

InTransition Ep 52 – Trish Johnston

- Voiceover: Welcome to In Transition, a program dedicated to the practice of content marketing in the public sector. Here is your host, David Pembroke.
- David: Hello, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome again to In Transition, the podcast that examines the practice of content marketing in government. My name is David Pembroke and I'm delighted that you've been able to join us once again. Today another very special guest. But first, as we do each week, to the definition of content marketing as it relates to government and the public sector. Content marketing is a strategic, measurable and repeatable business process that relies on the creation, curation and distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve an identified stakeholder or citizen action. Our guest today is Trish Johnston, the Assistant Secretary of Communications at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet here in Canberra, Australia.
- She's been in the communications game for over two decades. She's worked on some of the government's most complex policy issues including domestic violence, cyber security, indigenous affairs, climate change, resources and energy and preventative health. Her experience spans large scale advertising campaigns, strategic communications, public relations, media, issues management and digital strategy. Trish is currently, as I said, the Assistant Secretary of Communications at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. That means that she runs the show on behalf of the very important policy department here in Australia. Trish, thanks very much for joining us in transition.
- Trish Johnston: Thanks for having me, David.
- David: Trish, as the boss of communications there at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, give me a sense of what's a typical day look like for you.
- Trish Johnston: Well, a typical day at PM&C is pretty hectic, as you can imagine.
- David: I can imagine.
- Trish Johnston: Not only do we need to respond to the Prime Minister's office. We've got a couple Portfolio Ministers as well and Minister Cash is the Minister for Women and Nigel Scullion is the Minister for Indigenous Affairs. We've got a few Assistant Minister's offices that we need to look after as well, and of course there's all the internal departmental communications. We're going in all directions all the time, ranging from web work, strategy development, media inquiries, speech writings. We do all the speech writing for all the offices as well. It's a busy branch.
- David: How do you work out what's the priority, in terms of what it is that you and your team have to do?
- Trish Johnston: Well I guess our number one stakeholder is the Prime Minister.

David: Fair enough.

Trish Johnston: Anything that comes from his office is the number one priority, and then similarly from the other offices. Responding to the offices is a key part of our role. Then I think I look at the work in terms of where can communications expertise add the most value? I think you've talked on other of your podcasts about the shift from strategic to technical in communications over the last several years. I try to focus out if it's at the strategic end, where I think we can really enhance the way that a policy or program is going to be received in the community because I have some communications advice rather than at the technical end, where perhaps we can buy that skill from outside of government, like graphic design, for example.

David: Yeah. But how then do you stay strategic in an environment that does move, that does change, that can be so volatile, depending on the issue of the day?

Trish Johnston: I think it is a struggle and I think what we're learning to do is just pause, even if it's only for a brief minute in a very busy day where something has to be delivered. We're pausing to go, "What's the strategic purpose of this and where can we really add value?" Even if that process is very short, we're trying to train ourselves to do that first. Not just to respond and go, "Here's the tactics we can do for you," but take the step back, think about why are we doing this, what are we hoping to achieve, what are the best channels, and can we measure what we're going to do?

David: Now in terms of trying to turn that fire hose off, how do you manage up into those political offices but also most importantly I think and increasingly importantly, how do you manage across into the policy areas, so as that you're really managing it as efficiently and effectively as you possibly can?

Trish Johnston: Look, it is difficult.

David: Yeah.

Trish Johnston: It's not an easy thing to do. I guess what we've been trying to do ... What I've been trying to do is really build capability within the branch so that all of our interactions with offices and with line areas is at that high level of strategic interface. Then trying to get into the policy conversations with the ministerial officers, with the policy area as early as possible so that we're embedding communications in the policy outcome, as opposed to coming to us at the end and saying, "Can you make this brochure look pretty, please?"

David: Yeah. It's that notion of transitioning comes into that strategic function as opposed to being an order taker.

Trish Johnston: Yeah.

David: What's some of your advice to people to get into those conversations? Because I

know there's a notion of, how do we get a seat at the table? Traditionally, coms hasn't been particularly well-regarded in government and public safety organization. What advice do you have to people in terms of how do you actually get that seat at the table?

Trish Johnston: I think you really need to have some support from the top and that's been a very critical element of my ability to get a seat at the table. Our former secretary, Michael Thawley, thought that it was very important that communications was embedded in all of the conversations at the strategic level, so I have access to meetings that perhaps other of my peers don't, which is very helpful just to have visibility of what's happening across the organization and to pre-empt issues. I think there's a lot of relationship building that you have to do. It's really just walking the boys, for want of a better description, and letting people know what you can do is delivering. Actually delivering what you say you're going to deliver, because I think delivering is actually where people start to go, "Right, okay. These people are more than what I thought they were."

David: Yeah.

Trish Johnston: I think sometimes in coms we can be a bit precious. There are times when we just have to deliver what the client wants, whether we think it's a good idea or not. Sometimes we just need to do that. We need to know when are the times to do that and when are the times to pause and say, "Actually, we need a little bit of a minute here to think about this and to give you our very best advice on this."

David: Okay.

Trish Johnston: I think all parties have to do a little bit of work.

David: Let's pull that apart because there's quite a few really interesting things in there. Getting that support of the leadership, was that in the leader or was it because you were able to get to him and to explain to him, "Here's where we can add value," and therefore he could see that that's useful. That's going to be relevant, so yes, you can come into the conversations.

Trish Johnston: Look, I think it was a little bit of both but primarily it was in the later. He had come from context where he'd seen how important it was to have your communications right and to have those people closer to decision making. I think it was in the first instance my call and then we then needed to deliver. I think in being able to deliver a few key pieces for him ... Or for the department, really. Not for him specifically. Our value grew and he could see that we could ... We should be embedded in some of those conversations.

David: Now in terms of delivering those outcomes, are they the result of good strategic planning, where you're able to get in early, understand the issues and come up with a plan or were they because you were good at executing on the run against some sort of merging and quick developing problems?

Trish Johnston: Look. I wouldn't say we got in at the beginning. I think most of the opportunities have come when a problem has occurred and there's been the question asked. Why weren't comms involved in this from the beginning? Then we've been given the opportunity to do the strategic work. It's learning from failure really and then being able to deliver fairly quickly. I think the days where you've got a long time to plan and ponder are probably gone, but I do think there are some instances where we can ask for a little bit more time and get it, if we can prove why we need it.

David: Do you build planning schedules into your ... Say, your yearlong work where you're looking at a schedule of programs or a body of work that needs to be delivered? Do you ever get the opportunity to be thoughtful and really stop and think, "Okay, we're going to crack this problem and then we're going to be able to deliver the solution"?

Trish Johnston: Look, there are a couple of projects where we do get to do that long-term planning, constitutional recognition being one of them. We have been involved in that from the beginning and there is a lot of long-term planning involved in that. But most of our work is much more short-term than that. Having said that, we are in the process of trying to get that long-term view, particularly for content planning for our social media channels.

David: Yes.

Trish Johnston: That requires quite a coordination exercise really ...

David: Yeah.

Trish Johnston: ... so that we can get an organization-wide view of what's coming up and try and develop a bit of a forward plan in a more strategic way. But it hasn't happened yet.

David: Yeah. Obviously we'll get to that discussion about content and content marketing and how you're embedding that into your processes to deliver those outcomes. But just before we do that, I'm really interested also in how do communications people build credibility with policy areas? I get the boss, hopefully they know and understand, they can see the values. But how do you get the policy people to understand that there's a real value in what the communications team can offer in terms of the explanation of the particular piece of policy that's been developed?

Trish Johnston: Look, one of my previous secretaries I think summed it up most nicely when he said, "It doesn't matter how elegant your policy is. If nobody understands it or knows what they need to do about it, well then it's a policy failure." I think the opening is to explain to policy people that you're not trying to take over their policy, change their policy. You're really trying to help them achieve their objectives and if it involves citizens of Australia, well then they need to be communicated with. I think the other thing is that we actually need to demonstrate our own analysis, so why have we come up with these particular approaches? Why are

these the best communication approaches that we should use? I think what has happened and it's because of speed and responsiveness, there's a set of pretty standard coms responses that people feel that they see over and over again. It doesn't feel strategic. It feels very tactical.

What I'm trying to encourage my team to do is first go to evidence. Is there any research available in the public domain that addresses the issues that we're trying to deal with and that we can bring to bear so that we can bring another insight. When a policy person comes and says, "Mine is the most important topic in the world and everybody, the whole of Australia, needs to know about this," well there's some really good regular polls out there that tell us what people in Australia are really worried about and where their issue sits in that list. That's helpful to bring to the table. I think also communications theory is sometimes useful to bring to the table as well. Say what we know about communications and how it works, the Rule of 7. People have got to see it many times in many different ways, to actually start to get a message. Bringing some evidence and theory to the discussion I think helps raise our credibility.

David: Yeah. Have you cracked that? Do you have a really standardized approach as to how you will engage with policy areas to step your team through, "Here's our approach"?

Trish Johnston: Yeah. We're on the beginning of that journey. We have developed a sort of, "Here's how to ask the right questions when you go to the policy meeting. Try to avoid giving off the cuff advice. Say, 'I'm going to come back to you in one day, two days, however many days you think it's going to take you but quite quickly.'" Then go away and do your evidence. Then we've moved from writing those long communication strategies that we spend hours on and then merely get put on a shelf and never implemented to actually treating it like a pitch. We're a communications consultant. We come and pitch to the line area what we think is the best idea.

David: Right.

Trish Johnston: We've done that a couple of times.

David: Okay.

Trish Johnston: We are at the beginning of the journey. It's going well.

David: Yeah. It's quite an agile method of being able to get in, get the information, come back, put it together and come back. Very quickly turn around and say, "Okay, based on what we know, based on what you've told us, this is what we think is going to work."

Trish Johnston: Yeah. The other thing we're doing which is a little bit different is trying to involve other people in the branch in the strategic thinking part. Our other strategic

thinkers, right? Instead of normally, one person gets a project and they work on it. They squirrel away in the corner on their own and they don't talk to anyone about ... We have sessions where we get all the EL1's say, anyone who is interested in a particular topic in a room. Give a bit of context and we say, "What are some wild ideas here?" We just throw them around. What I've noticed, again we've done that half a dozen times now, and you just get a much broader range of options to think about because there is so much creativity amongst communication people. Why waste it by just giving one person a task? It's not too onerous. It doesn't take too much time.

David: Yeah.

Trish Johnston: It keeps people stimulated because I think people who are really interested in the strategic part of communications like the thinking part, like the knotting through a problem. How will we solve this? I think everyone feels a bit more engaged when you do that.

David: The creative pieces, and that's always good fun ... Come in and, "Okay, our responsibility here is a whole league of ideas." It's very engaging. I think it's one of the great things about working in government in the public sector, is what you're thinking about are really interesting problems and important problems as they rate to the Australia people, which is why most of the people who listen to this podcast are engaged in it, because they're not thinking about how to sell more laundry detergent.

Trish Johnston: No.

David: They're thinking about how to get more people to accept or to take up a particular program of some sort.

Trish Johnston: That's right.

David: But also then, in terms of the science side of your approach, how well developed are you in that area of being able to understand the creative piece but then also to measure and evaluate some of those programs that you're putting in place?

Trish Johnston: Yeah. Look, I wouldn't say we've cracked that nut. I think evaluating is hard. Obviously, we're looking at ways online to use the different tools you can buy and the market to measure our online reach and impact. But I think there are a couple of different qualitative measures that you can use. How successfully was the implementation of program X or Y? How well informed do the program participants feel? Were there a lot of media issues? Were services providers, did they feel well supported? You can do that in an informal way.

David: Yeah.

Trish Johnston: But I think it is hard because it's also not just communications, right? It's policy

design. It's stakeholder engagement. All of those things come together in an evaluation of how effective a program or policy is. I think we're just one part of that. I think the real question is, how do we get policy and program people to embed communications evaluation in their evaluations? To see communications as an integral part of program delivery.

David: Yeah. I think that's a very good point because again, you can't take responsibility for a program failure or success.

Trish Johnston: Yeah.

David: Because again, as you say, it could be the design of the program that may in fact have impacted the result.

Trish Johnston: Yeah.

David: Now just on indulgence here, I have a theory that I often discuss with my guests around the increasing importance of communication, given the changes in technology that we've seen and how the ubiquitous nature of technology, the distribution of mobile devices, the fact that everybody who we need to connect with in order to achieve our objectives are on the grid. Really, the challenge is to activate that connection. We'll get to the discussion about content in a minute, which is that atomic particle really that does open up that connection. But you've seen that reflected in terms of how communications is seen, that there is people within your organization understanding that big, contextual shift that is taking place outside that. Everyone is now there. We can get to people. Therefore, communications has never been more important for us because that ability to be able to link and engage and connect with people is in fact better than it's ever been in the past and therefore much more important for us than it's ever been in the past.

Trish Johnston: I think it's patchy, I have to say, in our organization. There are obviously parts of our organization like the open data policy people and the cyber security people who have big online constituencies and they know the value of communicating online. In effect, they're dragging us forward because ...

David: Okay. That's good.

Trish Johnston: ... they're already doing it. The rest of the department needs to catch up. I'd say in other parts of the department, it's completely not on their radar. It is a struggle. I think where we win the conversation is in cost effectiveness. If we do online communications really cleverly, it's cost effective. It can really be effective in reaching your target audiences if you've done the work to establish those online networks and it can be quick. It can be done quickly, much more quickly than traditional means of communicating. I think we're at the very beginning of a journey. We're just moving the department to ... We launched our Digital First approach last year and we're dragging people along with us.

David: Is there a resistance to it, a reluctance to it, or are people just so busy doing what they're doing that they really haven't had time to stick their head up and think, "Oh, how has the world changed in the last little while?"

Trish Johnston: I think it's a bit of both. I think that people are very busy. They don't see it as part of their role, to think about how to reach their program recipients which are kind of funny, but they don't. I think it's partly that. I think there's a mismatch between the direction possibly that departments want to go and then either what people have done in the past or what minister's officers might want. For example, we're very rapidly trying to move away from developing glossy brochures for the announcement of each new policy. Now some areas really get that. The Closing the Gaps report this year was an online report, interactive report, which was really well received across all of the stakeholders and government stakeholders as well. That was an example of where we'd like to go. Then in other areas of the department ... Because we've always produced a glossy, they want a glossy. It's sort of like, "Wow, that's so 1990s."

David: Although printed materials does have its place.

Trish Johnston: It does.

David: At the right time, depending on what the audience needs. But I don't think it's a default order, if you know what I mean.

Trish Johnston: That's right.

David: This is how we've always done it and that's what we'd like this time around.

Trish Johnston: Yeah.

David: Listen, tell me about your journey into content and how you're taking on that challenge, that ability to be able to go direct, the ability to be able to get so much more out of the events that you create and out of the excellent, smart people who you've got working for you and turning that into really useful, relevant, valuable and consistent content that enables you to build those audience with the citizens of Australia?

Trish Johnston: Look, as I said, we're fairly early in our journey. We got a Twitter account in August.

David: Look out.

Trish Johnston: Look out. We're out there. Look, I guess it's an interesting and a long journey. In some parts of the department, we're a bit further along. We already have indigenous.gov which is an engagement channel with indigenous communities that already have Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and YouTube and everything attached to it, so that was quietly happening under the radar. It is very effective

with indigenous communities. We wanted to obviously expand the department's presence to a whole of community sort of presence. We're working on a couple of things. We're working on upgrading our website to make it more user-focused rather than the website reflected the structure of the department.

David: Yeah.

Trish Johnston: Not the way that users might engage or the users we want to come.

David: Yes.

Trish Johnston: As opposed to the users that were coming.

David: Now how is that going?

Trish Johnston: Well it's still being developed.

David: The ideas? Or has it started?

Trish Johnston: No, the website itself is still being developed.

David: That's not a process that's aging you prematurely?

Trish Johnston: It is a little but I'm very optimistic that it will be ... Nothing could age you more than the internet, I think. People out there will know what I'm talking about. That process is in train. That's quite exciting because that is quite a content reach design that we've come up with now.

David: Right.

Trish Johnston: We do need a lot more content. As I said, we're babies at Twitter and we're progressing cautiously but the next move is to ... Because we have such a diverse policy scope in PM&C having a central departmental channel on Twitter is probably not the way to go.

David: No.

Trish Johnston: We need to break it down into ...

David: Completely agree.

Trish Johnston: We're just starting that process, which I think will be exciting because I think that we'll be able, with some really effective outreach, to get people following us and re-tweeting us and all those things. I think we'll be able to establish really good stakeholder channels.

David: No question.

Trish Johnston: Which are much more effective than the ones we're using at the moment, which are email lists.

David: Yeah, although again, they have their ... Email lists obviously have their role as well. But I think it also goes to this point of the actual content in government and the public sector is so rich with interest. If you can tell a good story and tell a compelling story with the graphics and the animation or getting that emotion about what it is, how hard is that going to be for you to become great storytellers within a very traditional policy department?

Trish Johnston: Look, I don't know that we're ever going to be great storytellers, but at least telling some stories. The thing is that we are very content rich. There's so much great stuff in indigenous affairs that's happening. There's great stuff in Office for Women ...

David: There's so many smart people working in the policy areas as well.

Trish Johnston: Yeah.

David: That to me is an absolute gold mine in the government and public sector, is getting people to think slightly differently about the contribution they can make and, "Hey, come over here. We've got a platform for you to actually help you build policy and help you find out what stakeholders want to know."

Trish Johnston: Absolutely. Yeah, very content rich. We're starting small in a sense. What we've done recently on the Women's Workforce Participation Agenda, we've developed a 6-month content plan where we ... In the same way that you would in a normal, a traditional communication strategy, acknowledging that third party advocacy is always a very powerful tool. What we've been doing is capitalizing on all the events that we know the minister is going to anyway. There's a whole social media strategy that includes infographics and things every time she's out speaking and then we get the key stakeholders at the event and we film them and we do interviews with them and we create content for later.

David: Nice. I like it.

Trish Johnston: Yeah. We're getting a bit of content in the bank so that we can actually just continually drip it out over time.

David: Good.

Trish Johnston: Indigenous Affairs, as I said, we already get some content there but in a fairly uncoordinated way. We're looking at how we can coordinate that and actually skill some of our staff that are on the ground in community to be able to take a little bit of a video for us. I think the thing that we need to impress upon people is it doesn't always have to be high-quality. It doesn't have to be beautifully ... Have beautiful

production values. An iPhone will do the job for a short Twitter video. There's a program we're trying to train people, but I think the main thing is that people need to be a bit of a shift in mindset, that this is not additional to their work. This is part of their work, to tell the good news stories of the government's policy and programs. That is part of a policy or program job.

David: Yeah. In that case, you're not just talking about the coms team. You're talking about the policy teams.

Trish Johnston: The policy teams. Because ultimately, they've got to identify the content. I don't know what's happening in all of the 20 offices across Australia. The people out there know what are the great stories and what are the ordinary stories. I can do the bundling and I can do the writing and I can maybe send someone out to video, but someone has to identify them for you. The people that are best placed to do that are the ones that are closest to the ground.

David: Yeah. There's another one of my often retailed theories through the podcast is exactly that, is that the future is really going to be about distributing that capability to the edges, to the places who are closest to the audience because the need for speed and that need of understanding and being able to quickly turn things around is where we're going to go and that's where we're going to have to get to. The role of the communications people is going to change to become more strategic and more understanding of where the whole program is, but the delivery will be very much at the edges, which takes me to the point of skills and skills development. That alone is an interesting point. I think that's something that people should mark down and understand, is that skills development is not just about the teams who may work for you today and stakeholder engagement and communications and advertising, marketing, whatever it is, public relations, whatever you have them categorized as. But it's additionally.

How are your skills in that centre pool of people you've got at the moment given the fundamental changes that we're looking at? Given this shift of content? How well-prepared for it are you at the moment?

Trish Johnston: Well I think we've got a few people that are very skilled in content planning, which is great.

David: As in understanding the type of content for the right channel at the right time, that sort of thing?

Trish Johnston: Yep.

David: Good.

Trish Johnston: I think we've got some skill there. I think the real trap is that I also have a lot of under 30s working for me and I think people think because they use Twitter or Facebook or Instagram that they know how to really use it. I think that's the trap. If

we believe that, we won't go and seek the expertise that we really need to seek, because I think there's much more sophisticated ways of using those channels than we're currently accessing. What I'm trying to do is bring in different voices, different experts to talk to us about how to really get the most out of these channels. Not just how to do a tweet. I think we can all kind of work that out. But why tweet, when, how, how do you build your audiences? When would you use Facebook versus Twitter?

It may seem obvious, but I think advertising in social ... I think there's quite a bit of nuance and targeting and things that can happen there. I don't think we've got those skills. I'm trying to bring us all up together. Obviously, I'm learning too. It's not the stuff I studied at university however many years ago. I think we have got some in house skill and we've developing video skill as well, so we've actually got a role that is about producing video content and I've skilled up a few people across the branch to be able to do that. But our policies and programs are delivered in remote areas, so really, I need people in remote areas to be a little bit more skilled, which is what we are planning to do. I think we're at the beginning of a journey again, to repeat myself.

David: Sure. Well the other thing is that ... I think we're at the beginning, all of us all the time. Things are changing, behaviours are changing, tools are changing, technology is changing. We really need to adopt that scientific methodology of test and learn. At this point in time, this is what we think is our best judgement as to the communications program that we need. But then let's press the button and see how performs get the learnings, adapt change, but really get that mentality that we're going to continue to ...

Trish Johnston: Evolve.

David: ... roll on and roll on and roll on, as we go through.

Trish Johnston: Yeah.

David: Are you optimistic? You sound like you're enjoying yourself, like it's not too much. Like, "Where do I start?"

Trish Johnston: No, I think it's an amazing and exciting time because I think the future of communications it not in large spend advertising campaigns anymore. I think generally, communications ...

David: Can you repeat that please?

Trish Johnston: That's just my personal view, my personal view. Communication budgets have shrunk across government. I think online communications offers us lots of exciting opportunities that don't have to be expensive. I think if we were talking about low budget coms without online, digital coms, then I would be quite depressed actually. But I think it's opened up a whole new Pandora's Box for us to get really creative

with and prove how we can help policy areas through these new and exciting channels.

David: Okay. Just a final question. If you had a magic wand and you could whiz it across the branch that you're in charge of, what's the one pebble in your shoe, what's the one thing that you're thinking to yourself, "I wish I could crack that nut. I wish I could solve that problem"?

Trish Johnston: I think it really is in the digital space. My sense is at the moment that there aren't probably lots of people out there, except maybe a few big banks and things, that are doing digital coms really, really well. I think there's a lot of people who know the words to use but I guess what I want is for us to move to the next level and not just be talking theoretically about how these things move. I want us to hit the ground ...

David: See the miserable results.

Trish Johnston: ... see some results and see that people are engaging with us online and be able to say to our executive, "See? This does work." I don't think we're there yet. I think we're still ... It's still a bit theoretical.

David: Okay.

Trish Johnston: Yeah.

David: Good. All right. Well, listen. Thank you very much for giving up so much of your valuable time to come in and share it with the audience today. We have a global audience. We have people listening all over the world and I know that they would have got an enormous amount out of that, so Trish, thank you very much for coming in.

Trish Johnston: Thanks for having me.

David: Thanks to you and thanks to Zalesh Carter, the show runner here at the In Transition podcast for pulling all this together. We'll be back next week with another exciting guest, discussing the fascinating process of content marketing in the world of government and public sector. Speak to you next week.

Voiceover: You've been listening to In Transition, the program dedicated to the practice of content marketing in the public sector. For more, visit us at contentgroup.com.au.