

## InTransition Episode 50 –Mandy Gyles

David: Well, hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that deals with the practice of content marketing in government. Today I speak to an old friend, and we've been in this business for a long time, and it's going to be a really interesting discussion because she has a fabulous background. Before we come to her, as we do each week we start with the definition of just precisely what content marketing is as it relates to the public sector. Content marketing is an evidence-based, measurable, repeatable, and strategic business process that relies on the creation, curation, and distribution of useful, relevant, and consistent content in order to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen or stakeholder outcome.

As I said, my guest today is Mandy Gyles who has a long career in the media. She has over 25 years' experience working in a range of different places. She started her career at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as did I. Mandy moved into the role of communications officer in the agricultural industry and then worked for the Department of Ag as a public affairs officer for the Australia Centre for International Agriculture Research. Now Mandy has stopped working in-house and she's working as a consultant for her own company. Her clients include the Capital Metro here in Canberra, SBS Radio, the International Crops Research Institute for semi-arid tropics, and the Australian Centre for International Agriculture Research. Mandy joins me now. Welcome to InTransition.

Mandy: Thank you very much.

David: I did just drop this on Mandy, everyone, as she was walking in we were going to have a chat, and it's a very hot day here in Australia and Mandy said, "Well, I thought you were going to ask me to go down to the pub which is underneath our office to have a beer." I said, "No-no-no, we're going to go and do a podcast." Mandy very graciously accepted or she didn't have much choice actually. I told her that we're going to do this because Mandy's got a lot to offer. I really want to talk to you, take you back actually from this transition. It's the same transition I went through, is this being a reporter and then telling stories and then working for organizations and telling stories.

Let's go back to that point where you thought to yourself, okay, I've done my time here with the ABC. What was going through your head at the time as to why you wanted to move?

Mandy: Well, I guess back then there was two reporters in Canberra for ABC Rural, and in Australia at the time around the rural reporters and different states, they only wanted so much out of Canberra.

David: Right.

Mandy: I mean it was a great job. It was a great job and lots of people said, "You shouldn't leave." It really was the best job around being rural for the ABC, so that was pretty hard

to leave. I just thought I could expand and achieve more getting out the ABC. Whether or not that was a good decision, I don't know.

David: What did you like about being a reporter?

Mandy: Well, I think the thing I liked about being a reporter was actually getting out on the road and actually meeting real people in their environment. That was the beauty of being a rural reporter in the regions particularly. The good thing, and so being out at Parliament House probably at the time wasn't the thing I loved, but I've grown to be interested now in politics, so I'm quite happy to work out there. It was actually being out in the regions, and the good thing about Canberra is you actually have got a farming region just down the road. Sarina Locke who took over the job eventually in my role, she made a great gig of that job and she did a brilliant job. Unfortunately they've just finished off that, that position doesn't exist anymore.

David: What makes a good reporter?

Mandy: Well, I guess the first thing is getting onto news that other people haven't told. It's grabbing people's interests with something that's newsworthy or interesting. It doesn't have to be incredibly newsworthy, just interesting sometimes. Because you're dealing with audio, you've got to actually paint the picture and bring in real sound to give people a feel of the atmosphere that you're experiencing. Being out in the field, getting the sounds of what's going on around you, that's to me what makes an interesting reporter.

David: And getting the people, too, isn't it? Getting them in their environment and really getting them to talk.

Mandy: Yeah.

David: The way you get people to talk is if you listen well.

Mandy: Yeah. The thing I love about being a rural reporter and a radio reporter, you're often getting someone else who is the passionate person, the one that's their story. You're giving them a platform to tell their story as much as anything.

David: Yeah. When you transitioned, you have these skills as a reporter and then you're not telling the stories from a news point of view where you're looking for new things to tell people, you're looking to tell the story of an organization, but at the same time you're looking to create that similar sort of connection with an audience. What did you find that were the hard things that where you jumped across the fence and you started telling stories for organizations like the Bureau of Agriculture here in Australia?

Mandy: I think it's actually getting those real people stories it can be hard in federal government. You might be dealing with a policy or something like that or I was working in Biosecurity Australia for a while doing their B.A. News. That's harder to get those people stories, but I managed to find them. We had some fantastic specialists in

Biosecurity Australia and so many of them had interesting stories to tell. Interspersed with the hard news stuff about what's happening with an import risk assessment, I managed to pull in stories about some of the interesting people that worked there and some of the things they did, which were not what you would expect sometime.

David: Were they the stories that performed the best?

Mandy: Well, I guess back then we didn't have the analytics that we have today, so I did get quite good feedback on that. I remember one of the, it's feedback I got which turns out it was from an old lecturer of mine, but was it's great to get these news that are on what things that are actually happening rather than the usual gumpf that comes out of some government departments.

David: How do we stop the gumpf? How do we stop that? How do we improve storytelling in public sector organizations?

Mandy: I think one of the biggest challenges is that quite often public servants remain quite anonymous, and I guess I managed to overcome that in a place where I worked for six years, in the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research. We'd have these people working there, research program managers, that had such interesting careers and the projects they were working on was so fascinating, and are really good talents. Because they hadn't been in public service very long a lot of them, they had just come in because this was a great job. We were actually able to use them, they were specialists in their area, and have them on ABC Radio or other places.

David: Yeah, look, I think the great pity really at the moment in public sector organizations is the fact that there is so many good stories that are locked up that we don't seem as yet to be able to get out as consistently as we need to in order to connect to the public so that the citizens and stakeholders can understand, well, why decisions are being made. There is so much talent in the public sector, so much expertise, but I think we need to continue to build confidence and trust that people start to say, "Well, yes, telling our story in this direct way that we can now is going to be good for us because it's going to help the government to explain what it's trying to do."

I'm fascinated and I'm going to dedicate the rest of my career try to sort this problem out, because I think we can and I think we should because, again, I don't think it's just people who've been in the public service for a couple of years, I want to get to those guys and girls who've really got that deep institutional knowledge who've been there for others. It really comes down to risk and this notion of risk aversion and the connection to the political end and personal risk, and as you say, anonymity and other things. What's the way forward? What do you say is the way forward that can help to start to deal with that risk that can build the confidence that people can say, "Yeah, look, we're doing good things and we're prepared to tell the story?"

Mandy: That's a really interesting question. I think it's identifying the stories that the general public, if your aim is getting to the general public, I suppose, you'll work out who the audience is, I think you're talking about the general public here.

David: Yeah, well, exactly, but an audience, I think, we've got to be audience-centred now and it could be the general public, but it could be a very narrow part of the general public or a very narrow part of the stakeholder group. You're right, I think everything starts with an analysis and an assessment of who that audience is. For example, it could be a particular piece of policy that a very narrow section of the community, well, most I think government policy really connects to quite narrow areas of the world. It could be the public, it could be narrow, but it's just getting people to have that confidence, to have that conversation which I think is hopefully going to enrich the policy or the program or the service or whatever it is that people are doing.

Mandy: Well, I guess you've got to get buy-in from the senior management, and I guess from them you find what do they want to achieve through your communication. There I would say really what we really need is blah, and so then you've got to work out how you achieve that. They can also say, "Look, I actually think this is a really important story or an important issue that we've got to have tackled." That at least gives you some direction on what they're wanting to achieve. Then I guess it's research sometimes, it's just talking to people and researching what these organizations have achieved, what work they're doing. The advantage of communications teams in these organizations is that they have a cross-

David: Yeah, that's right.

Mandy: knowledge across the organization that's quite often the specific areas don't. They obviously have a huge amount of knowledge that you could access.

David: Exactly, and also I think they have the permission almost to go and ask the dumb question, ask the simple question to find their way towards where those interesting stories are that stakeholders are going to be interested in, citizens are going to be interesting in. It really again and again during this podcast and speaking to other people it's that connection of trying to convince senior management. What are some of the tactics that you have used over the years to get senior management to understand that the risk is manageable, the risk is understood, and the risk is mitigated, and so, therefore, we really should go down this path of telling stories?

Mandy: Well, I guess one option is to start small and play it safe and for them to gain confidence that this is a worthwhile process when they see the positive things that can come out of promoting publicity. That's a good start.

David: Yeah, pilot projects.

Mandy: Well, yeah, and just getting people on board and seeing the advantages of it.

David: I think that does work. I had a laugh with a very senior public servant the other day who said they've got more pilot projects in their organization than Qantas has pilots.

Mandy: Yeah, that is a risk, isn't it? That is a risk.

David: Yeah.

Mandy: Look, like my experience at ACR was a relatively low risk environment because they did have a lot of good stories to tell, good people to them, and an interest from journalists. We're lucky-

David: And an interest from the community. People would have really loved that content, wouldn't they?

Mandy: Yeah, and I think we could have done better. You can always do better. It's actually-

David: What didn't you do well? That's interesting. Come on, tell us. What were the obstacles to doing a good job?

Mandy: Well, I guess in the public service you really have to have the ministry in mind and so you have to always be, because they want the good stories and they want to be able to put out a media release and things like that. I guess that's the big issue, is that those ministerial media releases don't always get a huge amount of pickup. It can.

David: Very delicately. Well, yeah, I know, but it's-

It depends on what it is, they can be very successful.

Mandy: Of course, of course, when they've got something to say, but it's something of use and relevance. The problem is often it becomes self-reflective and I did this and I did that, and really people don't care what they, you know, they've got to really talk in a different way. That again is part of the challenge over time, and I think increasingly as technology continues to change the way the world communicates and people have access to technology and have the ability to choose what information they receive, if politicians or anybody else wants to get into the consideration set of the community, well, they've got to give the community what they want, and I don't think the community wants self-interest and pronouncements about what great things we've done.

David: I think it's a real risk to politicians that if they do become that way that they will alienate people. I don't think really as yet, and I haven't seen the research, and I'm sure it's coming, but the fundamental and transformational impact on people's attitudes and the fact that they're better educated than they've ever been before, they carry around a supercomputer in their pocket which gives them access to the world's information. People are different. We're not as passive as we once were. Therefore, people who are trying to communicate need to understand that the citizen, the stakeholder, the customer, whoever it is, whatever language you want to use, is in control, so you really got to start with their interests, and if you don't, you're not going to succeed.

I guess the challenge is now that we're dealing with the traditional medias there that it's just so broad now and there are different avenues that people get information, reaching young people, there's lots of different challenges.

Mandy: It's changed and it continues to change. I'd be interested in your views on that as well, how have you managed the transition, because when we were journos it was pretty easy. I know in the current affairs political world that I worked in we had a program at 10 past 6:00 in the morning, we had one at 8:00, we had one at 12:00, and we had one at 6:00. Four times a day we had to knock off something to make the program fly, but then between them we were putting stories together. There wasn't that sense today, particularly for journalists, of almost you're filing and then you're looking for the next thing.

David: You're not filing to the clock, you're filing to whenever you can stand that story up, fire it out because you'd better get it out before somebody else is going to tell the same story. How have you adjusted to this new audience-centred continual movement that we all now have to consider as we seek to reach people and earn that share of attention that we all need in order for us to achieve the objectives of what we're trying to do?

Mandy: Well, for example, some of the work I do is promote through the media certain stories for some NGOs like RESULTS International Australia, and you actually get quite targeted about the journalists that you're targeting. You're really aiming for people that are likely to have an interest in your story and you're working towards their time frame. You're wanting to deliver the talent that they want, the timing they want, and things like that. In terms of that fast pace, I got a bit of a taste of it working up at SBS at Parliament House recently, and yeah, the continual need to update stories and they need everything yesterday, but that was interesting. It was a far cry from filing for Country Hour.

David: Yeah, yeah. Did you notice anything different? Was there less consideration of the quality or was the need for speed what was really providing-

Mandy: Well, I have to say that in some ways it's easier because there's so much material available that you can fairly easily download electronically compared to what it used to be like-

David: Yes.

Mandy: in that regard. Then I think there's a risk that everyone does the same stories. Particularly a place like Parliament House it's hard to get the different views sometimes but you've got to be out there.

David: It's an interesting point you make also I think in terms of that media relations which is an important part of content marketing. People have got to consider that public relations, media relations, public affairs, whatever you want to, it's a key channel, it remains a key channel, and that notion of exclusivity, that's what journalists particularly are looking for. They're looking for a story that you're prepared to give them that you'll give to them alone so that they can do a reasonable treatment of it and give it the effort that it's required. Because once it goes to everybody and once it loses that sort of sense of narrowness and that lustre of exclusivity, it's much harder to get the story across,

isn't it?

Mandy: That's right. Getting back to your question, I guess, regarding how you handle what's happening in the media, I guess some of the things, it's like creating your own media channels to your own audience and things like that. It's-

David: Sounds like content marketing.

Mandy: Yes, and making sure you've got fantastic photos taken that people would be happy to use, making sure you've got, you could have video taken that you can put on your website or you can offer to your partners, and even things like what we were discussing before, is podcasting as well so you can reach your audience through podcasts.

David: Traditionally, and it's not just public sector organizations, it's in the private sector as well, were traditionally set up around channels, but we're not set up around the audience and trying to understand and to leave a value for that audience. We probably have never had quite the capability that we do these days given that technology has effectively democratized the factors of media production and distribution, and so they now rest in every organization. Taking that transition from the old way that we used to do things to this new way of being able to produce, create, and distribute useful, relevant content, what do you think are the biggest challenges for public sector organizations to take themselves away from where they are to this new publishing mentality that's going to sit at the heart of that effective storytelling through your own channels?

Mandy: Well, I guess it's identifying the channels that your audience will use, and if you're looking at a massive government department, I guess often they are working with the general media because they're going for the general public, it's quite challenging, but it could be through Centrelink or whatever.

David: Yeah. I think the general public is gone. I don't think there's such a thing as the general public now. There's this notion of personalization and the audience of one, we're all now, because we have the control, I'm very narrowly interested in a certain number of things about a certain, so I'm really quite different to you and quite different to everybody else. We're all getting narrower, so this notion of, we're going to speak to everybody, I think it's a slippery slope if you take that. I think you really have to try to be as narrow as possible.

Mandy: Well, I guess the risk is actually reaching people, and there'll be people that you miss because they just don't engage in the channels that you decide to use or people that are not very internet savvy, maybe the older generation. It depends on who you're aiming for.

David: True, but again, as part of content marketing one of the really key things of content marketing is to understand that it's not just about digital, it is about print, it is about advertising, it is about events, it is about public relations, so we don't just toss away what we've always done, we've got to bring those things along. Again, it goes back to

the audience, who is the audience, what do they want, what are the stories that are going to light their fire, why will they care about what you're talking to, and then really make some great emotional content so you can tell some great stories.

Mandy: Yeah.

David: It's interesting. I also think that notion around, just going back to an earlier answer that you gave around finding those human stories, those people stories in public sector organizations, and obviously having the permission to tell a story that evokes an emotion, did you find that hard to get permission to be human?

Mandy: It depends where you're working. I mean it's not necessarily a human story about the people from the department that they might introduce a very interesting human story themselves. I think if you're working in a small organization it's a lot easier than a large one, I think.

David: Yeah. Okay, you spent a lot of time telling the stories of research and research communication, and again, it's such a big part of public sector organizations. What does it take to tell good stories about research or is it just the same approach as in tactics that you would take telling any sort of story?

Mandy: I think it is probably almost the same in one way, but in another way you've got a very fine balance with being able to tell a story in a way that people can understand and relate to and get an interest in and that the researcher is happy the way you've described it because they've usually done a very detailed study that's looked at particular aspect of something and they need it explained correctly.

David: Again, that's the-

Mandy: It's that managing that.

David: That is a real task and a real expertise, isn't it? Trying to get the plain English version-

Mandy: Yeah.

David: of something. Often people are so passionate, and they say to you, "And this has to go in, and this has to go in, and this has to go in," and then all of a sudden it's a blancmange and you can't find the story-

Mandy: Yeah.

David: but from their point of view it's clear, but then trying to communicate that to an audience who are perhaps not as engaged. How do you build that confidence with the policy developers and the researchers so that they can have the confidence that you're not going to dumb down what it is that they're trying to say?

Mandy: Look, I think it's allowing enough time for some to-ing and fro-ing between you and the

researcher and who-

David: Yeah. That's great advice.

Mandy: I mean it's just time.

David: Time.

Mandy: You'll get it eventually, and you might get it first off, but it just might take a while.

David: Have you noticed changes over the years in the way you tell the stories of research communication?

Mandy: Well, I think nowadays videos is becoming so regular, people are often using videos. That's a good way. It's actually graphics are getting fantastic now as well. I mean I remember we did a story in Cambodia with creating a television story for a series, and some of the material went to ABC and Behind the News did this fantastic little story for kids using lots of graphics and things like that, and yeah, that really-

David: And animation?

Mandy: animation-

David: Yeah.

really helps with telling the story, I think. That's sort of become much more accessible and fantastic now, graphics.

Mandy: Yeah. Well, and that's it, isn't it? This capability is now accessible, this capability is now available, this capability is within public sector organizations to tell you those stories, so increasingly I think we'll find the quality is going to improve as we get more people telling great stories. I did an interview once with this lady about mental health research and she told me a story that I could not stop listening to and asking questions. I remember the night on PM, the national current affairs program that went out every week, and we used to do stories three minutes, four minutes, five minutes was a long story, but I was so taken by this conversation and it was just electric, this conversation, because she was so personal about the way she told the story it ended up at 17 minutes.

David: I remember sending, I sent this interview, I rang my executive producer. I knew she was going to go off her trolley, but I said, "Trust me, trust me, trust me. You've got to-

Mandy: What program are we talking?

David: This was on PM. This was a 17-minute interview on PM, and it was the best story ever told. It was this-

Mandy: And they ran it?

And they ran it. Yeah. Well, I'd earned the right, I'd earned the right for the argument to say, listen, "I don't ask a lot, just listen to it. Just let it breath, let it work." It was sensational. It was such a beautiful story well-told. It's that great interviewing piece where you're not there. I'm a bit more present in this interview than I was in that one, but it was like the story was there in the person and out it came and out it came and out it came, and yeah. That was my favourite. That was many years ago now. What's the best story you've ever told?

I have to think about what the favourite is, but just in terms of something that springs to mind is that there was a filmmaker going over to Bangladesh and he was going with AusAID, I think. He came and said, "Look, if you've got some interesting stories over there, we'll probably be able to film something for you." I just got talking to, you know, the usual thing, going around talking to the research program managers and then ringing up the project managers and just talking to them all about what they're doing and trying to find something that really was going to work. One of them came up with something and it was really nice to get this story and get it on film.

David: It was about they had a project on introducing no-till seeders in to save labour into Bangladesh for planting various crops. This guy had been extremely poor and I think he'd sold pots, and he was very, very, very poor. He must've been able to get enough money and then he got involved in this project. He got his seeder and he just he worked his guts out. Because the farmers would pay him to bring his machine in. He'd go up and down and up and down, and he got involved in all this training. The Bangladeshi research project manager told the Australian, "I was so disappointed, he used to come to all the trainings and he didn't come this day." He turned up the next time. He said, "Where were you? You always come to the training, where were you?"

Mandy: He said, "I had a special thing I had to do," and he wouldn't say. Then he said, "Well, what was it?" He was having a blessing, a special blessing. He was actually a Hindu even though he lived in, and a blessing to the seeder. His life had been absolutely transformed. The nice thing about making the film is that they recreated the blessing with all the colour and beautiful kind of Hindu blessing of this machine. Just write a nice story because of it. He was so genuine and his life had really been changed.

David: Again I think there's another real key inside there, not only just the story but what you said in the introduction to the story was you saw the opportunity, you got out of your chair and went around and spoke to people in the organization. If you're in this business you have got to get out of your chair and go and talk to people and listen, because in public sector organizations there are reservoir of stories. They're there, you've just got to go and find them. I think it's the job of the communicator to go and find them. Now that we've got this ability to create great content, distribute great content, we've got to remember that we've got to get out of our chairs and go and ask simple questions, and two ears, one mouth, ask the simple question and the answers are going to be there. That never changes, does it? That never changes. It's just good reporting.

Mandy: The interesting thing is that the Bangladeshi research project manager, the Australian, and the research program manager in Canberra, they'd all heard that story and passed it on to me.

David: Beautiful.

Mandy: It resonated with all those people.

David: With everybody. Because we're all storytellers at the end of the day, aren't we? This is this, again, this notion of, well, we own the communications, we own the stories. No, the storytelling is everywhere. Like everyone can tell a story, that's how we communicate. Getting up and talking, and as you say, finding those resonant stories that are connecting that it's they're about. We just need to get them, tell them well, and then get them out. Just a couple more, maybe one more question. Looking into the future, what are you seeing over the next sort of while, what's one or two things that you think might be good advice for public sector content marketers as they get ready to continue to move towards this notion of publishing their own content and measuring the impact of that?

Well, I guess I've noticed, for example, the Department of Foreign Affairs is becoming more active in social media, for example, and to fuel social media you need good stories, you need good content. That's important, if you're going to go down that track you need the material to back that up. The stuff that actually is going to grab people that are on social media, that's one interesting thing. That's not particularly new, but -

Mandy: No, but it's a reasonable insight because I think that, it's not just about a few assets, you have really got to get into the game of creating lots of content because while the competition for people's attention is fierce, and you're competing with listicles and cat videos and everything else to get the people's attention, if you can get it right, the demand is large. People will chew it up if you bring it and you can create it, and you create good content. Getting ready to not just create content on a sort of, I think you're going to have to prepare to get ready to create it on an industrial scale, which again gets to this notion of building journalism and production skills into public sector organizations so they can keep up with the demand.

David: I think once public sector organizations start to communicate effectively, there's not going to be any lack of demand for it because people want to know how their money is being spent, where their money is being spent, and what good are we doing with it or why are these decisions being taken. I think it's a good insight because people have got to get used to the fact that they're going to have to scale up and get ready to be able to move to meet the demand of the audience and they've got to bring their senior leadership along with them. One more thing, if that was one insight, give me one more before we go.

I guess the thing that came to mind which was really more of a risk of that is dumbing things down too much. Sometimes things are complex and detailed and not incredibly palatable, but they're still important. It's just that playing the game, that balancing act

again, of handling what information you've got to get out there, how you're going to get it out there so people understand it. Yeah, as a responsible government I suppose you've got to tow a certain line and that's how you have to communicate. You do a job and it's not always incredibly fantastically interesting and fun every minute like social media is looking for, but that's just what you have to do.

It is what it is. Mandy Gyles, thank you. Thank you very much for coming over and saying hello and dropping into InTransition. We appreciate your time on this very warm afternoon here in Canberra, Australia. To you, the audience, thanks again for your interest in public sector content marketing. We will continue to tell stories with interesting people. Thanks very much for your feedback. If you do like the program, if you could jump over to iTunes and Stitcher or anywhere else and leave a bit of a review it helps for the program to be found. If you'd like to get in contact with us, you can jump onto the website at [www.contentgroup.com.au](http://www.contentgroup.com.au). It's [info@contentgroup.com.au](mailto:info@contentgroup.com.au) and just say hello.

Or if you know of anybody who you would be interested in me having a conversation with, we are always very, very interested in finding the most interesting people in public sector communication around the world so we can bring their insights to you so that helps you to do your job just a little better. Thanks very much, enjoy telling great stories, and we'll be back next week. Bye for now.