

EPISODE 108

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this weeks' episode of Coffee with a Journalist, brought to you by OnePitch. The guests in our show include some of the most notable journalists from the top US-based publications, who cover topics including technology, life sound culture, health, science, consumer products and business news. We discuss their role, the types of stories they cover, what their inbox looks like and how they connect with sources. Head to onepitch.co and look for the video page to learn more about new series featuring today's guest.

Today on Coffee with a journalist, we're joined by Stephanie Talmadge, editorial director of newsletters at Bustle. Within her role, Stephanie manages a team that oversees EDGE newsletters across the company. During the episode, Stephanie talks about pitches from both sources and journalists, email as an outlet for media companies, some of her work in journalism, and more. Let's hear from Stephanie now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:13] BB: Welcome everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. I run an agency called BAM which works with all venture backed technology companies, doing crazy things in the world, robotics, space, all the good stuff. But also, I'm the founder of OnePitch and this is who's producing this wonderful show. Because we publicists need to know how to better work with the great journalists we have to work with and get to work with, which is such a joy in creating and making all the stories that come to life in the world.

Today, live from Brooklyn, coming in hot, Stephanie Talmadge, who's the Editorial Director of Newsletters now at Bustle recently got a promotion. Upgrade Stephanie, congratulations, and welcome.

[00:01:56] ST: Thank you so much, Beck.

[00:01:59] BB: Yes. First, let's talk about your role and what you are now covering Stephanie, because it recently changed and so, things are different.

[00:02:07] ST: Things are different, things are very exciting. So, I have a background in newsletters. And when I originally came to Bustle, I was in addition to editing the sex and dating stories as a deputy editor at Bustle, I also helped launch their new daily newsletter, which is kind of a rundown of the day's top trending stories, but also specifically highlighting Bustle's latest and greatest stories. It's very conversational. It's fun, it's jokey. So, I was putting that together every day as well.

And our BTG, which is the company where Bustle lives under is just really excited about email right now, for a number of reasons that we can get into a little bit later.

[00:02:55] BB: I do want to get into that, but go ahead, yes.

[00:02:58] ST: But yeah, so they decided to kind of have me start this new team. And I'm working on building that team out right now, and we're going to be kind of revamping some of the other newsletters across the company to have a little bit more of an editorial touch than they do right now.

[00:03:18] BB: Fantastic. So, how has that changed from the previous pitches you got to now pitches you get? Or maybe you don't get any for news that you tell us, and then we want to talk about the emails and the use of emails, for sure.

[00:03:31] ST: Sure, sure. So, to start, I mean, I get a ton of pitches every day. A mix of – yes, still, I'm slowly working on kind of informing everyone about the job change because it's very recent within the past few weeks here. So, I get a mix of pitches from publicist and a lot of pitches from fellow journalists as well, looking to write for Bustle. When I started at Bustle, I was trying really hard to not just delete pitches, especially pitches from journalists, I almost never delete. I always try to give feedback, even if I'm not going to accept the pitch. But with the amount of publicist emails I was getting, some of them relevant, some of them not. I also had kind of a weird situation where my title was deputy editor of wellness, but I was really only

covering sex and dating. So, that made things very tricky, understandably, for publicists who were pitching me.

I am guilty of deleting some of the pitches that were totally off brand, gift guide stuff, stuff that I wasn't really touching at my last role. So, I definitely have done it. But I started out with good intentions.

[00:04:54] BB: Understood, so is there, Stephanie, this is just one of the questions we typically cover on here, whether it be recently or recently as in from weeks ago, when you had your other job. Do you have a best subject line you ever received?

[00:05:10] ST: Oh, that I've ever received?

[00:05:11] BB: Or recently.

[00:05:13] ST: From a publicist or a journalist or either?

[00:05:16] BB: Oh, either. We'll take anything. Oh, journalist send you? Oh, because they want to pitch to write on Bustle, huh?

[00:05:23] ST: Right. Yes, exactly.

[00:05:24] BB: Tell us what journalists are pitching you, yes.

[00:05:28] ST: Well, as well, as a person who was in the sex and dating space, there are certain words that might grab you in a subject line. You can imagine. Also, envision your only email inbox, right? And I see this with the newsletters that I send as well, basically anything, because, I'm writing subject lines every day myself. So, I'm also thinking about this, too. Anything with sex, that's going to get an open, anything with porn that's going to get an open.

[00:06:04] BB: How was your stuff not all in spam?

[00:06:06] ST: That's a good question, actually.

[00:06:09] BB: I'm really curious.

[00:06:10] ST: It's something that email marketers, we talk about that. But typically, if you are sending from an email address, or a sender address that has a strong sender reputation, it's not really an issue whether you have a sex or a porn in there. So, it still gets to the right place. I can't think of an exact subject line that was just an all-time, all-around winner. But I love from publicists specifically, I love anything that is going to let me know, right from go that they have data to share, or there's a new feature to share. Anything that is directly relevant to the beat that has a newsie hook is probably going to get an open from me got it.

[00:07:01] BB: Got it. Okay. But we should probably caution everybody here listening that do not send Stephanie, an explicit X rated subject line that actually has nothing to do indeed with it. I'm just trying to, like, pitch you up here appropriately. So, you're not going to get bogus subject lines, just so that your pitch gets opened. I'm just saying. That would probably piss you off.

[00:07:25] ST: That's a great point. And also, email marketing 101, you never want to mislead somebody with a subject line from what their content of the email actually is.

[00:07:36] BB: Exactly. Stephanie, for the times that we're in now, it's very hard, of course, to see people in person, but that is coming back. How does one attempt to make a relationship with you these days?

[00:07:50] ST: That's a great question. I, and again, same goes for journalists and publicist. I love when somebody just reaches out and introduces themselves. I mean, just, "Hey, I am so and so. I recently started working with XYZ." Or not. Or like I recently stumbled across this, just kind of explains the impetus for the reach out. I'm fairly comfortable meeting people in person, so I'm happy to do coffee, or drinks or lunch, whatever I have. This is a maybe a taboo confession, I have never done a deskside ever. So, I feel like deskside is for me one of those almost like corporate garbage lingo words, right? Let's just have a chat for 15 minutes. I'm social, I love to meet people, especially if you're working with a client who's well in the beat. I might not respond to every introduction email, if you are working for, let's say, like a nontoxic nail polish brand. That's probably not going to come up in my beat.

But I love to take meetings with publicists who are working on brands that we would cover. And that's also a little bit different now that my role has shifted, the newsletters kind of cover all the content areas that Bustle covers. So, that's a pretty big umbrella of general interest. And yeah, I think just a simple reach out, this is who I am. This is why I'm contacting you today. I'd love to set up a time to tell you about XYZ over coffee, drinks, lunch, whatever, and kind of leave it at that. I think it just really helps to put in a name with a face behind the email. And once I have that relationship with somebody, I'm always going to open any email that they send me.

[00:09:51] BB: Oh, always open. This is key information stuff.

[00:09:55] ST: If we have coffee, I'm paying attention to your emails a thousand percent.

[00:10:00] BB: This is good. I like it. Okay. Do you ever run across embargoes exclusives? I don't think so. But I got to ask.

[00:10:07] ST: I do. I've worked with some of the dating apps, especially when they've launched new features, to kind of get word out about those.

[00:10:18] BB: Do you like any exclusive embargo? Or like, does it pertain to you anymore? That's a better question.

[00:10:22] ST: Right now, I can't imagine that we would like announce something in a newsletter like that, I would probably send it along to one of the other editors on site, just because I don't think it would be the best. I mean, I would love to have exclusive announcement in the Bustle newsletter. But I think from the publicist standpoint that they would want that to live on site somewhere, since the newsletter is a bit more ephemeral, right?

[00:10:51] BB: Yes, yes. By the way, let's look back to what you hinted at just with the use of emails and the power of emails. And so, what is the focus of using emails? I mean, obviously, everyone has an inbox, everyone's getting that. But tell us a little bit more your philosophy of the power of emails.

[00:11:13] ST: Sure. So, it's, I think, very much kind of been in the conversation in media and journalism in the last few years, that there was the big Facebook traffic push in the beginning of the 2010s, where media outlets were just getting the bulk of their traffic from Facebook.

[00:11:33] BB: Yes, those days.

[00:11:35] ST: Right. Facebook was able to just kind of manipulate one little thing, and then everything would kind of go to hell, and media companies would be scrambling from ground zero to fix their strategy, or just throwing things at the wall to try to please the Facebook overlords. And the same issue of Google and still is now. So email, I think, is a wonderful outlet for media companies to focus on because you own the audience. You can talk directly to them whenever you want. You know you're going to be reaching everyone with the exception of out of office forwarding and things like that, but you are going to be able to reach every single person who has elected to hear from you. And also, you're talking directly to people who have elected to hear from you, and that is a really powerful thing for media companies to have.

There's also scalability in terms of new products and paywalls. Maybe you have one email that is a general email that is free, and then for your more engaged customers, or for a niche topic, or a special writer or something like that, you have gated are paywalled emails too. So, it can be a great source of revenue. And as you know, in terms of sales, and revenue placement for advertisers too, it can be a more valuable placement for them. So yeah, I think that –

[00:12:58] BB: Also, I think, important point, though, that you're eliciting here in this, is it's quite complex. It's quite a science, it's quite an art. There are multiple ways to leverage email newsletter. In other words, it's not just, "Oh, the one newsletter that I get." No, big outlets, such as the one you're out at, have these varying degrees of ones, which I'm sure you have data for days on how to slice and dice and think about that. I love your point too on, it gets to every single person who's interested.

[00:13:27] ST: Right. You don't have to cross your fingers and hope that Facebook is going to show this person who liked your page five years ago, this new story that you've poured a ton of resources into. When you highlight something in the newsletter, you know that it's going to go out to everyone you see, or everyone who is signed up rather. Yeah, there is a lot of data. Email

data is interesting. It's more limited, I think than some of the other data analytic tools that digital marketers and digital journalists have at their disposal, and with the way that privacy is going especially with Apple's latest upgrade, open rates, which have kind of been king of the crop is slightly less valuable and slightly less accurate.

So, reading email data is kind of an art form in and of itself, and crafting the communications as publicists know, firsthand is a bit of an art form, so as crafting any digital platform specific communication, right? Crafting an Instagram and a brand voice, that's an art form too.

[00:14:39] BB: I hadn't thought about the notion of reading through the data is its own level of science and education as well. This is like advanced statistics. I'm in a statistics class right now, for a PhD and it's like, wow, you really can do a lot with slicing and dicing, manipulating all these various things. So dang, you should maybe add scientific director or something to your title, that's just my suggestion.

[00:15:04] ST: Man, well, it's editorial director for a reason. I know my way around some of the email metrics. But I work with people who are much more technically minded than me and I would not be able to do my job without them.

[MESSAGE]

[00:15:25] ANNOUNCER: Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch.

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Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:15:48] **BB:** Okay, Stephanie, we have a fill in the blank section here for us. So, I'm going to tee you up with the phrase, and you could fill it in from there. Does that sound good?

[00:15:57] **ST:** That sounds good.

[00:15:57] **BB:** Let's do it. So first one, my favorite sources, always –

[00:16:03] **ST:** Academics. I love talking to academics,

[00:16:07] **BB:** Academics. Dang, we had someone else yesterday to say like colleges, if it has a college name to it, yes. Academics. Okay. Why is that?

[00:16:18] **ST:** I just think that they are so immersed in their area of focus. They're often you know, writing a thesis on some very specific element of what they're studying. And it always just leads for me to like the most fascinating conversations. I'm thinking especially of a story I wrote. I grew up in Georgia, I went to UGA. It is a big SEC football school. Go Dogs. We won the national championship this year. I wrote this when I was at Vox media about why fans in the south to dress up for football games and students. And that is a huge part of the culture in the SEC.

There's like an entire mini-industry that caters to game day dresses at Southern schools. And that's just not really the case that –

[00:17:11] **BB:** There is?

[00:17:12] **ST:** There is. There absolutely is. I wrote a story about it.

[00:17:17] **BB:** Well, I would imagine for West Coast people. It's like, oh, there's industries for Coachella, if you still go to that thing.

[00:17:26] **ST:** Well, I am embedded in the culture of school down there, and I've talked to one academic who was literally writing a thesis about that, and had conducted all of this research. And the tradition going back to like the 1800s, when the schools were founded, and all of the

gender like implications about people performing gender roles in the south. And anyway, it was a fascinating conversation. I always love talking to academics. That was a long-winded answer. Apologies.

[00:17:57] BB: No, but we got it figured out. Okay. You'll never get a response from me, if –

[00:18:03] ST: I don't think I've ever responded to a pitch about a gift guide inclusion. And granted, I work with fabulous, I have worked with wonderful commerce editors who are focused on that. I think, unless that's your main job, it's not something that a lot of journalists spend time thinking about. And also, the pitches are so constant, because there's always a gift guide with all of it coming up for something. I'm sorry, to all of the policies who have ever pitched me something about an inclusive gift guide. I really am. I don't think I've ever responded to one.

[00:18:42] BB: Yeah, makes sense. Makes sense. You can follow up with me if –

[00:18:46] ST: If it's been a week. If I haven't gotten back to you in a week, then absolutely follow up. I will do my best to respond. And once again, with the caveat that it's something that is formatted to be included in the newsletter now or previously, as a sex and dating story.

[00:19:07] BB: Next fill in the blank. My favorite stories to write are or we're –

[00:19:13] ST: Sure. I'm still writing in the Bustle newsletter, but I love to write trend stories, most simply, observational stories, things that are kind of in the zeitgeist and then talk to academics or whoever about why we're seeing that trend all of a sudden or not. So suddenly, Bustle has been working on some stories about the metaverse and imagining what life might be like for the Bustle reader in the metaverse and those have been really interesting to put together. We just did one about what sex work in the metaverse. I didn't write it, but I edited it about what sex work in the metaverse might look like. And it's not so much a trend but obviously we're talking about the metaverse right now more generally. I wrote a story at GQ about why so many professional NBA players have reptiles as pets, because I just noticed a ton of them had were really into snakes. And it's because they travel a lot and reptiles eat like every two weeks, right? You drop off a little mouse in that snake tank and back in again in two weeks when it's

finally digested. So, little observational stories like that are my sweet spot. A little bit, you know, off beat and just fun.

[00:20:39] BB: Yeah, I love it. The best compliment I received about my work was –

[00:20:44] ST: Oh, man. When I first started in media, it was my first job. I worked at current events publication called the week and I wrote this story. I was an editorial assistant. I was doing a lot of like putting together articles and things like that. But I pitched a story about why I was glad that I didn't go to law school. And for a couple years after that published, I would get emails from people that little personal essay I wrote, really helped them feel validated in their decision not to go to law school, and that was a more personal piece than I typically write and it was really gratifying to hear that from people.

And then number two was that I wrote another story when I was at Vox about just Greek life and sororities, and that was featured in the long reads Pick of the Week, which wasn't really a direct compliment, but they always picked five like long reads of the week to send out in their weekly newsletter. And it was a big honor to be featured as one of them as a longtime subscriber to that newsletter. So, that was definitely a career high, as well.

[00:22:01] BB: Nice. Well, these were good answers. Thanks, Stephanie. What are you reading, watching, listening to, binging? We'll take anything.

[00:22:13] ST: Sure. Okay. So, I just finished this book called *Night Bitch*. Apologies for the swear. It was so interesting. It was about motherhood and there's a lot of like magical realism in there. So, if that's your bag, it's a fun time. What am I listening to? I just went to the Kacey Musgraves concert at Madison Square Garden a couple weeks ago. I've been listening to the new album a lot since then, which I didn't love at first, but it has really grown up.

[00:22:45] BB: Okay, great.

[00:22:49] ST: What else? What I've been watching since August? A ton of Survivor.

[00:22:56] BB: Really?

[00:22:57] **ST**: Yes.

[00:22:57] **BB**: Isn't it in like season 27 or something?

[00:23:02] **ST**: Okay. Season 41 just wrapped. I've watched it. It was great. My fiancé is –

[00:23:09] **BB**: I can't – wait, is that the world record?

[00:23:13] **ST**: Of like long standing reality shows?

[00:23:14] **BB**: Yes. That's better than Law & Order, right?

[00:23:18] **ST**: They got to be neck and neck. They're neck and neck. Survivor doesn't have as many spin off like Law & Order does.

[00:23:27] **BB**: What happened. Oh, it was at Fiji this time. Okay.

[00:23:31] **ST**: They're always in Fiji.

[00:23:31] **BB**: What makes you watch it? Oh, they're always at Fiji. I don't know anything.

[00:23:36] **ST**: So, I had never really watched it before. My fiancé recommended it when our little dog was sick and he's very old and I was just kind of like having a hard time. And he was like, "You know what we need some low stakes TV to distract you." And boy, oh, boy, did he hit the nail on the head. I think he's watched half of them before, so he's rewatching it with me. So, he's honestly even sicker than I am. But I think we've probably watched 20 seasons since August now, which is a disgusting amount of time. Let me be very clear. But I have also been watching The Bachelor since college and it is just – it blows the Bachelor out of the water in terms of a reality show.

[00:24:17] **BB**: Oh, I mean, 42 seasons.

[00:24:20] ST: Yeah, Bachelor's on 20 something, I think. Anyway, it totally sucks you in. I have gotten several people hooked on Survivor since I started watching it because I just can't stop talking about it. And here I am talking about it on podcast. So yeah, old Survivor, new Survivor, love it all. I watched Season Three recently, which was in Africa and it is so much different than the current seasons. There were like lions circling the camp at night. They always had to have somebody stationed awake.

[00:24:47] BB: What?

[00:24:49] ST: They really had to work for their water. Anyway, I think they've learned from the Africa season to now, that they should just always be in Fiji. It's like, "Oh, yeah, we should just have people in front of palm trees and gorgeous blue waters." It's almost always Fiji now. I think they just got tired of also roughing it in these –

[00:25:11] BB: The crews are like, "Forget this. We're not on the show. What's up?" Oh my gosh, honestly, Stephanie, this is the first time and I've done more than a hundred of these that Survivor has ever been mentioned. So, congratulations, and wow. Now, I'm like enthused. God.

[00:25:31] ST: It's a great time. And if you're ever going through a rough week, and you just need something that is going to be intriguing, but also not a lot of work for your brain, Survivor is great.

[00:25:44] BB: Awesome. Okay, transitioning quite a little bit. Well, maybe in the vein of surviving. What do you think the future of journalism looks like?

[00:25:53] ST: Always an interesting question. And I think, I do think that media companies in line with what we were talking about with our conversation about newsletters and owning your audience, I think that any media company who hasn't already made the switch to a subscriber basis is kind of in the middle of that, or should be thinking about it. So, whether that's having a great newsletter program where people can sign up for different newsletter products, and maybe have some of those be paid subscriptions, that's one way to go having a paywall and hitting a certain number of articles. And then needing to be assigned in subscriber after that. I think that that or something like the athletic where you have to subscribe to read anything, but

there's this very niche reporting that you know exactly what you're signing up for, and you're there for that exact reason.

So, I think that media companies are tired of playing by Google and Facebook's rules and moving to a subscriber model where they are talking directly to their audience and maybe their audience isn't as big as it was when they were playing the search engine or social traffic game. And obviously, those things will always be probably a part of the strategy. But I think everybody's learned some hard lessons in the last five years about making that 80% of what you're doing. You can't do everything, and being specialized in one way and catering to a smaller audience that is super excited to be there, I think that's the future. And that goes for media companies to individual people on Substack too.

[00:27:44] BB: Good to know, especially all those Substackers that are still emerging, which blows my mind. But regardless, Stephanie, thank you so much for being on. Congrats on your promotion. Stephanie Talmadge, Editorial Director of newsletters at Bustle. Thank you for doing this, Miss Stephanie. I really appreciate you.

[00:28:05] ST: Oh, thank you for having me. It was a pleasure and go watch Survivor Season 41.

[00:28:09] BB: Stephanie. I am.

[00:28:14] ST: I should be getting some ad revenue.

[00:28:15] BB: You should be getting some ad revenue, get those clicks. You should.

[00:28:20] ST: Yeah. CBS, look at me.

[00:28:22] BB: God. Wow, blows my mind. Thanks again, Stephanie. Appreciate you.

[00:28:26] ST: Thank you so much, Beck.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:28:28] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening in to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Stephanie Talmadge from Bustle. If you enjoy listening to our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. If you have a moment, please leave us a review to share your thoughts about the show and today's guest.

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[END]