
InTransition – Episode 40 Matt Crozier

David: Hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome to another episode of InTransition, the podcast that explores the practice of content marketing in the public sector. My name is David Pembroke and I'm delighted that you've decided to invest thirty minutes of your valuable time as we explore the practice of content marketing in the public sector. This week we are joined by the cofounder and the CEO of one of the world's leading public sector, community engagement firms bang the table. Before we get to our guest, its definition time; 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 that you achieve a desired citizen or stakeholder action. Our guest this week is Matt Crozier. Matt cofounded bang the table way back in 2007 and with Crispin Butteriss.

Prior to founding Bang the Table, Matt worked in senior positions in both the UK and New South Wales governments, dealing with transport, infrastructure, land use planning and rural and regional development issues. He also ran his own successful consulting business, helping organizations to connect with government. Matt is also the former chair of Campus Housing Services, one of Australia's largest community housing providers. Matt joins me now and thanks for being InTransition.

Matt: Thanks David.

David: Matt, take us back to the beginning of bang the table because you really were miles ahead of the curve in terms of developing a platform where government and public sector clients could engage with communities.

Matt: Yeah it was – it's funny we thought of it as more as end of the curve, I think back then people thought we were a little bit mad. We worked, Crispin and I both, we met working in government and for our whole careers we spent that time working on important policy issues, things that affected people's lives and then trying to get them engaged. The process of bringing those ideas and policy to flourish and we are constantly faced with that problem in the public servants phase of talking to the same three or four people all the time.

We would only ever be able to get in the room, people who were so activated on the issue and that were sort of on the fringes of it, the people who were dead against or really in favour of something. Both of us realized the absolute power of getting to be everybody else. The people who didn't have time to come to our meeting, the people who weren't all interested in the issue but I had a view and push. Those people bring a lot to the table and so we feel working with those people online and giving them, lowering the barriers to participation would be a really good way to get them involved and get the policy outcomes. That very much proved to be the case.

David: Take us on that journey from 2007 and what the attitudes were like back then, as to what they are like today.

Matt: I don't know that the attitudes have shifted. What I find when I work with our clients, and I talk to other groups is that there has always been a commitment to involve the community. That has been something that exists, right through the government and we were going to the private sector as well. Sure there are cynics out there but generally people recognized the value of that and that's been increasing. I think where attitudes are changing is that people are gradually realizing these changes of technology that are enabling us to bring lots of all people into the discussion.

All, some sort of flighty fad, they are not something that's going to go away, they are not something that's just for kids, they are actually just part of our life now. Back when we started we used to talk to groups that used to talk about gov2.0 and various things like that. That's disappearing, it's not all over the line endeavour, what we are seeing now is that it's coming together, these are just tools. Just like holding a public meeting is a tool or doing some planning, or whatever it might be, these are just tools people are very open to using them. Of course you come in this content angle and we are learning how critical that is in achieving that engagement.

David: Looking at it from that sort of hardy perennial, that problem of getting to everybody else and getting beyond the noisy minority, what are your best tips for people to be able to successfully achieve that in their community engagement?

Matt: I think the very first thing is talk to people about what they are interested in. that might sound a little bit veracious but so often we deal with clients who are trying to frame things in a bureaucratic way. We work with a lot of local governments and some of them they have to engage the community about their management plans for instance. A local government management plan isn't particularly interesting to most people in the community but within there are a lot of interesting things. The harboring results have to been burry the controversial elements and just trying it through. We work with our clients to help them bring out those controversial elements because those are the things people are interested in. people are less interested in the overall strategic framework and far more interested in what's visceral, what's real in their own lives?

The library is going to close or we are opening a new childcare center; those sorts of things that people relate to. It also translates back to the way you present that material to the community. I often tell the story of a client who I will never name, who put out a cultural plan using our platform. The introduction was about ten paragraphs of text with no photographs. The only information that was provided on the site was a PDF of the document and it was like a sixty page document. They brought in a discussion forum and the questions were, comments on chapter one, comments on chapter two, comments on chapter three. Predictively they only got one comment and we actually had to moderate it out because it wasn't appropriate.

That's because the culture of that area was really interesting to a lot of the community. What they were doing was throwing out barriers to this thing that was saying, "If you want to participate with us, you'll have to think of this in a very bureaucratic framework. You have to print off a really long document and you have to comment on each chapter in term. What else we often see now, clients who – those questions in the discussion

forums have nothing to do with the structure of a document. They are videos, someone talking about the wonderful things that are going on. People are running a storytelling tool and inviting the community to send their own videos and photos and driving really engaging content.

That word engaging is the critical thing. If you go to a website in this form of text, it's not engaging, you want to get away. If you go to a website it's full of text it's not engaging, and you want to get away. If you go to a website and it's full of photo and video content and their reference is coming from social media and there is activity, you are going to dwell there, you are not going to give it seventy seconds, you are going to give it seven minutes. You are going to give it some time and you are going to start contributing. That's pretty much one of the key learnings we've had.

David: In terms of that though, how would you or what advice would you have for people who are involved in this content marketing process, being able to draw that citizen-centric insight and then to be able to translate that into compelling content that will engage the audience? I imagine most of the people listening to this podcast are really, they are believers, they agree and they understand that, but how do they crack that nut of the risk of a senior executive who says, "Hang on, I'm not comfortable with this?"

Matt: There are a couple of ways. We talk to the risk management conversation is one we have all the time. I think it comes down somewhat to the tools you use. The platform we have has nine engagement tools built into it, and they all have a different risk profile. An open discussion forum, even though we moderate that, it's true – it allows views to appear and there are still some people who think that people being able to publish that point of view and discuss is a bit scary. There are some issues which you won't want to do that. When you look at something like community storytelling it draws really rich content. It's not one of those real-time discussion things that you can check the comment before you allow it on the site. That's a very low risk profile but a very high impact in terms of how engaging it is. The first time we maybe used it was the national disability insurance.

We were running forums about the nature and structure of the national disability insurance scheme. They were being well populated by people arguing a point of view. When we opened up and asked people for their stories we got tons of ideas and stories from disabled people and their carers about their lives and what they were facing. It was fitfully emotional moving content and some of it very difficult to read but it really opened up and allowed clients to see what it was that sat behind those positions. We started telling these, both in those – those that were very personal situations, also in the planning context if you are changing a place that is special for people asking their stories about the place. We did one for the, I guess the first time, the Sydney Harbor Bridge and got stories from all the digenerians about their memories of the bridge, which were quite amazing.

Also about what people have seen elsewhere that they'd like to see. Inviting people in can be very low risk, could control how the content is. You can also, a lot of people put questions online, it could be very engaging but again, very low risk. It's all about that

selection of tools, how do you frame the issue and how do you select the tools you are prepared to use? I don't think there is ever a situation now where there is not some level of engagement that's appropriate within your risk profile.

David: In terms of the skills that are required within public sector agencies to be able to activate a platform such as bang the table or to run a community engagement program, what sort of skill sets do the government agency or public sector agency people need to have to be able to do it successfully?

Matt: This depends on what you are using. If you are using engagement HQ which is our engagement platform, you don't need any technical skills. What you need is the skills to bring together the right content and ask the community the right questions. It's the classic citizen engagement, perhaps skills that you might find through something like IAP2 training. IAP2 is the international association of public participation. Those same set of skills that those people in your organization who do citizen engagement have are exactly what you need. You shouldn't be thinking about engaging online and some sort of separate technical discipline because it's not. It's just reaching out and talking to people and through a technological platform.

David: The content marketing process as is see is a strategic measureable and accountable business process. It does start with the setting of specific objectives around a particular, whether it's a service area or a policy area or a program delivery. Setting objectives, how well do you think public sector organizations do in setting clear objectives for what it is that they are trying to achieve. ?

Matt: I think they are getting better. It is a really difficult area. We often find that people's expectations when they start engaging online are very different from the reality that they'll see. We try and help with that. We are reporting measures activity on the site in three cohort. I think the three cohorts are really important and should be as, regardless of what platform you are using because they are kind of critical. Where is the number of people you are reaching out to?

Then we have a second cohort which is informed. These are the people who've come and taken a look, not just visited the site eventually but actually have taken the time to have a look, read your documents, viewed your videos, looked there on the site. Understanding that cohort and targeting them is really critical to understanding, and managing your content, your targets and get public policy outcomes. The third cohort we have is engage. They are the people who are giving you feedback. The ratios between the three become where you should set your targets.

If I can give you an example, if you are putting up a draft – a lot of what people do is they, we've worked out a draft of what we want to do and we are going to put it out to the community, success does not look like a very high engaged cohort. Success looks like a very high informed cohort. I could sort of demonstrate that with an example. We did some work on a planning ordinance with a large local authority. We came to the project, they had an informed number of around ten thousands, and they only had ten comments. Ten people had chosen to comment but they could show and demonstrate

that ten thousand people had taken their time to read the documents. A lot of early engagement tools didn't have the proper metrics. They were just using Google analytics or something, people who are really understanding the dynamics.

If you can show that ten thousand people have read your document but only have bothered to comment, you can't say that nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety people agree with your or support it. You can say that nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety people informed themselves or were ambivalent enough that they haven't bothered to go any further. That in itself, if in your following policy is a really important number – of course most of our clients are on millennial contracts with this, they do repeat engagements, some of them do hundreds of projects a year. They've had those numbers against their own experience. They'll put out something that's typically controversial, they'll get hundreds if not thousands of responses and then they'll put out something else and see that.

Overtime you get to build a really strong picture of what's really happening out there in the community that you can never do. If you are running a public meeting and nobody turns up, you don't know if they haven't turned out because they master chef finale is on, or if they didn't know the meeting was on. You have really no sense of it but you really can achieve that online which is why it's such a valuable addition to your components. Just to, sort of summarise that a bit, we recommend strongly the targets set around a well, informed and engaged cohorts. We obviously try and help our clients to understand what realistic numbers might be relative to their population on that. We find that when people have done this a few times I think they are getting very good at setting targets.

David: I think that's a very valuable insight because as you say, the signal that you are getting out of those awareness and inform metrics is valuable. It may not be precisely related to an action or to behaviour at such but it has to be sort of representative signal does it not?

Matt: I think so. I think you've also got to recognise where this sits. This isn't – what we talk about is a certain engagement; this isn't building democracy, its building a picture. This should be put alongside your face to face engagement, the expert opinion and in that community. All of that package of stuff goes before our democratically elected decision makers, that will implement better decisions. We are not about, kind weighing opinions and dividing the people to whatever the most is in one place. This is about making sure everybody has had a chance to speak, to learn, and all our opinions are being given consideration.

David: Another critical part of the content marketing process is really that audience understanding and trying to get in beneath to understand the needs, the wants, the viewpoints, the pain points, and obviously design thinking or use a centred design is all arranged at the moment. What's your view about that particular process for helping to build a better understanding of the needs of the community?

Matt: I think that when, particularly design thinking where we take the time to use that process in just about anything, to be honest. We tried to use it in our business, to what ran across, to improve our software and our services. I think it brought us across the board. I think it's a really powerful process, it's I guess the one challenge is actually being able to take the time to do that sort of stuff properly. I think my organization like a lot out there are learning these skills, perfecting these skills. I think they are going to help a lot of organizations be a lot closer to the community in the future.

David: I think that it has to almost be embedded into those public sector organizations as a matter of practice, not just consultants coming in and saying, "Here it is – here is a lot of posted notepads in a nice colourful walls." I think we've got to build that capability in the public sector over time in order to deliver more precise, more accurate, more useful services to the community.

Matt: I think that's right. I think the online is sort of an outlet to help with that process, for instance we have brainstorming app, works for all that process. The online tools could be part of the mix in building that empathy with the community, building that deep understanding. They are never the whole picture. I think it's really important when we look at these sorts of process that they are going to improve the way we are engaging, we look at our face to face and our online processes together and build the swifter things so that you may have as much coverage as possible. What we are finding is that people are regularly using online tools to engage the community, or actually getting more people along to their face to face events.

What we are doing is we are building community; we are getting people more involved. Then, just sort of helping with that process, that people can maybe talk to you and have a bit of event before the process. We worked with a consultancy called straight talk, sometime ago on looking at the future; they are worrying over Manly Sea Eagles play. They used one of our forums, throughout the beginning of the process, to allow some of the anxiety and anger to vent out before they got people in the room to work with them.

It was fascinating to see that we ran a number of online forums alongside the first phase process. How that really helped to get people into the mindset of what's happening to dispel some fears. We actually saw the temperature change as we went through the process. I really like it when online tools are used in that way as part of an overall process of engagement, not as a – not standing out on their own. I think that's the sort of thing we are going to see more and more of.

David: How do you go around balancing those, the offline activity with the online activity? You do have that sense of coherence and effectiveness across a whole program?

Matt: Yeah, that's an interesting question. I think it's about designing the program from the start with relation to objectives. "What are you trying to do here, are you trying to inform all the people of decisions they have already been taking and then engage them about some aspect of a project? Are you trying to build community consensus?" There are all series of questions. I think then you select your tools based on what you are

trying to achieve. I personally believe that should maybe always be an online component to what you are doing. It'd be strange not to because just as, not everybody wants torture online, not everybody wants torture either.

You wouldn't want to be excluded out of the group. I think bringing the processes together is the right approach and starting, not from, "We are going to do a Facebook thing." Something – that we do hear a lot of people who start with the solution of the tool in mind instead of the process, I think it's much better to map out who are you trying to reach, what you are trying to achieve with him, and have to think about which tools that are going to be effective in delivering that, both online and offline? That's how you build an integrated process and they work extremely well.

David: I think you've really pushed your finger on something there and it's certainly something that we have in our experience, it's that people like do things before they do the thinking phase, because it's so accessible and because you can start. Everyone gets excited and they go out like at a million miles an hour and they run at a puff after a couple of weeks, not understanding that it does take time to build trusts with an audience. How do you encourage people away from the doing and move them back along the path to the thinking before they do the doing?

Matt: Its hard in every field, we try to help do that with our software in fact. We try to guide people we set guidelines, case studies, we do all sorts of things to try and get people really thinking about their objectives and deploying their right tools I think that we are moving away from an era where, a message came down from the minister's office saying, "We want to do a Facebook thing." That was how you selected the tool. The time when people used a forum because the boss said, "Use the forum," is going away.

We do see too much of just forming out a simple survey and which often is a real loss of opportunity to get people expressing themselves more broadly and understanding other views and things like that. I do feel quite optimistic about what's happening in terms of – we are getting a lot of really informed tool choice. We are getting people starting to think, the time when people wanted to be jumping on the line, this online fad I think is going past. That's good that we are – there have been so many times where I would talk to people about, who decided to do something on Facebook for instance. I've asked them why and there's been no answer only, "We wanted to do Facebook."

That's the sort of thing that we simply have solved and I'm pleased about that because sometimes Facebook might be the right tool but you should be thinking, what you are trying to achieve and then putting the tools next to it that's the important thing. I think if you go looking for, there are reasons to be consistent in using one platform on an ongoing basis because you get to build and paralyse the community around it. Therefore, I think what you need to do is look for a platform that has a number of options built in it so that – in other words try to using one thing.

David: In terms of your cadence of how often that you activate that platform to reach the audience. Do you have any sort of generalized advice for people as to how often it

should be knocking on the door of their audience so to speak to seek some of their various case attention?

Matt: Yeah, I think you should never stop. I think by consistently engaging on ongoing basis you build, you suspend cynicism in the community. If you go out and ask people about an issue you are dealing with, and those people come back to you with feedback, and then you go back to the people and tell them what you've learned and what you are going to do, then they can see, "Yes, it's worthwhile. We are coming back again." If you would go to the city of Sydney's website which is at sydneyusi.com.au, you'll see on their homepage, they are engaging the community about all sorts of stuff, everything from climate change to something as small and local as, "We're refurbishing a small local park." The community gets engaged through all sorts of levels.

The wonderful thing is, most of us don't want to engaged into absolutely everything. Something will come up during a year or two in your community where you do want to be engaged, and because you signed up to join in, you can come and get captured into that community. If you are going to a weekly or fortnight an email telling you about the all the other opportunities to come and be engaged, we don't find that many people unsubscribe from those – they are happy to have those.

They may not get engaged or hold the opportunities but they are there in your community and they are hearing that you are interested in their views. We kind of work with our clients and over the years we've changed our pricing model to reflect at, we want people to engage on everything, even if things went out of budget. Sometimes, they are the things the community are most interested in. it works and we've written blogs about the experience of various clients who've taken this really consistent approach to engagement and to see the virtual community panel just go up exponentially as more and more people get involved and activated on different issues.

David: I think that's a really interesting point because I think it's also, that's the gift of technology, isn't it? that you can actually be connected to your community twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year. This notion of the old days of campaigns where we would start and we would stop, these days there is no really stop date because there is always something else to talk about and I think that's fantastic advice.

Just in terms of, just a final questions, I want to respectful of your time, just choices around content types, obviously we are saying, video become very popular, audio has a place, photos have a place and there are different types of platforms. Do you have any sort of overarching advice as to how people can make choices and what threshold questions they need to ask themselves before saying, "It's going to the text or its going to be video, it's going to be audio," or what content type it's going to be?

Matt: The best thing I can say is, just mix it up, different people are to absorb information in different ways, so provide a room, and there is no reason not to. If you are having trouble for video, you don't need to spend ten grand on a production company. You can turn on your WIFI and take a video and talk to the family, go find the expert, point the

camera and then to talk to them. Just try to where got really engaging content. We've had a lot of clients working with those parts of the community, and those really personalized issues.

We saw some work about the very difficult issues of calling the ground bees in a certain mountain national park. The guys running the project, they actually – they made every question a video and the personalized the issue. It took a lot of this thing out of it. It was people talking about concerns and their opinions. When you personalize issues like that you really reduce the hate. My view is always mix it up, we all love video, audio and great photos and things, but there is really no reason in this day and age to pick one over the other, use them all.

David: Matt Crozier, from bang the table, thank you very much for those insights, those case studies, that wisdom. How can you let our audience know perhaps, how they might be able to learn a little bit more about you and a little bit more about bang the table?

Matt: If the audience would like to go to bangthetable.com they'll find – it's a blog site, it's where we write about this sort of stuff, the practice of citizen engagement. From there, there are links through to our software as well. I recommend a visit to bangthetable.com. You'll also find us on LinkedIn, on Facebook, and on Twitter, @bangthetable we have a good place to start looking.

David: Fabulous, thank you very much for your time today, a great conversation, a lot of enormous value for the audience and I'm very grateful for giving us some of your time today. To the audience wherever you are in the world, I hope you enjoyed that because I thought really Matt knows how all this stuff works and really go to bang the table.

There is so much information, there are so many resources there, these guys have been at it for a long, long time. If you are stepping into this path of using content marketing, and you can hear from Matt, it is a way of being able to engage citizens on ongoing basis and to us content to talk about your issues, and really get those insights that you need to inform your policy, your service or your program. Great conversation, thanks very much for joining us again this week and I'll be back next week.