

InTransition Episode 49 – Karl Herger

David: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, wherever you might be in the world. Welcome to "In Transition", the podcast that deals with the practice of content marketing in the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and I am delighted that you've decided to give me just a little bit of your time to talk to and to interview one of the most interesting people in Australian public sector content marketing. He is a really interesting guy and we will come to him in just a moment.

First, as we do each week, we look at the definition of just precisely what content marketing is, as it relates to the public sector. Content marketing is an evidence-based, strategic, measurable and accountable business process that relies on the creations, curation and distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen or stakeholder action.

Our guest today is Karl Herger. Karl is the digital marketing specialist for the City of Sydney. Karl is responsible for implementing the city's digital marketing strategy, including the content marketing strategy, social media, website builds, app development, analytics, online advertising and email marketing. Karl has been working with the City of Sydney for about four years now. Prior to joining the City of Sydney he worked for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as a digital marketing specialist. He launched and managed the ABC Facebook page, growing it from 2000 to 40 000 plus likes through this content marketing strategy and also the support of advertising.

Karl has over eight years' digital marketing experience, and he joins us today in "In Transition". Karl, thanks very much for coming along for the ride.

Karl: Thanks for having me.

David: Karl, just tell us a little bit more about your background. How is it that you started to get involved and get interested in digital marketing?

Karl: Actually, I did a Bachelor of Communications in public relations. I started off in a very traditional kind of PR agency. I didn't last there long, to be honest. I was there about six months, and then I wound up working in a non-profit healthcare organizations as a comms advisor. It just became fairly obvious straight out that while my training background was in PR and media relations, to me the blurring between comms, PR, marketing, online at the time, it all just seemed to be the same kind of kill the fish to me, which was having some kind of problem or objective that we were trying to achieve as an organization and then having a target market to reach, and then leveraging some kind of strategy and implementation to do that.

I didn't ever really figure that I was one kind of practitioner or I was tied to one kind of skillset. I was lucky enough in my first job to be thrown into an environment where I could do a little bit of everything, wear many hats, and I just fell into digital at the time.

David: Growing up though, were you interested in technology, or was this just something that emerged when you got the opportunity?

Karl: A bit of both. I was a massive nerd growing up and I still am a massive nerd, I guess. I was always really interested in using technology in a creative capacity, and not necessarily creative in the sense that I can do graphic design, but more creative in the sense that how can I use technology to communicate effectively or solve a problem, or do research, for instance. I was always really interested in that.

Before I started a comms degree, I did a Bachelor of IT, but I only lasted six months in that because I quickly found out that I wasn't born to be a programmer. Ironically, finding out what I didn't like led me to a career path where I could do what I wanted to do, which was leverage technology in a creative comms capacity. That combined with just a bit of luck, I ended up on the career path that I'm on today.

David: We'll come to a discussion about running the story, essentially online, for the City of Sydney, one of the great cities of the world. As we outlined in the introduction, you have a lot of responsibility for a lot of that story. Before then, I'm interested in your time at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Just tell us a little bit about that.

Karl: Sure. I was in the corporate marketing team and our job was purely digital. While at the City I do cross over into other areas, we were just purely digital there, purely a service arm to deploy things like Facebook advertising, figuring out paid search campaigns for anything from local radio to TV through multi-platform. Email marketing was massive at the ABC, and I think it's an under-looked tactic as well these days. People go to social when sometimes it requires an email marketing channel.

I was really lucky at the ABC to have the guidance of a really great manager with a very strategic marketing background, and I was able to really hone my chops in all kinds of tactical things, like I said, from online advertising, through to display, figuring out how do you try and get some meaningful analysis in an organization that is so large and has so many moving parts. I was really able to use that as a springboard into the role I'm in today.

David: What were some of the challenges when you were working back at the ABC, and what sounds like it was a reasonably siloed marketing organization where the roles and responsibilities and functions were split?

Karl: The main challenge is just shared sense of purpose. I think a lot of it is ... A lot of these organizations, they're structures ... In my observation, they're just born out of an old way or an old way of thinking about communication. We even see it today in government, in the sense that we have a marketing team here, and we have a comms team, a media team, and a web team, but at the end of the day we're all doing the same

thing. We all have the same set of customers. That same set of customers all have the same problems and opportunities that they're leveraging through communication.

The biggest challenge is, A, getting the business to buy into a shared sense of purpose. We're in it together, and we're going to be more effective, not only for the business, but for our customers. Finding that intersection, that sweet spot between what the business wants to do and what customers want to hear, I think that's the main challenge.

The second challenge is just figuring out all the infrastructure that goes behind it, but really thinking about problems rather than solutions. It's easy to deploy technology, but it's much harder to deploy it in a way that is meaningful and considered and audience-focused.

David: You mentioned that there was good leadership when you were at the ABC and I know you also have good leadership there at the City of Sydney, but whose responsibility is it to establish that critical element of purpose?

Karl: I think it has to come from the top, David. It has to. At the City there is a big degree of our managing up and we are encouraged to manage up, which I think is also good because it puts that responsibility on your middle management to actually come up with creative solutions, which I think is great. But it has to be a team effort; it can't all be managing up. There has to be a broad understanding from the top of the business that this content marketing thing, we're going to give this a crack. We might have put our eggs into the traditional media basket for the last few years and it's been effective, and it still will be effective in certain instances, but we may need to cut some of our resource in that area and apply it to a new way of doing things. I think in the environment I'm in now there's very much ... there's a high level of support around that general approach.

David: You've worked in these organizations, and really one of the things that we're always hearing from people is, how do you convince the higher ups? How do you convince the leadership that it's time to invest more in content marketing?

Karl: I think it's all about proof of concept, and I've observed in my time here at the City that actually having something tangible to show to anyone in the business that might not immediately understand the concept of concept marketing, that's what you need to lead with. I think the peripheral education, like ongoing education, is absolutely important, so I'll do a weekly or bi-weekly email newsletter around content marketing best practice or digital marketing best practice, or just interesting stuff happening in the landscape generally, but the big thing is proof of concept.

One example I've made that I have is recently we've ... Last year we launched a new online event platform to show all the events that are happening in Sydney, including the events that the City of Sydney produces or supports or sponsors. In the past ... We've always had this asset running. It's being going for a good decade, but it sat there and it was getting a lot of traffic, had a big built-in audience, but it wasn't really leveraged as effectively as it could have been. What we were doing was, we were creating these satellite micro-sites, one for, say, the Chinese New Year festival, one for Art and About,

our public art festival, another one for Sydney Christmas, and it was ... They were good sites; they were solid sites. They served the end user fairly well, but at the end of the day, from a business perspective, we were creating these web properties that were relevant for three or four weeks of the year and then they would be left until the next campaign period, and they didn't really benefit from this ongoing optimization program.

We had the existing "What's On" directory and it was getting a bit old and wasn't optimized for mobile, and didn't really show events in the most effective way, so we decided to redevelop it. Part of that project was about content consolidation, this idea of let's try and build an audience around what's happening in Sydney. We can also try and achieve our business objectives in one environment, as opposed to expecting our customers to be bounced around the internet like a pinball machine, or to get them to re-familiarize themselves with a new website every year. Let's build familiarity around one platform. Let's track our audience in one environment, and if we can track them in one environment we can understand them better and then we can provide a much more informed and a much better experience by what we're learning over time.

We found that by changing the approach, by taking essentially what is the same content and putting it into one consolidated environment, we've been able to get increases - not massive increases, but anywhere from a 5% increase across major events. We've been able to prove to the business that not only have we saved time internally, we've been able to all work on one asset together, so we can all solve problems in a shared way. We can understand our audience better. We save money, we save time, we build up our email database in one central location. We've been able to prove to business through, A, through our approach, and, B, through the data that we're getting that, look, this is a good approach in terms of content distribution.

David: You've had the opportunity to implement that program. What I'm really trying to understand is that initial point. How is it before you've actually run a program? How do you convince people, and do you really have to have a developed strategy and a well thought through evidence-based approach that will get you the permission to allow you to do a program like you've just explained to us there?

Karl: Yes, I think in an ideal world, yes, you do, but this ... The beauty about this project is that it started out as, look, we've got an event directory and it's getting two million visits a year. It's looking a bit old and it doesn't work on mobile devices; something needs to be done about it. It's an asset we need to keep going and it's a community service, essentially, in that we allow any business in the City or anyone that's running an event, they can create an account and they can submit their event for free, and they can do that for life.

It started off as we need to redevelop this thing. We went through a user experience design process to that, to make sure that what we were building was going to be a solid, well-informed asset, but it was only really midstream through the project that we started to realise that actually this thing could be used to consolidate our content. What we have here is an opportunity to do things a bit differently. We already had the buy-in to redevelop it, but at that point we didn't have the buy-in to necessarily migrate all the

old content into the new environment, so we ran that in parallel to begin with and then we made the decision to do it when it was a good couple of months out in the market. It wasn't like that was the idea from the beginning, but these things sometimes happen organically and the beauty of developing a web application in an agile way is that you can take these little changes in midstream without trying to document everything upfront.

David: How difficult is it to introduce that kind of agile methodology to the development of an asset within a big organization?

Karl: It's incredibly difficult to do if the function that ends up developing the asset isn't in your division. It's really difficult. Let me give you a bit of a history story.

The way we used to operate, and a lot of our current approach to where we are online which is in some ways a little bit fragmented, but we're getting a lot better and seeing some good results. That was all ... a lot of it was born out of a legacy process. Our division is called City Engagement and in there is a media team and comms and marketing, but the web team's only been in there for about 12 to 18 months. Previously they were sitting in the IT division. We had an excellent relationship with those guys, but the process was ... They were a little bit of arm's distance in some ways. The way we work in comms is a little bit different to the way the IT area works. They're just different methodologies.

A lot of it was built on what's called a waterfall methodology where everything's documented up front and then it gets signed off, and then you begin to develop and then ... You don't ever really test it with the market; you just release it at the end and if customers like it they like it, if they don't then you start fixing all the bugs and it's quite expensive.

The agile way of working is very different. Instead of 50% of the way through a project where you haven't actually delivered that in full yet; you've had working software. 50% of the way through the project you have working software, and you can put it in front of customers and say, "What do you think?" and they might say, "Oh, this is good" or "this bit's not so good" so you strip it from the project. Then you're in a much better position that 100% delivers something that's been tested and validated.

We couldn't do that with the old working model because it was predicated on this idea that everything must be documented up front, but since the web team moved into City Engagement, we had a good discussion internally and were able to bring them down, and we've been able to have a much more organic way of working with the web guys. To answer your question, it's very difficult to do that if it's in a more traditional kind of delivery structure like that, but again, it's the power of shared sense of purpose and the power of we're one division. We might be split up into different teams, but at the end of the day it's one city with one set of customers and we should all be working together.

David: And what a beautiful city it is, the City of Sydney. I'm sure lots of people listening to the podcast are thinking, "Wow, what a great job." You get to tell the story of the Harbour

Bridge, the Opera House, the deep water harbour, the famous New Year's Eve fireworks displays. It's got everything Sydney; it is such a beautiful place. What precisely are the objectives that you have for your content marketing strategy there in Sydney?

Karl: We're actually going through a project at the moment to really refine our objectives across the board. The way we're structured is that we have City Engagement and we've got our marketing team, for instance, but our marketing team is ... there are different areas in the marketing team that are split up into different portfolios. There might be one portfolio that's about arts and culture, another one that's about sustainability, another one that is more around, say, business. Currently, while we all work towards the big enterprise objectives of the business which is Sydney 2030 - we want to be green, global and connected - and now there are ten strategic action killers in that big strategic document.

We also have other objectives that are program level. What we're trying to do is really break that down so that as a division we just have one content marketing for the division, as opposed to, say, maybe, I don't know, three or four, depending on the portfolio.

What we've found is that through some analysis and through some content audit work, there is quite a bit of overlap with our content. Even though we have ... We have three parent types of content which we call ... One is business as usual content, the second is activities and events, and the third is stories and using updates. We found that in the stories bucket there's quite a bit of overlap, because we found that someone might write an article that's around the business portfolio, but someone in the arts and culture portfolio is writing something that may be about exactly the same topic.

We're trying to get to a point with this new content strategy work that we're doing where we have, again, that shared sense of purpose and we can collectively understand what are we trying to achieve with content; who is the audience? Instead of this idea that there's relative exclusivity over the audience at a portfolio level, it's that, no, there might be a set of five personas and sometimes they transact with us, and sometimes they might go to one event, and sometimes they might pay their rates with us, but it's still the same set of customers across the board.

We're getting to a point now where we've got ... very broadly we're saying, well, we're here to create awareness, we're here to build community, and we're here to change behaviour with that content. The next thing we need to do, obviously, is to get into the level of smart objectives. That's the next step for us to figure out what are our smart objectives, based on those three primary objectives.

David: Interestingly, when we were talking at the end of last year I was just getting to this notion of measurement, and we had a really interesting conversation about your experience in this space and the fact that what you came to the understanding, particularly when you're reporting up, is that you've really got to be simple, and you've really got to be clear, and you've got to make sure that you're telling that story in a dashboard set of metrics that can be communicated very quickly. Can you tell us that

story about your experience of trying to tell the leadership and the higher-ups about how your content's performing?

Karl: It's just trying to break down the old post-campaign report model, I guess. I've seen a lot of post-campaign reports in my time which are just data puked. It's a data dump, basically, and it doesn't really tell you anything. I think most people that would use Google Analytics wouldn't even ever create a custom report or wouldn't create a dashboard; they would just probably export the default report that's on the main screen. The challenge there is that a report like that is built to satisfy at a very entry level million and millions of customers that use the product, but it's not necessarily tailored to the story you need to tell internally.

In my experience, it's trying to get away from ... Less is more, I think is the first thing. The second thing is more words, less numbers. What I mean in that respect is that insights and then recommendation, and you can only really do that through words. The last thing is just pick your critical few. The only way you can get to a critical few ... When I say critical few it's like maybe the three or five metrics of numbers or KPIs that will indicate, is what we're doing online, whether it's a web property or an app, or a content piece, is what we're doing sinking or swimming, so your critical few.

The only way you can get to the critical few is to have a measurement plan. We spoke about this last year, I think, as well, that before you deploy Google Analytics or before you install that tracking code for whatever tool you're using, you need to have a measurement plan. I guess, very broadly that maps up the top level ... the vision statement for the property, the goals. That might be creating awareness, generating email sign-ups and booking registrations, or whatever, and then figuring out your KPI, and then figuring out the audience that you're going to measure against that.

You need to have a measurement plan. Our measurement plans for our websites or apps, or whatever, are generally only about one or two pages, but they do very clearly articulate, these are the things that we're going to look at to tell us whether or not what we're doing is successful. Wherever possible we just try and stick to that, so we just try and be very disciplined and consistent about how we report up. I've found that going from these reports that were just massive dumps of numbers, it's been much more effective to just present a one-pager with that measurement framework as the guts, I guess.

David: Do you find then that the discussions are much more around the recommendations and the insights, as opposed to the actual specific numbers as to whether or not they're good, bad or indifferent?

Karl: 100%, yes, absolutely. It's difficult, particularly when you're producing data in aggregate, it's not useful. Any data ... Avinash Kaushik is one of the guys that I love online. He's got a really great blog called "Occam's Razor". He talks about this quite a lot is that data in aggregate is useless. A lot of the data that you see in a post-campaign report is in aggregate. It will say, there were 200 000 visits, or we had 800 email sign-ups, or the bounce rate across the site was 60% - it doesn't tell you anything. When you start to get

into that level of insights, there's generally some level of segmentation that's been applied to the data, in the sense that we ...

Take New Year's Eve for instance, where we found that ... It got to the point where, two years ago, all our traffic to the Sydney New Year's website ... it's well and truly mobile now. It used to be the point that people were sitting at their PCs or laptops and they were doing research, but now it's all about mobile. The only way we can ever really ... It's a pretty basic insight, but the only way we could ever really get to that is to segment the data. If we just said, we had a 10% increase in traffic and left it at that, it wouldn't have got us to a point where we start changing our internal approach to design, which is now mobile first.

You're absolutely right. The whole insight and action is much better than just here are some numbers, undigested.

David: What's next for you as part of your team there? As I mentioned in the introduction, you're obviously across a whole range of areas of responsibility, telling that story of the City of Sydney, connecting with the audiences that you've identified, but what's immediately in front of you that you see as your biggest challenges and how are you going to solve those problems?

Karl: I think what's next for us is ... I mentioned it earlier about how we're trying to create a division-wide content strategy. That's the big one. There are some short-term things that we need to do to get that moving.

The first is do a proper audit of our content and to run that against the pillars and the personas and the objectives that we're trying to achieve in the new strategy, and then figure out what can be kept, what can be migrated, what can be decommissioned. I think that's the very short thing we're trying to do.

Longer term it's this idea around consolidation. I mentioned that we have three types of content, primarily, which is business as usual, and that's pretty well handled by our main corporate site. You can go there and transact and you can find out information on our policies and basic nuts and bolts things, and where parks are and that kind of stuff. The event side of things we started to consolidate in a creative platform, and we're making really good headway there.

The third thing is news and updates and that's where the focus is going to be. We're really active, but we're probably not as organized as we could be. What we really want to do in that space is essentially create a content hub where we can bring any kind of news content that provides an engaging window into what we do, that should be in one spot. At the moment it's not in one spot; it's split across different micro-sites and that's proving ... it can be a difficult user experience for our customers. I think content consolidation's going to be a big one where we can, just from a content perspective and from a data perspective, bring it all together, understand our audience better, more intelligently relate the data that we have. We can cross-sell that up through intelligent tagging, taxonomy of data, that kind of stuff. I think that's going to be big.

It's going to be a big challenge to actually develop that platform, but I think the bigger challenge is going to be changing the way we work. That's doing things like adopting a modern publishing mindset, that idea that day-to-day we're going to be producing content and that it's not going to be about a social media update or a media release; it's going to be direct-to-audience content that's maybe packaged and distributed in different ways. That shared goals and that commitment to why are we doing content marketing, and understanding and adhering to standards, which might be distribution, the way we do our messaging, how do we measure things, what are the formats we use, I think that nitty gritty stuff's going to be the real big challenge, and then just getting that buy-in to resource the hub, because the content's not going to come out of thin air. I hope that answers your question.

David: It does, but it's a fairly typical transition that I think a lot of organizations are in, is that going from the siloed traditional approach, not having that publishing mentality, not having the skills within team who can do that. There's so much to it, but I think that journey that you're on is a fairly typical one, from what I understand, in many public sector organizations, be they at an international government, federal government, NGO, not-for-profit - everyone's wrestling with the same sort of challenges that you are.

Anyway, I think Sydney's in pretty good hands with Karl Herger at the helm.

Karl: Well, I hope so. I think we're in a pretty good spot. We've got really good people here and we just need to ... We've got great writers here and it's ... That's the thing. People with traditional journo backgrounds that know a story and can tell a story, they're in demand today, and if we can combine that with people that have great digital marketing experience and technical experience, this melting pot of skills, this multi-disciplinary set of skills, that's the future of publishing, I think.

David: Yes, no question. Well, Karl Herger, thanks very much for your time today and best of luck with that. As I say, the City of Sydney, a wonderful story to tell. There are so many elements of where we could now dive a little bit deeper into how you're going to go about it. I think what we'll do is come back to you in maybe three or six months' time, just to get the update. Where did you get to; where were the bumps in the road; where are the things that you didn't expect? This is what the podcast is about is to learn from each other and to really get those insights so as we can make sure that, as we all go on this journey together as we are, that we learn from each other and make improvements as we go in this fascinating and ... It's so much fun, this content marketing space.

Thank you very much, Karl. I really appreciate your time today and I know the audience appreciates your time as well. All the very best to you.

Just quickly, where might people connect with Karl Herger on the web?

Karl: Sure. [Facebook.com/cityofsydney](https://www.facebook.com/cityofsydney). I think the work that our content producer does is amazing; it's worth checking out. Our event platform is whatson.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au. Check it out, send us an email. If you have any

questions or feedback I'd love to hear it. [Twitter.com/cityofsydney](https://twitter.com/cityofsydney) and [Instagram.com/cityofsydney](https://www.instagram.com/cityofsydney).

David: Okay, mate. Thank you very much and we will speak to you in a few months' time, and we'll talk to you offline before then. Thanks again, and thanks to you, the audience, for listening again to what's been a really good episode of "In Transition", to hear those stories, the detail of Karl's challenges, how he's been able to overcome them, and I'm sure you got plenty out of today.

Thanks again for joining in. I'll be back next week and I look forward to your company then. Bye for now.