

InTransition Episode 71 Transcript
Trish Johnston – Case for Content

Trish Johnston: Thank you. Just sort of reflecting on what Hank was talking about, about evolution, and I remember working in the Government Communications Unit in about the year 2000, and people were doing advertising campaigns and we were going, "Do you think they really need to have a website? Do you reckon this website stuff's going to take off?" In the twenty years that I've been in Government Communications, there's been a lot of evolution I can assure you.

I guess I wanted to tell you a little bit about the digital communications journey that we've been on at PM&C, which has been very kind of short and sharp. Of course, at the heart of that is content. I just wanted to sort of take you through our journey and give you a couple of case studies about how we're going, and tell you where we need to go next.

About three years ago, PM&C had no Communications branch. When I arrived there about two years ago, what content was was a press release drafted by the line area, and that was pretty much it. No one was doing any strategic communication, and the idea of content marketing was something quite foreign. It wasn't because there weren't people in the department who weren't keen to do that sort of thing, PM&C has traditionally been a pretty staid and risk averse sort of organisation. There wasn't a lot of appetite at senior levels. I think the previous Prime Minister did refer to social media as "online graffiti" at one point, so there was no top-level support for us to be doing anything innovative.

This all ended when it came to ... There was a perfect storm for us, in 2015. A couple of things happened simultaneously; we had some really very bad media coverage about the Indigenous Affairs strategy grants programmes, and the genesis of the bad coverage was that the content on our internet site was indecipherable to the journalists. The journalists just kept writing bad story after bad story, because they were adding up numbers wrong, basically. The Secretary railed around to me at an executive meeting and said, "Trish, why do we let that content onto the internet site?" I said, "Well, Secretary, at PM&C we have a tradition of letting our line areas post whatever content they like." And he said, "Well I think we better change that, you better start getting control of the content." Tick, way to go Secretary.

That was one of the catalysts. Of course then there was the change in Prime Minister and as Kim experienced for a couple of years before me, our Prime Minister is very digital and he has very high expectations of what the Department can deliver. Very, very quickly we got very, very digital. As over the course of a couple of years, we gained policy areas that were very much focused on digital things; like Open Data, the Digital Transformation Office is part of our portfolio, Smart Cities. These are big priorities in PM&C now, and Cyber Security of course, which all happen in the online space. We needed to be in that space too.

Because I think Communications people are eternally optimistic and just champing at the bit for the next new, exciting thing, we grabbed the bull by the horns and we ran with it. It is a case of having to demonstrate to the business areas how you add value and how what you're going to do and the time that they're going to spend with you on that is worth it for them. I'd say that our starting point was pretty low at PM&C; as I said, Communications was an afterthought, it was a press release, it was some talking points. There was no real value we could add to those very, very serious policies that people were working on. The other thing as I describe a few case studies for you, is that we had no additional resources. There was no money to do anything, and there were no resources. We also were running on the smell of an oily rag. But I think actually one, I think digital comms and online channels and things encourage you to be creative, and they encourage you to look at ways to do low-cost things. They facilitate that.

Anyway, I'm sure some of my staff who are here today will tell you that if we had an extra couple of people it would have been really great.

The first thing that we did was introduce a digital first strategy into PM&C. Basically, what we were saying to people is now it's not just about online, but it is about your audience. Where your audience is is online. We need to now be designing communications, designing stakeholder interactions, to be where our audience is and to deliver them what it is that they need. We introduced this, got that ticked off by the very high levels, then we started applying it without really much thought, things were happening very quickly.

The first kinds of things that we did were we developed a new internet site. You will notice a familiar body, in fact all of those people are in my branch actually. Interestingly, the desire to use real people, departmental people, actually came from the Secretary. We put up to him a design that had iStock photos in it, and he said, " We should have real people in it." So we did, and it made the website very much more interesting. The main reason for doing the website was that our earlier website had been developed in the 1990s and was lovely kind of dark greenish sort of color, and we had a new iteration of it only a couple of years ago. What we had continued to do in the new iteration was structure it around our structure. You could go in and find the governance group, the Cabinet Division, and we didn't actually structure it around the types of content that people would be coming to us for.

The whole idea behind the new website was that we've structured it around key content areas that people come to us. We've got a lot of analytics about who comes to the site, a lot of people come, and we've structured around the key topics so they come for Cabinet information, the running of Government they come to us for, because they want to work for us. They come because they want to know about cyber security, there's half a dozen topics. It's been structured like that.

We've spent some time focusing on developing a sort of digital communication strategy for the Department, because we have several channels. We've got the

website, we've now got (as of October last year) Twitter for the department, we've got LinkedIn. We've also got another channel which is mainly frequented by people in Indigenous communities called Indigenous.gov and it's got Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, and YouTube attached to it. It's been in existence a lot longer obviously ... It kind of went under the radar, no one was really noticing that we were actually doing content marketing in Indigenous space. It wasn't until we started to want to do it for the Department that people got involved. We had to quickly set up some governance, so we developed a Digital Communications Reference Group. The intent behind that group was to develop content. We knew that if we wanted all this digital communication to work, we needed lots and lots of content. In our Department, because of the enormous diversity of policy areas, there is a lot of content but we have no way of one getting people to actually feel that it was an important part of their job to actually communicate the outcomes of their policies and programs and two, to get it to us.

What our Operations Committee, which is one of the senior committees of deputies that oversee the operations of the department, decided is what we needed was actually an SES-level committee with a representative from each of the major groups in the Department, so that they would be responsible for driving content. They set content quotas, so that a policy area has to give us either five interesting facts or case studies a month, a program area needs to give us ten because they should be being able to tell stories about the impacts of their programs. We're struggling to get all that content, I might add, but there is a desire and an awareness there that that's what we need to do.

We also had to look at our social media policies and our media policies, actually. We had had a social media policy which actually made the news some years ago, which was very restrictive and understandably, people in the department weren't very happy about that. What we were able to do was, one convince the Executive that we needed to be in social media, and that took a bit of convincing. But also we know that some of the people in our Department are national and / or world leaders in their area, so why wouldn't we be supporting and encouraging them to be online. In fact they were; the reality was that they were. The whole of Open Data people, they came with social media, they came with websites, they came with blogs. Individuals had massive followings on Twitter and on Facebook. We needed to actually deal with it, not put our head in the sand.

So we did. Where the Executive got to was that certain individuals in the Department can be authorised to act in an individual way but to be discussing work-related things. That's a massive step forward in about six months, so we're pretty impressed with ourselves. Like Kim, we felt that we needed to do some capability development. First of all we're focusing on us. I'm not in that space, so I needed to become a bit more educated myself, and my sense was (no offense to any Gen-Y people here) but because you're all users of the technology, I think everyone thinks you're experts at it. I think that there's a difference between being an educated user and being a strategist. I'm concerned to develop all of my people to be actual strategists in social media, not just, I know how to use the technology.

So we've been focusing a bit on that.

We have actually been looking at our technology as well. I mean, we haven't had that support to upgrade our technology in a big way, so the best thing that we've been able to do we're working hard to consolidate our online presence down from thirty websites down to hopefully, probably, about three. So we'll have DPMC, we have a Ministerial Media Center which the most prominent one is of course PM.gov, and the Indigenous channels, because that is set up specifically as an Indigenous engagement channel, not as a policy and departmental channel. That's our aim. I think we're down to ten, so we've done pretty well.

The first case study I just want to talk to you about very quickly was Closing The Gap. Every year, in February, the Prime Minister reports to the Parliament on progress against a certain set of key indicators in Indigenous health, employment, education, well being, those sorts of things. We convinced this line area that what they needed, because we were digital first now, what they needed was to have an interactive online report. What it had, first some design by an Indigenous person which was a big step forward from our nice navy blue document. But also it had a lot of rich content, there was a lot of video content, there were a lot of info-graphics. The response to it from the Indigenous community alone was worth the effort. Because what it signaled was that we were looking at this in a new way, that we were very interested to hear the stories of Indigenous people, and the stakeholders were more happy than we thought that they would be.

What we did know, in terms of content, finding content is hard. Particularly if you want to have real content about a person in an Indigenous community telling you how much better things are now that they've got a job. That takes a lot of work from a lot of people to get that content. We did get that content, and for next year's report we're starting to get that content now. Because it takes a lot of effort.

What we also did, which was really good in terms of content, the night before the actual Closing The Gap statement to the Parliament, the Prime Minister had an Indigenous entrepreneurs event up at Parliament House. It happened to have a lot of the same Indigenous leaders that would be around for the next day talking about the Closing the Gap report. So we took that opportunity because they were there, to get vox pops and film them, so that we could use it on social channels. So we're getting a lot cleverer at saying, "Okay person X is here for this event, why don't we get a statement for them about Y, and we'll put it in the bank and we'll wait until we need to use it, or we'll have a dedicated plan for using it."

There was a lot of learning that we got from this project that then we took into another couple of projects. The main one I guess is the cultural change. We had to work very, very hard to convince people that this would be a better thing, that this would be a better way of doing it, it would be more engaging, more people would be interested. And they were. I think the other thing we learnt was in that instance, we didn't engage our stakeholders enough. We didn't reach out and say, "Hey can you guys re-tweet us or point to us in your social media." And I think that was a

little bit of a failing of that. We did a lot of social media for a day or two, but we could have actually staged it over an entire week, I think, if we'd actually interacted with our stakeholders a little bit more. But the main thing that happened was our senior Executive said, "Right, that was amazing! Let's have more of that!" So I did get the opportunity to say to them, "Yeah, happy to. My team are ready and raring to go. But we need money, and we need commitment. If you want this, it's going to cost." I'm half winning that battle.

Then we did Cyber Security, was the next one. Again, another group of people that came to our Department going, "What are you people doing? You're not on Twitter." Had a lot of conversations like that. Obviously that cyberspace is their policy area. Their stakeholders are Qantas, Telstra, Google, Amazon. They're online. We needed to be online too. The Prime Minister was launching the Cyber Security Strategy, and I guess for us this was the first time where we saw the benefits of using the "old fashioned" approaches to media and comms, and making them work together with the newer online forum. What we actually did was we actually did a background briefing for the Press Gallery, which had been never heard of in Prime Minister & Cabinet. We were able to convince the Executive to do it and the line area to want to do it, because we were solving a business problem for them.

The business problem was that they are consistently misreported, it's all about China and China's hacking into ... That's not what's actually going on, people. But that's all that the journalists are actually ever interested in. There's a lot of language around cyber security that the media toss around, which is actually inaccurate and doesn't mean what it actually means in the cyber-world. We had an expert in our Department who's sort of been steeped in the policy work for about twenty years, so we got her some media training, we put her in front of the Press Gallery, and she was amazing. There wasn't a question that she couldn't answer. That worked really well.

In the papers and in the online editions of the papers in the morning that the Prime Minister was going to launch, the papers were full of cyber security strategy because people had had a chance to absorb it, ask questions. The Prime Minister made his keynote speech, which we live streamed through our website, which was the first time that we'd ever done that. About a thousand people watched it, not bad for your first time. We ended up getting about four hundred and fifty articles across print, broadcast, and online in twenty-four hours. I think if PM&C had ever got an article in before that was pretty good going. We were mega impressed with ourselves, because we trended on Twitter for several hours at number four. The strategy was downloaded six hundred times, so quite a lot.

The other thing that we did was, again to support that cross-over between traditional and new media, was set up a Drop Box where we had information packages and info-graphics and video clips and all that for all the different media to actually use. Really, the success of that strategy was around good briefing, but fit for purpose content. We gave every different audience the content they wanted, in the form that they wanted it, so it made it really really easy for them to use it. That

was very successful, and again the Executive was sort of getting a little bit more excited.

Come the Smart Cities plan. This one the Prime Minister was excited about as well. We were all very very excited. This plan, because it does effect so many millions of people, did need very broad engagement. We had to come up with a way and a platform to engage people to have their say on the type of city that they do want to live in in the next thirty to fifty years. We developed an online engagement platform through Bang The Table, to facilitate the consultation. We live streamed that. We did a bit of the pre-briefing of the newspaper journos and the Press Gallery. This plan was downloaded fourteen hundred times and we had two thousand three hundred people visiting our site at the time the launch was happening. In commercial world, they're not a lot, but in Government they're not bad statistics. That day, we trended on Twitter as number one. Only weeks apart and we were really rocking it.

The funny thing was, though, it was amazing to see how a few successes like this really got rallied around the division heads in particular. I go to the meeting with all the division heads and the Secretary, and they were kind of competing with each other. Going, "Oh, well you were only fourth? We were first." We piqued that competitive interest that gets you to being division head, to work in our favor. But again, it was having the right content in the right place. We gave people somewhere to congregate to come and talk and have a conversation, and we made the content relevant to them.

Because we do have policy responsibility for Open Data and Open Government, we're increasing transparency. We're allowing the public to join in the discussion about how they want to live. As David was talking about earlier, it's about telling a story, and it's about telling people why it should matter to them. We seem to have kind of gone away from that in recent years.

We've got our PM&C Twitter, which we do a mix of kind of internal and external things. This is Indigenous.gov down the bottom here, and that is purely good news stories. The purpose of that is to share good news stories, and to normalise positive behaviors, and to show different communities how things work. Because although each community is individual and different, there might be an idea that worked in community x that we could use in community y. Those stories are always fantastic, that content is really delightful content and we get a lot of really positive engagement on Indigenous.gov.

This is Sandra, one of our Cyber Security stars. We're trying to think of ways to make it easy to do, as well, because we don't have a lot of people. So this was just ... Let's go stand out the front of the building with our iPhone, let's get a thirty second grab and Tweet it. And we did. It worked, a few people clicked through to our site. I guess the journey ... I'll talk about a little bit more. The journey for us is about how do we get the content? How do we make it really, really easy for people to get it to us? How do we go out to regional areas and skill people up so that they

can get the content for us? So we've got a whole strategy about that.

The other thing we're trying to do with content is actually see if there's different ways of tailoring the same content to different channels. For example, as I said on Indigenous.gov, we get a lot of those really rich human interest really positive stories. There's always a policy or someone in our Department who's usually done something in relation to that, so what we've started to do is take the one story, have the policy aspect on DPMC, have the community aspect of it on Indigenous.gov, and then have our staff's involvement aspect of it on our internal intranet. That's either video, or a story and that sort of stuff. We're just trying to find ways to optimise the content we have, because we just don't have enough to keep it as fresh and regular as we need to.

That all happened quickly; that happened all really between October and caretaker. We were doing a lot of work, probably wasn't all as strategic as it could have been, so now we really need to spend some time working out how we want to develop ourselves in a digital sense and what are the different roles of our channels and what is our content strategy, and get very clear on that and put in the necessary processes in the Department. More user generated content, more telling of that long-term story, less sort of dipping in and out. Which is a little tricky for us, because we're telling lots of stories; we're telling Cyber Security stories, we're telling a National Security story, we're telling an Indigenous story, we're telling a Data story. So we have to kind of work out how they work together and where it's best for them to be separate.

I think we need to do some more work on stakeholders; I think we could do a lot more with them, and engaging our line areas in that discussion as well. How do we get your stakeholders? How do you reach out? How do we make the right contacts to get content? And greater interactivity; I think that's a place we're very scared to go, and it might be a little way off. But there's a lot of things that people want to talk to the policy leaders in Government about and I don't think we can be having an open Government policy and not facilitating that kind of conversation. That will be something to look out for.

The next big sort of content strategy for us will be Constitutional Recognition. My team is working with the task force on that to develop a digital platform to facilitate consultation and engagement. Again, getting the right content, enough of it, at the right times that's interesting and gives the audience what it wants will be the big challenge there. But, as you can see, it's been a short journey and sharp journey so far. It's been lots of fun. We've learnt a lot along the way. We're constantly reassessing and reevaluating what we're doing. In the words of our Prime Minister, "It's never been a better time to be in communications at PM&C."