
InTransition Episode 87 – Ian Cleary

David: 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, coming to you today from the Expo Hall at Content Marketing World in Cleveland, Ohio.

Our special guest is actually a return guest for InTransition, pleased to see him again, but we'll come to him in just a moment. As we do start the program each week, we look at the definition of content marketing as it relates to government and the 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.

Joining me today is a great friend of mine, someone who I met many years ago here at Content Marketing World, and we have such a good time when we catch up every time, is Ian Cleary; one of the world's leading strategists, one of the world's leading thinkers in content marketing. A man who's made an enormous impact around the world over the last few years in his ... Just thinking around tools but then beyond that, now thinking around education and really starting to broaden the application of his skills and his knowledge around content marketing, social media, and all sorts of other things.

Ian Cleary, welcome back to In Transition.

Ian: Thank you very much, David. Always a pleasure to come back, thanks for having me.

David: It's great to be here, isn't it?

Ian: It is. I just love the atmosphere here, and it's like you can't beat three and a half thousand content marketers at a conference. It's such an exciting time for content marketing, and a lot of brands are still getting into content marketing you know? You just see here the potential of this industry to keep on growing and growing.

David: It is going to grow and grow and grow, and you do get that sense here.

At the moment, what's your assessment of where things are at the moment in terms of people understanding the opportunity of content marketing?

Ian: Well, if I got back and I'm based in Ireland and I still find that people, if I talk about social media, they're more likely to pay attention than content marketing. I still think there's a big gap there in knowledge. People don't understand the true value of content.

I think a lot of companies and people within businesses are creating content because they feel they have to, but as you said at the very start of your show it needs to be done in a very strategic basis that you're creating content to actually build out, for example, your sale's funnel to attract relevant people in.

There's an awful lot still of education as you mentioned for brands and companies to go that content marketing process, how it actually leads to sales. That's what we like looking at; is going an end to end process from creating a piece of content to actually cash, or generating awareness or whatever you want to do as part of that content.

David: It's one of the things also around the education; I'm fascinated that you and Mark Schaefer and Chad Pollitt have got into that education piece around helping people with the skills. It's a different mindset, isn't it? It's a new way of thinking about how you go about telling your story?

Ian: Oh, absolutely. There is a lot to learn. The thing about it is, if you just start off and you create a blog and you just share content, you'll get nowhere. If you build up the skills of how you create that content, how you involve influencers in your content, how you promote that content, how you optimize that content so you get ongoing traffic from Google, and then from that content what are the steps beyond that, when somebody actually reads it.

There is a lot to learn for companies, because you need to understand that process. Otherwise you're just going to be wasting your time creating random content that will be more damaging to your brand than anything else.

I say to people, "Never produce a poor quality piece of content." Consistency is absolutely important, but I prefer to break consistency rather than deliver something poor quality. The first article that somebody reads on your website, that determines whether they're going to take the next step and read another article, or content or anything. If that's a poor quality article, that's it. You're relationship's gone.

David: That's an interesting point that you raise, because it is one of the big themes here that I've picked up so far, is this notion of quality over quantity.

Are you saying that that's something that people have really got to take and be very mindful of?

Ian: Yeah. When you even think from a Google perspective, how are you going to rank for a piece of content in Google? The only way you've got a chance is if it's the best piece of content for that particular keyword term, or that particular topic. You really going to have to do a lot of extra work to make sure that's a super high quality content.

I think increasingly people are going ... Probably less content but higher quality, better distribution, better promotion, and making sure that content starts appearing on all different platforms. If you're strategic about that, it's not just writing one post; it's a post becomes a series of social media updates, becomes an infographic, becomes a

slideshow presentation, becomes an article on Medium linking back, becomes an article on LinkedIn linking back.

It's a message you're trying to communicate to a wide audience, and you need to do more work than just publish an article and hopefully it does well. That just doesn't work.

David: You're consulting widely ... Where do you see the sort of capability at the moment in terms of this maturity? Are you seeing that people are doing it well, the people who are doing it?

Ian: There's a mix. There's some brands do really brilliant stuff with content marketing; brands that we couldn't train because they come up with so many innovative ideas, you know? Which is great. I'd say the majority are not doing content marketing well. They're not creating the right type of content and they're not building out the whole process from somebody reading that piece of content all the way through to a sale. All that sales funnel stuff beyond the piece of content.

I think the majority of companies and businesses just don't do that well.

David: Okay, so if I'm a communications person sitting in a government department or a branch somewhere, and I want to get started. I want to take this opportunity to go direct, I want to be able to engage the citizen, because I've got something ... I've got a lot to say to them. I want to talk to them. They need to understand why we're making these policy decisions.

What's the advice that you would give them in terms of starting on that journey?

Ian: I suppose initially it's listening. It's listening to see what are other people saying? What messages are resonating with other people? Who is building the audience out there? Who's listening to them?

You don't have to build up all the audience yourself necessarily. You may go route to go via an influencer that has the trust and has the audience already, and you might decide that is going to be a better approach than you trying to build that audience, because it is difficult.

Now of course, these guys, the communications guys have a captive audience which is great. I would still say listen first and figure out what is working? What's resonating? Before you jump in. You really need to have that content strategy, even if it's a basic content strategy to start off with, you need to understand why am I actually creating this piece of content? What's it going to do when I actually publish it? What's going to happen as a result of it?

Starting with an article like a blog post is a great starting point. One valuable, useful article that you publish and try and promote and see what feedback you're getting from it, and then look there's the next article and see where you go from there.

-
- David: On the back of an envelope, working through those steps, what are the steps that people could start to sort of build out that strategy?
- Ian: We have a model called Prism and we teach it to our clients. It's about how do you make money from social media and content marketing? 'P' for people, you build an audience, so you start building an audience on social media. You have to analyse is that the correct audience you're building, because there's no point in having a million followers on Twitter if it's the wrong audience.
- David: How do you make that judgement then? How do you decide whether it's the right people or not the right people?
- Ian: There's various tools available that can help you with that. Even in the show here, there's a tool here called Affinio, and Affinio will analyse your Twitter followers and it will tell you exactly what are the profile of all your Twitter followers. Then you'll start to see ... Then you can do that across different platforms as well. Social Rank does it for Instagram, so each platform will have a tool like that.
- You're figuring out are they right followers and are they growing? You want that audience to keep on growing. Then 'R' for relationships is you need to build relationships with your audience. You build relationships on a one to one basis with key influencers in your industry, but then you build relationships with your larger, broader audience with content. Content is great for building relationships at scale, because you provide something that's useful and valuable that your audience wants to read and wants more of that information.
- Where Prism is 'P' people, build an audience, 'R' for relationships, 'I' for in-bound traffic. Typically you'll want to drive people to your website where action takes place. That's not necessarily selling a product or service, it could be just getting an audience to understand a policy that's come up within the government, or actually become a subscriber of some sort. There's not necessarily a sale.
- You drive people in and if people then don't take action, you want them to become an email subscriber, because you want to continue communicating with them on a regular basis. Then 'M' for monetization, whereas that's where you go after you become a subscriber, then you want them to take action. Monetization could be they buy a product or service, but it could be some other action you want them to take.
- David: In a government sense, it wouldn't be obviously buying something but it might be attending a particular conference. It's some sort of conversion, is what you're talking about?
- Ian: Yeah, exactly. It's a conversion. It could be buying a product or it could be there's a big event coming up and you just want to sign up for that event, or it could be that it's an awareness campaign and you want people to read content, watch the videos that you have related to it. Maybe there's an action or maybe there isn't at the end of that.

David: What would be holding people back, do you think? Within the government environment? Perhaps it's around risk? How do you convince people that this is something that they can do, and it's something that the world's not going to end if the content doesn't perform massively well every time, or someone's going to say something about you on social media that you mightn't like?

Ian: You do need to work with a reliable partner that has experience rolling out these type of campaigns. Because there is, like you say, a risk element; you need to understand what is your procedure if things go wrong. Because people can say the wrong thing, and you want to have policies in place so that somebody doesn't just jump in and damage their reputation.

I would say it's working with a trusted partner that has experience working with similar government bodies, and that's going to help significantly. They would have come across a lot of the problems and issues already.

David: You are known particularly for tools; it's one of your real ... You're probably the top guy in the world actually, who knows about social media tools.

What are you seeing at the moment that's really impressing you? You mentioned Affinio, but what other tools are you seeing that people are using that are really creating value for them?

Ian: There's a tool from Scoop.It, and they've come out with this tool called Content Director. What I like about it is that what it's doing is analysing the performance of content on the website, and then help companies make decisions on the back of that.

It will say, "This piece of content when it was published it got a lot of shares. You should start sharing this content again, because that's driving traffic," "Here's other pieces of content that actually drives more conversions," whatever that conversion is. Again, it has suggestions to share that out more.

Now you're actually starting to really understand what content is actually working for you? That information was available through Google Analytics, but no one really goes into the depths of Google Analytics. This just shows you on a screen, going "this content share that again," "share this again."

David: It actually directs you to ... It comes up with a menu and says, "Okay one, two, three, four, five, give these ones a run?"

Ian: Exactly. It makes it very easy. You just click a button and throw it back into the queue.

The thing about content is, if you create an evergreen piece of content, the content doesn't really run out of date, you should be continuously sharing that on a regular basis. That has a queuing mechanism which allows you to share that on a regular basis, as well.

David: It's an interesting point isn't it? Around particularly valuable evergreen content, that often people think, "Well, we've done that," and in the old days you would say, "We've just published that, we're not going to use it again."

This changing mindset, this getting people to think differently. How do you encourage people to think differently?

Ian: That's why we do the education programs, is to show people our process. There is a process that you can follow. There is skills that you need to build, but then we see the results of that. Once people start into this and actually start seeing the results and say, "Actually, I created this piece of content, it reached 100,000 people. 500 people signed up to the event." The content led to that, you know?

You were talking about this yourself, like doing a podcast people will come back to you and say, "I listened to your podcast," and when they listen to your podcast they make a decision; are you credible or not credible? Is your information good or not? That's just content, you're sharing valuable content.

David: Interestingly, this point around measurement is also key, I think, in terms of building credibility. In one of the sessions today, there's this notion of measure everything. I tend to agree with that. What's your view on capturing and the effort that you have to put into measurement?

Ian: I think the problem with measuring everything ... In an ideal world, you'll measure everything but the reality is if people have too many things to monitor, they don't monitor it because it's far too much information. It's really to drill it down; what's the key things you need as a business?

Then people can drill down to what's going on behind the scenes. I think if you're two or three data points where you go, "That's what I look at every single day, that's what I'm interested in." Then like I say just drilling down.

Yeah, measure everything but make sure there is a summary available that you can focus on the key things. What are the two or three most important things?

David: Just getting back to this point around education, because I think this is another big emerging part of content marketing. Is that we're very early days in this whole thing, really in this whole thing. You and I have been around for a while, but really it's very, very early. The Americans used the analogy of baseball, that it's the bottom of the 2nd or the top of the 3rd. I think the players are still in the back of the hotel asleep, you know? We're miles away from this really kicking in.

This notion of skills and development and mindsets, what are the skills that you think people need to be thinking about? If you're listening now, thinking, "Okay, Ian Cleary has told me there's three things that I've got to really focus on to start to get good at content marketing," what are those skills that I need?

Ian: I think one is that storytelling aspect, of being able to create these stories and ideas that are going to captivate and inspire people. One of the guys, Doug Kessler talked yesterday about coming up with something insightful, not just a piece of content. Something insightful that adds some extra value to somebody.

David: Moves people?

Ian: Moves people, exactly. That's what he talked about. I think that storytelling and creating that is really important.

I think then there's the whole content creation and optimization of all that content? That's not necessarily you have to do all that, but you need to have those skills in place. Then content promotion is part of it. The insight, then it's creation and promotion let's put them in together.

Then the third is building out your process going from a piece of content and you promote it to actually generate what you want in the business, the conversion process.

David: Where are the best places ... And RazorSocial is a great place for people to go and learn and to get education. Where else are places people could go?

Ian: There's nowhere else. It's only RazorSocial. Okay, your site David as well.

It depends on what people need. From a social media point of you, Social Media Examiner does provide really good information. The Content Marketing Institute provides great information from a content marketing side. There's a whole range of sites available, depending on which area you need to focus on.

David: Do you think that sometimes people find it a little bit overwhelming? That they would look at it and go, "Where do I start? Where do I begin?" I think your tips there around building that muscle around being able to tell stories that resonate, but resonate with a purpose. Obviously telling people stories just because they're great stories is one thing, but then there's got to be a purpose around it.

What are your thoughts around that?

Ian: About the storytelling?

David: Yeah.

Ian: Whether people have to become good storytellers or not?

David: Yeah.

Ian: It is, it's crucial. I mean, I'm not a storyteller; I have more of a technical background. I love all the promotion and optimization and all the funnel side of the stuff. I need to get better at the storytelling, because we don't have a really good idea at the start to share

that sort of captures the imagination, I think.

We've done training with a large company recently, and we brought in a film director. The film director talked about the structure of a video, and how to create actual images that inspire. It was just great content, because you realized we're producing; we're producers. We need skills as producers. We need people to either help us produce, or learn some of those skills in-house.

David: It's wonderful talking to you, because the enthusiasm is sort of pouring out of you.

Ian: I do love it, you know? We've been in there a few years. If we didn't like it this much I don't think we'd be back here every year.

David: No, but ... I'm the same. I just love it. Yes it's a job, it's work and all the rest of it, but there's that real sense of purpose around trying to understand and help people to tell their stories so they can achieve whatever their objectives are.

Ian: What makes it for me was I'd come to here, and people would come up to me and go, "Hey, I've been following your blog for years, it's great to be connected with you," and out of the audience we capture, some buy from us and some don't buy from us, but you're going to get that with any audience. It is nice that you're impacted people either way, and they're getting some benefit out of what you're sharing. That eventually comes back to you, anyway.

The thing about it is it's a long term commitment. If somebody doesn't buy from me today, I've often heard people say, "I bought your product because I've been following you for about a year, I heard you on a podcast, I've seen you at an event. Then an offer came up that was just right at the time." Which is great. All that automation and the backend that helps with that, because you can figure out how long people have subscribed for, what are people interested in, send appropriate communication based on what they're interested in, and that increases your conversion rates.

David: It was a fantastic presentation today here by Michael Junior, the American comedian, and he was making the point that really it's about giving. Life is about the value of you being able to transfer, and once you can get in that mindset of giving rather than thinking about getting, that things happen.

Ian: The thing is, people say to me, "I'm afraid to share the good information." The thing about it is, you have to share the best content. I share everything, but I'm constantly learning and moving on so there's always something else to share.

If you don't share your best content, then people are reading it and going, "Well that's just average." You're not going to impress anybody, so you have to have great content you're sharing. Don't hold back; just share it all.

Some people will take it and go, "I can do it myself based on this." Others will go, "I really need the help."

David: I think another sort of important part about content marketing; it's interesting you made that point in the beginning about social media, that you talk about social media, "Oh, okay I understand that," but content marketing, no, I don't know what you're talking about.

Such an important part of content marketing are events like the one we're at today and this notion of being able to create conversation and engagement between people. What are your views about the importance of people thinking about creating spaces and creating opportunities where people can come together to learn, to make, to network?

Ian: You can't forget about that. To me, I'm based in Dublin Ireland. If I just sat at home in Dublin, I wouldn't have built the relationships ... The relationships we have, we never would have had that connection if we didn't actually meet. You can do so much online, but I think if you want to really strengthen that relationship, having these group get togethers really helps. Whether it's at a conference, or a smaller local event, that's all part of it.

That's one of the reasons we ran a content marketing conference in Ireland as well, just myself and Mark Schaefer. Just to get a group of people into a room and that really strengthens the connection as well.

David: Yeah. I'm an enormous fan of it, and I think that when you're looking at your editorial calendars, you've got to be thinking about where are we going to create those opportunities for the human connection to take place? Because as you say it's a deeper connection, it's a stronger connection, and it's something that can sustain and create value for some time.

Ian: That's it. The other side of it is I come here to speak at events, because I'm building my personal brand as well as the company are building your personal brand. Again, you get a chance to have an audience, except the audience are right in front of you. It's easier than creating blog content because you've got that connection.

It is really important to get out to events. Try and build relationships online, try and interact with the influencers, but even from our session the other day with the guys from Tracker had Microsoft up on stage, and then said one of the key parts of their job is getting on a plane to meet the influencers. They know that once they have the personal relationship with the influencer, they're more likely to do something.

Find the industry events where these groups are hanging out, and don't worry about going to the sessions; hang out in the corridors and meet people and connect with people. That's what it's all about.

The thing is, content create value and we know that if we're at a business networking event, if we take out our business card and try and sell, that's not going to work. If we try and add value to a conversation at a networking event, things will work better for us. We focus on building a relationship at a networking event. You just need to think about

that online; you're building a relationship. It takes a bit of time.

David: I think it is certainly ... I've observed you over the years, and I think it's one of your real skills that you've been able to do, is to build that network. You've turned up, you've created value, you haven't asked for anything. All you've done is said, "I'm here, this is what I've got." You've very skilfully leveraged that influencer network and put it together.

I think that's another thing that people need to think about, is this notion of who else has got your audience and how can you work with those people? That particularly I think in the government space is very important, and we're doing a number of programs at the moment where third parties have very big and influential audiences and working with those people is a good thing.

What are some advice or some tips you've got around accessing influencers and working with influencers?

Ian: To me, the key thing with influencers ... You are building a relationship and you are building a long-term relationship. It can't be a once off campaign where it stops. You identify who are the appropriate people that have access to the audience you want to get access to, and then you start a relationship building process.

That could be you're looking to go, "How can I provide value to them?" You go, "Well I've got a big audience as a government body. Maybe if we feature them as an interview on our site, and profile them, that's going to add value. Maybe we start sharing their content out, that's going to get us noticed?" Then you can start reaching out to them, and then take it to the next stage and see if you can have a conversation, or meet them at events. Then you look to see how you can work.

When you're dealing with influencers, even from the session yesterday, they talked about the importance of not starting off with money with an influencer, it's going as much as possible can you engage an influencer without any cash exchanging hands? Once you have that relationship, then you go, "Actually this is really working, and this is useful for us. Maybe then we'll involve them in a lot more of our content, and use more of their time," and that's where you start paying out the fees.

David: It's such a special for government. I just think it's such a big opportunity, because increasingly I think that there's this sense of responsibility that people feel to strengthen their community and improve the well-being. Ultimately, that's what government is trying to do. I think if government can reach out and say to people, "Hey listen, can you help us solve this particular problem?" the doors are going to open.

Ian: Oh, absolutely. You just touched on community. That's what the government is; it's building communities. That's how social and content marketing helps build communities. There's some skills involved in that community building as well, which are required.

David: What are those skills? In terms of building strong communities through content?

Ian: A lot of it is relationship building; if people are good at relationships, then they're generally good with the community.

People want to get support, they want to get direct access to the most relevant people, you know? They want to get that interaction going. I think you need to set up a home for the community, so you can say set up a Slack group or a Facebook group or something, you form it then you have somebody that's overseeing and managing that community and encouraging conversation on a regular basis. You probably have other members of the community involved in that to try and keep that conversation going. It's an open, trusted place for people to interact and share.

David: This conference is very focused on Business 2 Consumer, businesses, brands, Business 2 Business. The notion of government being involved is not really part of the conversation here? They're coming, don't worry. I'm sort of a lone voice here at the moment ... There's a few people. We're actually doing a session tomorrow around government and public sector.

As someone who's not really in the government and public sector space, you do a little bit of work in that space, but if you observe and look in is there any reason that you would think that a government agency or public sector organization couldn't do content marketing?

Ian: The thing about it is, they are creating content it's just it may not be as strategic as it should be. That's content marketing actually puts a structure on the content you're already creating, so it's more strategic. It's not a guess that you don't create content; you are creating content. It's just having a better process for that content, and actually taking it a little more seriously because there's so much benefit and value from it.

David: Do you think that they just don't quite understand the power of it?

Ian: Absolutely, yeah. It requires some education. It's not an easy concept for a traditional business to get their head around, that we're sharing all this valuable, useful content and we're spending all that time creating visuals and video content and everything.

It's not an easy decision to take that jump.

David: But worthwhile? I'm certain that the value will be there.

Ian: Oh yeah. It's not a case of will you or won't you? You have to. It's when you're going to do it. You're better off doing it now, and getting a jump ahead of everyone else, because people are still holding back.

David: I totally agree with that. I think this is for everyone; content marketing is going to underpin every organization because it is the way that you will be found, it's the way you'll become known, discovered, engaged. There's no choice.

Ian: Yeah, absolutely there isn't. You might as well just get going now.

David: That's the other thing I think is some other advice, is it's about getting started isn't it? Not rather than saying, "I'm not quite ready with that! I don't know about this." You've just got to start spinning the plates, and then you might break a few along the way but at least you've got to get started.

Ian: Yeah. It's not like transforming an organization overnight how you do things. Like you said, there's a pilot project you would kick start it, you see some benefit and see some results from it, and then expand it to a wider base.

There's no reason why government bodies wouldn't start with that pilot process, you know?

David: I think that's great advice. I know you've got a session to get to, which is great, and it will be packed out as it always is for the Ian Cleary sessions.

Thanks very much for taking some time to be with us on In Transition today, for the second time. It's great to be back in Cleveland and celebrating and meeting old friends and having plenty of laughs like we did last night.

Ian: Absolutely, yeah. It's always great to be on your podcast, so hopefully number three will come at another stage. Thanks, David.

David: Okay Ian, thanks very much.

To you, the audience, thank you very much for joining us once again. We certainly appreciate that you dial into us every week as we continue the education around content marketing and government and the public sector organizations.

As Ian Cleary just said, just get started. Get going, get that pilot project started. Find something that is going to have an impact, find something that's going to work. Just get going.

Thanks very much, thanks very much again to be able to come to you here from the Expo Hall at Content Marketing World in Cleveland, Ohio. We'll be back again next week, so bye for now.