
InTransition episode 63 – Scott Alexander

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome again to InTransition, the podcast that examines the practice of content marketing in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and thanks for giving up a little bit of your time to be with me this week. Another great guest this week, who's got a really interesting background and doing some interesting and innovative things in content marketing in the local government area.

Before we start, as we do each week, and I know ... Somebody said to me the other day, "Why do you always go back to the definition?" I think it's important, because it's important that we do define just exactly what content marketing is. We are still in the very early days of getting used to the term. It's a very old practice, but it is a new term. Content marketing, as it relates to government and the public sector, the definition is that it is a strategic, measurable, and accountable 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 a desired citizen and/or stakeholder action.

To our guest this week, it's Scott Alexander, who is the digital and content marketing lead at the City of Boroondara in Melbourne, Australia. Scott manages a team of content creators for both internal and external communications. Prior to working in local government, he worked in content creation and social media management in the production industry for companies such as Madman Entertainment and Media World Pictures. Scott has also written and produced multiple award-winning short films and he joins me now. Scott, thanks for being in transition.

Scott Alexander: Thanks for having me, David.

David Pembroke: So, mate, let's just rewind the tape a little bit and go back. You've always had an interest in the creation of content, haven't you? What intrigues you about it? What engages you about being involved in the content creation practice?

Scott Alexander: David, I guess when I was younger, like a lot of kids I really loved movies and really was into filmmaking and obviously got a job at Madman Entertainment out of union, which was fantastic. I was heavily involved in marketing and the film distribution side of things. A funny thing happened, as they usually do. While I was at Madman, I got the opportunity to start up a little licensed apparel company within Madman, which was a little bit of a side-track, but it was selling t-shirts for Transformers, Voltron, Astro Boy and things like that. Because I didn't have access to marketing budget, I actually started doing things like email newsletters and marketing on Myspace, if you remember MySpace.

I sort of fell into doing content marketing, I guess, because I enjoy creating content

in an artistic kind of way, but then I found myself in a job where I didn't have a budget, really, to do print-based advertising, so I was just doing YouTube videos and email, ancillary campaigns and things like that and sort of went from there.

David Pembroke: You also got into the podcasting game early days, didn't you? You were running the ... Is it Manga Comics, the Japanese comics that people love?

Scott Alexander: That's right, yes. We had a podcast at Madman called Anime Snack Time. Basically it was a monthly podcast where we talked about new releases, we talked about events that were happening around the country. That was really quite early on in the noughties, I guess you'd call it. What was great about Madman, it was a start-up environment. I guess we were able to try lots of new things and just get on with doing it and that was great.

David Pembroke: That experience that you had in the private sector, when you stand back and look at it from now, obviously you've been in the public sector for a while, working in local government, how do they differ? How would you describe and explain the difference between working in the private sector in a start-up environment and working in local government?

Scott Alexander: That's a good question. Maybe if I could speak about the ways that I think they're the same, if that's ...

David Pembroke: Sure.

Scott Alexander: The completely opposite of what you asked me. I think one thing that I like to think of when I think about working in local government is I like to think that we're more of a utility company. We do all these great services. We've got customers like any other business and instead of a conversion being a sale, as such, their ultimate conversion really is engagement, engaging in, taking part in a strategy, documented feedback around that or using the services or using the library, really taking part in civic life. That's really our ultimate conversion, if that makes sense.

David Pembroke: Yeah, it does.

Scott Alexander: I sort of feel, in a way, that the techniques and tools of that inbound marketing funnel, are totally applicable. We sort of adapted the inbound marketing funnel. With business, they're after a sale or some sort of conversion around a sale and we sort of adapted the inbound marketing funnel to be in different stages. We're calling the top of the funnel just aware, once we drive people to the site or to an EDM or to a video, they're becoming informed, then when they do choose to take action, like download a draft, strategy document or undertake a survey, that's what we're calling engaged or interact with us on social. Then I think there's still that end of the funnel which is delight. That's really where our customer service elements come into play. Does that sort of explain, when I've come here and started here, I've really seen how we can adapt the funnel for local government.

Local government was using all the channels and all the tools of content marketing, but perhaps not in a cohesive way. The idea has been to really try and educate people about that funnel and educate them about the appropriate type of content at each stage of the funnel. For me, while we're not trying to get money out of people, we've got a different need, which is to really communicate the services that we provide.

David Pembroke: How difficult was it for you to introduce this notion of funnels and driving people through the funnels and having different types of content at different stages? Was it difficult to bring that framework and that structured thinking or was it already largely there, but just not described in that way?

Scott Alexander: It was certainly there. I think one thing that's been, not a struggle, but the educational piece has been about appropriate content at the appropriate stage of the user journey or the funnel. If you like, it's not uncommon to get communications at the top of the funnel that want to cover all the bases. It's sort of that education of saying, "No, at this point we're just trying to send out hooks. We're just trying to hook people in." To be frank, people are busy. If you can't get them in one or two sentences, you're not going to get them in 500 words. Don't worry about taking off all the check boxes at the top of the funnel, let's get them to the next phase, give them a little bit more information, then get to the engaged phase, where they're really probably giving them the most information.

I think that seems to be the thing with my observation of the government communications. I've sort of been exposed to that it's probably too much information at the wrong part of the funnel. Does that make sense?

David Pembroke: Yeah, it does. They try to do it all at once rather than building that relationship over time and, as you say, introducing the right types of content at the right time. How have you gone about building that content creation capability within the city of Boroondara?

Scott Alexander: When I started, I had four staff. We were operating in an old school, kind of comms department kind of fashion. What we've done since I've come along is we've changed, along with Deb Ganderton, the executive manager, and Andrew Burkes, who is the leader of communication strategy and performance, we turned the comms department into an agency model, what we're sort of calling the agency model.

What we did is instead of having people that were in charge of channels, specifically ... We used to have one officer that was in charge of the website or one officer who was in charge of e-commerce ... What we did is we turned half the team into account managers / project managers and they're not called the communications business partners, so they're very much meeting with the different directorates, getting across all of the issues at hand, and the stakeholders. Then what they'll do is they obviously come up with communications campaigns. That comes into my team, which is now comprised of nine people. We pretty much

then turn that into all of the collateral that's used across ... We have a videographer, we have social media, we have online publishing, we have print-based editor, a couple of designers and stuff. We're then turning that stuff into more customer-centric collateral.

The business partners, they would be responsible for doing media releases and perhaps some of those typical assets of a comms department, then I guess it comes into my team and we're really turning it into perhaps content that residents would be used to seeing from many organisations that they're involved in in terms of receiving content marketing from. Does that make sense?

David Pembroke: Yeah, it does. In terms of the way that it works, in terms of the strategic piece, where you get started, who has ownership of that, in terms of developing the plans with those different line areas?

Scott Alexander: I'd definitely say that it would be the communications business partners working with the directorates. They're writing up the communications plans, if you like. Strategically they're the ones doing that. I guess where I come in is I'm sort of setting up overall a model for doing that, in the organisations.

David Pembroke: But I like that idea of you're almost like that content creation hub that is dealing with that creation and distribution element of it. Are those account managers embedded in those areas or are they still part of a central comms area?

Scott Alexander: They're definitely still part of the central comms area, but they're certainly spending a lot of time in those directorates and getting across the issues that come up at meetings. I guess, if you like as well, with regard to my social media officer, what we've got is this idea of story leads. As business partners are out and about in the organisation, they pick up the stories that aren't necessarily in communications marketing plans. We're obviously trying to communicate specific things.

Then there's the stories that pop up, say about the guy that emigrated from Greece 40 years ago, who set up the little barber shop down at the junction and he's had the barber shop for 40 years. They're the little stories about our residents that our social media person can pick up on.

David Pembroke: That comes from the programme people just out in the streets? Everyone is largely then, by the sounds of things, being given responsibilities well beyond their day-to-day responsibility as a ranger or something else?

Scott Alexander: That's it. I guess we're in the process ... I've come up with this little expression called the skunk works. I don't know if you've heard of this idea of the skunk works. Lockheed Martin, in there, they have an innovation department that sits separate to the bureaucracy and that innovation department, they're like their R&D unit, and they just go off, separate to the bureaucracy and they just innovate, they just create things and they go for it. What I've tried to do with my social media and creative services team is create a skunk works that can operate a little bit

independently of the bureaucracy. We're getting stuff in from business partners and from directorates. It's very much council-centric type stuff, pushing messaging out about a strategy or a consultation, but then my team is able to go off and really tell the resident stories a little bit more and hopefully those ... You want it to be strategic, too. Those stories should have a dotted line back to the council plan, so what we want to do is tell the resident stories and perhaps a little bit about how a council initiative may have enabled that to occur.

David Pembroke: How is that transition going? How is the organisation reacting to having a skunk works operation in their four walls?

Scott Alexander: That's the thing. I think I'm very lucky because of Deb Gander ton and she's up for it. Her attitude is let's operate from a place of trust. We wrote a social media framework that gave us a set of principles that would keep us pretty safe, if that makes sense, so that we weren't ... We don't want to cause unnecessary scenarios to pop up. We've got some principles in place that guide us. She's basically been the one that's really saying, "Hey, we're going to be operating out of our comfort zone, but in order to move fast, in order to turn things around, we need to operate from a place of trust, not a place of risk management and control." I think with the right principles in place and good staff, you absolutely can do that.

David Pembroke: It also sounds, in some ways, that you may also be assuming types of content that would normally have been seen in the local newspaper.

Scott Alexander: That's right. I think we've got a responsibility to tell the stories of the residents. I go back to that idea of customer-centric communications. I often say to people, "It's not about us, it's about them." Often, a lot of government-type communications can be very much about council has done this or council has done that and I'm like, "Let's flip that around and say, 'This resident has achieved this thing and we were able to facilitate that for them,' because it's about them." It's much more leaning towards that idea of how we facilitate great things to happen in the community.

David Pembroke: In terms of that, are you seeing the results? Are you seeing greater engagement? Are you seeing a lot more interest in this citizen-centric type of content that you create?

Scott Alexander: Absolutely. I think even though our social media officer's only been here for a short while, but already when we're posting more what I call pure engagement stuff on social media, the organic reach and engagement and all that, it's off the chart. When we do the standard push messaging without any sort of boosting, you're just getting your 10% on Facebook and that's about it. It's pretty clear to me that when we tell a story that's not about ... It doesn't sound like council-speak, if I could be so bold, but when we speak like human beings and just appeal to things of interest that do have a connection to council, it seems to resonate with people much more.

David Pembroke: I'm sure that a lot of people listening would be drooling at the fact that in your skunk works, your creative services team, that you have nine people. You've done

well. You've obviously got Deb on board and she is supporting you with resources and I'm sure you're getting the results. With that, what types of content are you finding at the moment are giving you the best results and what channels are working best for you at the moment?

Scott Alexander: Sure thing. This is going to be ironic, but actually we just done a bunch of surveys with Coral Communications, or a bunch of communications audits with a third party. It came back that our most loved piece of comms was our printed Boroondara Bulletin, the magazine that we send out to 70,000-odd residents each month.

David Pembroke: It's interesting, the ACT government here in Canberra, in Australia, did a survey not that long ago and it was exactly the same thing.

Scott Alexander: I think it speaks as well to ... The cohort that's probably most engaged with Council is an older cohort and I think they probably would have a preference for print and that's all good. We've recently redesigned the Bulletin and tried to make that more user-friendly because I think there are some elements of the print work we can work on and improve. I guess the idea really is to start trying to migrate people over to digital channels as much as possible, really just starting to try and cross promote the digital channels a lot more, via the print, and drive people over. I actually think Twitter is probably our most popular channel and has the most people on it. Facebook is really a work in progress for us, as is Instagram.

The thing is while the organisation has fragmented its audience a little bit in that we have a core Boroondara Facebook, Twitter channel, but then you've got the arts director with their own channels, which kind of makes sense because it's quite a different sort of product offering, but then you've got disability and mobility support services have a Facebook channel. Immunisation have a Facebook channel, volunteers have a Facebook, Twitter channel. We're in the process of doing at the moment is really looking at all those ... Of course, when social media first started, everybody just wanted to jump on board and go for it, so not we're in the process of really trying to consolidate some of those channels and focus the audience, where it's appropriate.

David Pembroke: It's interesting that I know in the Redland City Council in Queensland, in Australia, they've taken that approach quite deliberately and quite strategically and they have divided up their services because they understand that the people who are interested in the dog pound are interested in the dog pound. They're not necessarily interested in immunisation or disability or volunteering or the arts. It's this notion of the world becoming a much narrower place and people drawing to them the content that they're looking for, which is challenging, to try to resource it. The other thing they've done in terms of delivering that service is to try to create capability in the council offices, in those different areas. It's not actually the central comms people who are actually doing the posting. They're doing the training and they're doing the oversight of what's going on.

I think what is going to happen in the future is that that capability around comms is going to get spread to the edges and that centre of excellence, like you're running at the moment, is really going to be sitting at the heart of the organisation, working with those people so their content creation and distributions skills are improving.

Scott Alexander: That's exactly our approach. We realised, to your point, people want to engage with the areas they want to engage with and we should be where the audience is, not make them come to a channel they might not want to be on to get their information. The social media officer that sits in my team, she and I work with all of the owners of those satellite channels and we do some best practice, some education, and collaboration and try and run a shared content calendar, so we're across what each other's doing and can share on the main channel as appropriate, and support them with content creation as well. Each one of those areas will have some content creations needs, so we can help them do that where they may not have the time or resources to do that or certainly outsource any of that.

What's great is that we've got this central function, but we're also allowing ... I couldn't agree more. Social media is such a monster, in terms of content. You can never create enough, it seems. Comms can't be that ... I would call it a bottleneck. It cannot be a bottleneck anymore. We've got to skill people up and get them operating fairly autonomously but with some good principles guiding them.

David Pembroke: I think the other thing is, I've noticed and observed my ... I've got two young daughters, a 13-year-old and a 10-year-old ... Particularly the younger generations, they're so comfortable in the creation of content. I think increasingly, as the younger generations come through, where it was previously, "You've got to learn how to do this. You've got to go and study and pick up principles," I think you still need a certain standard, but I think in the coming years it's going to be something that everybody does. It's just not going to belong to the communications area.

Scott Alexander: David, I couldn't agree more. I call it a new form of digital literacy. I feel like in the 21st century, if you don't have that ability to manipulate images, it's actually called digital literacy now. The problem is that you've got applications like Photoshop, which are a bit like a sledgehammer for a nail. Most people cannot get their heads around Photoshop. That's where I think tools like Canva, which is an online graphic design tool, can be amazing and free people up.

At the moment we're running a nine-session series called Content Club at Boroondara, where we're just inviting people from around the organisation to come to these lunchtime learning sessions and learn these content creation skills. It's that idea of you don't have to go to uni for four years and do Photoshop anymore, check out Canva, come and learn a bit about it in lunchtime learning session. Then we're give you some more resources to go away with. What's great about a tool like Canva as well is you can create templates so that the work is on style guide. It's in the style guide of the organisation.

People are still free to go and create what they need to create, turn it around

quickly without that bottleneck, but we can be pretty confident that it's still going to be on brand and not look questionable.

David Pembroke: Graphic design is one module within Content Club, and I love this idea of Content Club and having those lunch and learn sessions and building out that capability. What other lessons are there in Content Club?

Scott Alexander: Actually started off the first session of content club was really introducing the concept of the funnel and the adapted inbound marketing funnel for local government and getting people's heads around the thinking behind it. That was the first thing. I think you've got to sort of have a holistic approach. Some of the other skills we're covering across is, of course, photography and video. Of course, there's no point teaching people about how a specific camera works, it's about fundamentals when you're using your phone camera or when you're using a point and shoot type of camera or a DSLR. There were some fundamentals to think of that can ensure your stuff, no matter what you're using, is decent.

Then, of course, we're covering stuff like writing for social media, just that idea of there's a specific way to write for Facebook and Twitter. Then, of course, focusing on landing pages and just writing good content for your website, organising it properly, making sure it's easy to skim, really understanding that the user doesn't have a lot of time and they really want to skim and get the information they need and making it more user-friendly.

What else are we covering? We cover some stuff about engagement, actually, just some principles for engaging with the community. That can be in terms of community consultation. There's a few other things as well to do with strategy, but those are the main things that we're covering during the course.

David Pembroke: What's the response been like?

Scott Alexander: Really positive, actually. It's been great. Everybody's been ... I should say after each session we also publish a little newsletter that has a link to a survey, so we're getting feedback from each session and taking on that feedback so we can improve it for the next time. Really, this first one through is really the pilot or the MVP and then we'll tweak it and we'll run it again. The feedback has been really positive so far and I think people really ... People want to create stuff and they want to have autonomy to do what they need to do, so I think they're rapped about it, in terms of being able to just get some tools to get going. I guess our role as a comms department is just to give them the principles to guide them so that they're on brand.

David Pembroke: Do you serve cocktails at Content Club?

Scott Alexander: We serve food. They get lunch. The sessions go for about an hour and a half. We get them doing stuff. The main thing is we don't want to just sit up there and talk the whole time. We actually get people up there, having a go. This is great. We've

got people from governance attending, from environment and infrastructure, from youth services, from all across the organisation. Even they guy from the depot is there. The depot's got a hell of a lot of stories to tell. We're looking forward to seeing some content from the depot.

David Pembroke: Okay, mate, just a final question. What's the thing that's exciting you most, at the moment, because it really does sound like there at the City of Boroondara you've really taken on this content marketing approach and everything you're doing is by the book, really, world's best practice.

Scott Alexander: I think the thing that excites me the most is I feel like rate capping is coming in. I don't know if you're familiar with rate capping, but it could really adversely affect the people that receive the services that Council provide, like aged care or child maternal health. That's what excites me. If we can really communicate the good services that we do provide better, then I think that will really benefit the community and really help to establish the good work that people do do in local government.

David Pembroke: Fantastic. Scott, thank you very much. I'm delighted, absolutely thrilled to pieces, to hear this story and the progress, even over the last six months or so, since we've been talking about some of the things that you've been doing down there. It seems that it's rolling on. You've got your shape, you've got your direction, and I think it's grounded in that mission that you just described about delivering value for the community and improving the lives of citizens. That's the gift of what we get to do when we work in government and public sector content marketing. Congratulations on all those accomplishments.

Good luck with the Content Club. If I'm ever in Melbourne and I'm at a loose end, I'll jump along and get involved in one of those sessions. I'm pleased to hear that lots of people are coming because again, this is the future of content marketing in the government and the public sector, where this distributed capability exists across all areas, be you a global government, a federal government, a state government, or, indeed, municipal government as well. Best of luck with all of that. Thanks very much for spending some time with us InTransition. To the audience, thanks once again. We'll be back next week.