
InTransition Episode 08 – Russell Sparkman

David:

Hello ladies and gentlemen wherever you may be listening around the world. Welcome to this week's edition of InTransition, the podcast dedicated to the practice of content marketing in government. My name's David Pembroke and I'm delighted to be with you once again as we explore just how governments are using content marketing to strengthen communities and improve the wellbeing of citizens.

Our guest today is Russell Sparkman, one of the pioneers that has to be said of global content marketing. And it also has to be said, he's a good friend of mine. Russell and I have got to know each other over the years through attending Content Marketing World in Cleveland. And it also has to be said that I always enjoy catching up with him in person to discuss content marketing, particularly as it relates to the challenges of government and the not for profit sector.

It also has to be said that we are a niche of vertical within the Global Content Marketing Institute community. But while small, we're dedicated and enthusiastic. And I know that in the weeks, months, and years ahead, that community will grow, as we collectively discussed, just how is it that we will use content marketing to make a difference and to take on some of the world's biggest challenges such as climate change, demographic shifts, urbanization and the ongoing growth, influence, and impact of technology in our lives.

Now, as his established practice at the beginning of InTransition, we start with a definition which is being adapted from the Content Marketing Institute's definition of content marketing, and it's the definition, as it specifically relates to government.

Now that definition is, "Content marketing is a strategic and measurable business process that relies on the curation, creation, and distribution of valuable, relevant, and consistent content to engage and inform a clearly-defined audience, with the objective of driving desired citizen or stakeholder action."

Well Russell Sparkman and his brother, Kevin, started their business, Fusion Spark, way back in 1999. Fusion Spark is a network of talented individuals based across North America and Japan with skills in marketing, public relations, digital media, and journalism. Fusion Spark's mission is to create and distribute content that informs minds, inspires hearts, and influences decision.

Russell joins me today from Whidbey Island in Washington State. Russell, my friend, hello and thanks for being InTransition.

Russell:

Thank you for having me. This is quite an honour.

David: The first thing we might do is let's take the drone or the helicopter up to 20,000 feet.

Russell: Sure.

David: And give me your views on just how governments around the world and as well as not for profits and give me your view on how well governments are taking up the opportunity of content marketing.

Russell: Well, it's a mile higher, how many kilometre that equates to view of how government is using content marketing today. Well we're still on the embryonic stages, is the way that I view that. And I view that from the perspective of having done for government agencies what would be considered, by all definitions, of the definition you just gave actually, content marketing back in 2002.

And jumping forward today, just today, with a project, with a big non-profit client that we're working on right. I mean, literally today, not just figuratively today. But literally today, we've gotten back feedback on the content strategy that we've submitted to them. And reviewing their feedback, my colleagues and I were just discussing, well, we still have a lot of teaching to do here in order to get them to understand what it is that we're recommending and why we're recommending.

So again, the answer is that it's still really at the embryonic stage, is what I believe.

David: What are some of the things that perhaps we can do as leaders in this community to accelerate that learning and education process?

Russell: Well it's actually using content marketing best practiced as ourselves, to do as you were saying and that's to actually, let's say, nurture this niche. There's a tremendous amount of people in B to B and B to C alone that don't know what they don't know about this. And so much of the content over the past four, five years about content marketing, using content in digital marketing, however you want to describe it.

So much of that has been focused on B to B and B to C. And that community's still getting up to speed. So you can imagine how far behind years-wise government non-profits are. So what can we do? It's up to you, it's up to me, it's up to others to actually work together to use content marketing best practices, to provide the resources that speak to the language of people in government and also in non-profits.

David: So just how important is that issue of language to ensure that their communication is clear and effective?

Russell: Well, it's critical. Each profession has terminology that they are the most comfortable using. And fund-raising, it's not marketing leading the sales, it's marketing leading to, for example, donations or--And so for example, a tremendous amount of really good content about how a market today really get content that non-profits should be using.

It's all in the language of marketing and sales funnels and customer journeys and driving in sales, and so on. It's not in the language of the non-profits, and so the non-profit sector and with that, the government sector as well, then since they're not searching those terms on Google and they're not paying attention to the kinds of events and conferences that B to B and B to C community are going to, then they are not getting exposed to this content.

So yes, we absolutely have to frame our way of talking about content marketing in terms that are going to speak to that person who's in a public relations or public or media or media-facing role within a government agency or somebody who's in a development position at a non-profit. We have to adjust our language so they know when we're talking about how to use content to drive actions; that we're talking about the kinds of actions they're seeking to drive.

David: I'm intrigued by the feedback that you received today from the particular proposal that you're working on.

Russell: Yeah.

David: Obviously, there is that challenge around learning and education and in improving the way that those of us who are in this business communicate, so that as we speak clearly to the needs of the particular audience that we seek to serve. But what are some of the other feedback that you saw there that gave you a bit of a hint as to where perhaps there is other resistance points within governments and non-profit organizations to the notion of using content and content marketing to achieve their business objectives?

Russell: Well this one particular case that I'm dealing with today is, interestingly enough, it's not isolated and it happens to be on the topic of SEO and the relevance of content to search and to understanding how people actually use search and why they use search. And by that, the most part I'm referring to Google.

And part of the challenge is that these organizations believe that they need to say things and say them in a certain way. And so what you end up is with a lot of either non-profit or government jargon using words or phrases that the average layperson is not typing into Google as to search for that particular topic, whatever it may be.

And this is something that we have been educating clients on now for a decade and a half. And just having the experience that we're having right now today with this one client just reminds me as to how--Oh no, people such as yourself,

myself, we're now in a little bit of a bubble and we think, "Well, doesn't everybody get that that's how search and SEO and stuff works?" And it's not the case at all.

So anyway, the point is that it's a constant ongoing client education process. And in this case, the main point here is that, in this particular case, we have to work hard to try to teach them that the language they want to use is not necessarily the language that their target audience speaks when their target audience is thinking about whatever this particular topic is.

David: When you are in those conversations with potential clients and you are seeking to communicate with them the benefit of content marketing, particularly as it relates to them achieving their very specific business objectives, how do you go about communicating that value proposition of content marketing to a government or not for profit audience?

Russell: I'm just writing a note here so I make sure I have the whole question down. So, how to communicate the benefit of content marketing to government agencies? Well David, I was hoping that you would tell me.

David: I've got some clues, I've got some hints that we can share but you're the guest so I'll ask the questions and you give the answers.

Russell: Oh darn. One of the slides that happen at the slide deck now is I put up a question, and the question is: What is content marketing? And my next slide is: It's inevitable. It's not a definition, it's inevitable. Content marketing is inevitable.

Whether you want to use that term or not, it is inevitable that in order to communicate today, you have to assume the role of a creator and/or curator of content that speaks to whatever it is you're telling your subject matter is, whether it's health or environment or other socio-related issues. You have to be putting content out there for your prospects to find, for your prospects engage with you over, for your prospects ultimately make decisions over.

It's inevitable. You have no choice. The train has left the station in this regard. There is no more efficiency in just putting together a printed brochure. There is no more communication's objective achieved just by putting out a poster or putting something up on a bus panel or any other paid advertising.

So that's one of the points that we start out with: Look, this is inevitable. And then you start going through the process of explaining how and why a content strategy is so important in this regard and that it's really for their benefit to do the content strategy because, particularly in government and particularly in non-profits, all you hear over and over and over again is that we have limited human and limited financial resources which makes the content strategy process all the more important.

I like to tell prospects, "Look, content strategy's important because it's a process of deciding as much what not to do as what to do." Because as you've seen and experienced in this world we're in today, there will be a lot of sort of flailing about and trying this and trying that. Well, that mantra that you sometimes hear, particularly in the business world, is of test, fail, iterate, et cetera, you really don't have that luxury as much or at all if you're doing government and non-profit work.

So that's the other thing about how to communicate the benefit of content marketing, is getting right into that discussion about content strategy. And we always emphasize that from the point of view of efficiency of human resources and financial resources.

And then finally, we really try to emphasize. We have some pieces in our portfolio that absolutely demonstrate to prove this; that contrary to what a lot of what you may see in terms of conventional wisdom, you've got to constantly be churning out a new blog post today or new Facebook post, wall post, or Twitter tweets multiple time a day.

Contrary that conventional wisdom that you got to be constantly pushing stuff out, we demonstrate, this is important for non-profit and government, that a lot of subject matter, a lot of topics, if you produce at the outset, the absolute best content about the subject matter, it has a long-lasting, evergreen value.

Now we have one particular project that I love talking about in this context and it's at FloridaYards.org. And what I love to share with people about this is that this particular project is still the number one ranked search return site for all phrases and terms related to environmentally-friendly landscaping in the state of Florida. It is today the number one, number two, number three Google return for that.

And guess what, David? The last time content was updated on that site was in 2005, the day it was launched. So here's a government agency that invested in the very best on this subject matter, Florida-friendly landscaping, back in 2005 and today it is still returning on that original investment.

David:

So let's actually spend a bit more time diving into this notion of creating quality evergreen content with a really long tile in it because I think it's a really valuable and important point that you raised there; that it's less about volume, more about quality, more about understanding the needs of the audience, not so much of the government agency but the audience that they're seeking to serve, asking the questions and creating that compelling content that people continue to come back to.

So, give us some of the other insights or perhaps some insights into the process in your thinking as you went through building out that content program and then perhaps some insight into the distribution of that content and some of

what you did with the distribution, and then perhaps some insight into the management and evaluation of the impact and the effectiveness of that program.

Russell: Okay, just writing notes. That's a lot.

David: That's a lot, I know. It's a good case study, I think.

Russell: Yeah.

David: Because it really goes to the heart of what we're trying to talk about; it's to really to get people to understand that it's understanding what the audience wants, and if you're finding that ten years on that this is the place where people are still going back to understand about Florida-friendly landscapes. Well you obviously did something right.

Russell: Yeah, we definitely--we have tacked into something in there. And there are some really great lessons to learn. You mentioned the needs of the audience. And there's a certain marketing 101 aspect of identifying and understanding your audience, but where this starts to separate from marketing as we used to know it is that, by understanding the needs of the audience, it provides you with the ability to re-engineer backward what your content assets should be.

So you understand who your audience members are, you delve deeply into identifying what their needs, and you go through a rigorous process of prioritizing desired outcomes. And through that process, you can then re-engineer backwards.

So for instance, with the Florida Yard project, okay well--And by the way, one of your audience is always--it's always the group that's commissioning you. So in our case, the audience, one of the important audience was the Florida DEP, Department of Environment Protection.

So they had a need to teach Floridians how to plant more Florida-friendly landscapes. Now in order to enable that, well one of the needs that becomes pretty obvious is that, well, if you're going to recommend that then you really should provide a really great functional purpose tool that enables the target audience to actually explore what types of plants are actually Florida-friendly, native plants, and so on.

So as a result of that type of re-engineering backward thinking, we ended up creating an interactive plant database. And we got the database, I think, from the University of Florida and it was about 400 plants. And this database could be searched by any number of parameters that are ranging from light conditions, sunny or shady; subtle conditions, sandy or loamy, and so forth and so on.

And then in addition to that, there's some education content that's there. Not everybody knows what Florida-friendly landscaping actually means, so we created a Florida-friendly landscaping 101 tutorial. And the really interesting thing that happened with that, it's worth sharing here because it's a very different outcome because it was this government partnership than, let's say, band of business, let's say, like a big landscaping business, like a Home Depot or whatever.

And here's what it was: We created the landscaping 101 tutorial and if you went through the tutorial and completed all the questions, and it was pretty much a no-brainer, it was pretty easy to do, then you were rewarded with a certificate of completion and a packet of Florida-friendly wildflower seeds.

Well about 30 days after the site went live, we got a phone call from the client and they said, "You have to turn that feature off. You have to take that feature down." And you know why they asked us to do that, dude?

David: They ran out of seeds.

Russell: Exactly. They didn't have the capacity to do the fulfilment.

David: Yeah, right.

Russell: That's how popular it was. Now, imagine if that had been a business. That would have been an amazing metric as to how well you were succeeding with that site, which kind of answers one of your questions.

Some of these Florida projects now go back to the mid-2000's and this was also new. One of the things that we've had as a huge challenge and today it's still a bit of a challenge but it's getting a little bit better and that's around the idea of distribution. We provided with the overall content strategy for that project. And for every project that we're ever done, whether just for government or non-profit, we've provided with a content strategy and the plan for the website, et cetera.

We've always provided recommendations and plans for what you're characterized as distribution. We've provided recommendations for marketing the site. Now today, we are still dealing with clients who primarily view a website as pretty much as the end of one process and not really looking at it as part of an entire ecosystem of processes.

So most clients still, today that we're dealing with, they follow our guidance regarding quality content for getting the SEO benefit. But we're still challenged by finding clients that understand that, okay, we need to go to the next step and if one-third of our content budget's for original content, maybe one-thirds for created or other forms of getting content. Then we need about one-third of that

budget actually to paid advertising, paid placement to promote awareness of that content.

So while B to B and B to C were almost as much on top of that, we still struggle with getting clients in government and non-profit to actually see, okay, it's not a build the website launch. And then say, "Oh, I'm glad that's done." It's like, no, your job's only just started. And distribution is going to require these efforts.

David: Do you think that there is a bit of a change happening now as people's behaviour matures and they gain a better understanding, even from perhaps their own creation and consumption of content, that they perhaps are understanding a little bit more the importance of distribution and the importance of being active and being able to move content through the ecosystem as opposed to being static?

Russell: There's four big projects we're working on right now and compared to--So these are projects that came up on Q4 last year and Q1 this year. And I would have to say response to your question that some of these discussions are definitely now easier. They're just two years ago or one year ago.

So I guess the answer is yes. I still though, we were talking about this last week, one of our particular client, we were like, "Wow, how do we mint and reproduce more of this client because they get it so well, right?" And we were talking about how it's still a bit of a needle in the haystack to find a prospect in non-profit and government in which multiple people within the organization sort of get what the contemporary best practices are. And actually, they themselves are internally advocates for it. I still think that's a bit of a needle in a haystack.

David: Yeah, I tend to agree with you although our experience would mirror your experience and that the conversations are far more developed and there is a higher degree of understanding. And I think that's also being driven the collapse in the effectiveness of the traditional government distribution channels.

They know that the content they're creating and distributing even a couple of years ago are not completely ineffective but are much less ineffective than they were. So in seeking better solutions in order to influence the citizens that they're trying to engage with, that they are understanding of it.

I think the other thing that underpins the proposition of content marketing is that notion of it being a strategic, measurable, and accountable process. And I think that to me is really starting to resonate with a lot of our clients and that they understand that: Hang on, we can--yes, we've got a process that's being driven by business objectives. Yes, we've got a process or we've got a lens through which we're making multiple decisions, and then we're having a better opportunity to capture an understanding through a lot of digital metrics that's allowing us to track our effectiveness.

I think there's bright times ahead but as we move towards the end of our discussion here, where do you see the next year, two years, and how is it that the content marketing community within the not for profit and government sector, how do we come together to perhaps accelerate that learning process and start to see government really take this wonderful gift of technology in order for them to, as we say, strengthen community and improve the wellbeing of citizens throughout the world as we wrestle with some very, very major challenges that the world has?

Russell: Well, it's somewhat related to what we talked about at the top of the show here which is, it is a niche to which--and that rhymed, didn't it? It's a niche to which there is not presently a whole lot of good educational resources directed to them, again, and their language and also reaching them in the channels where they hang out.

So as you know, we had a little bit of email discussion about this. I've been producing a content marketing technique here in Whidbey Island and up to this date, it's been fairly generic in terms of the way we've talked about content marketing in the conference.

And we've covered things like video storytelling and analytics and so on. But again, it's been pretty generic in terms of who the target audience is. And so, it's part of our strategy this year, is to actually take what we've learned by producing that conference and actually re-tool that to become something here in the States that people recognize as: Okay, that's a gathering of professionals like me who are coming together to learn about this content stuff. And by like me, I mean, government communications and NPO communications professionals.

It's a long way of saying that I think perhaps another way of saying this is that, if you look at what Joe Pulizzi's done with Content Marketing Institute, content marketing world largely for the B to B and B to C group, we should try to have sort of a micro effort focused on government and non-profits.

And by the way, for those of you listeners, you may not know this B to B. Content Marketing Institute puts out an annual benchmarks, trends, and budgets report about content marketing. And starting last year, they started to produce one specifically about non-profits; where the sponsor were, where the official sponsors of that. It's a great study in the--I don't know if you've seen it.

David: I have.

Russell: Yeah. So if that however you published a podcast, a URL of that was published there. You should really get insight about what non-profits are doing, where they're finding success, where they're struggling, et cetera.

David: Okay, Russell. Listen, we will wrap it up there but it sounds like a task for you and for me and for quite a few other people. So I think this community will grow and it will grow quickly because I think there is such a need for content marketing to tell the story of government so as to they can engage with citizens in order to improve the wellbeing of those citizens but also to strengthen communities. And there's some wonderful work happening all around the world.

So I think our job might be to join it all up and see what we can do, and certainly to make a difference and to act with a purpose over the next weeks, months, and years ahead.

So thanks very much for joining us. Just before you go though, you do have a lot of resources, so where can people find you on the web and how can they engage with you and what's the best way to reach you?

Russell: Go to our FusionSpark.com website. And from the large carousel images on the homepage, we're promoting a number of webinars that we've done. One is the essentials of non-profit content marketing, we have another one on purpose-focused content. We have another interesting one on emerging and storytelling platforms.

So we're working to be on our own monthly schedule with these webinars. That's the best place, we're trying to draw as many people to that website as possible. I think that that's the best place to have people come. They can sign up for a newsletter, they can sign up for the webinars. Many of the webinars, by the way, are recorded so things we've done in the past are available.

David: Okay, well highly recommend that, ladies and gentlemen wherever you may be; Lots of knowledge, lots of experience, and as I say, one of the great pioneers of content marketing in the world.

So, Russ, thanks very much for joining us. Once again, delighted that you've been part of InTransition and thanks very much for all those insight and wisdom and we look forward to continuing to work with you in the years ahead. Thanks very much.

Russell: Thank you, David.