
InTransition Episode 27 – Deb Ganderton Transcript

David: Well hello ladies and gentlemen! My name is David Pembroke and welcome to this week's edition of InTransition. The podcast dedicated to the practice of content marketing in government.

Today, we're privilege to be joined by a legend of Australian Municipal Government Communication, Deb Ganderton. Deb is the Executive Manager of Communications and Engagement for one of Australia's Innovative Local Council Areas. The city of Boroondara in Melbourne. Deb is also currently serving as the President of the Government Communications Australia. An industry association dedicated to excellence in municipal government communications. But before we all learn lots from Deb, it's definition time, our definition of content marketing as it relates to government is an adaptation of the content marketing institute definition of the same practice.

Content Marketing is a strategic and measurable business process that relies on the curation, creation and distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content with the aim to engage and inform a clearly defined audience with the objective of achieving a desired citizen or stakeholder action.

So joining me on the line is Deb Ganderton and Deb thanks for being InTransition.

Deb: Thank you so much David, great to be here.

David: Deb, before we jump in to the discussion on how you're using content marketing in the City of Boroondara. I'd like to know the story of Deb Ganderton and how is it that you've come to be the Executive Manager of Comms and Engagement for the City of Boroondara.

Deb: Well, my background is in public relations; I've worked for myself, I've worked for agencies and I've worked for corporates. The challenge for me for public relations is how to have a relationship with your publics. I was interested in the days because I'm of a certain age where when you work for agencies and you were doing the below the line staff and you always took second place to the advertising sections. But those days are kind of blurred and gone now. I then did a couple of years doing tourism marketing/hospitality marketing.

I then came back to Melbourne and thought the 80s are gone, I need a job but I want to go back to an agency or what will I do. I saw an ad in the local paper that wanted someone who could write a press release and I thought, god I can do that. So I went to work for the local council which is just 10 minutes from my home. Well, it was a love affair that was to last for many years. The beauty of being a professional communicator in a local government setting as against in corporate settings is that you get to deal with all manner of stories and personalities.

So you need to find out from the engineer what news he's got; he or she will never say that building a bridge was anything special. But your arts people will it tell you, everything they do is completely special. So you need to be a translator, you need to be

a story finder, you need to be very curious and you need to find a voice for your organisation from very many different voices across the organisation.

David: What is your process that you enter into in terms of developing the stories that you used to engage with the people of the City of Boroondara?

Deb: Build trust across the organisation, that you can add value. Often communication departments in local government become the holders of the logo, the gatekeepers of the style or the nay sayers. Really work very hard and have your staff work very hard to build the capacity of the organisation and the staff to understand that you can add value. Understand that that the news is important and then perhaps have a beauty to share with the community of the work that they're doing because frankly the community are paying for it.

David: So then do you go about building that trust? Is it just sort of about getting out and having meetings with people, talking face to face or have you been able to build it to the point where members of your council staff and now coming to you with stories and story ideas.

Deb: Again that's a very mixed bag. So there is 1,100 staff here at the City of Boroondara and we are in five or six locations. So what I've done is we recently restructured our service and realigned it to create an agency model. So each of the five directorates have got a strategic business partner from communications. Instead of having to go the person who does the advertising and the person who writes to Boroondara Bulletin, they've got a central go to person that understands their business and that understands how we can add value.

Secondly, we're introducing a model of an Accredited Communications Specialist. We pick a person in each department, we have 29 departments, that might have a flare for digital, might have a flare for writing or might have a flare for design and we ask would you like to partner with us to build your skills so you can be our person on the ground. Between that person in the business with us working with them, we get that perfect storm of new stories.

David: Yeah I really like that idea. What sort of training do you offer these people who are working in part of these teams?

Deb: We bring in some externals but we also share our own knowledge. We have got our video producer to talk to them about what makes a killer video. We've got our web publisher explaining how you write for the web, how you write the same story for the different formats. We will have our community engagement person go in there and say, 'here's a toolkit.' We run an in-house sharing of knowledge and also how they can use our style guide and how they can use our photo library. We also have a publishing program through our Learning Department for the externals that fill the gaps for my team.

David: So how many people have taken up that opportunity to be the go-to accredited comms person in that particular division?

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- Deb: Well we've got a really healthy organisation here. We've been just swamped, so we wanted 29 departments, 29 people. We've currently got 45 that are saying "put me in Coach."
- David: How then do you get those people who are active and are engaged and are ready to be a part of it? How do you get their bosses to accept that comms is now a part of their role?
- Deb: The City of Boroondara gets communications, they get community and they get the need to engage. I've serve the Executive of the City so I've got the same vote as the engineer and the accountant and the City planner, which helps. So one, I've got a positional power. Two, you've got an executive and a senior leadership team that really understands the importance of comms. And you've got a highly engaged workforce that understands this is really important for their career. So we will invest in you if you wish to invest your time in us; it is actually a wonderful opportunity to advance their career.
- David: So in terms of building that trust with your executive colleagues and the chief executive officer and the mayor, how have you gone about building that trust?
- Deb: I walk in with a very high level of trust because I've been at the organisation for six years, but I didn't have to do very much work. There has been a long standing recognition of the importance. How I have maintained that and perhaps build on that is to not be seen as the PR girl. The extrovert, the let's run a lovely party. So I think it's really important for you to build on your personal brand as the trusted adviser by perhaps modulating your excitement. So I present with evidence, I do research, I evaluate, I take it through. So I use the systems in place rather than bursting into the room and saying have I got a great idea for you.
- David: I like that idea that you've really go to the table with numbers and you've got to go to the table with evidence particularly if you're going to the city engineer on board or the city granter on board, the chief financial officer. They understand numbers and it's numbers that move them. So could you give us a little bit of an insight into what are the numbers that really tickle the fancy of your executive council members?
- Deb: Well I think they want to see a plan and they're open for whatever plan there is and as you said we are really committed to innovation and re-imagining stuff but they want to kind of see...okay we understand agile management but where do you want to get to? So it's very clear to have a clearly articulated vision to then say and this is my plan for and it could be a one year, two year, three year, four year, ten year, hundred year plan. So there is an outline to also up front say that for this to be achieved because circumstances will change in advance and technology will change and impact will change and as we go along and find out more, that the trajectory may be changed but I will keep them advised. So there are touch points, there's well documented plans.
- Now before you roll your eyes as sort of go ahead and get anything down when you spend your life in plans, we do rapid prototyping, we plan for things to fail. There's also no blame, there was a no blame environment. I've got some spectacular failures but

because you set it up in the beginning to say this is a pilot or I'm testing or it's a prototype 5. Everyone feels quite able to have say but fail early. Don't go and keep it alive for a year or so and pour money into something that's not going to work. They build resilience with your elected representatives, with your colleagues and with the staff.

David: But it also sounds like you're really managing those expectations by making sure that your plan is expressed in very clear and simple terms that people can understand.

Deb: Absolutely. It is also vital that you can show community benefit and that it fits in with the overarching council plan. Yeah you can't just go off in a frolic. How does it fit in with the existing vision for your city and how can you add value.

David: Exactly. And to see that comms will be an enabler for the city to be able to achieve the objectives that it's got to outline in its corporate plan.

Deb: David that's so interesting you use that word Enabler. Comms doesn't exist in and of itself. We are there to enable other department...externally facing departments, internally facing departments to be the very best they can. Because we have got skills, superpowers if you like. We can help. The worst thing the communicators can do is take the glory themselves, believe in their own peers. You sit there and you help assist and enable the departments deliver their services.

David: Okay. So it's Wednesday after a victory that you've had in an executive meeting on Tuesday and you've got your plans through. How does then Deb Ganderton then scope it up and deliver it through your team, given that you do have the strategic business partner ownership piece where one of your team belongs to one of your particular areas and you've also got this growing skill enabled team who are sitting out in those divisions ready to be activated in the interest of achieving the objectives? How best do you go about then operationalizing these strategic plans?

Deb: Well the beauty of the development of the strategic plan is that you can start widely before you even go out there. So once you get the tick off and you get the funding then you just simply rollout the plan because you have developed it with everyone that could help you all get in your way. So the ticket is to engage early and widely to look at any pitfalls that may get in a way and then the improvements. It co create your work and the rollout is actually quite easy.

David: Alright then. But from that point of view though and making sure that it does roll out and it does linked effectively to program objectives, how then do you go about measuring? What sort of things do you put in place to measure the impact of the activity that you're undertaking?

Deb: Yeah I supposed when you look at. What are you trying to achieve of the project will say we are trying to achieve and if it comes, is it awareness, is it behaviour change? Or if you are trying to get a social media of impact, what was outside this, so it is bespoke for each plan, what are you trying to achieve, so there's goals and outcomes? And we would have a measure against each one of those and a way of measuring. So you don't get to

the end of your project and say did we do, did we do good. So it's all...and all this is template. We run by templates. Now we can change them but it actually...all the thought goes in the beginning.

So on a matter of evaluation; I try to stay away from ROI. I can pick a figure; I could actually get a big company to give me a figure. But you kind of then are limiting yourself to reaching that figure when things might change. So for customer experience improvement project, there wasn't much pressure but there could have been. Is what dollar saving to then to may I think and for this 10 million dollar investment what dollar savings are you going to make and how many staff? And you're just going, well perhaps if we can talk about what is the purpose. The purpose of the plan is to increase the customer experience, is to improve the customer experience. Not to create efficiency because it's our fundamental belief that if you improve the customer experience, efficiencies will flow. But then that sound a bit nebulous in a political environment. So could we research and benchmark the current experience of the customer and then after we do an intervention...I'll give you an example in a minute. Then measure the experience after that intervention. So you are actually measuring the cost of the improvement into customer experience of that project.

David: Okay. It does make sense and I'd like to know if you could give us that example.

Deb: Perfect. So a fence permit in the city of Boroondara and that for people who don't know Boroondara, so we are close to the city and we have a very beautiful housing stock. So to get a fence permit, our process review told us that you have to go five departments and fill in up to 14 forms. Depending, no matter if you're not in a heritage area. It made complete sense from the organisation's point of view because there was planning and building in local doors and from the customer, it was an embarrassment. You sit there going really...you know where I live but for each one of those 14 forms you have to repopulate your forms. Plus we have three different kinds of payment ways.

So we go if we have a customer focussed attitude while an organisation on centric thing, could we change the way this process works? So we're working on that at the moment. So we had benchmark the applicant, the people who are making...how did you find that experience with the five departments and 14 forms. We will then benchmark the applicants in the new system. We will report two council into our community on that kind of improvement.

David: So how expensive is it to you to continue to go back through the research phase to be able to not only establish benchmarks but to measure improvements or not improvement or whatever that was.

Deb: Yup let the polite one...so we have an annual research budget and so we would look at a mystery shopping program. We would look at annual satisfaction surveys. So within that budget we would run however many processes we need to run. So we use...can I mention the name of the company?

David: Yeah you can.

Deb: Yeah. The Customer Service Benchmarking Australia have got this absolutely reaper benchmarking for this kind of customer experience. Phone, email, letter, whatever you want. So they are making this officer, it's about 9 ½ thousand dollars and we will run that annually so it's not a lot of...

David: Yeah it's not too bad is it?

Deb: It is absolute gold because the annual satisfaction survey is about perception. You might have not use the service but you will have an opinion on it. That's okay but that is not going to help me do how can I report back on the success of my customer experience improvement project. It's not meaningful. So Deb you've been around in the comms game for a long time and we are in the middle of a major transformation being driven by technology. How is it changing the way you do your work?

Deb: It has completely turned my work upside down. Everything I'm good at and I have held dear is out the window. These are really interesting time to be in communications. So my background is in public relations, my core skills in advocacy and perhaps key message development. Well where does that take you when no one is reading the paper. So you have to reimagine yourself and use your skills to influence the organisation because people are talking out there. So the re-imagination and the influencing that I try to do in local government is one, never tell a lie. Two, fist up when you need to. Three, be respectful enough to be invited or listen to, to join a community conversation. As opposed, giving key messages out that no one is listening to and no one believes. Really interesting time.

David: So how are your daily work habits changing in terms of the way that you go about identifying and scoping out the work and then fulfilling the task and the tactics that are part of these plans that you implement?

Deb: Really good. This is all about having a really diverse workforce, having all manner of people that know more than you do. Some of my digital guys, some of my amazing. The old graphic designer where I now have a caricaturist, I've got a videographer, I've got an infographic. So now would I know all the things I need to know? No. So I employed people of all backgrounds. You employ people with old skills, you get them in a room and you talk about re-imagined comms, re-imagined futures. You give them as a leader, the vision for the future. You then say, how do we get there? I will talk about the business fit. The business fit is I need more content. I need less paper, I need more of this. Then personal aspirations. Where do they see themselves going? The idea of internal comms, culture change, that's an area we didn't have a couple of years ago was anyone interested in doing that. Did anyone want to be a business partner? This is what I think a business partner looks on. So each year or 18 months we realign our teams by our teams. They write their own position description. They decide that maybe year three they would like to move on. They would like to perhaps have a portfolio career.

So this is really healthy re-imagining of our work to fit in with the business needs in the community and the research we've done. And some people will stay here forever and I'm very happy for that and other people will say, I couldn't think of anything worst

staying in local government from my life. I want a portfolio career. So again, David gets the trust, they've trust me enough to actually be vulnerable. The unions come into those discussions in the appropriate time and I've never had a problem.

David: So in terms of your journey of this ongoing rolling continuing to change, where about so you add at the moment in terms of the balance of your team. You say 1,100 staff, how many of them are in comms. Obviously you've got your outsource workforce that you've started to develop which I think is a cracking idea that loads of people should take up. Given the other growing importance of communications but about that core team, what does it looked like at the moment?

Deb: Okay. So I've got 38 EFT but 20 of those will be call centre.

David: Oh okay.

Deb: So yeah. So it's interesting though where the social media sit. I think the context sent, it was possibly social customer service. I think...so where *[inaudible - 0:26:29.7]* is killing those. And I've also got engagement in research in my team. But they all blended because it is all part of the continuing...do you inform, do you engage. So even the titles are kind of changing. So what was your question?

David: Well it's just about what that looks like at the moment. Those 18 people, what is that blend because obviously, technology continues to change the way people are receiving information. You're going to require different skills in different areas, different waiting along the way. Just where might that balance of 18 sit today knowing that in three years' time that it's going to be different again?

Deb: Well it's just crazy. Crazy good. So we have started as I mentioned before our Boroondara Customer First Program. So that will mean that we are re-designing our website. But it took a while than just redesigning a website, we have got programs that are fixing our bare legacy IT Systems, our Customer Relationship Management Systems to ensure that we can...our technology will not let us down in giving us superior customer experience. Having said that, to build and write content for and reimagine our website, we will need additional staff. So I will have a transition team of six to go through, workout what our content strategy is, how it will look, how it's presented.

So we've got a four year project and we've got additional resources to do that. Now it's interesting because my team, we need to keep up, business as usual. So we work...and I'm head of both projects. So what we are trying to do is work with the team and indeed with people coming on, the workforce strategy that is at job. So we will not be doing permanent ongoing positions through the transition because the skillset that we will need will be quite different year 1 as against year 4. So it's again documenting and being really smart about what do we need, what are we delivering, year 1, 2, 3, 4. I know that, what staff do we need to take us through? We kind of know that although what you call people in title is so important because people don't...local government doesn't get half the title that's out there in the workplace and people might not think, oh I want to go and work in local government.

So you have to perhaps entice people with your vision and say can you please think about coming to assist us? You then need to keep business as usual. So how do you do that? Because we've got so much knowledge in my team. So they will need to work with the transition team as well. So it's very exciting time here at city of Boroondara. Nothing is certain. Everyone's got a very high level of engagement but I document, I do plans, I test, I co-create and I test again. So yeah interesting.

David: Is there any specific advice that you would give people around the management of communications around these ICT transformation platform that you're putting in place?

Deb: Interesting. For this project, the CEO says Deb, you need to be the executive sponsor of this project. And I said to him, that digital transformation project, I thought isn't that interesting Phil? Why would you pick me as I know nothing about digital? And he said because it's actually about the customer. And I thought, how interesting. So I'm not burdened with a whole of ICT stuff. I'm not burdened with a hold out of knowledge or anything really. Except I understand public. I understand audience and I understand connection. So I thought that was interesting. I had a few sleepless nights but never mind. Then make sure that you work really closely with the head of HR, your head of IT and everyone on the organisation because we are a symbiotic relationship. Role clarity is absolutely, like it's imperative. I have responsibility for anything that is public facing.

So that means backroom IT systems, I get IT to do it or get permission to do. Anything that is like, web forms traditionally would be created in IT that is created by my team. So it's an awful a lot of goodwill. There are some really conversations because it's not cut and dried. So it's about build your relationships, have a really clear. I have a charter like a responsibility chart or governance structure, again co-created. Have the difficult conversations early and then work through with a whole lot of goodwill.

David: I'm fascinated in your insights perhaps around this emerging theory that I have that technology is driving communications to a more important position in any organisation and at any other time in history because people are now in control of the information they receive when they receive it. They have the power to decide when they consume that content on which device and at which time. Would you agree with me that comms is now more important than it has been at any other time in your professional career?

Deb: Oh absolutely. And it is a very unwise organisation not to have comms. The corporate of government or anything, not at the highest strategic table. It would be...from a risk assessment point of view, it would be a very dangerous thing.

David: But it's still not there yet though is it?

Deb: No.

David: You describe to me almost a Nirvana for communications person in your role and that you are respected, you are trusted, you are entrusted with the most important project that the council is putting in place. But your position is not a usual position for a Comms Manager or Comms Director to be in.

Deb: Okay. 79 councils in Victoria when I was appointed to the executive here while I came and my job was an executive position. I think I was the only one. Six years later there's now 14 councils that have got Comms managers at the executive table. Not just reporting to the CEO. A lot of people report to the CEO but to actually have an equal seat at the table. Sydney was more advance but we've got a long way to go. I also think it's not comms. It can't be just comms. It is a larger portfolio. Well it doesn't matter whether it's comms or not but governance, research, customer service, it's an obvious nexus for it so it needs to be a larger portfolio rather than just comms which might be getting the great news out of our council. Yeah you have a shift to paradigm from that. We are so much more than that.

That's why I like community engagement, that's why I like having customer service in my portfolio because you can be the holders of knowledge and the sharers of knowledge to influence the organisation to put the community first and everything that they do.

David: Yeah I think the word that you've used a number of times during this discussion has been this re-imagination and this preparedness to be continually testing and learning and changing and not getting caught up in the old definitions of where it was but then looking at how technology is changing the behaviours and then how can you and the resources that you have there in the city of Boroondara best meet the needs of the audience. So really that's the role I supposed that you say it's not traditional comms which is the...yes it's the external stuff and we're going to tell you all the good news and we're going to tell you from our perspective it's really that understanding piece of the audience. What is that they're looking for? What are their needs, what are their wants and what are their pain points and then what's the information that we can gather, how do we assemble it and how do we distribute it in such a way that it's going to solve the problem or meet that need?

Deb: That's exactly right and I wouldn't too hang up on positional power for where does internal com sit, where does IT sit. Form relationship be of service, be of value, go back at enabling stuff, get invited into their teams. So a group of humility from a comms perspective is a really good idea and the work hard. Do the work, write the plans for them. Don't just stuck them a template and go, you know, start with a pyramid. You actually work with them because they learn from it. But you also...you are assisting them when you're most valuable and then they will include you and then you can kind of just go, have you thought about that. So I don't worry that where does culture sit in my organisation. Where it fits in the people culture and performance area. So I'm really good mate with that department and that manager.

So when we go through enterprise battling agreements when we go through industrial relation stuff, when we go through this transition, we're going to a digital world. She would no more think of doing anything without me and I wouldn't think of doing anything without her because it is a symbiotic relationship. Now that's not a power thing. We are equal but you just make sure that comms isn't going off ignoring them or they are going off running change programs without comms.

David: Yes and I think one thing is about for certain that technology will never test those timeless concepts of building trust through being respectful and being humble. So Deb Ganderton, thank you so much for spending some time with us today to give us the benefit of your experience and your knowledge and really to understand the way that you're going about being so modern in the way that you are assembling the various skills that you need within your team to deliver value to the city of Boroondara this notion of evidence based evaluation, rapid prototyping, no blame and really going out there and building that communications and content capability within the workforce beyond the comms thing.

I think that's such a very smart way to go and the fact that you've got...you wanted 19 or 20 or whatever it was, you've got 40 and you're going to get more and more and everyone thinks, hey I can be part of telling this great story, I want to be part of telling this great story, I can tell this great story. So thank you so much for spending some time with us today. I know our audience will absolutely love the insights and I look forward to talking to you again very soon in the future.

Deb: Thank you David.

David: Alright ladies and gentlemen, there she was, Deb Ganderton. A real pro, someone who just knows her business. So much to take away from that. I would actually go back and rewind and have another listen and this time do so with a pen and paper and just look at what Deb has done there. That is best practice.

As you would expect from the President of Government Communications Australia that industry association that we do have here in Australia that is dedicated to excellence in municipal government communication. So thanks again for joining us in InTransition. A great episode with Deb Ganderton and I'll speak to you next week.