

**EPISODE 121**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER:** Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by OnePitch. The guests on our show include some of the most notable journalists from the top US-based publications who cover topics including technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science, consumer products, business news, and beauty and wellness. 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](https://onepitch.co) and look for the video page to learn more about our new video series, featuring journalists from the show.

This week on Coffee with a Journalist, we're joined by Wirecutter Editor in Chief, Ben Frumin. Before Wirecutter, Ben was the Editor in Chief of TheWeek.com, a senior editor at Talking Points Memo, and a professor at Columbia Journalism School. During the episode, Ben talks about his process for reviewing and vetting pitches, the quality and standards the Wirecutter team follows, how they approach product reviews, and more. Let's hear from him now.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:01:15] BB:** Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist, produced by OnePitch. I'm the Founder of OnePitch. This is Beck Bamberger and also the Founder of BAM, an agency that works with all venture-backed technology companies that are growing and thriving and hopefully making the world a damn better place because we need some of that.

With us today, because we want to know what journalists really need and want from us publicists, is Ben Frumin, who's the Editor in Chief of the Wirecutter from the New York Times, quite the outlet to get on if you're anything to do with a tech product of sorts. I'm so excited to have you, Ben, because you're a big get, by the way. You're kind of a big deal.

**[00:01:55] BF:** Well, that's very kind of you to say, but it's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

**[00:01:58] BB:** Yes. Ben, we did a little bit of our video recording so far, and I very much got the impression that you all are inundated, frankly inundated with products that are dying to be featured and covered, of course. Can you tell us a little bit about your inbox and what lies within?

**[00:02:16] BF:** Yeah, absolutely. You are right. I mean, Wirecutter, we believe that we are the premier product recommendation service in the country. We serve millions and millions of readers. We cover thousands of product categories, and it is powerful. Like Wirecutter's recommendation is something that is really meaningful to millions of people and can absolutely be a big deal for a product to be chosen as a Wirecutter pick.

The way that we make these picks is strictly and entirely through or editorially independent and journalistically rigorous process. But I understand that lots of companies would love to have their products reviewed by Wirecutter. That said, I will gladly take you through my inbox. This may be slightly disappointing. I am an inbox zero sort of person. So I treat my inbox almost as a to-do list, where if there are emails sitting in my inbox that I haven't dealt with, it like stresses me out a little bit. So I have vanishingly few things in here, but let me open it up, and I should say too –

**[00:03:12] BB:** Sure. Sure. Let's open it up now. By the way, there were like two thoughts of school here or schools of thought with journalists. They are all the way to the rigorous zero, or they'll let it fly 57,000 unread emails.

**[00:03:25] BF:** Oh, my god.

**[00:03:25] BB:** It's either you're like one or the two. I don't know, but it's absolutely fascinating, and the camps are strong. It's either/or.

**[00:03:33] BF:** I have – My personal inbox right now has one unread message, and my work email has one unread message, and both of them are stressing me out a little bit.

**[00:03:40] BB:** Wow. Wait, so how often are you in your inbox then?

**[00:03:44] BF:** Constantly. I mean, I'm just sort of jacked into my computer all day, Slack, email, etc. Anytime that I see emails pop up, the little sort of like parenthetical enumeration, I'll pop over just to see what it is. It may be an unhealthy Johnny on the spot obsession with responding to things, but I pride myself, especially with my staff and colleagues, on being accessible and being responsive and being there to answer questions as swiftly and as confidently as possible. So, yeah, I reply quickly.

**[00:04:13] BB:** Wow, wow. That is incredible. Okay. So with the pitches now, do you ever have something you respond back to, you refer back to six months later, something like that?

**[00:04:27] BF:** Yeah. I would say, look, 99% of the pitches, probably more than that that arrive in my inbox, I delete or archive with barely a second spent on the subject line. I can tell almost immediately if the pitch is bad and if it's not going to land, if it's not offering something of value to Wirecutter and our readers. It takes me longer to see if there's potentially value there. But so, so many of them I can dismiss almost out of hand.

Good pitches I will return to if there was a product that was kind of interesting but wasn't the right time or didn't make sense for us at the time, but I might read it later. But usually, I'll deal with something the moment that it arrives and either read it and archive or delete it, once in a while reply, glance at the subject line, delete it. Or in rare cases where it is really excellent pitch, I'll follow up with one of our journalists to see if they have this product on their radar, if they want me to make the connection for them, etc.

But I will say just looking at my inbox, Beck, I have four emails in my work inbox, and one of them is a Google Doc replies to edits I had just made on a story prior to recording this podcast. Another is about subscriber engagement numbers. Another is a pitch email, which I am planning on responding to because I do appreciate the simplicity and straightforwardness and thoughtfulness of this pitch email. The last is a budgeting email from our director of finance.

**[00:05:44] BB:** Okay. Now, because you're the editor in chief, and this differs sometimes with reporters versus "journalists," do you forward along pitches as well? Can you go a little bit more into that?

**[00:05:55] BF:** Yeah, absolutely. In the rare case of a truly good and reader-serving pitch, I will sometimes follow up myself. If it is a general PR introduction, if it's something I'm frankly just curious about, if it's an area of coverage that perhaps we're not in, but I might be interested in learning a little bit more about it, I will follow up myself. If it's a product category or an area of coverage that we're already in, and again in the rare case where it's a really great pitch that seems intriguing, I will typically follow up with the reporter or the editor on our staff who covers this and honestly just pass it along to them in some cases and say, "Do with this what you will. I just wanted to pass it along to you."

In other cases, I might ask a more pointed question like, "This seems kind of interesting. Is this worth us including in a scout report and consider reviewing in the future? Is this something we've dismissed in the past and why?" But again, those really, even that level of inquiry and passing it along, are the exceptions rather than the rule.

**[00:06:53] BB:** Okay. Okay. What's a bad pitch to you, Ben?

**[00:06:57] BF:** Yeah. Well, there are any number of ways that a pitch can awry.

**[00:07:01] BB:** I'm sure.

**[00:07:03] BF:** For better or worse, the editors are quite a judgmental bunch about what is bad.

**[00:07:07] BB:** I'm sure.

**[00:07:08] BF:** But I will say one way that a pitch can go awry is if the person doing the pitching clearly hasn't taken the time to understand Wirecutter, who we are, what we do, the just incredibly comprehensive and rigorous journalistic methodology that we go about to get things right for our readers. If it could be a pitch that was just sent to anybody, it wasn't clearly tailored to us, to me, that is a bad pitch.

Another category of bad pitch to me is something that fails to look at things from the reader's point of view. Everything that we do is in service of the reader. We're in the business of helping people solve problems through making the right purchasing decisions, making sure that they're

going to buy something. It's something that makes their life better, easier, happier, more peaceful, more efficient, and isn't just some sort of hyper consumerist, disposable plastic garbage that's going to end up in a landfill.

Far too many pitches to me come from the perspective of like what the company is excited about or what they think the appetite of a breathless or gleeful recipient, rather than the much more simple and straightforward thing of how is this going to make somebody's life better? How is this going to exceed your expectations of what this product can be? What problem is this going to solve for a person? What question is this going to answer for them?

I would say another thing too is just really another way pitches can go awry is over selling. Journalists don't want to be sold. You're not going to bamboozle or hoodwink us. We don't want to be tricked.

**[00:08:35] BB:** Not exactly the people to try that on. Yeah.

**[00:08:37] BF:** Yeah. At the risk of using a relatively blue term, like we have great bullshit detectors, and we are skeptical by trade, and we are constantly asking questions and really applying standards of sort of rigorous journalistic inquiry to everything, including the emails we receive. You're not going to pull a fast one on us or get us to just immediately buy into the hype of whatever it is that you're selling us on. To me, sober, straightforward, almost –

**[00:09:08] BB:** Sober?

**[00:09:09] BF:** Yeah. Like dispassionate. I don't want to feel like this person pitching me has skin in the game, even though I know –

**[00:09:16] BB:** Yeah. Even though you know they do. Yeah.

**[00:09:18] BF:** But no journalist wants to feel like they're on the receiving end of somebody selling them something. That's not what we're doing. Like we're in the business of reporting, and we're in the business of helping people.

**[00:09:26] BB:** Discernment.

**[00:09:28] BF:** Yeah, being discerning. So simple, straightforward, sober, to use the word again, and human, and really thinking about the reader. Like that's how to avoid these things going awry.

**[00:09:39] BB:** Okay. One off question because it doesn't pertain to our usual list of questions here, but you are married to another journalist.

**[00:09:46] BF:** I am. That's true.

**[00:09:47] BB:** NBC News now know your value. I think you're the first on this show out of the 120 or whatever episodes. How is it being married to another journalist?

**[00:09:56] BF:** Well, I am the luckiest man in the world, where I'm married to the most incredible woman in the world. So regardless of her career, I'm just very, very lucky. Yeah. Aliyah and I met in journalism school. So we were in the same like reporting one-on-one classic journalism school.

**[00:10:08] BB:** College sweethearts. Love it.

**[00:10:12] BF:** Kind of we've been together about 15, 16 years, something like that. It's hard for me to imagine not being married to a journalist. I think that it's very comforting because we kind of understand each other. We help each other. But I've met couples who are in the same industry who absolutely love it, and it's hard to imagine anything else. I've met couples who they're in different industries, and they're like, "Oh, my god. If I did the same thing as my spouse, like I think it would drive me crazy."

I completely understand that there are perspectives in all camps. But for us, it's great. I think for us, it creates a greater understanding of who we are and the work that we do. Aliyah and I are also just like we're reporters at heart. We like talking to people, we like asking questions, and we like learning about things. Even in our social lives, we'll often find that like she'll be talking to somebody. Then 10 minutes later, I'll be talking to the same person, and I will inadvertently be

asking this person all the questions that Aliyah already asked them because we both approach almost every interaction with the same spirit of sort of curiosity and trying to learn about people and things. For us, it makes our marriage work very nicely.

**[00:11:15] BB:** So wait, sometimes you're talking to like the same source?

**[00:11:17] BF:** I mean, like, centrally, yes. So we –

**[00:11:19] BB:** Oh, oh, oh.

**[00:11:20] BF:** Yeah. Long, long ago, we both briefly worked at the New York Post at the same time. We have sort of overlapping careers at various points. But, no, I more mean it socially. Like we'll be at a party, and she'll be talking to somebody and asking them all these questions. 10 minutes later, I'm talking to the same person, and they'll be like, "You know your wife asked me like five of the last six questions you just asked me." It's just to say that our brains kind of work the same way I think.

**[00:11:43] BB:** Yeah. That's cool. What a special thing. My parents were married, and they still are married. I was like they were obviously married. I'm like, "No, my parents don't have to be married." Anyway, my own bias buster there. As dentists though and they met in the Navy doing dental work, and they are now retired dentists. But, yeah, same career path, same thing. It does happen.

**[00:12:03] BF:** I love it. For what it's worth, a woman on our editorial staff at Wirecutter, both her parents are dentists as well and –

**[00:12:09] BB:** See.

**[00:12:10] BF:** Yeah.

**[00:12:11] BB:** I bet it's a club.

**[00:12:12] BF:** Yeah. I love it. Well, that's how you all get great smiles, right?

**[00:12:15] BB:** That's true.

[BREAK]

**[00:12:18] ANNOUNCER:** Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to see the unique ways OnePitch helps PR professionals and marketers pitch journalists? Head to [onepitch.co](https://onepitch.co) to learn about our new OnePitch score and see how easy it is to find the right journalists to pitch your news to. Sign up for your free account today. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

**[00:12:42] BB:** Okay. Ben, when you consider a laptop holder, a bounce house, you wrote an article once on that, how do you come up with the idea of that story that you want to do? Because as you mentioned in an earlier, when we were doing our video segments, or actually I don't even think we put this on the recording necessarily, you're not like showing up at a warehouse being like, "Which 300 products do I want to touch and play with today?" Like you only get and receive stuff that you say, "Yes, please send me." So do stories in any way, shape, or form, evolve organically in your mind during your meetings, and then you sell us out the products? Or is it more reactive?

**[00:13:23] BF:** Yeah. That's a great question. I'll just say very, very broadly, before I answer the Wirecutter-specific version of this question, I started my career as a newspaper reporter, and one of the great joys – In San Diego, actually, I used to – I worked at the Coast News and the now defunct north –

**[00:13:37] BB:** Yes. Coast News. Oh, my god.

**[00:13:41] BF:** I say this just to a fellow San Diegan like you. But one of the great joys to me of being a newspaper reporter was that you could follow your curiosity anywhere, and you could pick a topic that you'd never really considered before like if you're driving by an in construction butterfly highway interchange and be like, "I wonder how they build these things. I wonder how



they're funded.” You get an engineer on the phone, and you get a finance person on the phone, and you'd learn about it. Then you tell people about it in 12 column inches in the newspaper the next day.

I've always been a big believer that so much great journalism is sparked by the curiosity of an individual that if you are curious about something, if you are enthusiastic about learning something, if you believe that information and context and knowledge can make you better, like there's probably a larger audience out there for whom that is also true.

The Wirecutter-specific answer I will say is that when we are trying to decide what product categories to cover beyond what we already cover, and it is worth saying that we have something like 1,500 product reviews that we are constantly revising, maintaining, testing new products for, reassessing the long-term viability of our existing picks, like it is very much like a year-round garden that needs constant tending, rather than like a flower stamp selling fresh cut bouquets that wilt and die four days after you buy them. We are caretakers in a way who are constantly pressing ourselves to make our catalogue of existing work as excellent as it can be.

But, of course, we do plenty of new things too, and these ideas come in any number of ways. It is usually, honestly, a mix of quantitative kind of analysis and data, as well as our own journalistic judgment. So we have all sorts of tools where we can try to identify what people are interested in right now, what people are hoping to learn about right now. We look at search volume. We look at various social metrics, trying to understand like what are emerging categories that people might be interested in.

This can be not necessarily new categories. It can be changes to the way we live that change what people prioritize or what products are important to them. As one light-hearted example I will tell you, in March 2020, during the great toilet paper shortage, in the early days of the pandemic, traffic to Wirecutter's guide to the best bidets spiked by 5,000% **[inaudible 00:15:58]** looking for alternatives. We have all kinds of ways of trying to look at what matters to millions of shoppers. What are they looking into?

Some of it, though, is also just our own journalistic judgment. All of this data can tell you what people are looking for today, what they're interested in today. But it can't tell you what they may

need a year from now or what things that they don't need to know about might be of interest to them. But once we know that we're covering something, whether it's a bounce house or metal detectors or a laptop stand or any number of things, our journalists do what's called a scout report, which is like a reporting and research project that usually takes a few days, where they assess the entire product category. Who are the big players? What are the bestselling models? What makes a good one of these?

If it's a bounce house, is it durability? Is it safety? Is it how small you can pack it up? Is it the ease with which you can inflate it? Is it how easy it is to repair? If it does spring a leg, like whatever, we sort of have all these dimensions, and then we come up with a model list, which is we can't test every bounce house that's ever been created, but here are the eight that we were testing. What's critical is we decide that independently and based on nothing other than our own journalistic and editorial judgment. We don't test things just because companies ask us to. If a company sends us something unsolicited, we send it back or we give it away to charity.

**[00:17:19] BB:** No. You mentioned that.

**[00:17:21] BF:** Yeah. We decide what we test, and we think that's really important for readers to trust our recommendations. We believe that our recommendations and our process are the most trustworthy in the business. Readers need to know that the only thing powering our decisions is our independent analysis and reporting-backed conclusions about what we believe is best for our readers and not what some companies happen to send us or ask us to do.

**[00:17:45] BB:** That is so critical. Plus, also with bounce houses, how would you even test 20 of those? I mean –

**[00:17:54] BF:** It will be time-consuming. Yes, it will be –

**[00:17:56] BB:** Difficult, difficult challenges as a further thought. Okay. Ben, we always like to hear what are you reading or watching or listening to podcast-wise. We'll take anything and everything because this is where I get all my ideas. So what do you have?

[00:18:11] **BF:** Sure. So I read a lot of books. I'm usually reading at least a couple of books at a time. I have two kids. My daughter is six and my son is four. When they go to bed each night, we typically will have this little like kind of reading nook in my house, where I'll read a book or a magazine for 45 minutes or an hour. So I'm reading two books right now. One is this just beautiful memoir by Harry Crews. It's called *A childhood, the biography of a place*. It's about his life growing up in the South. It's one of the most beautiful evocative memoirs I've ever read. I'm just halfway through it, but I highly recommend it. It's just gorgeously written, and it is really just an extraordinary work.

[00:18:48] **BB:** It just came out. Yes, yes, yes, yes. Okay, great. Is it a little bit like *Hillbilly Elegy*?

[00:18:54] **BF:** I haven't read *Hillbilly Elegy*. I would like to think that this Harry Crews book is probably a little bit more poetic and a little bit I don't want to say more personal. But from what I know of *Hillbilly Elegy*, it's probably a little more literary and a little less mass. But I couldn't really say, having not read Vance's book.

Then the other thing I'm reading, which is a little embarrassing to say, but I'm reading Franz Kafka's *The trial*, which I just had somehow never read before. This Kafka guy, pretty good, pretty good writer, pretty good thinker. It's –

[00:19:24] **BB:** Who would have thought? Dang. Hey, sometimes you got to back to the classics of all the things. Wow. Okay, thanks. By the way, what do you read to your kids?

[00:19:35] **BF:** Great question. So their tastes change constantly. They are super into The Berenstain Bears right now. So we take them to the library every Monday afternoon and come back with like 20 or 25 books. Then like those are the kind of books for the week. We also have just a shelf full of like a few hundred kids' books that we –

[00:19:53] **BB:** Wait a second. Wait a second. Wait a second. 20 to 25 books.

[00:19:57] **BF:** Yeah. But they're like picture books that take like 15 minutes to read.

[00:20:01] **BB**: Got it. It just sounded like, “Wow, that’s aggressive.” Good on those kids.

[00:20:05] **BF**: They got two journalists as parents. It’s a –

[00:20:07] **BB**: Yeah, shoot. They’re going to be voracious readers. Yeah.

[00:20:10] **BF**: Yeah. But I mean, they’re short books, 25, 20 minutes each to read. But they’re super into Berenstain Bears books these days. So that’s –

[00:20:18] **BB**: Awesome, awesome. I love that. Well, then, especially as you’re two parents as journalists, growing hopefully voracious readers and curious humans, what do you think the future of journalism looks like?

[00:20:32] **BF**: It’s a great question. I hope that it is very bright. I will say, as I mentioned, I started my career almost 20 years ago as a newspaper reporter, and I became a newspaper reporter for like all the sappy, feel good reasons. Like I want to help people, and I want to make the world a little bit better, and I’m very curious, and I want to learn about people. Then I want to share those things with other people and, hopefully, inform or entertain. Or if I’m lucky, expose some injustices and rights and wrongs.

All these like boring clichés about journalism [inaudible 00:21:03] comfortable, sunlight is the best disinfectant. That is meaningful to me, and I believe it, and I believe that journalism is just an incredibly important public good that makes us better as a people, that makes our civic life and health better, that makes this country better. Obviously, like our industry has been beleaguered 20 years in some ways through macro-economic forces outside of our control, and in some ways through really short-sighted own goals by people within the media.

But I am bullish on the future of American journalism. I believe that it is just so important to the ongoing functioning of our shared public life and our liberal democracy that it has to survive, and it has to thrive. As far as what I think will happen to the actual industry, this tape was a little more novel five years ago. At this point, it’s actually happened. But I have long felt that there would sort of be a great clearing out of these mediocre volume-based publishers that were all

kind of writing the same thing without actually doing anything, any kind of enterprise or original recording.

So many of these businesses were based on like the sort of quick high Facebook traffic and the

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**[00:22:19] BB:** Yeah. Click, click, click, click, click. Yeah.

**[00:22:21] BF:** Yeah. Like the pursuit of programmatic ads and pivoting to video. I have long believed that there would be a small number of publishers of just extraordinary integrity and premium quality, operating at a national and international level, are just so comprehensive and so vital that they would be worth paying for, and they would thrive. Obviously, the New York Times is the best example of that.

**[00:22:47] BB:** It is.

**[00:22:47] BF:** It is the – For my money, like by far, the best news organization in the world and producing the most vital and important journalism day in and day out. But then also, I believe there will be any number of smaller publishers serving niche audiences who believe that the work being published is worth paying for. Whether that means sub stacks, whether that means like smaller b2b publications, whether it means like a particular subject matter or even geographic-focused audience, where it's like a Morning Brew sort of thing.

What I think is continuing to happen, though, is that so many of these publishers that thrive in the 2010s, that couldn't offer one of those two things, are really feeling the pain. I think that was a little bit of a sugar high. I know there are many, many, many great journalists who work in many of those places. I don't want to glibly dance on the graves of the companies that employ them at all. But I do think that what will emerge and what will dominate in the next couple of decades of journalism is quality, important, vital, reader-serving journalism that people believe is worth paying for.

**[00:23:59] BB:** I am so happy to hear that, Ben, and your approach to that. We've been on quite the run here on doing this show with a real increasingly strong, optimistic viewpoint on the future

of journalism. It's great because I can tell you this has not always been the trend on this little show. So thank you for that and thanks for giving us a high note to end on.

**[00:24:19] BF:** My pleasure. Thank you so much for having me. It was great to meet you and talk with you.

**[00:24:22] BB:** Thank you, Ben. Ben Frumin, Editor in Chief, the Wirecutter, published by The New York Times. Check it out, especially if you need a bidet and basically anything else in tech. Thanks, Ben.

**[00:24:33] BF:** Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[00:24:35] ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist featuring Ben Frumin from Wirecutter. If you enjoy listening to our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. And if you have a moment, please leave us a review to share your thoughts about the show and today's guest. To learn more about the latest tools on OnePitch, and to subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter, head to our website at [onepitch.co](https://onepitch.co). We'll see you all next week with a brand new guest and even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]