
InTransition Episode 108 – Shannah Hayley

David: Thank you very much for joining us.

Shannah: Thank you, David. This has been a great conference as it always is.

David: It's a wonderful conference, isn't it? How many times have you been now?

Shannah: This is my second year.

David: Okay. Fantastic. I think we do learn a lot each year, and it's a great community that's growing up around this practice of content marketing. Before we talk about the city of Plano and everything that's going on there, what about some of your background? Tell me your story.

Shannah: After spending some time working in D.C and living overseas, I was in east Africa working with a nonprofit. Teaching in a local university. I have a communications degree both undergraduate and graduate. I moved back to the states, but it was way too cold to live in the part of the U.S. that I was in and moved south to Texas where I joined the professional services industry. I was working for accounting firms and then architecture engineering and construction for nearly 20 years. Until I got involved ... Felt like I was disconnected from my local city, and I was living in one part of the metro area.

I should say for reference that Plano is within the greater Dallas/Forth Worth metropolitan area. Although it's certainly not a small city by any means, but I was traveling an hour and a half one way each day to work in downtown Dallas. Got engaged through my local city in an organization called Leadership Plano which is designed to connect business and community and governmental leaders to know more about how the city operates holistically. Not just from a governmental perspective, but how does the health care system work? How does the criminal justice system work? And so on.

Through that process got engaged with some of our city government officials, and they encouraged me to bring my skill set and come back home to where I live, and have a wonderful 20 minute commute and an all in experience with the city itself.

David: That to me sounds like a really great initiative leadership Plano, that tries to bring everyone together. Whose idea was that?

Shannah: That's a great question. It's led by the local chamber of commerce. It's a nation wide organization though. Several cities throughout the U.S. have them. You find them very frequently in large cities, so leadership Detroit, I'm sure there's a leadership Cleveland, leadership Dallas. It's really a way of grooming and developing future leaders. Kind of the in call to action for graduates of leadership Plano or leadership any organization is, what are you going to do next? Are you going to be on a board for a nonprofit that's

impacting the community? Are you going to join city government? Are you going to join the chamber? What are you going to do to really contribute to the community that you're part of?

David: Okay, so they convinced you. You obviously graduated and thought, righto I'm take on the task. Take me through that journey.

Shannah: They approached me in ... I joined the city in July of last year, so that would be 2015. They started talking to me in December of 2014 just to kind of feel me out. I was very happy where I was, but they said, "You know what we have here in play is we do a great job of telling our story to the media." My colleague, we call ourselves the two headed department. He's a former journalist like you, David, and came in house to the government, but he's focused on media relations. They said, "We've handled that well, but what we don't understand is marketing." What they had done was combined the traditional government office public of information. The PIO office and our broadcast arm which was Plano television news had combined and become a department called marketing and community engagement.

It had not been traditional lead by anyone with a marketing background. They felt that, one, they didn't really understand what marketing needed to be in a government context, and two, really have someone that could help them execute that with excellence which is something that the city of Plano values. I came in and spent probably about six months before I ever even committed to joining the city to looking at it on a deeper level. I pulled the city strategic plan, read through that. Looked at the counsel strategic objectives and really thought what's the next thing? For me it really was, again, about that journey, and that's what we talk about in content marketing, right?

We're talking people step by step on this journey, and as you very well said, to inform and to take action. The way I explained it to counsel and to the city leadership as we were talking through this was, all right, we have people who are unengaged. That's point one on this customer journey, or this constituent journey as I call, and I want to transform them into people who are actively passionately engaged advocates for the city. That takes quite a bit of time. The only way you can do that is through content marketing.

We're trying to transition this group of people who are highly talented members of public information and of television and transform them into a group that said, "All right, we're not just creatives who respond to departmental and counsel requests. We're actually intentionally nonreactively taking our constituents on a journey. We don't want them to be uninformed." We've just completed fist year of what I consider to be a five year kind of all in turn around, and that involved restructuring the team, really rethinking who we were, going back and creating a marketing and communications plan. Which essentially is a content marketing strategy, but that terminology doesn't translate necessarily very well through the political structure. That's what we're doing, and really setting out some very clear objectives.

They were fundamental in every way, David. I look at it and I laugh. As a marketer by profession I'm like, gosh, you know, our first goal was to align our brand expression. That felt like a really big deal was to align our brand expression, and we're not there yet. I mean, it still feels very much like not even a house of brands. It's independent entities. This next year we're really doing a complete brand over look on how do we create this feeling of the city is one and then departments have unique identifiable identities that also cohesively belong to the city? That's a challenge. We'll use a contractor to come in because otherwise you're doing too much naval gazing, and it's hard to separate out the emotion of that.

We want our departments to feel freedom. We want our library system to feel different than our parks and recreation system, to feel different than environmental health. Yet you want to still know that they're the city of Plano, so how do you do that? How do you achieve that, and how do you allow people to collaborate and be part of the process? It will be fun. That was going one. We started working on that and, gosh we needed to work on tone.

We had everything from very stuffy formal government speak to the voice of the unknown eye. I was like who is this eye that's tweeting? You know, is that a librarian? Is that a marketing coordinator? I don't know who the eye is, so we need to figure out who we are. We came down on the city of Plano is warm and relatable. We're friendly and approachable. That's our tone. We're as formal as we need to be when the circumstance calls for it, and we're as informal as it needs to be. Last night we just won an award from 3CMA which is a governmental communication organization here in the states for the best creative marketing campaign with the least dollars used. I'm proud of it because we spent exactly \$0 on it.

It came directly out of strategy. I believe that if you know your why, if you know what you're about, and then you have a plan, you can take advantage of kismet. I mean, kismet really is never really kismet. There's always a lot of intention that happens behind. Our little story was a foolish reality TV show that's very popular here in the states called The Real Housewives. They had a branch called The Real Housewives of Dallas, and one of the characters, non scripted, scripted characters, made a disparaging comment about our city and said, "You know it feels a little Plano in here." The show actually called out the city on twitter and said, "What does the city of Plano think about this?"

It was such an interesting discussion in the after math of what happened within our team. Because my response, and I happen to be watching twitter that night, that's where the kismet comes in, you know? Why was the director watching twitter? Why was I handling it? Long story, but I just responded. I thought, you know, we need to be where people are. That's a significant part of our strategy. People were watching that show, so that's where we were. We responded with a, "Hey, no big deal. We'll just shake it off." I didn't even say shake it off. I had a GIF of Taylor Swift performing Shake It Off, and it went crazy. It went crazy.

It started a whole campaign of "it's a little Plano in here." That was a saying that popped

up in our community, and it was so fun to watch our influencers because all the things that our counsel questioned ... Not that they were questioning our team, but that internal soul searching of is our message getting out? Do people hear what we're talking about? What's your rank? Oh, gosh we're the 4th largest city. We're the safest city in America. All of these things that we constantly push out.

I'm watching Twitter, and their response was how dare you say it's a little Plano in here? Did you know we're the safest city? Did you know we're the 4th largest city? Do you know we're the 3rd best place for families? That stuff was coming back, and it was unprompted on our part, and it was so wonderful to watch them defending their place. Then they started saying, "Well, it's a little Plano in here, and I like it." And I said, "Well, all right. What a great idea, right?" I emailed our city leadership and said, "This is a really crazy idea. You have every right to tell me no, but I really think it will work, and I hope you say yes. Will you let me just create a T-shirt? We won't make any money, but it will just say 'it's a little Plano in here' and let's see what happens."

They said, "Well, all right. Let's see what happened." We turned this around. In government time we turned it around quickly. That show aired on a Monday. We created the T-shirts on a Friday. We dropped it the following Monday 5 minutes after the next episode started airing in the middle of the show because it's a very social media driven show. People second screen it all the time. We dropped the T-shirt, and it exploded. The name of Plano went all around the country, and I've seen shirts all around the world. People have taken pictures of them wearing the shirts, Tweeting it back to us, showing it's a little Plano in here and I like it. We've seen a spur of other shirts of people designing other things.

One of my constituents tweeted last night, "If you love Plano you might want to consider buying this." It's a tea towel. I'm telling you it's a tea towel with a map that has been ... It's lovely. Of a map of Plano drawn on it. It's perfect for giving to realtors to giving them to residents. That was part of our strategic goal was to create this sense of community in a city that's grown very quickly. Some 80,000 people in the early 1980s to 275,000, 69th largest city in America. How do you help all of these people who have come from other places feel like they have something that they own? It's a little Plano in here, and we like it, right?

We can use that. That's a point in time thing, but it's part of this other larger strategy of ways that we're trying to help people. That ties into kind of some social media marketing, some pieces that we've put out that are all about love Plano, and my Plano. Accidents happen, but we know our why. Our why is build community.

David: It seems also that it was there. That that feeling was there, but that execution activated that feeling that was there.

Shannah: I would agree. I think that's the beautiful part of that type of campaign. If you were listening on a deep level you hear what your community is talking about, and that way you're not stealing. I mean, you have the great book Steel Like an Artist, right? It's the same idea of what's already out there, you just amplify that discussion. I'm a big

believer that the government is not here to solve your problem. The government can't create resources, but we are a facilitator. We are not a hub for activity. We can connect people and help them by making those introductions, and we can also provide a platform for those conversations to happen in a very safe way.

We try to do that within our team, but we try to do it with intentionality. When my team meets, and we meet every week to kind of talk about, all right what's happening? Not on a task basis, but what are we trying to do? How are we moving our goals forward? We remind ourselves that our job is to find a reason to say yes instead of saying no. That doesn't mean that we say yes to everything, but we need to be able to say yes to the right things which means that we need to be able to say no. The only way that you can do that without people feeling that you're favoring one department over another or one initiative over another is to lay those goals back out.

That's a very collaborative process. That's one thing that was very different for me coming from private sector to public sector, was to say, all right, this content marketing strategy, this marketing goal development, instead of an executive team going away and planning on their own it's the executive team, and then you're going back and you're validating with the lower level. You're getting the input almost down to the bottom of the organization to get this complete buy in. At the end of the day, and I think we turned that fairly quickly. We did that within a three month period.

To go back and say all right I know you might not like a no for right now, but remember we all sat down together. We all agreed that this was the direction. It's not a no but it's a not yet, or maybe not that way. Because this is what we're all in on right now, and then we'll add that, and then we'll add that. I think that's the beauty of the plan.

David: The plan seems to be also that you started in the right place, because you started at the strategic plan of the organization and then what you've developed is an enabling document which is driving back towards those larger corporate objectives that are sitting there as sort of the north star of all your efforts. They're all driving back towards achieving and solving those bigger problems.

Shannah: Correct, and I would say that's something that I brought with me from the private sector. I think, at least in professional services realm, there's always been the challenge for marketers to make that next level. We talk about the glass ceiling in terms of equity for women in leadership, but really I believe that that glass ceiling exists across the board in professional services firms. Particularly in the industry that I specified in for many years of getting marketers into the [inaudible 00:16:12] It's almost as though there's this lack of operational knowledge, so marketing is very focused on getting the dollars and closing the sale, but then do you understand operationally how to deliver a job?

I've always approached my career that my job leading the marketing effort, leading the communications effort, is to understand what is the organization trying to achieve? If I understand those goals and align with that, then you're part of the conversation. When I accepted the job with the city I understood that I was going to be advising into that role,

but I didn't realize that I would be sitting with our executive team. I would like to give a lot of credit to there city of Plano for really being an innovative city in the way that it thinks about solving problems. It's a very anti silo organization.

They bring all of the department heads together once a month. We spend a couple of hours each month of really just kind of hashing through issues and making sure that we have alignment and understanding of what each department is trying to achieve, how we're part of that process, and then that goes all the way up to city leadership. It's a strong leadership group to be affiliated with.

David: Coming across from professional services, the private sector into the public sector, what are the things that have struck you that have been different or perhaps even surprising?

Shannah: I was told that the place would be slower, and it is slower. That's not a bad thing. It's not as slow as I mentally thought it would be, but it does take longer to make a decision. I definitely have seen analysis paralysis where we have a lot of go go go, wait don't go, okay go. That was hard to adjust to because I was used to, we've made a decision, go, and then we'll come back and evaluate. That's very much a business realm. The other thing that has been interesting to me is the role of leadership within my team. I had envisioned it. I've always been a vision caster. I'm definitely the big picture visionary, and I need a person or a team of people who are the doers and the executors to keep us on track. I value them. Hopefully they value me.

What I didn't realize, I thought I'll cast a vision, we'll find out where the gaps are, and then we're going to go marching along, right? It's more vision casting, find out where the gaps are, train, remind the vision, come alongside, cheer lead, okay here's the vision again. Oh, we need a little more training. All right, let me cheer lead. Let me push you. Come back and cheer lead and push you. Oh, here's the vision. There's a lot of that. A lot of back and forth. I think I started in a good place on that. I knew that my team had been through a lot of changes from combining into this new department, and just really being unfocused. They recognize that themselves, so I walked into it saying I think I'm going to start by really loving this team.

I came in with that intentionality of maybe the job right now is to give this team identity and purpose. I sat with each member of the group and said, "Hey, I personally believe you are creative, talented individual, and that you are a professional. As long as you operate in a sense where if somebody comes and asks you to do something, and you say sure, when, how, and deliver it, then really you're just an admin, and I want you to be a professional. I'm going to help you do that because I believe that you have that in it." Just transformed how we saw ourselves as a team.

That doesn't mean that we still don't struggle with it. That doesn't mean that we still don't say yes, when, how, where, you know? Just how you see yourself, I think it makes a world of difference, and that was a surprise to me because that's a difference from public and private. Private the marketing team knows that the marketing team are professionals. They're not admin. To have that sense of self and what your role is wasn't present.

David: At the moment, what would you identify as your key challenges to implementing this content marketing approach? Perhaps even before that question, how have you [inaudible 00:20:38] in the benefits of the content marketing program that you've developed and implemented?

Shannah: In terms of really saying that the benefits are in place, we're strong reporters. Every month, that's a requirement just for all directors within the city of Plano is to report on what your department is doing, so I've really tried to tie that back to, you know, here's the plan, here's the progress, here's the next thing. We have an organization that's all in on that. That's part one. Part two, the challenges. The challenge is tied to success in some ways because I thought, let's do this bite sized, right? We need a marketing plan for the organization as a whole, and then we're going to cherry pick departments because we can't do everything at once.

I probably cherry picked, I thought I was being smart, I'm going to pick the three largest departments because they have the most client facing. That was a huge mistake because they were the three largest departments. I mean, you can do the math. Why would you pick the three largest departments? Because now you have this massive enterprise to deal with. Now we've had success with that structure, and so everybody wants to see why can't you add on? Why can't you do this? They're just, I feel like although we have very fortunate to have this huge team. I have 15 people on the team, you know? Including my counter part who's solely focused on media relations. I mean, how lucky are we to have a full television crew? I mean, how lucky are we?

I still don't feel like we have enough resources. Really trying to figure out how I best use my resources is a problem, and how to hold departments at bay that really are ready to go all in and I can't serve them well, so I don't want to serve them halfway. Maybe there is a way to do halfway, and I just haven't figured it out. We're trying to sort through that, and then I think the third challenge that I'm very aware of right now is just the impact of change, and what that's having on our community, on our culture. I'm very sensitive to how people are emotionally invested in that and how that really impacts the way they see their neighbors. The way they see the government. The way they see their own role in society.

Again, that's not our job to solve that, but at times it can be our job to help people work through that. We had, of course, the unfortunate shooting of the Dallas police officers a couple of months ago, and our office, we have a very structured crisis communication plan. We have two, actually. One deals with public relations crises and one deals with public safety crises. This was clearly a public safety related issue. We don't ever talk first. We let our public safety PIOs go first, but over the course of 4 days our office really took the lead in kind of helping our community as I called it, "the chief grief office." That really was our role was to provide a place for people to publicly connect.

I think that's just a one point in time, but there are other opportunities that are like that. We've tried to find innovative ways through our strategy to help people deal with change. We use organizations like TEDx. It's been a great platform for us to help sponsor

TEBx Plano, and we watch that and say it's okay to talk about difficult issues. The city thinks we should be able to talk about difficult issues and admit that nobody knows the right answer, but maybe together we all know the right answer.

I think there are other ways to do that without over stepping our bounds, but I think that that's going to be a continual challenge that we as marketing and communication professionals within the government sector need to figure out where that boundary is because no one wants the government to tell them how they should respond. Clearly there's a place within that realm that we do need to have a voice. Even if it's just a central talking point.

David: I think that's one of the cleverest executions I've heard in a long time. That you're able to establish this program through a very trusted brand to be able to engage in the difficult conversations, and to allow everyone to participate that shows leadership, but at the same time doesn't step over that line.

Shannah: Absolutely. I mean, it's been very freeing for us because, again, the city doesn't have any say what so ever over the topics that have selected. In fact, there's a broad consortium of individuals within the community that help source speakers and help put those on stage. From the city perspective I step in, and we sponsor the venue. I usually coach. My background, again, is communications. I taught public speaking for many years, so I'm able to help with that side of things.

Then we're able to bring our media resources into place where we are able to amplify those talks, and of course that's what TED is all about. Everything goes to the master TED site. I appreciate that. Even within the city, I always remember I'm a person too, right? I'm a Plano president, as well. Some of those conversations feel uncomfortable for me, too. It doesn't mean that I'm not a better person for having listened to it and at least broaden my perspective.

When I did my masters degree I focused on intercultural and small group communications, and I was looking at what groups perform better that are mixed? Why do they perform well, and why don't they perform well? It turned out that the individuals that performed well across cultures and in small task focused groups did well because they had increased communication competencies. The more access we have to different view points and different world views, the better able we have to come to a new and unique solution and to make forward progress.

I've kind of carried that with me. To a certain extent, that's what the department of marketing and community engagement in Plano is all about. It's not necessarily to say this is the path we need to be on, but how can we get a lot of people in a room together to build a path of their own? Then we watch and, again, as the government we have by the people, for the people, of the people. We then respond to what they're wanting to do.

David: From here on in, where is the next step? Where is the next big opportunity to continue to make progress in implementing your content marketing program in Plano?

Shannah: For us, the next step, a couple of things. We are definitely, as I mentioned, going to go all in on the brand refresh. I think that will be a big thing. We need to have that consistency, and I think any content marketing structure needs to do that.

David: That was interesting today here at the lab here at content marketing world, we had Martin Skipney from the city of Vienna in Austria, and he was saying that that's his challenge, as well. That the city of Vienna hasn't got its story straight yet. They've got infrastructure in place. They've got capable people in place. They're telling a good story, but they're not telling a great story because they don't quite know what it is yet.

Shannah: Exactly. The story is ever evolving, too. I mean, I think during your portion of the session today you talked about these global trends that have impacting us, and some of them, yes, were specific to PacRim, but so many of them I thought, well, you know that actually is impacting us, as well. With massive migration to Texas we'll have another 30,000 jobs come online just within the city of Plano in the next 12 months because we've had the entire north American head quarts for Toyota is relocating to Plano, and that will come online at the beginning of 2018. That's just one of probably, that I can think of off the top of my head, five massive corporate relocations.

I mean, again, we're going through yet another wave of change. I sit and think, okay, again, we're processing change and all of the things that are related to that. How do we talk about transportation and water issues? You know, those normal things. I've become very interested in two issues in particular, and I think that this will have a play in our content marketing strategy, but I'm not entirely sure where and how. I've kind of dedicated myself to the next 12 to 18 months to really doing a deep dive just personally thinking through.

The first is the concept of social listening, and not social listening on the surface like the "it's a little Plano in here." Really social listening on a deeper level because I truly believe that situations that lead to 5 Dallas police officers being shot and killed start on the under surface. They're conversations that are happening that we're not hearing that are the beginning of future issues that we're unaware of. If somehow we could listen to those, and not solve the problem but join the conversation earlier, how interesting would that be?

David: There's that issue isn't it?

Shannah: There's a creepy line. There's a creepy line.

David: Where is that creepy ... How do you manage that creepy line, you know, government listening?

Shannah: Right. That's part of my deep dive, because I want to be sensitive to that, and gosh that falls under all kinds of things. You know, we've had solutions that we've developed that try to not cross the line for things related to traffic and transportation, you know? Nobody wants to give up their GEO location. It's so fascinating. We'll willingly give up

our shopping habits on a grocery cart so we can get customized coupons from the supermarket, but gosh darn if a Google beacon reveals what quadrant of the city I'm in so I can get customized traffic solutions. You know, that feels like it's crossing the line because who has the data? That's that trust factor that government doesn't have, so I don't know the answer. I certainly am not proposing that we go all in like the national security administration to deal with things.

I would love to find some way to just know, okay, even if it's a word cloud that's popping up, these 25 things are really being talked about, but it's not necessarily a service level discussion. How interesting would that be that I could then sit down and say, all right let's not solve that, but let's understand it before somebody shows up. Before a petition starts, you know? Before we have a candidate come from out of the blue. It would be nice to know that.

The next thing that I think would be really interesting to solve, and I know every city is dealing with this, is how to bridge the digital divide because that's becoming more and more profound. I think mobile is the answer to that. I mean, the Pew internet research study is very clear that people who don't have internet at home are accessing governmental websites in increasing percentages through their cell phones. The cell phone, the mobile phone, is part of the solution, but figuring out how to do that in a way that people are going to be going to that website for other things than paying their water bill, I don't know the answer.

It would be interesting to kind of crack that nut. I think content marketing can be part of it. I think we can figure out how to integrate using our social media. Again, go to where people are and meet them there because the government's content marketing strategy has to be tied to the concept of, you don't need to be front of brain until you need to be front of brain.

By that I mean I'm living my life. I don't need to think about the government until I need to think about the government. That's, you know, my trash wasn't collected on the right day, or not collected at all. I fell in a pothole. I don't know how to pay my water bill. I got a citation for watering my lawn on the wrong day. That's whether I need to think about it, and I want them to think about it with the correct information. My job is to get that correct information, so I've moved somebody from unengaged/uninformed, at least to aware. If I can move them from aware to passionate advocate where they're doing my job for me then we're building community, and that at the end of the day is what we want.

David: Shannah, fantastic. What a great plan. You really sound like it's clear, and that's the thing. You've got your why and you've got your vision, and you know exactly where your objectives are. It sounds like you're just making great progress all the time through your project. Obviously there's hiccups and bumps along the way. Just before we finish a couple of those that you see. Obstacles perhaps in the horizon?

Shannah: I think the greatest obstacle is uncertainty, right now. Our political structure, you never know what your resources are going to be, and what public sentiment is going to be at

any given time. Uncertainty can be a challenge. It's not like we're reacting to profit margins. Maybe the challenges for me personally since this will be my first season of going through potential change related to elections, and we'll see what happens to that.

The second challenge is really just kind of the popcorn nature that I've discovered about government, that there are always more priorities, passions, desires, needs, opportunities, as opposed to challenges or problems. We use the term opportunities. There are more of those than we can handle, and because I do know my why. My why is that I love Plano, and I want others to love Plano, too. That's my personal why. I want to solve all of those, so that's something that causes a problem with our plan. I'm trying to teach myself, so this is kind of that inside internal Shannah, you don't always have to innovate. Sometimes you need to double down and go deeper.

That's what I've personally challenged myself with for the next 12 to 18 months. Maybe it's not the next new shiny thing. Maybe it's just get really, really good at what you're doing, and really, really see if it's making a difference that you think it is. I mean, you've seen 12 months of difference, but are you going to see the 18? Are you going to see the 24? Are you going to see the long term? Wouldn't it be interesting to choose to retire at the end of my career? I've never thought of retiring, but let's say I do retire 20 years in with the government, and look back and say what is Plano today because of what we did with this crazy content marketing plan in 2015?

David: Shannah, let's tune in. I think what I'll do as part of In Transition, we might come back on a regular basis to continue the story. We know what the story is today, but to understand, you know? What's happened? What's grown? Where are the challenges coming from? Thank you very much for spending some of your time with me today at the end of the government and public sector lab that we had at content marketing world. We've had a great program here in Cleveland, Ohio. Again, at the content marketing world in 2016, and I'm very grateful for your time today, so thank you very much.

Shannah: Thanks, David. I appreciate it.

David: To you the listener, thank you very much for dialing in again and spending some of your time with us this week. What a fascinating conversation with a very talented communicator whose got a great why, and let's all look on and see where she is able to take the city of Plano. I'll be back next week. Thanks again for your time. Bye for now.