
InTransition episode 20 - Prudence Cook podcast

David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen, my name is David Pembroke and thanks once again for joining us InTransition, the podcast dedicated to the practice of content marketing in government. I'm thrilled to be with you again today as we bring you the insights and wisdom of some of the most interesting people in the world of content marketing in government. This week another real treat for you but before I introduce our guest it's definition time.

Content marketing is an old practice before I do get to that definition, it's a relatively new name and people are still familiarising themselves with it and what it means. Also I accept that for a government audience the word marketing is a bit of a turn off.

Marketing is often saying there's something the private sector does in selling products and services, generally sometimes, things that we don't want but I think is all of you know the challenge of selling ideas and decisions to citizens sits at the heart of the work of any democratically elected government. I think also as behaviour changes that the many of the world of marketing will change and it will lose that sort of sales-y awful connotation that it has had over the many years.

Anyway to the definition which is an adaptation of the Content Marketing Institute's definition of content marketing as it relates to government audiences and 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 the desired citizen or stakeholder action.

So today's guest, Pru Cook is the manager of Online Communities for the Grains Research and Development Corporation. She joins me now. Pru, thanks for joining me InTransition.

Prudence Cook: Thank you for having me.

David: Pru, take us to a day in the life of the Communities Manager for the Grains and Research Development Corporation. What sorts of things that you're doing in terms of managing those online communities?

Prudence: Sure. My day usually starts with looking at any activity that we've had overnight. Our main audience is Australia's 22,000 grain growers not all of it on social media of course but it's having a look at people who have been in WA who are in a different time area and looking at what the discussions that have been happening overnight.

For example, a lot of people are in their tractors at the moment putting their crops in the ground. It's looking to see what those conversations have been overnight whether there's anything that we need to address or looking at any particular conversations that might have happened that we can contribute resources or expertise too. For example, this morning there was a conversation that happened overnight about the influence of disc seeding on the soil-borne disease, Rhizoctonia. That was me trying to find some resources that I could slide into that conversation to see if we can give growers additional support to help them make decisions for what they're doing.

David: How hard was it to put your hands on some resources around that particular really narrow issue?

Prudence: GRDC is very lucky in the sense that we're very content rich. We've got years and years' worth of resources and a really, really good library of update papers, scientific resources, YouTube clips bits and pieces. It's just a matter of being able to tap into the right person within the organisation to direct me towards the resources that I need to slide that back into that conversation.

David: What sorts of relationships have you had to build within the organisation to ensure that you're getting appropriate and timely access to that sort of information?

Prudence: It's still at stage where it does require a little bit of encouragement when it comes to social media but what I've been doing is picking key areas that we can really help and develop. Shaping them up into case studies and I regularly offer internal training for staff within the organisation so they can on have an understanding of why GRDC is playing in the social media space and what I can do for them in terms of helping get their messages out further and picking a few key examples where we've had some really good successors.

I do a lot of training in industry as well too. A lot of people just don't realise that social media can deliver really scientifically relevant and farming specific information. Often once they see the types of conversation and the detail

that's happening on social media, it's fairly easy to get by and then it's just a matter of people now at the stage with our volunteer voluntarily come to me and say, "Look I've got this, what can we do? How can we get that out in social?"

David: Let's have a maybe draw down on one of those examples where you've been able to really add value to this large and very dispersed community around Australia.

Prudence: Sure. A recent one would be development of an app that helps growers to calculate the soil moisture that they have available in their soil which allows them to make decisions around what they're going to sow or if they're going to apply fertilizer stuff like that. They've got the app in a testing stage and now are looking for growers to actually be guinea pigs and road test that. The project manager approached me and asked what we could do.

Obviously social media lends itself really, really nicely to something like testing an app because you have an audience that is already familiar with the technology. All of our growers are, very high proportions are accessing social media resources for mobile devices. It was fairly easy to put together a campaign to promote the app for a testing.

The project manager came back shortly after and said, "Look every time the post went out throughout the campaign we had a huge spike in people registering their interest and we now have lots of new users who are delivering us with some really useful feedback." That's the kind of stuff that I would then include in my training internally which encourages other staff to look to social for a way of communicating on research outcomes not just at the end of a project when something tangible is delivered but also throughout the life of the project to look at continuous improvement and getting growers involved with research throughout the life of the project.

David: That's a great example of delivering value to that community and engaging them and also drawing value from the GRDC's point of view so as that they can improve the delivery of service to the farmers around Australia. I'm also interested very much in terms of the planning and the approach of you and how you're going about it.

Obviously you're coming in on a daily basis and looking at those issues that are jumping up but do you have a formal planning process in terms of what

you're trying to put together? Is it just social media or are there other things that you're using other tools that you're using as well to communicate with the farmers around Australia?

Prudence: Definitely. The first part of your content I have a content schedule that I work on and I'm very, very reliant on analytic sort database content scheduling. I'll always look at a) monitoring what's actually happening. What are the conversations that are happening on social media so I can show that any content is marrying up with and what's happening there.

I'll also look at social media and website analytics so we'll be able to go and have a look at what people are clicking on, what people were Googling this time last week or what they were Googling this time last year because farming is very seasonal and you've often got quite narrow windows in which content is readily useful to a farmer.

I'm also watching the weather radar as well too and if you've got a big rain band coming through, being prepared to have some good time and resources ready to go to put out so that farmers can make decisions then and there should they have a good rainfall event are really, really handy. I'm really, really big on constantly analysing content that we're putting out and using website analytics to ensure that we're putting out content that is really relevant for that audience in particular as well too because some stuff that might perform particularly well for one medium doesn't work on the other so it's constantly refining that per platform.

My responsibility predominantly in social media but GRDC does a lot of other stuff in terms of putting this kind of information out whether that be through digital suite of products like our website. We do podcasting, we do a lot of YouTube clips and extension videos that way and we also do a lot of face to face training and events and still trying to do group extension where I have a possible in terms of still having that face to face contact that farmers really value.

David: In terms of that planning, how far ahead are you looking if you got sort of certainty around what might be happening in sort of 3, 6, 9 months down the track?

Prudence: We have cropping calendars which provide a really nice overview in terms I've looked at this time every year we will be expecting farmers to be scouting for

this particular disease or planting this particular crop, etcetera. But I do have the ability to be very, very flexible with social media so that if I do all of a sudden see that people start tweeting about for example last year Midwestern Yellow's Virus. There was an outbreak in Canola in South Australia which was quite devastating. We're able to pick up on that stuff, pulled together a fairly coordinated overview in terms of what's being seen in paddocks where, what the media and other organisations are saying in terms of advice and pull that together and be able to make decisions and be quite responsive in terms of getting some of that stuff out as well too.

David: It's a wonderful service for the farming community. They must be delighted with these sorts of information that you've provided.

Prudence: I hope so.

David: Do you see the feedback coming back to you? Do you see that there is that gratitude and pleasure that they're getting from the fact that you are serving them useful, relevant, valuable information in a timely fashion through the channels that are useful to them either be it, as you say, social media through the phone or a podcast when they're on their tractor?

Prudence: We do get some good feedback although for me my key metric really is click through rating. We've got a lot of farmers do have a personality type but they're not too forthcoming with praise but it's really good for me to be able to see that I've put out something and that lots of people are clicking on it straightaway.

For example, there's a reasonably new practice narrow windrow burning which farmers do to control their weed seed bank and we had a recent rainfall was able to put out a resource on managing wet windrows. And my click through rate just went through the roof which was phenomenal it meant that we were putting something out just as people needed it and that was the information that they wanted to pull down and then read then in there and that sort of to me is just as good as a "Well done thank you."

David: Have you experimented with content that sort of goes a bit beyond the utility of farming to sort of extending to providing more value perhaps on the edges maybe looking at some entertainment of content, things that are not just purely specifically about farming?

Prudence: In terms of content while I predominantly focus on getting out research and extension resources we do a lot in the capacity building space.

David: Training?

Prudence: Yep, this is the favourite for that which works really well particularly on Facebook we do a lot of case studies on a students and PhD students that we fund that kind of things so that it gets a lot of good stuff. It's very interesting though when you look at social media trends in general they often say that having a photo will increase engagement and really light engaging content.

I find that we get a lot of engagement with that kind of stuff so likes and re-tweets that kind of stuff but the click through rate isn't quite there. But for us if I look at our most popular posts overtime they've been quite scientific and really pertinent to that particular stage in the growing season.

Those kinds of resources are the stuff that really gets the most success amongst our audience which I found quite surprising. We do try to balance some of the more engaging and entertaining type content but we find the hard-hitting stuff is actually more successful which is quite interesting and a bit contrary to what you read elsewhere.

David: Perhaps that's the farming community then maybe they're getting their entertainment elsewhere. They look at the GRDC really for that really useful relevant valuable content that's going to help them in their jobs.

Have you been surprised at the pickup rights and adaption rights of social media or do you really sense that it's made for the rural community because to me it seems like an ideal place for a rural community to be able to draw down on the resources and be able to take from the GRDC the value that it really is looking for?

Prudence: Definitely, farmers were the first ones to really champion social media particularly from an advocacy point of view. It's certainly not a new technology to the farming community. The grains industry lends itself really, really nicely to something like Twitter in particular because we have auto-steer and tractors so that the short 140 characters is really nice to monitor a couple while you go the link to the paddock turnaround and go back again.

The grains industry is really picking up on this quite nicely and you see particular hashtags, like tweets from the tractor cab and plant 15 and harvest

15 that spring up so that people can be out in their tractors and head us and discussing exactly what's happening while they're out there. There some really good imagery that comes out of it as well too, particularly when they get bogged.

David: What's next? Where do you start to take this valuable resource that you are providing to the Australian farming community? What's next? Where is the innovation that's going to continue to add value because it sounds like you've got a nice program moving you're getting the engagement you're getting the uptake you're seeing through your click through rate that there's a response and value, but where's next? Where are you going to go next in terms of trying to continue to create value?

Prudence: We really want to look at some of the more visual type mechanisms, so looking at in additional social platforms perhaps on Instagram or Pinterest for sharing a lot more visual learning. At the moment we're sticking with our Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn as our main and of course YouTube and podcasting audio visual products. We really, really wanting to get this really good bank of analytics to be able to be very, very predictive and using that to guide our communications going forward. I'd like to see us at the point where we can have a look back and go, "Okay this time over the last three years growers have been looking for information on this particular pest so we need to have a communications product ready to go two weeks before," so we get into this really proactive instead of reactive phase of content and communication activities.

We have a lot of regional people doing our communication activity from all around Australia. It's being able to give them the stuff that they need to ensure that we're being really, really responsive. Also really wanting to use a lot more for monitoring to guide activities internally as well too so being able to pick up on staff for example do some gap analysis. For example, soil moisture monitoring if we wanted to do a gap analysis to see what sort of industry interest there was in soil moisture probes for having them look at how much soil moisture you have.

We have the ability to look at Twitter and see conversations of growers that are using that technology. Advisors that are selling or promoting it and then using that as perhaps some touch points to guide a gap analysis to look at well

where should research be looking at this particular space so there's a lot going on in there.

David: That's nice sophisticated stuff isn't it to be able to draw those insights out to guide where you going to actually invest your research resources in order to deliver value.

Prudence: Definitely and it also gets you some nice touch points in terms of knowing where to start or it compliments existing methods that we have. We have regional panels and regional cropping solution network groups that are out in industry that help guide research. But it's nice to have the social media to perhaps back up some of these assumptions and maybe provide additional touch points in terms of extra contacts or perhaps provide an ultimate point of view.

David: What sort of programs are you using around the analytics?

Prudence: Predominantly using that analytics that are involved with that within a lot of the social media themselves I think that they provide fairly good overview of what's happening there. Google analytics is really, really important to me in terms of having a big look at what percentage of our website is drive by social and what kind of content people are looking at there and that kind of stuff. I have a social media management software package that I used that provides some good analytics as well too.

David: Which one do you use?

Prudence: I'm using Sprout Social at the moment.

David: Happy with it?

Prudence: Yeah it's working all for me.

David: And social listening, what tools are you using there?

Prudence: Agriculture is quite interesting in the sense that we got to quite finite our target audience. We probably estimate that maybe about 10% of our growers and advisors are on social media. It's actually quite a manageable community in terms of being able to listen in to some of those tools.

I'm trying to actually use lists to ensure that I'm keeping an eye. If I was to search by key words there so many different keywords in agriculture that a

you'd rather run the risk of running into way too much with a topic like weed or canola or just have far too many keywords once you get into some specific diseases and pests and crop varieties that it would be far too big to manage. Actually using Twitter lists to try and monitor as much of that as I can. There is a big manual monitoring component of my work but I hope that that kind of allows me to pick up on some of the conversations like the deseeding and Rhizoctonia that you can use to really getting to those conversations and add that value.

David: That 10% estimate that you just mentioned is that a small number? Do you feel or do you think it will grow from 10% to a much larger percentage of the grain growers in Australia using social media?

Prudence: Yes, I've been playing in social media for the grains industry for about four years now and its incredible life. I've come from a training background in terms of actually doing workshops and developing training packages for growers, advisors and researchers. When I began with this space we had to lump social media or in with apps in smartphones because we knew that nobody would turn up to a social media workshop but I've just recently done a series of events that I was presenting out on social media.

It's at the point now that I've got offstage and had five or six new people following me that it just five applicants it's like consequence of that. I think it's been around long enough and I think people have heard enough about it and perhaps become familiar with that for social reasons as well too because obviously a lot more people they might have a Facebook account that they're using to keep in touch with family and friends and once you can demonstrate that there's benefit in when you can demonstrate some of the types of conversations that are happening on social that's just a little push that they need to go and seek a lot more information. It's also very interesting as well too through a series of workshops that I did run is that you have a lot of growers at the end of it that would say, "Look I can really see valuing using this service for information gathering but I don't want to post anything. I don't think anyone would be interested in what I have to say." There are a lot of people that are seeing value in it and information gathering too.

David: But it will grow by the sound of it.

Prudence: Definitely you're saying new users that have farm machinery related avatar and from a grain growing region that are popping up and following us every

day. If you'd ask me if we'd be where we are right now four years ago I've probably wouldn't have believed you but it is something that's increasing quite rapidly.

David: In terms of your team or the team that works with you in the communication function for the Grain Research Development Corporation in Australia you say that it's regionally based and located which makes a bit of sense but could you tell me a bit about your team and where they are located and what roles do they play?

Prudence: Sure, we sit in a business group called Regional Grower Services and within that we have a corporate communications team, we have a products and services team, we also have an extension in training team which I sit under I'm seeing as delivering extension type communication so really trying to get the benefits of research and development out of there. We have contractors out in the regions that deliver the rest of the extension and training team our regional managers that are based in both the North South and West GRDC regions. There's a lot of engagement in terms of identifying the conversations that are happening on social and looking for opportunities that we can use to really get good content packages together.

I tried to put out a weekly publication that goes to our communicators and across the border team which I help to familiarize people with social media if they aren't already there but also identifies here are some of the things that are being discussed, here are some of the stuff that GRDC has put out this week that has performed particularly well. It gives people an indication of how their content is working and allows them to identify opportunities for our coming stories. Also allows them to the added opportunity to identify talent for upcoming communication products.

We're quite a small team but with a lot of communication products that we're putting out but trying to identify opportunities to really cross over and make sure that we get a good cover of regional issues. The nature of social as well too is that you can have farmers from Western Australia learning from what's happening over this side and vice versa.

David: In terms of that team though you mentioned that there's communications in this your organisation. Would you describe it is as solid or not solid at all that there's real visibility around what everyone is trying to do and whether you're

sharing the same network of people who you're trying to talk to through the social channels?

Prudence: I think it's really good in terms of click communication that's coming through from all of the different channels and contractors keep us very regularly updated on what's happening and I think it works quite well.

David: Podcasting, I love podcasting I think podcasting is fabulous and I've always thought that into these rural and regional areas into the farming community the podcasting is such a great thing because either driving in cars for long distances or self-driving tractors there's time to access knowledge and information. How's your podcast performing?

Prudence: Cool, I don't actually sit across the podcasting so I'm not a hundred percent how it's going analytics wise. We do get some good feedback. I often try and identify through social media activity. People that I can touch base with directly over the phone so for example over the weekend we had a tweet through about how valuable someone had found out YouTube channel so I gave them a call and she said, "I also listen to your podcast and I got onto it when I was working on a farm over in Canada." So the feedback that I had from her there was good but as a setup I'm not directly across the podcast. It does perform quite well when we put it out over social media.

David: But people access it through the social media you can see the numbers.

Prudence: I think podcasting which is something that I often run by people it's similar to social media as people might have heard of it but I'm not quite sure of the value so it's say, "Basically radio on demand and you don't need an internet connection provided if connected when you've got your Wi-Fi," when people got, "Oh that's really good and see value in that."

David: How do you stay on top of the lightest trends in social media and digital communications? Where are you drawing your knowledge from so as it you can be better at your job?

Prudence: I following about latest on social media so when you get to sit and watch Twitter and Facebook a lot so really looking at some of that kind of stuff and driving trends there but try to regularly read things like Mashable and have a look at anything that's coming out that could be important. The good thing about being in social media too is a lot of people send you stuff anytime the word pops up they send it through. I guess just playing in it a lot of spoke to

it's sort of dominates both work and outside of work and some little pitches sometimes to the detrimental of other areas.

David: It is one of those things isn't it this whole space of content creation, content distribution, curation through digital online offline channels it's so much more interesting and so much more effective than the way that we used to communicate when the media had the monopoly. Now where obviously that monopoly no longer exists and we're all able to communicate much more efficiently and effectively. It's very exciting I think and I think really in terms of delivering value for your community I can see that this is only going to get more and more important and we'll watch on with a lot of interest as you continue to innovate, you continue to have success and you continue to deliver important value because again its niche information but it's important information, isn't it?

Prudence: We think so.

David: Congratulations. Thanks very much for joining us InTransition.

Prudence: My pleasure.

David: Thanks very much I really enjoyed the conversation here with Pru and you can see that it's time to get involved. It really is time to get started and the fact that what Pru is doing is listening to the audience. Listening and trying to understand where can she add value on behalf of GRDC.

She gets it in the morning, she opens up the channels and she can see where those conversations are. She gave a couple of really good examples there is to where she was able to demonstrate clear value to a community and looking at the weather, understanding what those conversations are and being helpful, being useful, being relevant and being valuable to the community that she's serving. I'm sure she's going to only have further success.

Pru, thanks again very much for coming in great conversation. I know there's a lot of insight there that people will take away to improve their content marketing and their social media, thanks very much again.

Prudence: Thank you for having me.