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## Episode 37 Alun Probert - Transcript

David: Hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome to another episode of In Transition, the podcast that explores the practice of content marketing in the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and I'm delighted that you've decided to give me some of your valuable time today to discuss the ever changing world of communication in the public sector. Now for those of you who were paying attention you will notice that we're no longer talking about content marketing in government but we are talking about content marketing in the public sector, a slight pivot and the reason being is that we found that some of our constituents in national associations, NGOs and not-for-profits didn't really see themselves as being from government. I did, but they didn't, so from here on in we'll be talking about content marketing in the public sector.

This week we bring a special guest back, but before we do its definition time as we go through it every week and it is really important to get this definition right so that we understand just exactly what it is that we're talking about. Content marketing is a strategic business process that involves the creation, curation and distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content designed to meet the specific needs of an audience in order that you achieve a desired citizen or stakeholder action.

If you will recall, back in episode 23 we were joined by government communication expert Alun Probert. Alun's the founder of GovComGroup and he's a very experienced government communicator. For nine years he was the Executive Director of Strategic Communications in the New South Wales government and had responsibility not only for digital policy, but also advertising the New South Wales government and all of the New South Wales premier's websites. Prior to joining government Alun worked in the magazine industry in Australia and overseas and was personally responsible for the launch of a number of successful magazines in Australia including FHM and Okay. Alun thanks once again for joining us.

Alun: Morning David, how are you?

David: Hey mate, fantastic. Listen, now where were we? Because we were having such a great conversation a couple of months back. I think we ended up the conversation where we were starting to talk about the collaboration and potential collaboration between the private and public sector and how in fact that may be able to be developed in order to deliver value to citizens. What are your views about how the public sector can work more effectively with the private sector?

Alun: Well I think it's an interesting point and I'm going to springboard off what you said in your intro again because it's about meaningful, it's about relevant, it's about content that people want to get and the private sector, just from a sort of industry point of view, everybody I speak to in advertising agency land at the moment is tackling with this problem too. How do you make content interesting? How do you produce, in its most one-dimensional form, an ad that will run at the beginning of the thing you really want to watch on YouTube that people don't skip? I think the most interesting thing for government at the moment, and as you know it's a bit of a thing, a bit of a hobby of

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mine, is that I think it's time to stop thinking about the challenge as being different for private and public.

It's actually about engaging people, diverting them from what they're doing and helping them with something because actually government starts a few feet behind Coca-Cola and Krispy Kreme donuts because really nobody want a message from the government or, I apologize, from a public sector organisation. Nobody is looking at the internet thinking I wish there was some more government stuff I could read.

David: Can I just challenge you on that point? Is it more that they don't want it or they don't want it in the form that they're getting it at the moment because I have a theory that I'm fast turning into practice, that if we can turn this notion of creating useful, relevant and valuable content about government programs that will enrich people's lives, they'll want it as much as they want it from Coca-Cola and Krispy Kreme donuts.

Alun: Unequivocally and thousands of people, probably millions of people, call government phone numbers on a daily basis to get information. How do I pay my bus statement? How do I get a driving license?

David: Yeah, of course. How do I get my money? How do I get my allowances?

Alun: Yeah, but our starting point is we don't wake up in the morning wanting to be informed. We do go to, and we're all, I think, forming views, because frankly we are all learning as we go here. We go to YouTube to be entertained, not in the same way that perhaps someone that choose to pick up an encyclopedia to learn. When you're in a space to be entertained, but I guess the point I was making was that nobody wants to be interrupted by advertising or by content that they didn't ask for and so it's all about context and it's all about quality and it's all about delivery. Then even when you have somebody wanting to access your content, I'm going to be flippant, but making it really, really good is incumbent on anybody in marketing nowadays because it's so easy to click and do something else.

Even an article in your favourite newspaper or magazine, if after three lines, four lines, two paragraphs, you're not sucked in, it's easy just to flick the page and maybe that's just me, but my instinct is that people are increasingly less likely to dwell on something that doesn't capture their attention, because they're either time poor or because other websites are available. It's the biggest challenge of all and the notion of people being loyal to products, like you David. I've been in marketing a few years and years ago we used to work on a basis of getting loyal customers because they stayed and they spent and then, I don't think it will do that anymore. I think people will walk away from a business without a care if something new like Uber comes along that's just better.

David: I totally agree with that but I think probably one thing that could protect you against people walking away is that notion of creation value in your audience because if you can consistently deliver, consistently add value, consistently solve problems, consistently answer questions, you're more likely to earn that trust and respect that's going to ensure that you get a disproportionate share of their attention. Otherwise, but again, it

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has to be on point and that content has to be absolutely precise because it's not, as you say, people have got an infinite choice as to where they can devote that scarce attention that they do have.

Alun: The challenge for government organisations, in this whole area, the starting challenge is that they don't have engaged customers who are interacting with them on a regular basis, with the exception perhaps of Centrelink and perhaps something around Medicare. I remember looking at this when I was working on the launch of Service New South Wales, everybody's got a driving license but people only come and interact with government every three years about their driving license. What you aren't able to do, which perhaps the brilliant work that Optus are doing with Ricky Gervais at the moment, you aren't able to build a platform that starts a conversation where people will come back tomorrow because there's no reason to come back tomorrow to your government problem. The heightened challenge for government is being really relevant at the frankly sporadic and incremental time that people come and knock on your door.

It's not actually different in purpose but it's harder and it's much harder because of course the challenge for government, all governments probably except for organisations, is that the audience isn't definable by boring old things like demographics and attitudinal studies because your audience is everybody. It's a lot harder and I think that the challenge for government is sort of saying, "Okay we're a few steps behind but nevertheless it's good to start looking at what other organisations in the world are doing, and governments, public sector organisations and private, to make their content more interesting and to get people more engaged with your organisation."

David: Let's sort of drill down onto that particular opportunity around driving licenses and the challenge of the notion at the moment where it's transactional, where I come once every so often, I pick up my license and then I go away. What about if that platform had useful, relevant, valuable and consistent content around driving? Around driving skills? Around driving conditions and that the government could become a provider of really valuable information for everyone who drives a car? Then over time you can build that relationship and then the transaction sits at the edge of it but the relationship comes through the content over time.

Alun: This is a really interesting debate at the moment because one of the most successful bits of government publishing five years ago was a thing called DirectGov.co.uk that did exactly that, that said let's put all the stuff about driving into a, excuse the old-fashioned word, into a portal and let's put other stuff on that portal and from memory they had a used car sales car guide, price guide, whatever it's called, and they even had articles from Jeremy Clarkson because it was a driving portal and within it talked about those videos on learning to drive and taking lessons. They've come away from that now because I guess they're not in the business of curating that sort of content, but it's a really interesting path and it's something which I think we talked about before and I have the strongest view on, is that people don't interact with government, they interact in a series of disconnected interactions. You're not in the same frame of mind when you go to casualty as you are when you're getting a speeding ticket, but they're both government.

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This notion that somehow you go to a government and deal with government, for me that isn't consumer experience, same at local government level, same at every level. If you've got a problem with somebody opening your bins you don't want to talk about car parking. The challenge for me is actually finding a consistent way across government of understanding that the user need is based around a specific reason they've come there and yet the way that we communicate with them will have had similar constituent parts in terms of the right kind of language, the right kind of follow-up, the right kind of accessibility and as you sort of touched on there, the opportunity to share other pieces of information that they might be interested in but that have some sort of relevance to the question, without saying go to a portal where everything about government is there because that brings into mind, I think one of, I'm really interested in the work that Paul Paul Shetler doing in Canberra and Sydney and my favourite quote of course so far is he said "People shouldn't need to carry around a map in their head of how government works."

This is the challenge isn't it? It's the getting to the fact that people come to us with a probably they need solving, a question they want answering and our job is to, in public sector communications, is to help them with the answer, understanding why they asked the question and they didn't ask the question because they want to talk to government.

David: Yeah, that's right, but again it's to solve that problem but then they want that information in the form that they want it, at the time, on the device of their choosing.

Alun: If we change the mood a little, here's an interesting thing from the ten years I spent in government. Putting that information on a URL that says .gov.au automatically confers authority.

David: Yes.

Alun: During the days when we were all kind of working it out, I worked with a couple of government departments who came up with great .com ideas or great .com names, URLs, for things they were doing. One of the flaws with that was that it didn't have government authority conferred on it because it was a .com. There was a point of view five years ago that .com's were bonafied and everything else was a bit flaky. Not true and one of the things I did towards the end of the time I was in Premiers in New South Wales was to insist that everybody use the .gov address, A, because it conferred authority, but B, whisper it quietly, because Google gave it priority in terms of search rankings, so it's a really interesting thing is that understanding the framework of how you communicate the information starts with simple things like using the right URL.

David: With that you raise an interesting point there around customer experience and this notion of personalization where everyone now, the world's getting increasingly narrower and narrower and narrower as people decide and control the information they receive, when they receive it at the time of their choosing, et cetera. How does government get on top of that when people are looking for a one-to-one interaction and how do you crack that problem?

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Alun: Well I think this is where I probably have the strongest view that I think that many, many new emergent bits of work happening across government, across the world are getting it right, which is that it starts with what the user need is. Why have they come to you? Where people all over the world are getting it wrong is starting with what government wants to say to people. We have to, that lovely phrase which being bandied around for a couple years now about how in gov 2.0 it's about a dialogue with people, not a monologue anymore. Government still sometimes tends towards monologues.

We shout at people, we announce things with loud halers whereas once you're starting a dialogue to have a dialogue, you have to listen to the other person, you have to understand why they're there. The way it's being done really, really well in all parts of Australian government at the moment is where people have started engaging with the person, not necessarily having a conversation, but engaging as you said David, with understanding why they've come in the first place.

From there the iteration of how you deal with them and what the story looks like and how long it takes, what information they need, becomes a bit of a flow chart, but if you start with a policy and you start with uploading a pdf saying read this and let us know what you think, you're just shouting at people.

David: How do you transition? How do you change the mindset? Just exactly what you said, here's the policy, here's the pdf, tell us what you say, to I want to ask you what you want before we actually start crafting the policy and the response. How do you get that message through?

Alun: I think it starts at the, and this is probably 50% of the work I'm doing at the moment is solving this issue across state departments in Canberra and a few private suppliers. It starts with an understanding of what better will look like, so if we do this differently, what will be the results and how will we be better off? By engaging with people we might find that we'll get the policy right first time rather than getting it wrong and getting criticized. By engaging with people we might be able to test a price point.

It's actually going back to the fundamentals of customer research that we all learned 25 years ago and it's about working out first off, what is it that people want from us and how is the best way to deliver it? Having done that, in the modern world the great opportunity is to think how and refining it because people change, things get refined, things get better, but the starting point is having an understanding, and this is a bit, this is very much my opinion, but I think it's about having a cultural understanding in the organisation and actually wanting to communicate with the public that listening to people is better than shouting at them.

David: Are you finding that in your work, that more of that attitude is finding its way into the key decision making areas of the government agencies?

Alun: Absolutely. Absolutely, I think we're at the apex of a really interesting time and at the peak of it is the work that Mike Baird's doing in New South Wales where Mike's effectively running his own social media channels in New South Wales, BairdsEyeView is

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a hashtag and so there's a leadership position there that then says to everybody else in government, it's good to engage, it's good to have this point of view and I'm hearing lots of positive feedback about that sort of, from the old leadership model, that that's seeping through, but what's also happening David, which I personally think is probably fundamentally interesting in terms of this whole notion of transformation, is the agencies that have the greatest day-to-day interaction with the public, emergency services, transport in terms of driving licenses and obviously Centrelink and Medicare in Canberra.

Those are the guys that are making the change happen fastest because those are the guys that are already in the business of one-to-one relationships with the public. There are some departments that have an arms-length relationship with the public and quite rightly, but there are some departments and say that the best work in digital media in Australia in government is in emergency services. You have this kind of crazy thing for somebody like me that five years ago was writing a social media policy for government. I would never five years ago have predicted that the police would be using Facebook as one of their primary communication tools. That would have seemed like madness to me five years ago. The police on Facebook? How does that work? It's actually a really good example of an organisation that have embraced the power. They have a full time guy. I know Sydney well because I happen to know they guy, he used to work for me, but a full guy in Sydney, who is updating the police Facebook page right now and who is not sending all of his updates upstairs for somebody to approve.

David: Yeah.

Alun: It's changed. It's not a question of can I see sprouts of changing? It's changed. I worked in an organisation as most of us do where the original code of conduct says you can't talk to journalists. Now here we are in 2015 and the media manager for both rural fire service and police in New South Wales have complete carte blanche, appropriately, to say whatever they like on social media. I think it's great and in both cases, senior managers in those organisations. Rob Rogers, the fire commissioner in New South Wales is an active poster of information on Twitter about fires in New South Wales. That's how it changes, by people getting on and doing it, and people seeing the benefit. I'm seeing it happen with new premiers in Victoria and Queensland. I'm seeing it happen because those guys are saying, "Why aren't we doing this?" That's a pretty good question. Yeah, why aren't we doing it?

David: Well and indeed in terms of the Australian context, the new Prime Minister is perhaps the most effective content marketer in the political class in Australia and has been for many, many years.

Alun: Absolutely, and yeah, very rude, me to miss that absolutely and equally the team, I'd say the DTO team are in their own way just kind of knocking down walls of obstruction on a daily basis. They have just posted something that's invited people to come to their office next Friday to have a look around and our good friend Craig Thomler posted it online saying, "When was the last time the government invited people to have a look?" I've got

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a feeling there might be a thousand people turn up, but I'm sure Paul and the team will look after them.

David: Let's just dial it back then to these recent notions. Emergency services and police, as you say, they've seen it deliver business outcomes. The reason that they're using it is because it works and it helps them to solve the problems that they've got as part of their organisation. Perhaps other regulatory organisations or policy areas, and this notion of risk, how do you challenge that notion of risk to get people to move along and to start to think, look we really have to start to embrace and engage in change, if in fact we're going to be relevant?

Alun: David I think that that's probably up there with the how do we know if advertising works. I did a couple of events with John from Cofluence and the Govcamp a couple of months ago and the greatest barrier to innovation or perceived barrier to innovation was fear of what might go wrong, fear of lecture of criticism by a journalist, fear of information being in the public domain. It would be incredibly naïve to not understand how big a deal that is but at the same time, if you're working on a policy and you haven't spoken to the public about it or indeed if you've had a town hall meeting and I may have given you my favourite quote before, but the people who turn up to town hall meetings are only representative of people who turn up to town hall meetings. If you've not taken the opportunity to use the internet to talk to a massive audience of people you may not have the right policy.

It's a really interesting risk dynamic around, yeah somebody might say something that gets you a bit of bad press but the upside is but you might understand the things that when you make the announcement would have got you even worse press because you got something wrong. That's the balance and I cannot stress strongly enough how easy it is to be flippant and simplistic about that. This is a really, really big issue for an organisation that's not used to having conversations in public, but the opportunity to learn, and that there was actually some brilliant work done Melbourne by Colmar Brunton a couple years ago where they ran effectively an open facilitated online research group but it had four, five hundred people in it, not six people in a wet, dingy room in north Sydney doing a focus group.

We're all learning together. I do a lot of work with ad agencies and they're all learning too. This is all new stuff but all I would say is if it's about knowing more about the decisions before you make them, that's got to be empowering. The policy teams have major issues with some of the process that's needed here and I support and understand why nobody wants to jump straight in.

David: Yeah and I get that as well and I also accept that at the political level there is a degree of sensitivity about the press and about the media and about how is this going to make us look, but I think what content marketing actually allows you to do is to continue what I call the baseline of your story, like the baseline of a song. It can keep pounding away for you, day after day after day, underneath the noise that may be going on in the media so you can deliver value day after day after day through engaging with your audience,

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listening to them, explaining what exactly it is that you're doing, outside of that hysterical context of what may be in the media.

I think we saw that recently in the UK, where David Cameron, at the political level though, and the media level, it was accepted that he wasn't going to win the election but the UK government communicators had delivered a very effective service to the community and in fact I think the community were much more engaged because of the way that the government, when I say government I mean the departments, had communicated so effectively out into the citizenry. I think that there was a lot more value that wasn't identified at that media political level but it certainly was appreciated at a day-to-day level.

Alun: I think there's absolutely so many issues there and so depth in that whole area because of course less people are buying newspapers, less people are listening to talk radio and so it'd be really interesting to try and get some kind of view about exponentially what share of voice do those traditional media actually have with the majority of people because within the corridors of political power they still hold say I think.

David: Oh yeah, no question there's a disproportionate influence but I think it's changing. I do think it's changing and this is the gift of technology is that you can be the media. You can create your own story but the challenge then is to not turn it into a propaganda machine or a spam machine but go back to the point that we're talking about is getting into the shoes and the lives and the hearts and the minds of the audience, understanding what that is and creating value over time by distributing useful, relevant, valuable and consistent content.

Alun: Look I agree and I think it's interesting. We talked about this before that we're having this conversation now and it's what, five, six years since Obama's campaign which did all of those things.

David: Yes.

Alun: With lots of consistent information, stories well told and so I think you're right and this probably is my, we're touching on some of my, both my strong beliefs and also the most common themes I'm coming across in my work at the moment. Getting out there and telling a story and it being consistent is a full time job. It has nothing to do with watching the papers today. It has everything to do with what's your hundred day plan? What's success going to look like? I don't about you David but I've started to find myself saying some of the things that I used to use in private sector consultancy ten years ago. What does success look like? How are we going to celebrate the wins? Because my experience, and I'm beginning to realize it's actually a common thing worldwide, is that governments aren't disposed to or used to celebrating success on a non-political level.

I think a big part of content marketing is saying, "Here's more good news. Here's a customer well-served. Here's a satisfaction rating that's gone out the door. Here's another. Here's the Opal card, it's actually been a really big success", and for whatever reason, and maybe, I'm a marketer and I'm probably a little bit prone towards a bit of

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hyperbole, aren't we all, but sometimes I kind of think wow you're doing lots of really good things. Why not shout about that rather than the thing that some bloke on the telegraph just dragged out of the water. That's the view of an ex public servant.

David: Well and from someone who, I've never worked in the public service but done years and years and years of work of working in the public service, I think there is that sense of let's celebrate a little bit more. Let's be proud of some of the things we do and let's be proud of our service because ultimately it is public service and that's why most people work in the public service, because they want to serve the community and when they do good things it should be celebrated and we should be talking about it. The thing is, we've now got the tools. We've got the skills.

Alun: Well absolutely.

David: We've got everything to do it so let's get out there and make it happen.

Alun: Whenever I'm doing interviews or keynotes and stuff I always try to make sure I don't bang on about Service New South Wales too much but part of the transformation that Service New South Wales has brought is around putting, Mike Pratt led with this idea about putting the customer at the heart of things. Where it's manifesting is in really lively Twitter accounts that when people complain saying they're, particularly on Twitter, they'll say, "Leave it with me I'll work it out for you." It really sort of manifests helpfulness but also a continuing narrative of how things are better than they were. One of the things that I think, and this is hardly a pearl of wisdom, but one thing's most interesting about Service New South Wales is it's effectively a new business. It wasn't formed from an old business re-badged. It was a brand new organisation and I think that sometimes taking the clean sheet of paper, what can be done here, albeit driven by people who were absolute experts at customer service having been in the banking industry the last four or five years.

As a result now what we've got is something that, obviously Service Victoria is now going to build on and grow. I most certainly said this last time, I do get a bit frustrated at the amount of commentary in government about hard and how difficult things are and the lack of appreciation and sharing about some really good things that are happening and it's all over the board, Camber Innovation Centre and Sarah's business and stuff that's going on at South Australia in terms of the way they're voting on things. There's lots of really great stuff happening and the skill for me for government marketers is probably just to look around a bit more about other things that are happening perhaps in other countries as well David. No better community engagement in the last year in government than the New Zealand flag referendum. It's not entirely on social media and from my understanding massive tick in the government's favour.

David: Okay Alun we're going to have to leave it there, but we will continue the conversation. I'm not sure when, but stay tuned we'll come back to it and lots of good stuff there again today audience. I think we're getting there. We've got to keep moving, moving in this direction, getting deeper into this notion of content marketing as a strategic, measurable and accountable business process that can give you the results and allows

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you to be able to walk upstairs and have a discussion about the business process because that's what content marketing is. It's not a thing, it's a measurable and accountable business process. Jump online, jump onto [contentgroup.com.au](http://contentgroup.com.au) to learn more about that in terms of the public sector. Go to the Content Marketing Institute. There's loads of information out there about content marketing so just educate yourself. Let's get going. Let's start creating more useful, relevant, valuable and consistent content and let's start creating even more values for the citizens and the stakeholders that we serve.

Alun Probert, thank you very much for being in transition. Thanks very much audience for being here again and we'll be back with another episode next week. Thanks for joining us.