
InTransition Episode 83 – Rachael Sweeney

David Pembroke: Well hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome to InTransition. The podcast that examines the practice of content marketing in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and I'm delighted that you've decided to give me a small amount of your time this week as we continue to explore the practice of content marketing in government and the public sector.

Today we'll look at stakeholder engagement. A skill central to the success of any government or public sector communicator. We'll talk to one of Australia's leading experts in the field. Before I introduce her to you we start, as we do each week, with the definition of content marketing as it relates to government and public sector.

Content marketing is a strategic, measurable, and repeatable business process that relies on the creation, curation, and distribution of useful, relevant, and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and or stakeholder action.

To my guest today, Rachael Sweeney is the director of her own agency, Collective Position a communication and stakeholder relations company based in Melbourne Australia. Rachael studied public relations with a politics major at Deakin University before starting a career in government and stakeholder relations. She's worked on two major rail infrastructure projects in Victoria. I'm really looking forward to talking to her about that. She has also been a major award winner back in 2010 and also in 2013. She joins me now. Rachael, thanks very much for joining me InTransition.

Rachael Sweeney: Thank you very much for having me.

David Pembroke: Rachael, let's talk stakeholder engagement. A topic that's really central to the effectiveness of any government communicator. What do you need to get it right?

Rachael Sweeney: I think that's a really good question. One of the things that we do at Collective Position, and I think one of the things that I've done pretty much my entire career working in the stakeholder space is, obviously, you really need to know who your stakeholders are. Now they that might sound quite obvious to a lot of people, but I guess the reality is that not all stakeholders present themselves equally and not all stakeholders are, I suppose, as transparent as other stakeholders are.

David Pembroke: How do you go about finding all of the stakeholders and then how do you map them in terms of their influence?

Rachael Sweeney: Sometimes it's relatively easy. Usually you find on quite contentious projects and those that are obviously causing a major shake-up in a particular location or on a

particular issue they do rise to the surface quite quickly. Particularly from a government's point of view one of the easiest ways to do that is to actually launch an inquiry of some sort, run a submission process, and then communicate that out through various channels. Including media is always a good space.

If it isn't as contentious or if it isn't as high profile then usually we do a lot of desktop research. That is getting online, spending a good half day sometimes, a good couple of days just searching through different ... Doing keyword searches around different issues. You'll be surprised, obviously, about what will come to the surface. Social media is obviously making that really easy these days. The use of hashtags, the use of campaigns that are running with different issues, you can sort of cut to the chase and find people fairly quickly. Of course one of the most prevalent ways to access stakeholders is to access them through peak bodies as well, because they obviously have good relationships with the people that they represent.

David Pembroke: Now not all stakeholders are created equally, so how do you go about judging who is and who isn't a key and important stakeholder that has to be managed?

Rachael Sweeney: Again a good question. It really depends on the issue at hand. I suppose when it comes to massive changes in government policy usually the first person, or the first group of stakeholders, that you would seek to engage are those that are actually directly impacted by any of those changes. If there's an issue that's currently underway, and there is one issue that we're working on at the moment, where a particular stakeholder may be accessing a certain form of government support and the government is seeking to change that support. If you're not directly engaging with those, firstly, that's not considered a good mechanism of public policy. You should actually be engaging quite directly with those people to understand how that change is going to impact them and work through that stakeholder with any changes.

Additionally, if you are actually working with a peak body or a representative group, and these days what you start to see quite a lot of is informal alliances that come together, so when an issue emerges people generally work themselves together in some sort of group. Whether it be a residence group, whether it be an industry group that's not an official peak body, whether it be interested and impacted stakeholders, they generally work themselves into some sort of informal alliance and sometimes they formalise that alliance. Then you can start to negotiate and engage directly with that alliance. Naturally people do tend to rise to the top so some good negotiators do tend to rise to the top of the groups, whether or not they'd be formal or informal alliances. It's also very important, as well all know, the squeaky wheel does tend to get the oil. It's also very important to try and seek views outside of those really boisterous and sometimes very loud stakeholders because there are those people who tend to be less engaged on issues. Maybe because they're not ... They don't necessarily see any changes as being ... Going to impact them negatively or positively. They don't really see the change anyway. That is a view that you really want to make sure that you're

understanding as well and the reasons for that.

David Pembroke: What do you do about people who you know are going to be antagonistic early? Is there anything that you can do to manage them? To take the edge off their impact in terms of the development of a policy or a program or a service, perhaps even a regulation?

Rachael Sweeney: Not quite. I have certainly found, and I suppose I've worked both on ... As a person who is engaging around a particular issue and I've also worked as someone who is being engaged on a particular issue. What I've found on being on both sides of the fence is that nobody likes surprises. Now, generally, I have found being on the other side of the fence that that can actually be a really big thing for governments in particular. The political process, and also the departmental bureaucratic process, doesn't always allow, in my opinion, for really solid and true engagement around particular issues because there is concern about how things are, obviously, going to be perceived. One of the key things that we like to do is to try and not create any surprises for people.

David Pembroke: Is that changing? That notion of, okay, we don't really want to have a genuine discussion. The reason that I suggest to you that perhaps it's changing is given that everyone is now carrying around a megaphone in their pocket that they can activate. They can have conversations about any particular topic that they might like to have a conversation about and that aren't really need the platforms of the organisations who might be seeking to control or debate a particular issue and they can in fact have these conversation wherever they like to have them.

Rachael Sweeney: Well I think that's right and I think it's changing to various degrees. I think sometimes governments, in particular, try to still leverage that amount of control. I think it's interesting the way that you pose the question to how do we actually manage stakeholders. I don't like to use the terms of stakeholder management as much anymore because, largely, people will do what people are going to do. The best way I have found to engage with people is to get in early, try and limit surprises as much as possible, but also too, I think it's really important to try and have that authenticity around the engagement process as well. If you treat all stakeholders equally in the provision of information and also, not necessarily access to different sorts of formats, but some people will never be satisfied with the process of change that you're going through. Some people will be able to, I suppose, be worked through the issues and you can negotiate some of the terms of those changes that may be seeking to occur.

Sometimes people actually don't really want a high level of engagement, but if you're providing a high level of information to lots of different sets of stakeholders in an equal and, I think, very transparent way it's not necessarily that you're managing those stakeholders but what you're actually doing is giving them the opportunity to, in a respectful way, to respond to you as they see they need to. As I said, not everyone's going to be happy with particular changes, but as long as you're treating them with respect and also with an equal measure of transparency

and provision of information you're not trying to manage them in any way. You are, in fact, trying to deal with their issue in a meaningful, and I think, authentic way.

David Pembroke: How comprehensive do you have to be in terms of the delivery of that information?

Rachael Sweeney: Look, I genuinely have found as the world becomes really fast paced with the sorts of information that you can find online. It's a bit of a flick process sometimes. People aren't really engaging with information as they should. That is actually one of the biggest challenges that we find. That often you want to give people information about certain things but they're not willing to engage with it. Sometimes all you can really ... We try, very simply, to provide information to people in the first instance. Then as they seek to have more information then the ability to provide that through maybe one to one consultations or group consultations or maybe in the provision of more data or paperwork is often a good way to go about those sorts of things. I think, initially, the best way you can actually do it is to try and simply everything for them but really impress upon them that their opportunity to engage with you around this particular issue if they feel that they need to.

Now some people want everything. They want the full box and dice. They really want to get down to the nitty-gritty of that. Sometimes the reason that they want that is they're trying to change your project. They're trying to stop your project. They're trying to catch you out. It's a bit of ... Sometimes you get a bit of that with stakeholders too. That they're trying to actually work with you so that they can actually put your project on hold and so that nothing will actually change. Mostly people, I think, genuinely want to understand what the impact is on them and how and where they might be able to contribute to that process. I genuinely think that if ... Not in every single case because as I said, sometimes people no matter what you do to engage with them they're only ... The only way that they will be satisfied around certain things is if that the whole project or the issue stops in its tracks and nothing changes. They don't want to see any progress on that issue. Nine time out of ten the better part of the stakeholders set is actually, I suppose, open to discussing the issues and how they may be able to contribute or shape that policy change or project in a meaningful way that tries to limit the impact on them but also can see the project continue.

David Pembroke: How do you deal with people who don't want to engage and who are recalcitrant and just want to object?

Rachael Sweeney: Well the way that we have always done that ... Let's be honest. We can't control that necessarily anymore. It's exactly as you said. They will always find like people around them and they genuinely do have the opportunity to seek out their own and create a mega throne through social media. Largely all you can really do is provide them with the information and the opportunity to engage with the issue at hand.

There's been some really big infrastructure projects that have actually needed to

occur because otherwise the system, whatever it be road, rail, really large telecommunications projects and things like that, if these projects don't continue then Australia as a nation or a city won't be able to grow. Unfortunately there are those projects that exist, especially they are occurring in a brownfield site, where change is going to be the face of that city over the next however many years. We've got massive growth in Australia and so those projects will need to continue to occur.

I think there are always going to be those cohorts of people who are absolutely against any change in their particular circumstances. Which largely has a greater disbenefit to the wider population. Now people should engage with those people in a fair and in transparent and in an open manner. Providing the same information that they would provide everyone else and making sure they have an opportunity to speak directly to those people who they believe they want to get the information from. Whether it be a project engineer or whether or not it might be an environmental person within a group and in organisations so that some people feel very empowered in the process speaking to an expert. I think those things should be facilitated. Having said that too, there are going to be those people who will never be convinced, but as long as you're able to deal with those people in that respectful manner and try and still open those doors for them to influence the process then the project, you know as they say, they project must go on. It's about how we can do that with a limited impact as possible on those stakeholders, particularly where they're directly impacted to a provision of the infrastructure.

David Pembroke: What's your experience then of running consultation processes, engagement processes, and that important link with the elected officials office? How do you manage that quite complex relationship given that elected officials like to get elected and they don't like to upset too many people?

Rachael Sweeney: Well I suppose the best way that I can answer that is probably from being on the other side of the fence. I've spent the better part of my career, obviously, in an advocacy space, so we're engaged by organisations to manage processes of change but also to drive processes of change inside government. Obviously there's two key stakeholders in that process. There is the elected officials and there's also the bureaucracy attached to that. I've often found that there is a tenuous process that exists between dealing with the elected officials and then also dealing with the departments themselves.

The department are obviously put in place to deliver policy and one of the key things that we always make sure we're doing when we're trying to drive a process of change is to keep those people that will be responsible for delivering any new projects or any new policies informed of what the changes that we are seeking. We try and get feedback from them around the detail of any challenges associated with that and also how they see the benefit of those particular changes that we're seeking as well.

We've also, obviously, been on the other side where departments have engaged

directly with us to understand any impacts of those things. The political process is obviously something different and I think, personally, that it should be. The bureaucracy is place to deliver government policy and as such it needs to do the things that it's instructed to do. Whereas politicians are obviously in place to represent their communities and sets of stakeholders associated with those communities as well. You can have a very different conversation with political advisors and also ministers themselves about the impact and the need for change in a way that is going to impact the community and your particular client that you're actually representing. I guess what I mean when I say that is sometimes I find that the bureaucracy's not very interested in the thoughts and the feelings and the processes attached to those things, the social impact as much as the economic impact. Whereas I find that politicians are much more open to understanding the wider community impact around some of those decisions and policies that they may make as well because they live in these communities and because they understand that certain things are needed. Where the sometimes, not always, but you know there has been opportunities to do these things where maybe the sheer economics of a process hasn't necessarily stood up but you can see that the wider community benefit will be there.

David Pembroke: Just going back to a couple of those big rail projects that you worked on. What were some of things that surprised you, perhaps, going in to those stakeholder engagement processes that you didn't anticipate at the beginning of the projects?

Rachael Sweeney: I think one of the things ... I should actually explain too that I came into both of the projects that I worked on when they were really sort of in train. I think one of the things that surprised me a little bit, and maybe it shouldn't have been as surprising, but ... Maybe this goes a bit to there's been a lot of talk about over-consultation and things like that, but maybe people weren't as informed about the changes that were about to occur within their own backyard. It seemed that a lot of consultation had occurred before the first sod was actually turned. That's when people's minds switched to the fact, oh my gosh, this actually might impact me. I think that is the biggest challenge for infrastructure projects in particular and big, big changes is it's a busy ... We all live busy lives. You can advertise about the need to come down and have a chat to people prior to a project kicking off but it seems like there is a lot of shock to the people where opportunity is given ...

David Pembroke: Yeah, nobody told me.

Rachael Sweeney: ... to have a say. Then, obviously, nobody told me. Yet it's quite clear that they'd had opportunities to be involved. I believe that ... We see it sometimes with our own clients as well. You can see an issue burning in the future and the clients willingness to engage around that particular issue so that you can be ready to deal with the change that's coming up. That you can be informed about how you're going to engage with the government around this particular process. Even doing the thinking that's going to be required to really meaningfully engage with that change. Their appetite to do that is not always very high.

It might surprise some people that even though as a professional advocate and someone who, obviously, can see lots of changes on the horizon sometimes convincing clients that they need to act today to deal with the challenges of the future tomorrow with things that you know are coming down the pipeline. Because either you've been told, so government have done the right thing. They're trying to keep you informed of possible changes that might be afoot. Then suddenly something is announced and the scramble begins to how we're going to respond to that issue when you've been probably advising those clients along the way that ... To be ahead of this one.

I think it's the same on infrastructure projects as well. That is, I see, the biggest challenge that people want to start to engage with the process when a lot of decisions have already been made. They may have had the opportunity to contribute to that decision making process but the bowls almost moved on, if you like. Now they can, obviously, still contribute in another way but it's just not the way that they want to do that but the time for having that conversation has passed.

David Pembroke: That's a really interesting and I think probably universal problem isn't it? That trying to get people's attention in this hyper busy, hyper distracted, I can look at whatever I feel like I want to look at from anywhere in the world through any channel, on any device, at any time. What's your advice to people in terms of the shaping of a story and the timing of the story and the presentation of the story? Do you have to be dramatic? How do you make it compelling? How do you get people's attention?

Rachael Sweeney: Well I think, also being again to sort of seen it both sides of the fence, and this is not the case in every infrastructure project, but certainly things that I've seen both from inside and outside of government is the need to possibly over complicate the message in the first instance. The fear of getting something wrong and the fear of being slammed by the media, which is real and which happens all the time, but that fear of reputation management verses the fear of actually just trying to simply engage people so that they understand quite clearly and simply that this is actually going to impact them. Those things almost work against each other. The need to really be so pristine in the way in which a media outlet might represent an issue verses the need to be really gritty with people about what the impending changes are. They do often work against each other.

It was funny that you say that. Listening to the radio this morning and listening to the ... I think it was the governor of Florida, talking about the impending storm that's about to move through their state. He was very clear. It's probably one of the first times I've heard a really clear statement out from elected representatives. If you do not get out and into a shelter you will die. There was not any two ways about it. The idea to be really firm and frank with people so that they understand the implicit nature of what is coming down the pipeline to them is a really hard challenge.

As much as possible as communicators I think it's our role to push back on engineers and push back on senior people within a project to say when they want

to over complicate things and where they want to try and take the edge off of certain things. I think it's really important to say if we don't deal with this now, and be really clear and frank and open with people about what's going to happen so we can try and get their feedback into this process now. We are going to be dealing with this challenge down the track. We're going to be having this conversation with them but it's going to be in six or eight month's time and unfortunately we won't be able to do anything about it then.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Rachael Sweeney: I think most communicators who have been listening to this have had that challenge. I think we all deal with that need to water things down to a saline. Really sort of, very sort of, non meaningful statement about something for fear of being called out or criticised in the media is a constant challenge. It's a fine balancing act. Maybe as time goes on the imperative to be more clear with people, and I can start to see things like that occurring now. I think people have learned the lesson of not engaging early and not engaging in a meaningful and transparent way. I think that there's absolutely no doubt that people see the benefit of that. I think that it's still one of those tensions that exist.

David Pembroke: Now one of the big transformations or one of the big benefits of the transformation driven by technology is that we can all now be in the media business. We can create our own video, audio, stills, techs, the graphics, and there are multiple online and offline channels that we can use. How are you seeing content ... Or what is the role of content these days in terms of running successful stakeholder engagement?

Rachael Sweeney: I think there's a million different platforms out there that people can use. I mean there's obviously the big social ones, but again, I really think it comes down to making content meaningful for people and keeping it as simple as possible. I think as all communicators have probably had this challenge and continues to be one of those is when you have, say a massive environmental impact statement or a really complicated engineering project and you're trying to distil that down to very simple statements that don't really always reflect the wider work that's being done in that space. That is the challenge but also it's a worthy one to engage with.

Also one of the things I'm starting to see too is the willingness of people to get into the detail a little bit as well once they realise the issue impacting them. A lot of people don't want to make reports available. A lot of organisations don't want to allow people to engage around the detail because they feel like that is going to be problem for them down the track in keeping things ... A project moving forward. Now you don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that mostly people can access to these reports through either FOI processes or through other processes in which they might find a friendly stakeholder on the inside or something like that. Nine times out of ten you've really got to engage with those people in a simple way to try and set the tone, if you like. Set the message for them and set their understanding of the project up initially before it becomes a game of Chinese

whispers. Then where people are willing to engage around the detail, I'm a believer in making that stuff available to people.

Also importantly where those people aren't going to necessarily have the skill set to understand what is being presented to them to sit down with them and walk them through what's being presented in the report as well. I think the worst thing that can happen is when people just put these massive reports up online and they don't bridge the gap between a really simple message about something but also trying to work through some of the detail with them. People make up their own assumptions about what they're reading and misinterpret what's there on the page. That is actually, my belief, is that is where the stakeholder comes in. That's where you move away from straight communication into really engaging with someone in that two way communication that is actually meaningful and transparent and authentic process.

David Pembroke: All right Rachael. Well thank you so much for giving up some of your time today to spend with the audience to discuss what is often complex, rarely simple, often challenging. I think people listening today would've got a lot from the examples that you used and the advice that you've given. I think there's quite a bit in that that we can take away and incorporate into the next stakeholder engagement process. Because I think as well the world changes, as people become more informed, more aware, more active the need for high quality stakeholder engagement is going to be central to any affective government or public sector organisation.

Thank you very much. Now listen, if people would like to get in contact with you to have a conversation about how you might be able to assist them. What's the best way to catch you?

Rachael Sweeney: If they just jump onto our website, collectiveposition.com. Just type in collective position and it will come up through Google. We'd be happy to help with anything that they require in that space.

David Pembroke: Fantastic. Well Rachael, thank you very much and to you audience, thanks once again for turning up to listen to InTransition and to understand just exactly a little bit more perhaps about the role that content can play in stakeholder engagement. Because as I said before, as channels proliferate, as capacity, people's skills improve there is a big opportunity to use content in our story telling so as we can inform, we can engage, and we can bring people along on the journey of explaining just exactly why it is we're taking those positions. Thank you once again. Pleased that you did join me this week. For this week it's bye for now.