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## InTransition 138: Trevor Young

Speaker 1: Welcome to InTransition, a program dedicated to the practice of content communication in the public sector. Here's your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen, and welcome once again to InTransition, the podcast that examines the practice of content communication in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke, and thank you very much for joining us once again. Or, if it's your first time, thanks very much for joining us, because I'm sure you will really enjoy today's conversation, as I have been looking forward to it. Because we speak to an old dog of the Australian content industry.

He's been around this business for many, many years, and he has lots of insights. I remember seeing him speak at some conferences a couple of years ago, and he was certainly one of the leaders in the content space in Australia, but before we come to him, I will start with the definition of what content communication is. So, content communication 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 (learn more [here](#)).

So, to my guest today, it's Trevor Young, who goes under the Twitter handle of The PR Warrior, which is also his freelance brand, and his website. But he also runs a content communications firm which is called Zoetic Agency. He started his career back in 1993 and has worked for a couple of the very large agencies. Edelman, obviously you know that. Porter Novelli as well. And has indeed worked for a range of both private sector and public sector clients, including the NAB, MYOB, Bupa, Swinburne University, and with the Victorian Department of State Development, Business, and Innovation, and he joins me now. Trevor Young, thanks very much for joining me InTransition.

Trevor Young: Thanks very much, David, your very kind intro there. It's funny you call me an old dog. I'll take that as a compliment. I always think that this whole digital social world is every year is like seven years, which means that I started blogging in 2007, which means I'm 70 years up in this space.

David Pembroke: What has changed in that time? Or, are the central tenets of what has always been successful still successful today?

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Trevor Young: Good one to kick off with. I think everything's changed, and nothing's changed in one degree. I mean, stories and being able to tell a good story, and have a human connection with people hasn't changed. It's just I guess the methods we're doing has obviously changed considerably. Or, we've got more options to do that, and I think the other part of it is that the challenge we have today that we didn't have a few years back is just the incredible amount of noise and the explosion of channels.

I guess when there's so many brands, organisations, government agencies, everyone's out there, individuals, pushing their own thing, and often doing what they've always done with the channel, and that's just broadcast. It gets very noisy out there, and I think sometimes we also forget that our competition now is not just the similar sort of an organisation, or a business competing in the same space. It's really your bomb-headed mates sending stupid Snapchat videos or there's a lot of messaging going on, as we know. The dark social media as it's called. So, just that whole attention, getting people's attention is a huge challenge for us as communicators.

David Pembroke: Now, there's an enormous amount in that answer and I think we might just go through and pick out some of it, or unpick some of it as we go through. Maybe that first point that you raised about the challenge of creating a human connection, creating a relationship. Why is that so hard for some government agencies and brands and not-for-profits to understand that that is the essence of successful communication?

Trevor Young: Gosh, I don't know. I think sometimes maybe we put our hat on and we're professional, and that means that we don't communicate like we do as people outside of the office. But probably the hardest thing that we face in that regard is to do it at scale, and we now have got tools to do it, but it's still hard to scale. I think relationships and that type of thing are really hard to do on a big scale, but we also need to understand that as communicators, sometimes we just need to go to the influencers.

Sure, we can go to our audiences directly, but a lot of those relationships I think should be built at an influencer lever, and obviously that opens a whole can of worms. What is an influencer? That's going to differ per thing. I don't see influencers as the highly crafted image of an Instagrammer necessarily, depending on what industry you do, or you're in. It could well be the head of the industry body or everyone's an influencer today, but there could be people who like your cause, your issue, what it is you do, and just happen to have a few thousand followers on Twitter, but they're engaged followers. So, it's not cut and dry by any means.

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David Pembroke: So, when you are going in and talking to some of the clients who you're working with, and you're looking at this sense of trying to help them to get to scale, what do you advise that they need to have in place well before they even need to start to understand the influencers and the role that influencers might be able to play? But what are some of the foundation pieces that need to be in place so as that they can get this content game right?

Trevor Young: Well, we start with a lot of it's an education piece, I guess, but luckily because Dionne Lew, my partner and I, we put out a lot of stuff out there, so people understand who we are and what we do by the time they get to us. So, having a philosophy and being upfront with that philosophy I think's quite important, so the people that we talk to tend to already be across that.

They might not know how to do it, but they're very open to it, so that takes a big worry off us. But we try and get down to ... We sit at the intersection of owned, earned and social media, and certainly a content first approach. We take people through, often it's just better to just get the basics right first, and not try and overcook everything. Understanding their audience, you'd be surprised that a lot of people, you have a workshop with them and they'll fight tooth and nail, the individuals in the room, about who their audience is, and to prioritise.

So, just getting clarity on your audience and then understanding them a little bit better, and also getting them to make that as a mindset. Always be understanding your audience. You're not going to know them 100% off the bat. Smaller businesses do, because they're closer to them, but also, I guess as communicators, David, we've got the two sides of the coin. We've got the what do we stand for? What's our message? What do we want to tell the world?

Then, on the other side is what's of interest and relevance to our target audience? We need to mesh the two together, and so we spend a fair bit of time trying to find out, "Okay, what's your flag in the ground? What's that site on the left? Then, what's our audience want to know?" Then, we can get a little bit more directed with what we do. That's across all the channels. It shouldn't change too much across various channels.

David Pembroke: What sort of questions are you asking when you're helping your potential clients understand their audience and the types of content and the

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channels, and the frequency, and the other things that they need to know in order to be effective with their content programs?

Trevor Young: A couple of things. One is I guess it's coming down to making them prioritise first. So, the ones that are really the ideal, and again, business is different often than a government agency, so read into that what you will. If it's a government agency and you're trying to bring about change, then often people don't know much about that audience 'cause they don't necessarily have that ongoing relationship with them. Whereas, in business, and you've got a sales team, or a head of sales who's been out there and knows those people a little bit closer at the coalface, they're going to understand them a little bit more.

So, sometimes we'll have to go away and do a little bit of research, but we need to start somewhere. I think that's the key is we don't nail everything in a workshop. We need to ask the questions, but sometimes we need to go back and dig a little bit deeper. I guess the part where we do start is asking, it's pretty hackneyed, but what are the questions they're asking? What inspires them? What are they fearful of? There's all the fear and the needs and the challenges, that's probably classic inbound marketing when it comes to content.

But I also like to look at well actually, what also inspires them? What do they dream about? How can you help them in a positive sense as well? I think it's all helping in a positive sense. That's what we call the utility content, we'll lead with that, which is just simply being useful and helpful and the questions people are asking. Some clients have done research before, so that's a good kicker for us, and I think the challenge is probably when we've got multiple audience groups and we can't do everything, so we have to be a little bit more circumspect and prioritise.

David Pembroke: Do you find people open up to this opportunity, of this questioning, which is asking them to explore perhaps audiences or the people that they are seeking to do business with, or to influence, but to look at them in a different way than perhaps they traditionally do?

Trevor Young: Yeah, it does. I like to get the stories out of them. I like to hear ... I only did one the other day, and the client was just starting to tell us stories of clients and the situation that they'd gone through, and how our clients' software product helped them, and we can just tell the story without any mention of a product. It's great. So, I think just as we resonate, we the people, resonate with stories a lot more, I think when you talk to clients as well and you're

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going through a workshop phase, getting them to start thinking in stories and soundbites is pretty good.

That's certainly one thing. The other thing we look at is proof points, so if we're going to be going around and taking a position on something, we do a thing called our spheres of conversation, and we try to identify, what are those conversations that we want to lead or be part of? What debates do we want to ignite? What issues do we want to participate in the discussion of? That might start at quite a high level, and then we start bringing it down into that company or the client's specialties within that.

So for example, you might be into an advanced manufacturing for example, in Victoria. But to be part of a bigger picture and to be more relevant in that industry, you need to start talking at the science and innovation conversation at the top. So, if and when the government sort of recently had the science and innovation policy that they brought down, and you want to be part of that. You'd want to be getting hold of the report and looking into it a little bit deeper, but then you'd skew the content and the conversation more towards your area of specialty, which would be advanced manufacturing, and then advanced manufacturing in Victoria, and that side of things.

So, there is a cascading effect, and we've found that that's probably the most useful thing we do because it really helps our clients understand and get clarity about what they want to stand for. I think that's important, 'cause you can't be all things.

David Pembroke:

No, indeed. I also like that insight that you provided around where do people get that understanding about the audiences that they're engaging with. It can be a government agency or department, or a not-for-profit, or a business. You mentioned that the sales team who are out on the ground, for example, who are living, breathing, talking, eating with the people on a daily basis, that they have greater insights. I think sometimes we don't look to the resources that are sitting around us, because we don't think to ask when in fact, some of those richest resources are maybe even sitting on the same floor as us.

Trevor Young:

Exactly. I think you get people to stop and think a little bit about their ideal clients, and that's when it starts to come together a bit. Who are the people that if you just want to spend all your time with these people? There's usually a few of them, and that's a composite of them, and I did this exercise with some mortgage brokers, a room full of mortgage brokers once. One

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woman, when we were talking about the audience who she was ... Her ideal client. She really realised that at that point a good proportion of her business was coming from women in their 40s who were divorced.

They've got different dreams, aspirations, challenges, pain points, et cetera, when it comes to buying property with her for an investment, or just to live in, versus a young couple starting their journey. So, their informational needs are quite different, and she had a lot of empathy, and she could understand them, and she knew them very, very well, because she'd sat at the kitchen table with quite a few of them. So, the opportunity for her would be then to really try and own that space from a content perspective.

David Pembroke: And did she?

Trevor Young: I don't know. I don't know, actually. I did try to follow her up and I never got a phone call up. Maybe she hadn't and that's the reason she was scared of what I'd say, but I guess that's the frustrating thing when you do see opportunities and day-to-day life catches up with people and they don't do it as much. I guess another thing that we look at, that's the utility base which as we all talk about, and it's fantastic that you've got content that's useful and helpful and relevant, to your audience, your pre-determined audience.

But there's also an area in PR and comms we're involved in, and I'm writing a book at the moment called "Content Marketing for PR" and really just been grappling with the differences between probably the more inbound marketing, the HubSpots of this world, and that pure inbound B2B marketing type funnel, filling the funnel, versus what we do as communicators. There is some overlap, but there's quite a bit of differences as well, and a lot of different nuance.

So, I've been going through the pains of researching and writing that, but one thing that we do in comms is for want of a better term, and I know we hate it, but let's just call it leadership or thought leadership content, and that's where a classic example would be a Seth Godin who he's not sitting there answering people's questions or necessarily being useful and helpful. He's poking people in the eye metaphorically. He's challenging people and trying to change the way they think about things.

That's a little bit different to the classic content marketing that we read about a lot. So, sometimes you've got to go out and push that boundary a little bit more, and do that side of things. What do you think about that?

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David Pembroke: Totally agree with you, because I think it goes to that point that you were saying around the competition for people's attention, people's time. Unless you have a point of view, then why would anyone bother? Why would someone listen? Yes, as you say, there's the utility content which will help you through answering the questions that you need answers in order to be able to put in place a content program of some sort, but ultimately I think there has to be some value there. I think it does go to that point of having a point of view to enable you to cut through the noise.

Trevor Young: Yeah, and that's not necessarily being provocative for the sake of it. It's about gathering that information, having insights, joining the dots, and then having a point of view on it. That's how you build followings, I guess, and it's again, it's not either/or. I love utility based content, I think that it's the most respectful way of dealing with customers and clients, and stakeholders. Just a third area that we've been doing a lot more of is what we'd call corporate content.

David, you'd be all across this as organisations have to put out those press releases. They have to put out the statements, they have to put out all sorts of things under the guise of corporate or corporate communications. The way I look at it is why not do it with more journalistic integrity? Why not do it with stories? Why not do it in multimedia? Why not take those dry topics that you can put out and no one's interested in, and try and turn it into something that they might be interested in?

David Pembroke: It's funny. Working in the government space as we do, you couldn't begin to imagine how many press releases die without anything ever being reported off the back of them, because again, there's nothing in it. It's not content created with any perspective from the audience, and it's just a series of facts or positions, or statements that are not relevant and therefore, nothing happens. So, trying to get people to understand that opportunity of maybe thinking about a story from a journalistic point of view, maybe looking at an initiative, a government initiative, and then think about, "Well, what's the impact?"

Then find somebody who it has impacted on and be able to tell their story, as the way of bringing to life the benefit that is a result of the policy or the program or the regulation. It's coming, it's slowly coming, because I think they're starting to see there is so much effort that goes into press releases and media statement that just never see the light of day, because they're competing for people's time and attention and people just aren't prepared to give it to stuff that's not worthy of it.

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Trevor Young: And I guess the other part of that is that, okay, well maybe 'cause you have to, and it's too hard to change at this point, you put out the press release, but then you try doing things. You'd hear this as well. "I'd like to do some stuff but I can't get it through internally," and I have empathy for the comms people that are trying to push some new ideas further up the chain, but maybe the goal is just to do it in small waves. So, it's not about, "Let's replace the media replace." In fact, just put it out there and leave it as it is, but it's the little things you do over and above then.

Do you turn that release into six or eight Twitter cards? Or, some micro videos, and just do some little interesting things over and above. Because I know what will resonate more, and that's how you start getting some runs on the board. I think that that's probably the best way to attack it, but there's no doubt all organisations have got stories to tell. Some are better than others, but it's how we start telling those stories, and the various channels that we use to tell those stories. Because we are now the media channel.

Sure, go to the media, but sometimes the media that we've found comes to our clients or to us, or whatever, because of the content. So, it's a content first approach. Put the content out there on your own channels, and through social, and then over time the media will start seeing that and come to you.

David Pembroke: But it's a different mindset, isn't it? It's a different skillset to think about it in a different way. So, if you've always been in say a government communications agency, and your role has been to produce the ministerial speech, or to produce the media release, you don't have that sort of journalistic mindset, nor perhaps the skills to be able to create the Twitter cards, to create the video, to create the audio. So, what's your view on the current state of digital capability? Not just in government, but across the board, in being able to take advantage of this gift of technology, which means as you quite rightly say, as that we can all now be our own form of media.

Trevor Young: Yeah. It's a bit of a topic that I'm pretty passionate about, actually. Because I mean, I think the future of the PR and comms industry is not hanging on it, but it's certainly an important one if we get it right. Dionne and I hosted at our office here last night, about 15 students, PR and comms students from Deakin University, so all this is pretty fresh in my mind.

We were talking about this, about what are the skills that you're going to need to future proof your career? And, there was the conversation, I



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listened to it the other day on one of the myriad of podcasts I listen to about being a generalist versus a specialist, and where is it going? It was Paul Holmes from the Holmes Report. He's a major global journal service in the PR industry, and it was an interesting conversation.

Because there was a move a number of years ago. "You've got to specialise, specialise." But what Paul was saying is it's really hard to find the generalists who can join the dots and to see that bigger picture and pull all the elements together. So, I think that having that mindset of understanding the various channels and where everything fits and at a certain level, and then I don't think it's possible to know every channel really, really well, but it's important to know what you don't know, and then bringing in specialists as you need them.

I'm a great believer in learning by doing, so I've done podcasts. We own our own gear in terms of tripods and iPads and microphones, and doing basic video. So, I believe in doing, but not all the time. We bring in specialists and other journalists and video producers as well. I think it's just a matter ... You said it earlier. It's about mindset. I think you need a mindset of you've got to continue learning for starters, but you've got to experiment a little bit and I think that agility and even trying out a little bit of social reporting, is what I call it, a bit more real time reporting on your organisation.

You can't let everything get perfect when you're doing a live stream on Facebook, for example. The content's got to be good, and people have got to be able to hear and see, to a degree, but it doesn't need to be a Spielberg production. I think that that's an overhang of days gone past, when it has to be perfect. Well, in this world, you wait 'til perfect, too late. You've missed the opportunity. It's gone, it's done.

David Pembroke: So, I'm interested at that gathering last night of the students from Deakin University, what was the most popular question that you were asked by the students last night? And perhaps a second question is do they feel like they are well prepared to contribute when they get their job, when they get their first job?

Trevor Young: We spoke for about two hours, so there was a lot of questions. I think the ones that they're very interested in is where they're going to end up, agency versus in-house. Because they're quite different. They can be quite different, and some people are suited to agencies. Some people are better suited to in-house, and some people can straddle both quite well.

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So, it was really about finding that side of things. That whole notion of specialising did come up a number of times. "Should I specialise in this, this, and this?" I found that that was quite interesting, because I'm a believer of being the generalist first, and then starting to specialise when you know what you're good at, or what you want to do.

So, I think specialising at that early stage is probably not the way to go. Sorry, what was the second question? What were they-

David Pembroke: Well, so the first question was, or just let me pull that back into my mind. The first question yeah, was what was the most popular question? I can't even think what the second question was. Gone. Gone. Gone for all times.

Trevor Young: Sorry about that. I had it in my back mind, but then I went onto ... I'm thinking about the questions that came through last night. Oh, about whether they're prepared.

David Pembroke: Sorry, yeah. There we go. Do they feel like they're prepared?

Trevor Young: Yeah. I mean, I did question them on ... We questioned them as much as they questioned us. We questioned them on are they doing enough around social media, and they felt that they'd done a lot of social media, which was good. Because that certainly wouldn't have been the case two or three years ago.

They're very much about getting real life experience, and I reckon the ones we spoke to last night were very circumspect about that, about starting at the bottom and not expecting to go up, learning a lot, asking questions. One thing that they were very keen on, I think one thing that did come up a fair bit was mentoring and, "Should I have a mentor? How do I find a mentor? Is it going to be good for my career to have a mentor?" That sort of thing.

That certainly popped up which is good... I think the fact that they came out at night to listen and learn, and absorb, and ask questions, and participate, and they were motivated and enthusiastic to do so, they didn't have to do it, I think that they're good signs from that particular group anyway, that they want to get on. They know they've got to start at the bottom, they've got to keep taking jobs and work experience, and internships, but seek out mentors as well.

David Pembroke: Indeed.

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Trevor Young: That sort of attitude is what we want. That's the future of our industry, and if that's the case, it looks like pretty bright.

David Pembroke: Yeah, indeed. Now, here's just a tip for anyone who's interested. You never ask someone two questions. My old boss at the ABC, if he was listening to this now, would be glaring at me saying, "Never two questions." It's a rule. It's a good rule. You ask someone a question, you never ask them two questions, but there you go. For anyone who's interested in podcasting, which I am, and you are, and I think everyone should be, because I think podcasting is really coming into its own. What's your view on that? A couple more questions.

What are your thoughts? Because you're obviously, as you said before, you listen to God knows how many. I'm subscribed, I counted them the other day, to 115 podcasts. It's terrible, isn't it?

Trevor Young: I was in your territory and I've carved off about a third, so still not great.

David Pembroke: I should go back for a spring clean, but every so often you listen to one and you think, "Oh, that was really good. I might have to go back to that." Anyway, I think podcasting time is still coming, and-

Trevor Young: What I like about podcasting, David, is the growth of it has been steady. It's not this just hockey stick growth which everyone jumps on it and then it flattens out and goes kaput. It seems to just be continuously growing as people, 'cause the stats that come out that people who understand ... Sorry. People who listen to podcasts listen to a lot of podcasts. So, the insight there is that once people understand it and they explore and they experiment, that they really love the medium.

It's getting people to understand how do you get a podcast, and obviously that's getting a lot easier and easier. It wasn't too easy a few years back, when you had to hook the phone up to the old iTunes, but now it's getting good. I've done a couple in my journey, and about to resurrect my older one which was Reputation Revolution. I had about 120 episodes on that, and really looking forward to getting back into it again.

So, I just love the fact that ... And when we talk podcasting, I mean yes, there's the ongoing build a large platform over a period of time, but I'm starting to see, and I'm starting to suggest to at least two clients that there's an opportunity for them to do a short run. That could be 10 to 20 episodes,

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on a particular theme, getting really in depth on it, and then walk away from it.

David Pembroke: Totally agree, and that goes back to I think the insight that you had around the insurance lady looking at women over 40 who were getting divorced, and that being her particular niche. Because my view is really that the world is getting narrow, and getting really, really, really narrow, and I think that's where the opportunity is in content, is that you have to go really narrow, because that's where you'll find your audience if you can create that valuable content for them.

This notion of personalization, "I want information that's relevant to me." The broadcast era run and done, and we're now into the very much that narrow cast area, so I totally agree with you. That's a clever tactic. Now listen, just a final question, because we have gone overtime, but are you optimistic about the content business and the public relations business?

Trevor Young: I'm very optimistic. I think there's a large role for PR to play, and that's why I'm scoping it out for this book, but I think that in terms of what we do in PR and comms is we used to have gatekeepers before. So, we should be feeling quite liberated that we can now go direct to an audience, but it's not just the content that you create. It's the conversations that you can spark, it's the humanity that you can bring to an organisation, to the people that they're trying to reach out to.

The influencers is a whole area of hard to scale, but it's an area that PR people have been doing for 50 years. It's just that there are more of them now, and they're not just media anymore. So, I think there's so many boundaries being crossed, and that's the challenge I think for our industry, because if you're a client particularly, you're faced with SEOs now doing content, PRs doing content, PRs doing SEO. Advertisings are now all of a sudden starting up content divisions.

You've got content agencies, you've got social media agencies who have now worked out that it's all about the content. It's pretty tough for clients I think, and that's why I think they need a philosophy around where they're going and what their plan is and their vision, because if they get besotted too much by every idea that comes in from every agency, they're going to get very confused very quickly, and none of us want that. So, I think that the positivity from my side for our industry is that it very is much about telling stories, about being human, building relationships.

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That's what our industry should be doing, and that's what our profession does at its heart. To me, that's not going to change. You can have robots doing a bit of writing, sure, but no one can outsource relationships and [inaudible 00:33:37] and connection with people. I think the more we go down the path that we're going, digital path, the more we'll be craving that face to face ... Well, not face to face, but that humanity in communications, and the transparency in building trust in brands.

David Pembroke: Very good. Well, Trevor Young, thank you very much for bringing your very special kind of humanity to the InTransition podcast today. How might people introduce themselves to you, so they could have a potential conversation, or find out more about not only you and your agency, or maybe even that book that you're writing?

Trevor Young: Yeah, Twitter's still the best one. [@TrevorYoung](#). Pretty easy to find. I'm on it quite a few times a day. Our agency business is [Zoetic.agency](#), one of those new domain names, so no .com.au. Zoetic.agency. And the blog is [PRWarrior.com](#).

David Pembroke: Okay, very good. Well, Trevor, thank you very much for sharing a bit of time with us today, and to you the audience, thank you for coming back once again today. If it's been your first time, thanks very much for joining us and we look forward to you coming back in the few weeks ahead. I think we're up to episode maybe 140 or something like that.

But we'll be going for a few more years to go, because there are interesting people such as Trevor Young who are prepared to share their wisdom with you, so that you can improve the communication and improving your communication in your government agency or department, you will help to strengthen communities and improve the wellbeing of citizens. Thanks very much for your time today. A very special thanks to Trevor Young, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

Speaker 1: You've been listening to InTransition, the program dedicated to the practice of content communication in the public sector. For more, visit us at [contentgroup.com.au](#).