

LEARNING UNCUT EPISODE 26
TALK NERDY TO ME – SANDRA LAMMAS

Michelle Ockers: Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. I'm Michelle Ockers.

Karen Moloney: And I'm Karen Moloney.

Michelle Ockers: And today we're going to talk nerdy with Sandra Lammas from the University of Southern Queensland. Welcome, Sandra.

Sandra Lammas: Hi. Hi everyone.

Michelle Ockers: Our hope for today's episode is that people are really intrigued by the title, which is a little unusual. We're hoping it's going to grab their attention just as strongly as your Talk Nerdy To Me program has done at the university. Now, Sandra, I saw you speak about the Talk Nerdy To Me program at a conference last year, and you had the audience laughing and talking about the cleverness and the effectiveness of the approach you took. You really do grab attention. And so, before we get into some of that attention-grabbing stuff and the fun of that, let's start with a brief overview of your organisation, the department you're working in, and the audience that you're trying to connect with.

Sandra Lammas: Sure. So I am the manager of ICT Training at the University of Southern Queensland. We have about 1500 staff and we're located over 3 main campuses. So in Toowoomba, Ipswich, and Springfield. So I suppose some of our demographic is that we have staff that can work in any campus and also sometimes don't work on any campus. They actually work completely online.

Michelle Ockers: Okay. So the audience is the staff and not the students in this case.

Sandra Lammas: In this case, yes it is. Yep.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, great. So we're actually going to put a little segment from the very first video you made to launch Talk Nerdy into the podcast. We're pretty confident that even without seeing the video footage, it's going to give listeners a sense of the tone of the program and what you were trying to achieve with it. <Audio from Talk Nerdy video plays here>

So now that we've had a little taster of Talk Nerdy, can you tell us why you created the program?

Sandra Lammas: Sure. So being in ICT particularly, we did have a lot of important things that we felt were important things to say to staff. Because if they don't know things, they don't know how to use the features, they don't know all this new technology is there to make their jobs easier. A lot of the feedback we got was they're too busy, and they would tell us to our face that they'd just delete our emails. Soon as they see ICT, it's not really that high on their importance list and they just delete it, which was a really bad thing for us. And so, I really thought about it and thought, well, to get a different response, we're really gonna have to do something different. And that's where the whole concept began of, where to from here? What can we do that will grab people's attention voluntarily?

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. I think most of us would be familiar with that challenge of email cut through, and particularly where it's broadcast emails or regular emails. Are people actually reading it or not? So my sense is there's a little bit of frustration there, but hey, we need to do something a bit different.

Sandra Lammas: Yeah. And we had to try something. The risk was fairly low. I mean, it is staff. If we tried something and it didn't work, we just don't do it again. So that gave us a little bit of bravery, I suppose, to try something a little out of the box.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. Great. So can you talk to us briefly about the program? Just describe the program in a nutshell.

Sandra Lammas: Sure. So rather than sending out text emails with text in it that nobody reads, we decided that we would use video instead. So what we do is we create a video no longer than 120 seconds in length that tells our staff about one clear message that we're trying to get out there, and we send it out every Monday at 9:00 AM for about 40 weeks of the year. So really it's just a lot about ... Instead of people not wanting to read anything or the text being a bit boring, all they see when they open the email is a video, a picture of the video and a play button. They play it, they click it, and it plays and that's it. It's as simple as that.

Karen Moloney: In terms of creating the videos themselves, you devised a production process workflow, which you've very kindly shared with us in the resources for this episode. Can you just talk us through the steps in that process?

Sandra Lammas: Sure. So the very first thing you need to do is get your idea. So you need to speak to your stakeholder and lock in their key message. And the biggest hint I can give there is, you really need to have a very clear message, maybe no more than three main points. Some people want to

pack it all in there, but you just can't. It just becomes muddled. So nice, clear messages is the best way to go with that one.

So once you've got your idea, we then move on to scripting. So with your script, work out your theme. What's your video's going to be based on? What's it going to be about? For example, is it going to be staff sitting around a table in the tea room having a conversation? Or is it going to be someone going into the library and checking out a book? Who knows? Just whatever the theme is. And then we script up our video from there. We just use a simple template to do that.

We then get that script checked by the stakeholders and the management of ICT, because they're the ones that have to sign it off to say, "If this all goes bad, you can blame me." But they always get a say. So we get that all checked off. We then go and create the video, and when I say create it, we film the video using iPads and iPhones. We don't use high production. We don't use our media section, who we have here at the university, but we just do it ourselves. So it really is just middle-aged women recoding things across campus. It's really very unglamorous. You don't have cameras and lights. It's just me and an iPhone.

We then go back and edit it. So with our editing, we just use the editing software we have here at USQ, which is Camtasia Studio, but it's really irrelevant. There's so many free ones. Whatever an organisation uses for editing software you can use. We simply just put on an intro. So we use the same intro every time, so people have an expectation that it's a Talk Nerdy To Me video and they know what to expect.

And just another hint on the editing. The last screen is where you should reiterate your key message. Really important because people get too excited about being entertained with the video but then can miss the message. So if the message is on that last screen that sits on their computer they can read it in their own time and that nuts it down a bit.

We then recheck the video, again to the stakeholders and to management, and then if all is good, we release it to our audience on a Monday morning at 9:00 AM.

Karen Moloney: Okay. So there's quite a few steps in there. How long typically would it take for you to produce a video from go to whoa?

Sandra Lammas: Yeah. So we actually produced them weekly, and we chose that on purpose because we wanted to hit what was ever current. So if there was a particular phishing scam that was hitting the university, we could create

the video that week to be released on the Monday. So that was really good for us, but it is a lot of pressure to get it done in time. But if you add it all up, I'd probably say it took a day, but it's not all at once. It's the concept on this time and then the scripting and then you have to wait for the checks and balances. But if I added it all up, maybe about seven hours. Some were much quicker. Some I could do in an hour, depending on the theme and stuff like that, and some would take longer.

Karen Moloney: Yeah. Because I mean, I love the creative approach of those videos, because they weren't all the same format. So again, when people open them, it's gonna be something different each week. And I really like that because I think ... I've seen a lot of branded videos in organisations where it has to be all company colors and logos and fonts and things like that, and it can just get very stilted and switch learners off. So where does that creativity come from, and how have you managed to sustain it for such a long period?

Sandra Lammas: Well, I've always thought I had a pretty good sense of humour, so that probably helps a lot. Look, I used to watch vines. Remember vines? I don't know if they still do them. Six seconds videos.

Sandra Lammas: And I was always impressed that you could send a message or get a laugh in six seconds. I mean, who would've thought that was even possible? So I think I got a lot of the inspiration from the Vine. If they can do that in six seconds, must be something I can do in 120 seconds. So I think that was the start of it. Also I get inspiration from anything from Facebook videos, commercials I see on TV ... For example, we've done one with fingers talking, just two fingers talking to each other. That was taken from a post office ad at Christmas time. It just a still shot of two fingers talking to each other. And I thought, "That will make a great video. Let's do that." So that kind of thing. We use Game of Thrones. Occasionally someone will make a Game of Thrones reference. So a TV show.

I really do play on the geeky side of ICT, I suppose. LEGO, Star Wars, those stereotypes that we don't find offensive, because you've always got to be very careful not to offend people. And yeah, characters help too. So every year we create a special character for Talk Nerdy. So the first year was Staff Vader. So it was just a staff member in a \$10 plastic Darth Vader mask and a cape, and he used to be in some of our videos. And then we had Merle the tech savvy nanny. So she used to help. She used to work on the service desk and she was very helpful, but very tech savvy and all over it. We made puppets one year, Hope and Surly. Hope was the good puppet, would tell you the right thing to do. Surly was the bad puppet who would say, "Why don't you just do it? Who cares?" And our

last character was ICT Panda, which was a \$20 panda head from Kmart that we used to just put on someone's head.

Karen Moloney: I've seen those. That's great. So heavily inspiring people out there to get out and try something crazy. So video lengths. You say that your inspiration come a lot from vines, and you decided that the Talk Nerdy videos would be max 120 seconds long. How and why did you decide on that duration, and why is that the sweet spot?

Sandra Lammas: Yeah, it's a good question. It's because the main complaint people had was that they're just too busy. Too busy to read your email. I'm too busy to talk to you on the phone. That kind of thing. So I figured 120 seconds. Who hasn't got 120 seconds? I mean, it takes a real conscious decision to say, "I haven't got 120 seconds to watch that video," because by the time you've had the thought you could have been halfway through, really. So we found that 120 seconds just seemed to be that sweet spot. It was long enough to get a message across, but not too long to start getting boring. And no video over the 4 years was ever over 120 seconds.

And we always made sure we put what the length of the video was on the email. So if we had the image and the play button, it always said 68 seconds. So people knew it was only 68 seconds long. And that's worked for us beautifully over the years.

Karen Moloney: I find that actually on some websites and things, that now we've got articles where they'll have the time to read the article. I like that because once you to start scrolling, you sometimes don't know how long you're going to be there for. But if I go, "Well, it's a three minute article. I'm happy to jump in." It helps you make a choice, doesn't it? So tools wise, you've mentioned that you're just using iPads, iPhones, and Camtasia as your editing suite. So was there anything else at all in terms of effects and things that you used, or is that it? Is that your toolkit?

Sandra Lammas: Yeah, that's pretty much our toolkit, and that's mainly because we had no budget. It was just I had this idea ... Yeah. It was that I had this idea, I have no budget, they're not going to give me the resources to create them before I've even come up with a pilot or anything. So it really just ... And also they have really short shelf lives. These videos are only in the moment. They're just for now. They might be used maybe once or twice, but that's pretty much it. So we didn't need that high production that a corporate video requires, which means we could get away with iPads and iPhones and existing software. And like I said, any props we used, I'd just walk around and bring a hat from home, a cape from the kids' dress up box. We really never spent anything more than ... I think we spent \$15 on

Merle's wig when we first met her character, and that was about it. So you don't leave a lot of money.

Karen Moloney: No, and that is the point, isn't it? With a lot of solutions, sometimes it doesn't have to be the big Whizzbang high production stuff. It's really about being creative and engaging with the people that you're trying to communicate with.

Sandra Lammas: Yeah. And with the internet and Facebook and that, a lot of people are making their own videos and we've got very used to not perfect quality. So the fact that they're not fantastic quality and they can be a bit grainy, really we've never had a complaint about that.

Karen Moloney: I think as a consumer, you're not worried about that too much. But I think as L&D we like to polish. We need to stop polishing.

Sandra Lammas: It's just not worth the polish. It's not worth the work to put that in for a one-time video.

Michelle Ockers: You did some animations as well, didn't you, Sandra?

Sandra Lammas: Yeah. Some of the animation we did using a product, I don't know if you've heard of it, called Powtoon. It's an animation online program. There's a free version that you can use. We used the subscription just to take the branding off it so we could use it for more corporate things. It's really easy to use. It was quite interesting. It does take time, though. We found that animation videos did take longer than a pure video with staff in it.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, they do.

Sandra Lammas: It was good to mix it up, and it's certainly a good skill base to get into. But again, another free resource that people can use and access and do something that they can use for their corporation or business.

Karen Moloney: In terms of the production and distribution of those videos, did you face ... How did you do that, and did you face any technical challenges with getting them out there?

Sandra Lammas: Yeah. Well, main bit was first of all, how are we going to make it? It has to be super easy. It's all about the less clicks, the better to get there. We do have certain sign in walls and firewalls and things throughout the university, but my goal was to make it that you just clicked and you just viewed it. That was really the goal. So we do have a central repository

here at USQ, and I was able to get permission to have it on a different setting so no one had to sign in to get to it. And that was the real big one because as soon as people have to sign in, you start getting people-

Karen Moloney: Yeah, you've lost them.

Sandra Lammas: That's it. They're gone already. So that was one big challenge, to get them to understand. The risk was low. There was really nothing to be concerned about the videos and to allow us to make them very easy to view, and that was a really big hurdle but definitely worth the risk because that non-sign in is really important.

Karen Moloney: So you mentioned that Talk Nerdy was a new approach to learning and communications at USQ, and an opportunity to innovate and do something different. But what shifts in skills or mindset needed to take place for you to really embrace this and make it a success?

Sandra Lammas: Well, I had to convince people particularly that funny was okay. That just because we work in a serious environment doesn't mean everything has to be serious. So getting people to be comfortable with maybe having a laugh at ourselves, like using Star Wars as a reference, and convincing staff to be in the videos. That they're our best talent, so let's put them in. That was a mindset shift for people. Also we had to be very careful to be funny but not offensive. It's a very fine line. What I think is funny, somebody may not. So that also comes into those multiple check layers we do in the flowchart. I might not pick up that something is maybe a bit close to the line. So someone else reading it can pull you back and go, "I don't know if I'd do that." Things like that. And things like that happen. You don't always see it yourself. But yeah, that and keeping the message really simple. People come in and go, "I want to tell them this and this and this and this and this." It's like, "Well, no. We'll just give them one message and link off to something else." But yeah, it was really just that you don't have to be serious to get the message across. You can try something different. People can actually laugh and still learn at the same time. So to us that was the big hitter.

Karen Moloney: Learning should be fun.

Sandra Lammas: That's right.

Karen Moloney: We just miss this everywhere, don't we? We're intent on cramming content down people's throats and making them compliant. And actually, if it's fun it's just a much better experience for people.

Sandra Lammas: That's it. And we were looking at voluntary engagement. We couldn't force people to watch these videos. It was completely voluntary, and we got so many ... Still the numbers, even after four years, were still super strong to continue going after four years of people electing to watch these videos. So the proof was in the pudding there. People like a laugh.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, absolutely. And when you were talking about ... You can take yourself a little bit lighter, that a serious topic doesn't necessarily always need a serious treatment. And also people trying to shove a lot of content in. It just made me think. Karen, you mentioned compliance. It just made me think about compliance training. And the challenges with compliance training often is that the stakeholders want everything in the content, and it can come across quite heavy. But you've found a way to cut through that, and I think you had an interesting experience in regard to compliance and audit somewhere along the line with the program, Sandra.

Sandra Lammas: Yeah. We touched on a couple of videos on cyber safety, which was very topical at the time. We'd had a spam attack and we were trying to just let people know about them, and we played on the fishing. Instead of real fishing, some guy was fishing and that kind of thing. We used cans of spam for that humor factor. And then have an email at the end of the year from our directors saying how happy the auditors were that we ticked off these cyber security information training for staff, and it was completely unexpected. It certainly wasn't our goal to do that, but they absolutely met all the requirements and our views were much higher than any other email or notification or training that they've ever tried to voluntarily get out to staff before. So that was an added benefit. So that was good.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. So that idea of capturing the engagement, capturing attention and then weaving the content, the message into it when you've got people's attention can be pretty powerful regardless of what the content is, right?

Sandra Lammas: That's it. And in ICT, wow. Some of our topics are pretty dull. How many people want to hear about the new wifi upgrade or things like that? A lot of it's fairly dry, but there's always a way to make it interesting.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. Fantastic. And the program's been going for around five years, and I know you've done a lot of monitoring of what was happening with the program and engagement with the program. How have you done that, and what has that told you? What have you been able to figure out in terms of what to keep doing, what to adjust based on your monitoring?

Sandra Lammas: Yeah, well it was really important ... And also being from ICT, statistics are key. We love data. We don't go on assumptions. So when we set it up, one of the really important things was for us to be able to track how many people viewed the video. As you know, if you send out an email, you can't actually track who's read or opened the email. So by putting the link in our repository, when they clicked the image it would open the file from our repository, which would then record the click, the view number. So that's how we could keep the numbers. So we've kept every video viewing numbers from its inception, and then I use those really to show that it's still being watched, it's still current, and that people still want us to continue.

And also, we do ask people for feedback, if people want to give us feedback on the videos. I'm happy to say 99% of it is positive. We do get the odd one where people don't appreciate my sense of humor, but that's okay. You can't make everyone happy, which is to be expected. And we monitor that feedback, and one of the changes we did make because of the feedback was in the subject line. We never used to say what the video was going to be about because my concern was people will go, "Well I already know about the wifi system. I don't need to hear that again." But it could have changed, and so we were concerned that people would not watch. But we did get feedback from the staff saying, "Well I want to go back and re-watch that video, but I can't find it because it's not in the subject line," which I thought was fair enough. So we did change it and we put a title in the subject line of what the video was about. But our numbers did drop by over 10%.

Michelle Ockers: Oh, interesting. So your feel for that was actually right.

Sandra Lammas: Yes. And I still feel we shouldn't put it in there, but I was overruled by management, which is fine. Can't win them all. So we do put the subject line in, but there was a clear drop in numbers as soon as we put in what the video was going to be about.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. Interesting. So we've spoken about the surprise around the audit and the cyber security content that was taken as evidence towards audit. Was there anything else unexpected or surprising that's happened either while you've been creating content or as a result of the program?

Sandra Lammas: Yeah, there's been a few things. One thing I suppose, which is not uncommon for any organisation, ICT's got a bit of an image problem at times. Before we started, we were seen as a little ... I suppose some people would even say arrogant. They don't really hear from us unless something goes wrong, which is never good for your reputation because

people forget all the good stuff you're doing cause they can't see it. They only hear when something goes wrong. So these videos really helped our image across the university. All of a sudden, we weren't seen as sitting in dark rooms with the lights off not talking to people. We were seen as communicating and having a bit of fun, and engaging and having a laugh at ourselves with the Star Wars references and things like that. So that was really, really positive. We had people contacting us saying they'd love to be in the videos, which, who would have thought? So that was really great. We were able to shoot some of the videos in other areas of the university with their staff, which was great. Again, that collaboration really came into it, and that was really unexpected but a wonderful advantage. So it really helped our image even though we didn't necessarily know we had one at the time.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. Fantastic. You spoke to me in preparation about the fact that the program ... I mean, four years is a long time to sustain something like this, right? And to keep it fresh and keep people engaged. You spoke about the fact that other teams in your department have now picked up the program, so it's being used more widely than just ICT.

Sandra Lammas: Yeah. So it has just been ICT for all these years, and then we had other areas within my division say, "Well, we want to do something like Talk Nerdy. How come ICT get to do it and we don't?" And so after a few discussions it was agreed that the Talk Nerdy videos would be expanded to include all of the areas in our division. So now instead of it being ICT every week, one week it's HR, one week it's finance, the next week it's campus services, that kind of thing. Which I think is a really good thing. I think it's an evolution it probably needed. So that allows other areas to not only get their messages across, but also different people making the videos. I think I'm nearly run out of new ideas, so it was great to get some fresh thinking in there. So yeah, it's gone really well.

Michelle Ockers: And have you had to coach people coming in fresh to start making videos?

Sandra Lammas: Yeah, we had a workshop a number of weeks ago where I led a workshop on how we do it, how I did it. Doesn't mean they have to do it that way, but this is what worked for us. And we actually created a video in the session. So I said, "We've got half an hour. We are going to come up with an idea, script it. We're going to film it and we're going to finish it off and put it to bed," which we did, and I thought that just gave them the ability to see that it doesn't have to take a long time. It's really as complicated as you want to make it. And yeah, we shot this video, came up with a

concept and recorded it right there in the room, and it worked out really well. So hopefully they'll now go off and create their own videos.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah. What do you think are the key challenges for people starting this fresh, given you've had to coach some people through it? What are the common challenges if there are any in getting started with making this video successful, this video program successful?

Sandra Lammas: Yeah, I think you really need ... Well, you need support from management, of course. You need management willing to take a bit of a risk. It is low risk as far as I'm concerned because they do approve it before it goes out so they can see that it's not offensive or that kind of thing. It doesn't have to cost a lot of money and I think that's a really important point. As soon as you say video, people imagine they have to purchase cameras and sound gear and lighting, and it's just not necessary. You just don't need to do that.

Don't underestimate the need for entertainment value. It can't be just a message. It has to have some theme or entertainment in there somewhere. Otherwise, people will just stop watching. If you're just swapping texts for someone standing there telling you, well then you're really not hitting the mark. We used to always joke that they come for the entertainment, but they leave with the message. So that's the mindset we took from that.

And also, use your own staff. You don't need actors. You don't need to worry too much. Get around and use people that you talk to every day. And then people also get to see that, well in our case, IT staff are real people and they're really funny and they're all very different and they're all really engaging. So do that stuff, and like I said, having fun doesn't mean you're not working or that you're not learning. So that would be my key ingredients for the success of Talk Nerdy.

Karen Moloney: Awesome. So we like to be very practical on this podcast and help people try new things. So you've given us a few tips about the key ingredients to success there. But if people are keen to do more with short videos but have never done it before, what would be your key takeaway tips just to help them get started?

Sandra Lammas: Okay. Well the first one is absolutely have a go, because you don't require too much too to do it. I've presented this to my management with a pilot. So I came up with a topic which was current at the time, which was a cyber security thing. I made the video myself and then I sat down with management and I presented it to them with a one pager. This

is my idea. This is how I'd like to send it out. This is how it works. Sat down, showed it to them, and they were really excited because they could see the end product. And I could tell them it didn't cost much in resources. Yes, it took me this amount of time, but look at the potential impact we could have. So just give it a go. Everyone likes a laugh. There's so much to be serious about, but really you don't need big budgets. You can use what you have and trying something different is what's going to get you the attention that we're all looking for.

Karen Moloney: Absolutely. Okay. There's just one final question we like to ask all our guests. Could you share with us the biggest thing that you do for your own professional development?

Sandra Lammas: Okay. Well, with my own professional development, I think the main thing is I try not to limit myself to PD about my own profession. So I'm a trainer by trade as well. I've trained for years, but I think it's really important to look wider than that. So for example, I'm about to attend a business analyst for non-business analysts training, because I think that's an interesting area that could be used in any position, really. Also a lot of the soft skills, emotional intelligence; Enneagram, the personality type training; mental health; first aid. I've done a lot of those recently as well. I suppose it's about future proofing my career as well, and also just all of that really contributes to being a well-rounded person and a well-rounded employee. So I try not just to do management, not just to do training, but look outside a bit and see what else is around. Because as they say, our jobs are changing all the time and I just really like to be ready for that happens. And also I get bored really easily.

Karen Moloney: Yeah, I feel you. I contracted for many years for the same reason, and I think having that broad ... Dipping your toe in lots of different places just gives you ... Allows you to be more creative, doesn't it? It just brings so much more to the experiences that you can put together.

Sandra Lammas: Yeah, that's it. And we're not pigeonholed into this one career path in our lives. There's so much more out there and you just never know what people are looking for. And how can we be trainers or learning and teaching ourselves if we're not willing to continue learning ourselves? So we really have to eat our own dog food there, I think.

Michelle Ockers: That's a good way of putting it. Absolutely. So we're going to include a link to your LinkedIn profile if anyone would like to get in touch with you to find out more about the topics discussed in today's episode. That'll be in the show notes along with some of the great resources. Sandra, one of the things you've done, you must have had a lot of inquiries from people

about this program because you've put together a fabulous set of resources that you've been sharing with people. We'll pop a link to those in the show notes as well, and that will include some of the sample videos, and I would really encourage people who are listening to the podcast to go and have a look at some of the videos just to get those creative juices flowing in and to see how funny some of them actually are. So thank you so much Sandra for talking nerdy and sharing your work with us today. We really appreciate it.

Sandra Lammas: You're welcome.

Michelle Ockers: And for all of our listeners, if you are finding Learning Uncut valuable, can you please take a moment to rate the podcast? And if you have the time, to leave a review comment. We really appreciate the time that our guests put into sharing their work with us, and it'd be fantastic to have as many people accessing their stories and case studies to learn from them and try something new themselves. Thank you.