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The Digital Access Show

Season 3, Episode 38: Sandra Muller, Trauma Lens

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[Narelle] Welcome to this episode of The Digital Access Show. Now, last week we had Nikki Fiedler, from Content Design Hub on, talking about… the content design, what it is, what the process is, and what needs to be considered. A couple of weeks before that, we had Sandra Muller from True North Content, our guest today, again talking about language, and content design. And it's really important because if you don't have… a document, your communication that isn't… specifically designed to get the message across, you've got a shop front with nothing much in it. This week, Sandra's back. Thank you, Sandra, for coming on, and we're going to be talking about a very specific area, that I'll be honest, I have no knowledge of. Sandra Muller from True North Content, thank you for coming on.

[Sandra] Oh, you're most welcome. Yeah, really happy to be back… here again, and… having the opportunity to talk all things content with you, and this week talking about trauma awareness in content and content design.

[Narelle] And that's something I don't know anything about. I, so I'm eager to learn. Teach me.

[Sandra] Yeah. I think of it as an extension of accessibility. We've talked in the past about creating accessible content, and whether it's through… using plain language to better understand content, whether it's more of a technical side of thing of making sure… people can access and move around a website if they're not using a mouse, for example. Yeah, so trauma awareness… in content and content design is, it's… it seems to be a relatively new discipline in the content area. But the more I learn about it, the more I realise it's what I've been doing for the last 25, 30 years in creating accessible content. So, the point to start with is like, you know, what is…

trauma? And… trauma is… something that's experienced in the body. It's, I thought trauma was in the mind, but no, I was really… I found it interesting when I learned that it's actually, trauma is held in the body. It's our central nervous system. It's how we regulate or dysregulate. It's that sense of… overwhelm.

[Narelle] Yep.

[Sandra] Yep. That can happen. Yeah.

[Narelle] I know that feeling very well. I often experience it.

[Sandra] Well, anybody who has disability… also has trauma. That's kind of like a given. Those two things go to go together unfortunately. Yeah, so it's that sense of overwhelmed… where normal coping mechanisms… yeah, are overwhelmed in response to a perceived threat.

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Sandra] Or an actual threat. It's… It's like if we think about our brain, our prefrontal cortex… is the logical kind of thinking sort of centre of our brain. And it's like that goes offline. So, logic and reason goes out the door. Our emotional centre, the limbic brain. So, usually the two work together, the prefrontal cortex, and it allows us to control emotion. So, when your prefrontal cortex goes offline, that emotional centre… doesn't have anybody in the driver's seat, yeah, looking after it. And then we've got our amygdala, which is that fear centre of the brain. So, that's what has that response of fight, flight, freeze, fawn, in response to feeling trauma. So, you might be thinking, okay, but how is this… How is this relevant to content and content design? So, when people experience, people might experience trauma as a one-off event. And that might be through… an extreme weather event, such as a cyclone, or a flood, they've lost their house. It could be… a violent home invasion… that has caused that trauma. Complex trauma is when you have, like, ongoing repeated trauma with no sense of escape. And unfortunately, for Australians, that's like one in four adult Australians live with… complex trauma. So, for that reason alone, it's around five million Australians, that's enough reason to use a trauma-informed approach to your… content design and your writing. Yeah. So, through training that we've been doing, we're borrowing heavily from… a

framework, or there are six trauma-informed principles of practice that have come out of the mental health sector. And… The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. That's where these six principles have come from. And we just look at how we can apply those principles… outside the healthcare sector to the work that we're doing. Yeah, so it's things like if you're on… an insurance website, and you're putting in a claim, you need to claim, following an extreme weather event, like, they should not have imagery on that website of… ominous and foreboding… weather. They should not have, yeah, photos of bushfire and flames. So it's, and some of these websites do. It's really quite, yeah, startling. So, these are the things that can… re-traumatise… someone in that moment when they're going in for the claim. How else it plays out, oh, there are just so, so, so many things.

[Narelle] Can I throw one in?

[Sandra] Yeah.

[Narelle] I don't know whether this is relevant, but you'll tell me. So, every time I get an image-based PDF, which happens constantly, there's always that knowledge of, I know I'm not going to be able to read it. And it's frustrating.

[Sandra] Yes.

[Narelle] And I get quite, depending on what it is, I get pretty angry.

[Sandra] Yes.

[Narelle] Is that what you're talking about?

[Sandra] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. That is totally normal. And… And that is how trauma plays out. It's that anger that you feel at these microaggressions, or aggressions that hit you in daily life. If you're struggling to access the information that you need, of course, that's, you know, really going to… stress you further. And so, I think that's a perfectly natural response. And this is what happens to people is, yeah, they have these traumatic… responses. It also can reduce cognitive function. So, when I'm talking about trauma, I'm also being inclusive of… grief, and high stress situations. So, if someone's just lost somebody that's close to them, and they're having to navigate… what they call death admin, for example.

[Narelle] Yep.

[Sandra] And you know, that, that sort of situation where, oh no, I'm sorry. I have to talk to the owner of the account… to change the water bill over to you. And it's just like, well, you know, my husband's passed away. Like, I can't put him on the phone. Like, having to, that is just so re-traumatising for people. Things like that, but that's all part of… service, and moving a little bit away from what I'm talking about. But… it's things about creating a sense of safety for people. It could be something as simple as having a… quick exit button on a page, so that, yep, if I'm reading about a particularly… sensitive subject, or you know, I might be on a domestic violence… service page, or I might be on a bank hardship page. I want to be able to get out of that quickly if someone's coming. Yep. You want to make sure that… the information that you provide around it… is also really thoughtful. So, you might get to the end of the page, and say you're on a bank hardship page, and there are all these… related pages that are talking to you about… why you need an emergency fund, and… budget saving tips and things like that. And these things are done with good intentions, but what they don't realise is that that could be… invoking a sense of shame and guilt, that I don't have an emergency fund, that I haven't been, you know, budgeting in line with your tips. So, it's being conscious of the content around you as well, on a page. So, you know, like yeah. Getting rid of that sort of stuff that… could invoke… feelings of shame and guilt. What else? Oh, gosh.

[Narelle] You're talking about the way you use words. The way you use imagery. And is it also the flow of the information?

[Sandra] A hundred percent.

[Narelle] Okay.

[Sandra] Yeah. So, if like, let's stick on that bank hardship page. What you want to know first up is who I can contact, and how. Like, what are my contact options? Can I speak to an actual person? Can I email or do I have to fill in a form? Do I need my banking details right now? Is this going to stick on my record, on my credit score if I approach you about this? So, you've got things that would be immediately in your mind that you want answered. So, in response to that, the page should be

structured so it's got a different contact. "You can contact us these ways. Contacting us will not affect your credit score." And then moving into the further information, and that is things like setting expectations around what… people can expect, and what they need to provide. So, you know, knowing we might ask you for some bank statements, or… Yeah, what information the bank… might ask to support a hardship application. You want to know what… the possibilities are, like, how this might play out in my life. Like, stop paying interest, or get a pause on payments for a while and how long that might be. You also want to know how long it's going to take… the bank to make a decision. And… So, this is all about setting expectations. And there's another thing at play here, which is power dynamics. So, for someone coming to this from a vulnerable state, where they're experiencing financial hardship, the bank holds all the power. And yeah. So, they need to be really mindful of that, and that mindset with the person. So, you really want to be sort of… setting them at ease. And this is why you want to be giving them… all that information upfront about… what information they need to provide, and what those expectations are, and the timings and things like that.

[Narelle] And then, it would come in, God, this is fascinating, because then what you're doing there with that… will also come into play for someone… that's… on the neurodivergent scale.

[Sandra] Yeah.

[Narelle] Because they would already be feeling overwhelmed.

[Sandra] A hundred percent.

[Narelle] They'd be struggling with how words are put together.

[Sandra] Yep.

[Narelle] So, then it's thinking about the white space. It's thinking about… the way… the sentences are structured, the way the words are structured, the visual appearance.

[Sandra] Yes.

[Narelle] Down to not having very long lines, using bullet points, being direct, and yet kind.

[Sandra] Yeah, absolutely. It's applying all the plain language principles… to the content. It's kind of just thinking about things through another lens. So, those words that you choose to use… we recently worked on a cemetery's trust website, and… It had a kind of patronising tone at times, and you know, you could almost hear somebody going, there, there, there, there, patting you on the shoulder. And people experiencing extreme grief in those early stages who, you know, those customers who are at need right now that need to organise a funeral… for a loved one who's just died, they just want direct, you know, they just want… They don't want the fluffy language. They just want to be told directly what's next, what the steps are, what I need to know, how to make a decision. And they were using language like, you know, to make the right decision, which insinuates there's a wrong decision to make. That can like land a seed in someone's head. What if I do the wrong thing? What if I plan the wrong funeral? What if I, you know, go for the wrong kind of service?

[Narelle] Yeah. People with severe anxiety issues.

Yeah, yeah.

My gosh.

[Narelle] It's such a big overlap, isn't it, with people with disability?

[Sandra] It is. It is. Absolutely. Yup. And you know, I always say, designing for accessibility… means you are creating a better experience for everybody. And then if you throw this trauma awareness lens on top of that, it's improving it even further for absolutely everybody.

[Narelle] So, how do you go about… designing for trauma?

[Sandra] Yep.

[Narelle] For trauma lens?

[Sandra] Yeah. You… work with your subject matter experts. And see, one of the things about, it's kind of, it's co-design is one of the… principles of… your trauma-

informed principles of practice. And often, that can be hard to do because… you don't want to be re-traumatising people, and asking them to tell their story again and things like that. But what we often do is we'll use an intermediary. So, for example, with the cemetery's trust, the call centre… staff, and some of them have been working there for many years, are dealing with people… who have, yeah, just experienced the loss of a loved one, who they need to organise a funeral for. They know the language, the questions that they ask, they know the things that they… they need people to know and understand. And so, it's by talking to them, and really drilling down into, well, how do we prioritise the content? And we give the… absolutely must-know stuff up the top. And think of it like an upside-down triangle, an inverted pyramid, and it's the journalistic model of, like, telling a news story where you have… all the facts and details and key information up the front, and the importance diminishes as you go down the page. So, that just means that we never say the ta-da moment, with the jazz hands, ta-da, down the bottom of the page. You're leading with that. And that can be hard for people who have gone through, say, a university, an education system, where you build an argument… to the point where it's kind of, it all comes together in a conclusion. Yeah, it's like the exact opposite of that. And I think that's why we see a lot of content… that hasn't thought through that prioritisation at all. It's just because of the… people going, say, from academic writing, straight into a job, might be in policy, it might be in, yeah, some other area, but, yeah, they're still applying that model of… structure to a page, yeah. So, it's really about talking to the subject matter experts, understanding… the user questions, and the things that they need to know, because people won't always ask the questions… that they need to know. Like, yeah. So, yeah. What do we need to tell them as well as what… they ask us. Yeah. And then designing the content that way, and making it as clear and direct… as possible, breaking it down into step-by-step processes… when that's needed. And I mentioned earlier about that setting expectations of… how long we expect this to take, what documentation we might need from you. Yeah. And then in the midst of that, if you're asking people to complete a form, you wanna give them the opportunity to save where they are, in that process. So, you know, don't make me go through… all those questions again at this point. Like, yeah, save my progress, because I might be feeling too

overwhelmed to continue, and I want to come back to it later. So, it's things like that that can really help.

[Narelle] I see such a big overlap. Like, what I'm hearing is that if you design… for accessibility, you have to include the trauma considerations, which obviously when we do something, we're always thinking about… people in neurodivergency, people's mental health, how the words are used. Are they in context? Like, I saw a website yesterday, and it was talking about, say, fish. And there was a cow there. And I'm thinking, why is a cow, an image of a cow on a fish website? It's out of context. It doesn't make sense.

[Sandra] And that's adding to your cognitive load. Like, you shouldn't have to be processing that information.

[Narelle] And the fact that it was even mentioned, and I'm looking at it and thinking, it's decorative. A person with a vision impairment doesn't give two hoots, whether it's a cow or a dog, or whatever, on a fish site.

[Sandra] I would expect it to be a fish.

[Narelle] But I would expect it to be a fish. Yeah. And I find that… That's really interesting. What are some tips you would give people… when they're looking at content design? Or they're wanting a website… done to include the trauma lens?

[Sandra] Yep. It would be things like… removing barriers. So, I don't need to know my policy number. I don't need to know my whatever number. I can log in just…

[Narelle] Oh, they frustrate me, full on.

[Sandra] Yeah. Think about it. If you've just lost your house in a bushfire, you may not have access to the documentation that you need… with things like that. So, you know, remove any possible barriers. Give people a sense of choice, and empowerment. And that can be by… providing different ways to contact. So, some people might prefer to have a human on the other end, someone that they can tell their story to, like, I've just lost my house and I've been paying my… policy for years and years. I just need to know that I'm covered… for this event. Or it could be somebody who prefers to submit an email, or maybe go face to face. So, letting people know what their contact, contact options are gives them that sense of… a

little bit of, yeah, choice and agency… in that situation. And I think that really ties into that complex trauma where… people have felt that they, you know, have no way out. There is, there is no… option, that it's continued, and yeah, sustained. Things like… not… not clouding information, not overwhelming people with too much information that might come from edge cases. So, at True North, we talk about the happy path, which is, it's like the one size fits most. And it's about… allowing people where that one size fits most… to go through the process, without being aware of the 971 edge cases that sit around it, because that really compounds overwhelm. We did that on the Australian Passports Office website. It was… a process that had… very scattered information. And it was… The happy path was… overwhelmed by all these… edge cases that sat around it. And that's also, often edge case material sits in FAQs, which are very poor for, yeah, are very poor… in most situations, because information that is in an FAQ… should actually be answered in the body content… of a web page itself rather than buried in an FAQ. And FAQs are… requiring people to have a particular mental model. So, it may not fit. It's likely to not fit, especially with someone experiencing complex trauma as they're trying to navigate a website. There's other things like about not making assumptions. So, on the cemetery's trust website, there was a lot of language around your loved one, our loved one, your loved one. But, you know, what happens if I'm here because I need to organise… uncle Derek's funeral, and he was a particularly nasty man. And you know, the earth is better off without him on it. So, that kind of removing that sort of language, because that's assuming that you loved… rotten uncle Derek.

[in unison] Yeah.

[Sandra] That's another tip, is to just to review your content, to make sure that you are not making assumptions… about a person's situation. And that really feeds into another one of those principles… of practice, which is about… gender, history, inclusivity. So, it's like trauma doesn't happen in isolation, and being aware of that. And like most copy out there, or content on, say, a website is designed for… a cisgendered… a white person.

[Narelle] With no disability.

[Sandra] Yeah. Who's able-bodied, is neurotypical, et cetera, et cetera. So, yeah. So, just check your assumptions that you're not… Yeah, writing…

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Sandra] In that narrow, very narrow mindset.

[Narelle] Yep.

[Sandra] Using plain language, of course, is always the way to go.

[Narelle] You know what's funny? As you're saying all this, I'm going, oh, yeah, WCAG, readability, da, da, da. I'm sitting there listing the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines that match with it. It is so linked together.

[Sandra] Yep. It is.

[Narelle] Amazing.

[Sandra] Yeah, very, very, very much so.

[Narelle] Very interesting. And for everyone that wants to know, I've actually… requested that Sandra do a blog to accompany this podcast, talking more about it. Gives me a chance to learn more and Sandra's agreed, so also look out for that. That'll be released this coming week as well. Sandra, how do people get in contact with you?

[Sandra] Yeah, sure. I am at truenorthcontent.com.au. You can email me, sandra@truenorth.com.au. If you've got any questions, want to have a chat about accessibility, about this trauma-aware… lens that's so important to apply to our work.

[Narelle] Yeah. One thing you said that really resonated with me, and I've got to paraphrase, there was so much in that, was the fact that, you know, trauma sometimes is always with you.

[Sandra] Yes.

[Narelle] As a person with a severe vision impairment, obviously when I was born, I never expected to be where I was, where I am now.

[Sandra] Yeah.

[Narelle] And… it's always there. It is the… anxiety… of not knowing what's at your feet when you take the next step. It is the anxiety of not knowing who's there in front of you, because you don't know. It is that absolute frustration when someone says, oh, don't you know my voice? I talk to you a bit. And I'm thinking, yeah? Okay. And then having to explain, I don't even recognise my own sons. The moment I hear their voices, but they could stand in front of me and say nothing, and I would have no idea.

[Sandra] Yeah, right. Yep.

[Narelle] And that's an anxiety, and an overwhelming sadness… itself.

[Sandra] And you carry that with you every single day.

[Narelle] People with disability live with that every day. The person that can't get out of the wheelchair, the person that can't control their hand movements, or… whatever it is, and have other people think that, because they can't control their physical movements, that their brain… is affected as well. And I've got one name for anyone, Stephen Hawking. Brilliant brain. He had issues, physical issues. The trauma's always there. So, thank you, Sandra. Thank you for coming on and talking about it. And I know that was a bit of a downer, but… that's how… standards, how applying the WCAG and the trauma lens… make a difference. Talk to Sandra. Now, if you like what we do on The Digital Access Show, like, subscribe, share, review. We'd love to have you come on the journey with us. And we are coming close to the end of this… season. With the new season coming up next year, we have no idea what we're going to cover. If it's anything like this season, it'll be, I'll find a rabbit hole to follow. Have a really good week and we'll see you next week. Bye-bye.

[music playing]