

InTransition Episode 54 – Mitch Joel

David: Hello once again, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to InTransition. The podcast that examines the practice of content marketing in government and the public sector.

My name is David Pembroke, and I'm delighted that you've decided to give us just a little bit of your time this week to discuss content marketing in government.

As we do each week, we begin with the definition of content marketing as it relates to government and the public sector, because I think it's important that we do understand just exactly what content marketing is. As we explore the concepts and the ideas, that we know exactly what we're talking about.

Content marketing, this is an adaptation of the content marketing institute's definition I might say, but as it relates to government and the public sector.

Content marketing is a strategic measurable, an accountable 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 specific and identified citizen and or stakeholder action.

To discuss content and all things content today, we're joined by Mitch Joel who's one of the world's leading thinkers in all matters content. He is the president of Mirum, a global marketing agency that operates in close to 20 countries with over 2,000 employees.

He's also importantly the host of the popular podcast, Six Pixels of Separation which recently reached the massive milestone of 500 episodes. Mitch is also the author of two books on the implications of new media. His latest book, Ctrl Alt Delete was named one of amazon.com's best books of 2013. It examines just how businesses and marketers can capitalize on the interconnections of modern society.

Mitch has been named as one of the top 100 online marketers in the world. Instead of speaking at, perhaps, Google or Microsoft or anywhere else in the world that Mitch does today, he joins us from Montreal. Mitch Joel, thanks very much for being InTransition.

Mitch: Thanks for having me David.

David: Now, perhaps I should have said, "Mitch Joel, who are you and what do you do?"

Mitch: Exactly. Yeah. I think you just said who I am and what I do.

David: Mitch, actually, maybe let's start there on the podcast. 500 episodes and it's where I first came across you. You really enjoy it, don't you?

Mitch: Yeah. We say the number 500 now, and a lot of people do daily shows and things like that. I've been doing a weekly show for 500 consecutive weeks, haven't missed a week.

It's caving in at well-past I guess a decade now at this point. It's a funny thing.

I started the show because I was blogging every single day. When I mean every single day, I mean 7 days a week. I thought, "Well, even on Sundays, the Lord above rested. I should probably rest too. Maybe it was just be easier to talk instead of type."

I started the podcast with that spirit of more rambling through what's been happening in the world and how things were changing. Again, we're going back to 10 years ago. Quickly, as you know, because you produce a podcast, it's not that easy to do and it's a whole bunch of work. As the technology evolve and the quality of the shows evolve too, you had to keep pace.

I enjoy it immensely. I tell people it's probably the biggest guilty pleasure that I have. Every week I think of a problem I have in business or something I'm not sure of and then I go, "Who would be the best person to ask?" and then I coyly invite them on to my podcast. More often than not, people agree, which I'm very gracious for. I get to corner them and speak to them for upwards of 35 minutes to an hour about all the things that they're great at.

The little secret is that I hit the publish button. In reality, it's much like all of these great people just allowing me the niceness of spending time with me. I feel very, very fortunate about it and I treat it with a serious amount of sanctity.

David: Yeah. As a member of the audience, I feel like I'm sitting there just listening in on a great conversation, an interesting conversation. I think this is perhaps one of the great powers of podcasting is it is so intimate.

Mitch: It is and it isn't. People hear that and thank you, I appreciate those compliments. What they don't know is that from the years of 1988 onward, I had spent years interviewing every famous rock star and music celebrity and really cut my teeth going into rooms where every 15 minutes another journalist was brought in to speak to the celebrity who was tired and exhausted from the gig before and they had to play that night.

I quickly realize that going in with questions and ask them the same things everyone else was asking them was not doing me anything. That became the moment, again, when I was much, much younger when I realized that you have to have a conversation. You have to know your stuff. It's not about the next question. It's about where they're going and how they're leading it.

You're right, that podcasting affords anybody the ability to have a show. It doesn't afford anybody the ability have a show. It doesn't afford anybody the ability to know how to engage somebody in a conversation. At the same time, having the communication skills to really bring the conversation out so that it's publishable.

Those are things that I learned over a decade of working in a very, very tough milieu, rock stars and things like that. That I really do think I was able to transcribe into this business world, and I'm very fortunate for that and I feel very grateful for that. I don't

hear that lot in the content. The level of content for me falls very flat because I feel like the person is just trying to get to the next question instead of really trying to have a great conversation.

David: Perhaps, is that the difference between a good podcast and a bad podcast?

Mitch: Yeah, it is. The problem is there's just way too many battles.

David: Have you got time to waste on bad ones or do you just quickly turn them off and just spend your time on the ones that you enjoy?

Mitch: It's funny. As the years have gone on and on, it's almost like I'm not as serialized and dedicated to weekly listen to one specific person or show. I typically drop in and out based off of, "Do I like the content? Do I like the host? Do I like the guest?" It's funny. I have a show and I love podcasting, but I'm not a massive consumer as I used to be of the genre at all.

David: Okay. Listen, it's an interesting point that you made there before about going back through your history, because I think one of the things I particularly admire about you and your work is that you're not just an observer, not just a student, you're a participant. You've been in this content business for, as you say, going back to really even the days when you were a very young man and you were publishing those magazines from when you were almost a teenager. Where have we arrived at and how can people be successful in the world that we have today?

Mitch: A book could fill the answer to that question. It's not an easy thing to answer. Long ago when blogging first became something and it's getting real awareness. I'd say that's probably around over 10 years ago. Everybody wanted to have a blog. Everybody had a blog.

Coming from a place where not only was I publishing magazines, but I was also writing freelance for a lot of magazines. I remember the gatekeeper. I remember me pitching stories in a pre-internet world by fax machine, by telephone, by regular snail mail and getting rejected time and time and time again. When blogging came to be, I realized that that was the end of those gatekeepers as Seth Godin has so eloquently called them.

When I pushed out a little bit forward of where we're at, I think we're at the same place. Where we at. We're at a place where anybody can have an idea, a thought, a story to tell, and they can publish that idea in text, images, audio or video or all of the same time, or one or two, or mixed up, or however they want, in short form or long form. They can hit this amazing button that does publish it to the world. That doesn't mean you're going to have access to the world. It doesn't mean that the platform you're putting on is going to have the attention of the world.

In theory, anybody who would like to find whatever it is this piece of content is, can find it. What's happened is we've obviously had a massive evolution of the technology where we went from, and it's more simplistic form of text, to images, to audio and video.

That's just a complexity of how we deliver this content through the technology.

Of course now, what we're seeing several decades later is the ability to do all that on a smart phone, which makes it extremely mobile, extremely live and in the moment. You can think about things like Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, and it creates a very different dynamic of what any brand, what any business, what any government can do to connect to their audience.

David: Yeah, indeed. How do they succeed? How do they do it well? Is it a matter of understanding the platforms? Acquiring the skills? Understanding the planning side of things? What are some of the things that people really need to get right if they're going to ensure that their story is heard?

Mitch: They can't suck. You just can't suck. You have to understand the audience. You have to understand how they're connecting and what they're getting value out of in whatever platform or type of media you choose to create. You have to come at it with a very authentic and real and value added component to it.

I think more often than not, where I think things fall down is that the people who are creating the content genuinely and unfortunately see it as a job, versus the stuff that they're meant to communicate, "Mitch, how do you still blog every single day? How do you still podcast every single week?" I'm not even publishing all the things I would love to publish.

The truth is, because I have a little bit of a nose for news and interest. Also, I'm extremely passionate about using words, and audio in my case. I'm not really a video or an image guy, to communicate to a broader audience. On top of that, I have layered in a theory of consistency.

I come from the magazine world, and I can tell you that I'd read these magazines that came out monthly and I'd be so passionate about them. I'd go to the corner store where the magazines are being sold. I walk away every other week, "Uh, there's no new issue. There's no ..."

I can tell you, the magazines that I really love, whether it's a Fast Company, or back in the day, Business 2.0, Wired. You could sense that it's been about a month and it's time for a new issue. If you know what I mean.

In digital, we went in this real time perpetual content flow which I think is interesting. When you create great content and the audience wants it, they have a feeling. They understand the pulse of how you're pulsing that content out.

I think a lot of the publishers who aren't really getting it just yet are so fragmented and it's so disjointed that there's never anything for the audience to latch on, "We wrote a post last Thursday, then there was an audio clip on Monday, then we post it on Facebook." It's do disjointed that there's no way any of these audience can clamp on and go for the ride.

I think it's all of those things. The truth is, at the end of day, it goes back. You can't. It's really hard to suck. It's actually very easy to suck in the sense of ... It's hard to suck in the sense of people won't connect to you. They just won't. There's no interest if there's nothing there for them.

David: Quality obviously, as you say, is fundamental. I just like to explore this notion of consistency. Have you noticed ... Again, this is probably given that you have been a publisher for so long and you've published so much content overtime. How have you seen how consistency has helped Mitch Joel to build his considerable platform and to build the relationships you do with audiences now which are located all around the world?

Mitch: If you take my podcast, Six Pixels of Separation, I think there's over the years, and by beating it down people's throats, they know that every Sunday there's a new show. If I don't publish or something goes late or an FTP fails, I get e-mails and tweets and, "Where's your show? I'm going for my walk. It's Sunday morning." It's almost like they're expecting it like they used to expect the Sunday Times.

I know that there's something resonating. Every Saturday I do a blog post where two of my friends, Hugh McGuire and Alistair Croll, we share a link. Basically, it's a link to the other person that we think they should see because we're all from different types of industries with digital at our core.

It's been going on over 300 of those, and if you just follow the flow of my content, you'll see people saying things like, "Can't wait for Saturday. Can't wait for the link exchange." In a world that is so crowded, and I think a big problem is the quality where the cream rises to the top. That's true, but now there's so much cream, it's hard to know what's at the top.

That by at least creating that editorial calendar in my own world, I hopefully and habitually, I'm getting my audience in line with that. Some of it might be more unconscious and some of it is more pre-meditated. Unconscious is every Monday morning I do a hit on the big local rock radio station here where I talk about digital media. It's about 8 to 12 minutes long. It's really an overview. What happened? What are the three things that happened, and what's my app of the week? It's posted to SoundCloud, and I post that every single Monday on my blog.

I haven't habituated anyone to that. I just post it every single Monday. What I noticed then is in the other social channels, whether it's Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, whatever it might be, if people are connecting to me. They'll be, "Oh! Great segment this morning." They're becoming more connected to it, but I'm not broadcasting, "Monday is radio segment day." That's not how I do it.

Sunday is podcast day. Saturday is weekly link exchange. I have in my own head a roll out of the rest of the week. For me, Monday is the radio component of it. Tuesday is usually a deeper thought piece for me. Wednesday is more elegant question thought,

which is something I've read, and there's a question being post in this article. I'll come back with a more elegant question for business leaders to think about.

Thursday, another thought piece. Friday, typically, it's a video that captured my attention. I'll do a bit of a commentary on it and then embed it in the thing.

Again, it's not something that I publicly broadcast, but I know from my history of traditional media, that creating that habitualisation and getting people comfortable that there's something there regularly. It keeps the pace and flow more reasonable than we went for two weeks and didn't do anything.

David: Yeah. In terms of seeing the audience growth and the response to that, because that's a lovely cadence and you've outlined that really lovely and clearly. Have you seen the audience respond to it and grow overtime?

Mitch: Yeah. Obviously, I'm fortunate and that it seems like every year, the appetite to continue with me or for new people to figure out who I am is there. I always jokingly say that in my industry I'm a little mouse. I got 65,000 or whatever, 70,000 people maybe on Twitter. I look to the giants. I look at somebody like my friend Gary Vaynerchuk, and he's got millions upon millions of followers and I'm like, "Listen. He's running a similar type of business that I am. He's done it extremely successful. I think we've done it too."

I know that if I grow my audience 10 times, that I'll still be just at par with him and he's probably someone who can walk the streets without getting mobbed by adoring fans. That there's a bigger world out there. It's not necessarily a question for me of how many more people can I get to that size of follower base. It's not that really important to me.

What's important is that I have my own game and strategy around it. When I look at other people, "What's my game?" My game is to be the marketer's marker. My game is to be somewhat more academic. My game is to be a little bit more philosophical. I think my game is to also create a depth of content. Meaning, my pieces typically run a little long on the blog and I know that. I do it because I want people to commit to it. I want people to spend time with it. I don't want to have a buzzfeedy, typical 250 word article.

I'm creating restrictions and almost speed bumps if you will that run counter-logic to what's happening online, but I'm doing it for specific reason because I'm looking for a specific type of person, not a specific size of audience.

David: Yeah. It's wonderful, because what you're outlining is really the opportunity for people to be thoughtful about who it is that they're trying to connect with. Obviously, you're not trying to get to everybody. You're trying to get to a particular type of a person who's interested in marketing and build a relationship with them overtime.

Mitch: Yeah. I also want my work to be destination based a little bit. I'm less interested in engaging on Twitter and Snapchat. I understand them. I work with them. We recommend the clients, and I get it. I'd prefer that the conversation, if you will, the discourse against my content happens by people reading the blog post, listening to the

podcast. I don't care if they comment or like. I really don't.

I want them to be better for that content. When I'm writing it or creating a conversation, all I'm thinking in my head is, "How can I have the best conversation with this person if it's a podcast?" If I'm writing a blog post, "What is something about this thing that I haven't read or that is bothering, or that's itching at me that I need to get out and explore?" I'm hoping that when I do either of those two things, somebody else in the world goes, "Yeah, me too."

David: Yeah. Listen. This podcast is really all about trying or starting the education process really for government and public sector people working in communications all around the world to transition from the world, the traditional world of media buys, public relations, traditional digital place to taking on this gift of technology. Which means that everyone now has the ability to be a creator and distributor of useful relevant and consistent content.

It's difficult sometimes for people to, "Where do we get started? How do we start to build those relationships with citizens and stakeholders through content?"

What advice would you have for people who are just starting out on this journey of becoming a publisher?

Mitch: To me, it's actually very simple. What are you good at? What do you care about? How are you good at communicating? I see so many people they start a blog and they're just not good at writing. They're much better at capturing images. Start an Instagram feed.

I think that the real trick isn't what's cool? Where are the masses? It's what type of content can you create passionately? What type of content would you create if there wasn't any money involved, because typically there isn't. If there wasn't any audience involved, because typically, the beginning isn't. What is that skillset that you have, that you believe needs to come out?

Again, for me, it was very obvious that it was primarily writing and then I do enjoy, for sure, having the conversations for the podcasts as well. It was really the writing thing. It was a no-brainer for me. Even with things like Twitter or even Medium or LinkedIn, I see the format and I get it and it's attractive to me for certain pieces of content maybe. It doesn't satiate what I need to do as a writer.

Again, to-date, maybe that will change. It's happened still for me in the simplistic blog. I recognize that that's uncool. That it's not Snapchat and that it's not creating unique filters for Snapchat and geofilters and all that stuff.

I'm okay with not trying to just appease, because that's the shiny, bright object of the day. I think the written word has been around a long time. I think it's going to be around for a long time to come. All I'm doing is actually parsing and pruning the audience and getting the people who are most interested in the work that I'm creating.

It's not a very smart strategic thing that I would say to a client because they're trying to get mass. They're trying to reach almost everybody. I think you need different levers to pull at that point. You're not going to get anywhere on the content side of creation if whoever is creating the content, treats it as a job, and, "What do I have to do today?" Versus if you saw a shot of my desk here, you'd see a whole bunch of papers just bullet point after bullet point of potential blog stories, podcast, interviews, ideas, things like that. I just don't have enough time to get it all out in words.

David: What about the context? The broader context? I was interested a couple of weeks ago when you started talking about the need to publish where audiences are and you were mauling over this idea of, "Am I going to take everything and put it into Facebook and start putting all of my material there?" Where are you with that thinking at the moment in terms of how people engage with these massive platforms that are now in place?

Mitch: I realized doing this every day for as many years, decades as this point that I've done. That as the years progressed, it was getting increasingly more difficult to get somebody to come to the blog. At first, they would come because they weren't that many. They would come because they signed up an e-newsletter.

Then there was RSS and then they'd have it in a feed, in a reader, and then they would get shared and then the social media came on. When social media come on, really ... When I say social media, I mean social networks. Let's about LinkedIn. Let's talk about Facebook. Let's look at what Medium does.

Those platforms make it even harder to say to somebody on them, "Hey, you're here at Facebook. We're having a jolly old time. Come over to my blog and checkout this thing that I just wrote." When in reality you can just embed it there into that content.

That increasing cost which isn't necessarily monetary, it could be just time, energy and effort, switched the power. This only happened very recently. I'd say within the past two years where it's been a dramatic shift.

Whereas before, I used to think, "What will be the legacy of Six Pixels of Separation?" As the destination for how I think? What's happening at Mirum? Et cetera. Et cetera. I realized that it's almost like more the freelance world that I came from, which is I didn't own the magazines that I was publishing. I just published on them. I published on them because there was an audience present.

I would urge people if they were thinking about starting today and getting started in this is actually to not worry so much about what you're putting on your own site, behind your own walled garden if you will. Rather, where is your most active audience? Can you reach them directly in there?

For me, I have been testing putting some of these content that I would normally just blog on to Facebook. I'm thinking about things like LinkedIn and Medium and getting more regular again with the Huffington Post which I contributed to for many years and I probably will start that up again really soon.

The thought that I have is Six Pixels of Separation used to be the destination. Everything I did out in the social media networks was about getting you to come back to check out the blog download of the podcast. Now, I'm thinking about how I can maybe invert that. It's in Facebook. It's on LinkedIn. It's in Huff Po. It's in Medium, and that the blog that used to be the destination now becomes more of the archive.

Everything that I create is still there, and you can visit there and it's as fresh as any other moment. The real action on that content is happening in the spaces outside of the blog.

David: Yeah. Right. Where do you think that's going to end up? Do you think it is this notion of distributed content that is going to be fundamental over the next few months and years? Increasingly, it's going to be. That's where you've got it have to be?

Mitch: I think there's an equalized thought around not just ... It used to be, "What type of content are you creating?" That was then a big thing. Now I think there's an equalized thought around not only what type of content are you creating, but where are you distributing it? That it's not sufficient to just put it on your own property, because then you have to spend a significant amount of time, energy and effort getting people there. More often than not, you have to pay for that as well.

I'm not saying you have an easy float on Facebook. You're on Facebook with all the likes that you may have for your brand and all that. You still have to potentially pay to have all that stuff come through to your audience, but better than nothing.

David: Yeah. What was your response then? Again, one of your other conversations the other week with your friend Avinash Kaushik, where he was saying that he's heading perhaps in the other direction back to his own site, putting more focus on building e-mail distribution because he's found that perhaps the engagement. I think he mentioned around Google+ had dropped off, and he was looking for another experience. How do you reflect on the fact that someone as popular and prolific as Avinash is now focusing on his home base?

Mitch: I would correct the statement and I'd say that what Avinash is doing is he's very, very active in the social spaces where he'd seen the value. What he's trying to do which is something that I embarrassingly never did was build the database, so that I can actually speak direct to my audience.

He recognized that he too was late in that. He anticipated, as I did, that hanging around blogs and social media, that's enough, but there's a value and actually being able to speak directly to people through that inbox. This new little newsletter that he has is directed to build the database up, get the names there and send the contact out. He's not dismissing posting on his blog, posting on Facebook and all the other places where he's doing amazing, amazing stuff. Probably one of the smartest guys I know.

I think he's just playing a little bit of catch up as I should be. Embarrassingly enough, I haven't. I probably will soon, to building that database, because it is. It is somewhat

wasteful to not be able to have that direct relationship with your audience if all you do is have the blog and they're not necessarily coming there as often or as frequently as they used to.

I think there's a tremendous power in just building that database and having it. The only way that that database from my perspective. I think Avinash is, again, one of the few that's getting it so right is it's pure value. He is not telling you about his e-marketing course or trying to sell you a book. Every little e-newsletter that Avinash sends you is a beautiful little gem. I think it's brilliant.

I think, again, I definitely see my moving in that direction. I could see all of the authors and thinkers that I love doing that, and I would love nothing more than to open up my e-mail every day and have all the smartest people I know sending me little personalized pieces of content of things that are on their mind because it's sometimes hard to get that message through on the Facebook feed. It's sometimes hard to get it through in a cluttered place like LinkedIn. It's very hard if I, as the reader, I'm not actively going to their site every day. Which is something none of us do anymore.

David: Listen. I need a couple of minutes before we close off. I just quickly want to get your views on ... Not only are you this prolific creator, distributor, thinker around content digital marketing, et cetera. You also are involved in the agency world, and you're working with clients globally as part of the WPP group.

In that role, what's the advice that you're giving to people when you're walking into those meetings and they're saying, "Mitch, talk to us." What does Mitch Joel say to those big clients who are looking for the insights? What are the key things that you're saying to them as we look forward?

Mitch: From a content perspective, it's not to forget about content. I think a lot of them really feel mostly because these channels have been in their offices without us and said to them, "They've got mass reach." That a lot of the social media conversation, it's just a pay channel now.

I think that it's true, and that's the game that the social media networks have to play, but it's not the only thing. I think there still is a value in creating valuable, tangible utility based content, one. Two is I think that they have to fundamentally understand how this content is being consumed. We can talk all we want about web browsers and blogs, but all of these stuff is really happening on this mobile devices.

Now, that's a Pandora's box, because the minute you go there, you start looking at things like their websites and everything they've done today. For the vast majority of brands out there, from the biggest to the smallest, from to B to B, to B to C, it doesn't matter. Those experiences are pretty not great.

At best, they're responsive and unfortunately your consumer is living in a tender, uber based environment where they have interactions, sliding the thumbs up, down, Snapchats and they come to lesser than web versions smaller than mobile experience

that isn't really intuitive and organic like the other apps that they use. It's a very bad brand impression.

The other stuff that I'm looking at primarily is where is the innovation coming from? When I say innovation, I don't mean a better mousetrap, a better ad. As an engine of marketing now, because these publishing platforms, you can create digital products, digital services, bridges between what you physically may sell or bridges between what services you may offer from online ordering.

The other side is the transactional side. I'm not talking about them ultimately buying your product. I think that's really important. I'm talking about what happens to get them to that point and how are you engaging those transactions.

If somebody signs up for any newsletter, does that give them a higher propensity to convert to being a customer? If they watch a video and then sign up to an e-newsletter? What is that do? Understanding the dynamics that are happening behind it, not just the ... Again, with Avinash Kaushik, called the Vanity Metrics. The real metrics of conversions through micro transactions or micro conversions.

David: Mitch, thank you very much for your time today and for sharing some of your wisdom on just exactly how it is that you've got yourself to where you are. You still sound excited, enthusiastic in this infinitely fascinating world of digital marketing that's changing every day. Are you as fired up as you've ever been about being involved in the business?

Mitch: It's a yes and no. I'm as fired up because I feel like whenever you're talking about the evolution of brands and technology, the runway is very long and very wide. In that instance, when I look out at the horizon and see things like augmented reality and virtual reality and robotics and drones and marketing automation, I'm extremely passionate about it.

On the other side, I'm a bit none excited about it because I feel like we've given up on the social, that the human beings having real interactions between real human beings through digital channels, because we feel like it's all just paid now and it's all been turned into the cash machine.

I don't think that that's true, but because brands are reacting that way and traditional agencies are selling that bill of good as well, I'm disillusioned on that side.

David: Okay. All right then. Listen, thank you very much again for your time. Thanks for being so generous with that time and certainly for the audience, because I know they would have got an enormous amount out of it. Just quickly, how do people connect into the world of Mitch Joel? Where can they get to know you a little bit better and understand some of the thinking that you're continuing to do on a daily and weekly basis?

Mitch: Google Mitch Joel, it's all there.

David: Okay. Mitch Joel, thanks very much for joining us InTransition.

Mitch: My pleasure. Thanks David.