

InTransition episode 55 – Kate Bradstreet

David: Well, hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome to In Transition, 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 joined me once again today. Today, we speak to a very experienced government communicator who's got lots of wonderful insights and she gave a great presentation not long ago to the International Association of Business Communicators here in Canberra, Australia and we'll be talking to her about that in just a moment.

Before we do that, as we start the podcast every week, we look at the definition of content marketing as it relates to government and the public sector. Content marketing is a strategic, measurable, and 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 desired citizen or stakeholder action. That is content marketing.

To our guest today, Kate Bradstreet is a communications consultant with over 15 years' experience. Kate has advised on several projects for the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet including the Prime Minister's National Ice Taskforce and Reducing Violence Against Women and their Children. Prior to founding her own consultancy firm, Kate was the senior director of online communications for the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency. Kate has also spent several years with the Australian Federal Police, rising to become the commissioner's chief media adviser where she advised on such high profile events as the second Bali bombings and the crisis in Timor. Kate, thank you very much for being in Transition.

Kate: Thanks very much, David. Glad to be here with you.

David: Great career. What are you finding at the moment that is really engaging you in the work that you're doing because you're obviously doing some fascinating work.

Kate: I really like the work where I feel like I can connect with the public. When I'm talking about connecting with the public, it's on these very issues that I feel are at the heart of where we need to think about. At the moment, I'm working on the Prime Minister's COAG group on Reducing Violence against Women and their Children. This is working with Ken Lay, the former Victoria Police commissioner, and the 2015 Australian of the year Rosie Batty.

Now domestic violence was on the national agenda in 2015. We have been able to move the conversation that was, as you know David, probably a bit of a taboo topic, one that was discussed behind closed doors or actually not even discussed. Now, it's across the national papers, it's a community conversation that's happening and it's reached the very highest political levels.

David: Interesting though in terms of content, there was, might have been a month or 2 ago but there was that wonderful sequence of stories on the ABC night after night after night. This is the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for our listeners overseas. There

was a program on the Monday night, on the Tuesday night, on the Wednesday, and it came at this hideous problem from all sorts of different angles. It just jolted me as a consumer and I thought to myself, this is really a powerful way to communicate and obviously, you can't have 365 days a year. How do you sustain that engagement? How do you sustain that interest over time in a topic that is so important and so crucial to the future of a country like Australia? It's a global issue, domestic violence against women and their children.

Kate: It is absolutely a global issue and you're exactly right. Why the emphasis was at that particular time is that it marked the International Day of Violence against Women. Now from a content marketing perspective, from a media perspective, I looked at that period of time and knew that that was going to be a key touch point. The trick is knowing it's going to be a key touch point, so engaging media on that and making sure it gets a good run in that week. You can't have it left in that week. It has to continue, so that is about finding the key opportunities.

In that week, Ken gave a very in depth and really deep presentation at Monash University that got massive social media coverage, got lots of shares, got lots of likes. His particular quotes were being talked about. The challenge for me as its main advisor and communications advisor was how do I use that and make sure that that continues and deepens the conversation outside of the week where the attention is on the issue anyway.

David: How are you doing that at the moment?

Kate: What I look at, David, is I look how the audience has reacted to that piece of information or that speech or that media release, be what it may. What I need to do is find other ways to connect to the community and keep that conversation ongoing. That means providing new content, that means looking at new angles, that means actually finding things that people want to discuss and get involved with, not just running out standard lines, not just using the same talking points that you've been using on this issue for 5 years.

David: Freshen it up, make it interesting. How are you going about using content and how are you creating useful, relevant, and consistent content in order to engage and inform a specific audience to achieve that desired citizen or stakeholder action which is obviously to stop it or reduce the incidence of it?

Kate: Sure. I use a tool where I'm talking and look at stakeholder mapping. I analyse what's being said in the media by any stakeholder that might be talking about this issue. By doing that and by tracking it, you can actually track where the conversation is going. 12 months ago, the issue of domestic violence in Australia wasn't even linked to gender equity. I knew that gender equity is at the very heart of the issue but the conversation was so far behind. How do you get to the heart of the issue in taking the community or leading the community on conversation, on that conversation, where that conversation needs to go? We're not there. I'm not saying that we're there yet. I'm not saying that the conversation on Australia on domestic violence is gender-based. It's not but we're a

long way there.

Now the way you go about doing that is at the very highest level. We've had the prime minister talking about respect for women being linked to domestic violence. We've had all of the premiers and COAG supporting domestic violence and putting it on the national agenda. We had Rosie Batty last year as the Australian of the year did 300 speaking engagements to really get this community conversation going. There are points in that time that you cannot be rolling out the same information. You can't be having the same lines. You need to find the new angles. The way to do that is to track way the conversation is going and think about the next point that will deepen that conversation and engage your audiences in that way.

David: In terms of that tool that you're talking about and it was part of your presentation at the IABC luncheon, is it an actual tool or is it like a piece of software or is it something that you were just using with a piece of paper and a pen to understand the issues?

Kate: It's an issues management tool that I've been using for a long time because I've obviously been dealing with very in-depth, high profile issues across my career. It's not an app you can download or something like that but what it is analysing what the stakeholders are saying publicly. It's looking at what media is covering or what other content areas are covering. It's looking at who other players in the debate and what are those players saying, and have those players change their position on the particular subject matter from what they may have said 12 months ago.

A way you can track that is you can understand how the conversation is progressing and you can look for those key points in time to enter that conversation. Now it might not be always with the spokesperson that you're dealing with or the person that you want to be out there, it's the best time to enter the debate. You just wait until there's a time that is the right time that you know you're going to get the emphasis that you need to progress that conversation.

David: You produced a template during ... I think it may be useful for us to link that up in the show notes so people could actually see what that template looks like because it's quite a simple document really, wasn't it? Just steps you threw quite logically and sequentially what are the tasks that you need to provide that overview of the issue that you are managing.

Kate: I would argue, David, that anyone that's in an issues management role and media role and communications role, it's a very simple way of knowing what your stakeholders are saying. In 6 months' time, you're not looking back and going, "Oh, what was said 6 months ago? I can't remember what they've said and have they changed their position?" It's a tool that can be used every single day. You read the newspapers, you watched the news, you know what's going on. It's a simple tool to track what is being said and look, "Oh, okay. They're saying that about that particular issue. Here's where we can get our point across. Here's where we can get our point in. Here's where we can change the conversation."

- David: It's really just a matter of process, isn't it really? Just to build it into your daily work processes that you could just keep working on.
- Kate: Absolutely. I think the actual task of entering information into a template is a process. It's then what you do with that information where the strategy side comes in.
- David: Indeed. Now obviously the interest that we have is around content and the use of content to use this gift of technology that we now have to be able ... Everyone is a publisher. Everyone can create video, audio, stills, texts, and graphics and there are ... Pick the number of channels that you'd like to distribute that content through. How well are your public sector clients understanding this gift and this opportunity for them to be able to build audiences over a sustained basis by telling their story using content and the process of content marketing?
- Kate: I think we're in the early days of it, David. Another thing that I talked about in my presentation was this risk versus opportunity concept. Inherently, the public sector were operating in a risk averse environments. My argument is a risk can very easily be turned into an opportunity. If the departments and agencies aren't telling their stories and aren't finding those stories and aren't connecting with their audiences, I actually argue that they're in higher level of risk than using it as an opportunity. I think we will get there but I think it's going to just take some time to actually bring the executive on board to understand the benefits of connecting through content marketing with their audiences.
- My other argument is that every department and every public sector organization have communications and media teams. It's very reactive. They're reacting to the media, they're reacting to questions being asked rather than saying, "Okay, we might be getting criticized by media. How do we better get our message out? How do we better actually engage with our audiences so not what they're reading is not just this negative outcome that might be a spin on the media story?"
- David: I still struggle with this notion of risk. How can creating your own content in a useful, relevant way for the audience and distributing it, how is that risky? How is that any more risky than putting out a press release and then what, thinking that the media were going to treat your information with due respect or due care? It doesn't really happen much, does it?
- Kate: No, I don't think it is risky. I think that that's the point that I'm saying. This is not everyone but some people feel that engaging with your audience is a risk-based activity. It is risky act if you don't engage with your audiences. The criticism if something goes wrong is well ... The first criticism is, "Well, you haven't told us what's happening. You haven't engaged with us. We don't know what's going on."
- David: Again, that to me makes it even more obvious that you've got to start doing this because to mitigate those risks of being criticized for not informing as citizens and stakeholders become even more demanding about how their money, tax-based money is being spent and what in fact is being done. Anyway, we'll come to that in another

time. Let's just talk about you for the moment. Why did you go back to the university to study a master's of strategic communication? What did you see is the value out of that?

Kate: I've been a journalist at the start of my career and I've been an editor of a rural newspaper and I've gone to Sydney and I've worked in the metro newspapers. Then obviously, I crossed to what they say is the dark side and ...

David: Lots of people coming out of the dark side, steady procession.

Kate: Then my career had still been at that very issues-based, topical at the Australian Federal Police and trying to help the government get the carbon price legislation through. I wanted to go back to study my master's in strategic communication because I strongly believe that communications has to be aligned to the business priorities and the business outcomes of any organization that you're working in.

David: No argument from me. What did you learn?

Kate: This was at Canberra University, a great university here. I was able to do it face to face. What I learnt was that you have to have a seat at the table. You have to have a seat at the executive table to have that influence. Now as communication professionals in Canberra, often communications doesn't have the same level of weight as say potentially policy executives or program executives.

What I learnt when I went to university is that if you don't have that level of influence and if you don't have that seat at the table, you can't get your communication strategy aligned to the bigger business objectives. If you don't have it aligned, then the communication is always going to be a secondary and you're probably finding yourself fighting these things like risk versus opportunity, fighting these things like why can't we just get the content pushed out there, why can't we use social media, why can't we use other channels to get our messages across?

David: How do you solve that problem? How do communicators get a seat at the table?

Kate: I think it's about proving. It's about proving the worth of the communications. It's about being ready for when that issue hits. It's about using tools like that's they call the mapping. It's about getting the executives to understand that the reputation of the organizations is the number priority and who in the organization is looking out for the reputation, it's your communications area. They will have the nous for what's happening in the media, the radar for what's happening on the political fronts. They will have engagement with stakeholders and know their concerns. They are number 1 looking out for reputation of the organizations, therefore they should have a seat at the table.

David: Would you agree with me that given what's happening with technology, given the ubiquity of devices, mobile devices, these high-powered computers that we all carry around in our pocket, high degrees of connectivity, everybody's on the grid, that communications is now more important than it's ever been for any public sector or government organization and therefore, it makes it compelling that communication has

to be at the heart of what the organization is doing?

Kate: It's real time. If something goes wrong before, you may have had a day to sort your lines out in an organization. You may have had the newspaper bringing you up and said, "Oh, I understand this happened at a stakeholder meeting. What's your response?" You go away, you have hours to formulate a response, to think of what you're going to say, to sort some issues out. Now you might have 2 minutes if you're lucky because whatever happened at that stakeholder meeting will be tweeted out, will be put on Facebook, all the complaints will start.

You have to be more prepared for when that issue hits than you ever have had to be in past. That means that you had to have an issues management approach in your organizations agreed to, you need to have your spokespeople agreed to, you need to have your issues approach sorted so you're ready to go, you're ready to respond, you're ready with content material, you've already put all of those things in place before that issue hits.

David: In terms of building that respect and trust through evidence, are you seeing examples where communication is starting to be taken more seriously in and among the clients that you're working with?

Kate: Yeah, I think it is and it varies from where you are. I think that organizations that have been through a bit of a rough patch maybe had an issue hit that they haven't been prepared for or something has gone wrong are much more progressed in relation to communications being a priority and the communication professionals having input in the seat at the table. It's a shame though, David, that it takes an issue or something to go wrong to get that important buy in.

I do believe that through recent years in government not being able to potentially get policies through that they have needed to get through because the communication or the connection with the community has been lacking. There has been more of an emphasis on, "Oh, we can't just make this policy and not communicate it." We could have the best policy in the world but unless we've communicated it, unless we brought our audiences along and they support it, then it's pointless.

David: Again, I still struggle with this notion of, "Okay, well the way they were going to convince and get our message across is we're going to do it through the media." That's really never going to work because the media is not interested in that dispassionate analysis of whatever it is that you're saying. They're looking for the angles, for the where are the conflict that they can tell the stories. Advertising is not really a great way to do it either because you can't really explain things through advertising. You can certainly raise awareness.

Why is it that we're still backing that space? Why is it that we haven't quite yet been able to make that transition to being able to become a publisher, to be able to produce a line content, and to be able to build audiences over time by producing that explanatory content that people can get in various different forms, through different

channels, on different devices so that they get that understanding that they need to say, "Okay, I got that. I understand it right. Let's move forward."?

Kate: I think it's driven a lot by the 24/7 news cycle and that government department is structured in a way that they're answering questions from journalists, that they put prioritization on having to have the media to focus on that probably comes from the political realm as well. I think it's a resourcing question in terms of dedicating some resources to the reactive. You're always going to have to answer those questions of course and media, do they have to be engaged on issues of public significance? It's looking at how much of your resourcing goes into reactive versus the proactive communications. If you get that balance right and you are putting out messaging and you are putting out content in different ways and utilizing the different devices, then that's the game changer.

David: Do you think it'll be a quick change or do you think it will take time given that government and public sector organizations are notoriously slow to change but I don't know. I get this sense that they're going to have to change because everything else is changing so quickly around them, there's not going to be this ability to say, "Well, just stop because we're the government and therefore we're immune to all of these changes." When everyone else is being turned upside down by technology, surely government's going to be upended.

Kate: I actually think the stakeholder expectations are going to increase or already have increased. The stakeholders expect government to interact with them as business does as they get interactions from elsewhere and that is real time. As the stakeholder expectation on we want the information and we want it now increases, government are going to have to move with that.

David: Just back to you again. The master's was obviously a great experience for you and you got that theoretical underpinning obviously sitting on top of that deep journalism practical experience and working. You've also left government to jump into the consulting world. Why did you do that?

Kate: I felt that when I was in government, while it was great being in the system and being knowledgeable about it, as you move up the ranks, you get less away from doing the communications work and more into the management side and my passion lies in communications, in the doing. I thought, "How do I best do that?" That's when I decided to establish the business. I was saying to myself I want to do the communications, I want to do it at high level, I want to work on very interesting topics that move the Australian community. How do I do that? I set up my own business, I became a consultant. I pretty much do the same job as I was doing when I was in government.

David: Yeah, but you don't have to go to meetings.

Kate: I think having an arm's length approach and not being inside the public service gives me ...

- David: Frees you up.
- Kate: Frees me up to be able to really give the communications advice that I think is going to work for that subject matter.
- David: I'm sure amongst our audience that there are a number of people who are in exactly the same position with exactly the same concerns. What advice do you have for them on that journey? What are the things that they have to look out for?
- Kate: I think that in communication roles in the public sector, people need to pick subjects that they're interested in and passionate about and that connect with communities. If you do not do that, you'll find yourself in communication roles that might not be communicating to an external audience that might be working on a website or might be doing other things that you don't feel passionate about. You can do the job that I'm doing within the public service. It's just really taking those opportunities, finding things that are going to make a difference.
- David: In terms of taking the step and going out and getting started because I'm sure you've probably got a mortgage and you like to eat and you like to buy clothes and do all the rest of the things that we like to do as humans, how hard was it? What advice do you have for people to get going and get started? What are the things not to do?
- Kate: There's many things not to do. I guess I was fortunate in one of the biggest things, I think, and you would understand this in the Canberra environment, is your contact group. If you've got some good contacts and you've worked across multiple agencies and you're well-known for the advice that you can give, then that's when you can start your own business. If you don't have the connections, if you haven't got a broad range of experience, it would be very tricky stepping out on your own.
- I also think you have to offer a point of difference. You have to offer a point of difference to what you would've offered as a staff member. I guess what I'm going through there is that you have to be prepared to speak to the executive, you have to be prepared to push your point whereas with internally, you may have been a little bit not able to do that if you're a bit concerned or worried about what that might mean.
- My advice to people who would be wanting to step out is do the maths, make sure you've got the backing of a good brand, of a good website, of a good content strategy behind you, make sure your connections are good and you know what sort of work is about, and then you just go for it and see how you go and pick and choose the projects that are going to make an impact.
- David: Really, it sounds like what you're saying is make sure you've got at least 1 or 2 really good opportunities that are live that you can then transition. Start working off those and then once you start getting yourself moving 1 after the other after the other and then off you go. What about the actual business side of things? Again, people might find it a bit scary that when you are in a full time job, the money just lands and you don't have to think about it whereas when you're a consultant, you live on your wits and you actually

have to pay your taxes and you have to do everything else. It's a different responsibility.

Kate: It's a completely different base and you have to be ready for that because if you haven't had the business nous and the business side, you might need to bring yourself up to speed. The ATO actually doing webinars at the moment on thriving small businesses on getting across the tax benefits and thresholds and what you need to know. You actually have to go and put yourself out there to learn the business side. You might have the communication side down path and you may be the best communicator in the world, if you don't have the business side down path, then there's going to be a problem.

David: I'm really interested that we just quickly go to the use of research in government because I think it's fascinating in that it's such a big area and obviously a very big area that can help content and content marketing. What are your views about research and how you can integrate research into your communication practice, in your content marketing practice?

Kate: Research is really important. Government often do research for big national campaigns. It's based on research that has been done that might inform a 60-second ad. There is a depth of research out there that could be used for multiple content purposes and the research, if it is good and solid research, if it is showing community attitudes, if it is deepening a conversation, it needs to be used in multiple ways. It is a content marketer's dream.

David: Yeah, exactly. How do you get your hands on it? Is it easy to get your hands on it in a government circumstance?

Kate: It depends how it was done and what purpose it was used for or was going to be used for. I think often government don't release research for particular reasons, whatever that might be. When they do, there is actual multiple use and you can actually go ... For example, research that was done for the domestic violence campaign we based a speech off for Ken last year and what that did was he was able to be an independent spokesperson from government but using government research to really challenge community attitudes, and that's what got the pick-up.

David: That's research at that macro level, that big research that is undertaken. Obviously part of that issues matrix that you're putting in place, that's research as well. What about other forms of research? Are there any other ways that you get reliable information and put in place experiments where you can test and learn how different pieces of content or different lines are performing or different activations might be working?

Kate: I think government is rich with research because really, you're getting input from community, you're getting input from your stakeholders, you're getting input from what's working in a policy sense. That's all research. It might not be formalized research that ends up in a research report. You, in government, have a wealth of information and knowledge at your fingertips. It's what you do with it. It's how communication professionals use that information to then go out and communicate with their audience or connect with their audiences.

David: We had a guest, I can't quite remember. I think it might've been Gina Florence from the city of Bryan in Texas. She was a guest on the podcast and she had this great piece of advice about getting up from your desk and going and having conversations. That's research. Going and talking to the program areas, into the policy areas, into the people who have got the insights, the academic community, the research community. That it's there, you just have to go and find it. Sometimes you just have to go and have these conversations. Getting up and walking around was this very simple piece of advice.

Kate: It's not going to land in your inbox, David. Unfortunately, as much as you'd like the story to just be there and that's where I guess I use my journalistic sense comes in. I go and ask questions. I go and find things out. I go and treat it as if I'm trying to find out the story and you get to the bottom of it and you just think about the best way to use that content.

David: Now just before we go, a couple of minutes to go, what do you see is the big changes in the next 6 to 9 months in public sector and government communication? Where are we going to see the big changes?

Kate: I think the environment obviously with the 24/7 news cycle, the uptake of social media, the expectations from stakeholders, I think we're going to see a change and the change I'm talking about there is a way that government connects with their audience. Government has to do it real time, has to think about how it's managing issues, has to think about how it's connecting with their audiences because if they don't, the stakeholders are not going to be happy with any of the responses.

David: Then you're saying or suggesting that really to date, they haven't.

Kate: I'm suggesting today that's being slower than anticipated and slower than what would be expected of stakeholders. That's why you see things on Twitter or on Facebook criticizing government for not doing the engagement correctly or not being on the front foot or not responding, burying their heads in the sand. If you're prepared for, when that issue hits, if you're prepared with a spokesperson, if you're prepared with content, getting content out in a different way, then you're in a much better position.

Then it goes back to the argument that I run earlier in our conversation, David, is that the effects of reputation of the organization. Anything that hits, you need to be prepared for because if your reputation is impacted, that affects your organization's daily operations, staffing, and morale, all of these other things that can go wrong. You need to be prepared for it and you need to be ready with the strategy to go. If you've familiarize yourself with that strategy, if you've got executive endorsement on that strategy and approach, then you're so far ahead of the game.

David: Kate, where can people learn more about you, get access to you, give you a call, come and work on their program? How do they reach you?

Kate: Probably the best way is through my website which is

katebradstreetcommunications.com.au. All my details are on there and the work that I've done in the past and some case studies and I'm always happy to have a chat even if that's an issue someone's got that they just want to run past an idea or a strategy, pick up the phone, and I'm always happy to take your call.

David: Fantastic. Kate, thank you very much. Wonderful episode there of In Transition, very experienced communicator, knows what she's talking about. An enormous amount of value there for the audience. I'm sure you enjoyed that. I really enjoyed that chat with Kate. What a delightful lady and great professional that she is. Thank you very much everyone for joining us once again. We will be back next week with another episode of In Transition. We'll catch you then.