to contain our activity into a strategic framework perhaps that provides the coherence that these sorts of programs need to be effective?

Richard: It would an organisation-by-organisation question. We should have, but what we might not have is the framework. We might not have the paddock to play and I think that might be the questions that organisations can kind of get their head around, "Where do we give people freedom to actually have these kind of conversations?"

We have these conversations quite regularly with organisations, the dynamic being that we want a lot of our people involved but we don't actually really want all of our people involved. We want them actually getting out there talking about us but we don't really want them saying too much. It's very difficult to have your cake and eat it within this context of conversations.

David: Richard, well, thank you very much for spending some time with us "InTransition." I think lots of insights there, the key insight particularly from someone like Richard who is working day-to-day with lots of large organisations is we are really only at the beginning of the journey of introducing effective content marketing and effective social media marketing into government agencies.

There is such a long journey ahead of us. It's an exciting time. It really is an interesting time and the change is going to happen fast.

We're trying to identify and see where that tipping point is. Richard, thinks maybe it's come and the surge is going to follow very quickly. I tend to agree with him; we're starting to see that the insights are really penetrating and people are starting to understand just how important getting those conversations onto the screens of people are.

As we have moved from an era of deference to an era of reference. Seth Godin refers to it as "the connected economy," and the way information now moves side-to-side, it doesn't move up-and-down so how are we as communicators in government going to get our stories about our policies and our regulations and our programs into a form that's going to get them onto the screen?

How are we going to earn that very scarce attention of our audience so as they will consider us amongst the millions and millions of choices that we now have?

Exciting time for communicators. Great time to be in transition and Richard Spencer of Isentia, thanks very much for spending some time with us today.

Richard: My pleasure. Thanks very much.