

EPISODE 134

[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 who write about topics including technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science, consumer products, business news, and beauty and wellness. We discuss the types of stories they cover, their thoughts on exclusives and embargoes, their favorite pitches, and how they connect with sources. Head to onepitch.co and look for the video page to learn more about our new video series, featuring journalists from the show.

Our guest today on Coffee with a Journalist is Max Ufberg from Fast Company. Max is a Senior Staff Editor at Fast Company, covering and managing the tech team. During the episode, Max gives us the scoop on his pitching preferences, why it's better to talk with a reporter or editor before you pitch them, what constitutes embargoed news, and more. Let's hear from Max now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:13] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. You're here because, hopefully, you want to listen to a journalist talk about their inbox, what they like about pitching, what the future of journalism is going to look like, maybe some book recommendations. We'll see what we get.

I'm Beck Bamberger. I started OnePitch because there was a real big need to help publicists get to journalists better, more efficiently, and in a real, true, authentic way. That's why we created it. It came out of a bit of my agency that I have called BAM, which works with all venture-backed technology companies and, occasionally, a venture fund here or two.

Today with us, very exciting because we don't have editors on here too often, definitely another level of the inbox that we'll get into in just a second, Max Ufberg. He's the Senior Staff Editor at Fast Company, specializing right now in the tech vertical for Fast Company. So I'm sure we got

lots of tech pitches and bitcoins and things to chat about, Max. So welcome, and thank you for being here.

[00:02:16] MU: Yeah. Thanks for having me.

[00:02:17] BB: Yes. We just saw your cat. He's 18. Alfie, right?

[00:02:22] MU: That's right. Yeah.

[00:02:22] BB: Oh, Alfie. Hopefully, he'll pop up. Well, we did see him on a cameo video. So if you want to watch our little video vignettes, you'll see him there. But, Max, I like to start with just making sure people know directly from the horse's mouth on when we have reporters here, what the outlets they cover do. How would you describe Fast Company's coverage?

[00:02:45] MU: We cover established and emerging tech, the products, as well as the major players in the industry. I would say we have a couple sort of core areas of coverage in our tech section, Web3, AI, the gig economy, transportation tech, and sort of productivity tech.

[00:03:05] BB: Yes, definitely. To get your job faster and better done.

[00:03:09] MM: Yeah, exactly. Which is very much like a Fast Company niche, I would say.

[00:03:13] BB: Yes. I would agree with that. Great publication. I look at it every day, to tell you the truth, so yes. Thanks, Max, for that. Now, your inbox, I know we'll spend some time on this. How is it in your inbox, specifically with pitches?

[00:03:29] MU: Specifically with pitches. Well, it's weird now because I am back to being an editor. So I have a mix of reporter pitches, like freelance writer pitches, and PR pitches. So probably in total, like there are, I'd say, when I wake up, maybe 70 pitches or so.

[00:03:52] BB: 70, seven-zero?

[00:03:54] MU: Yes. 60 To 70 pitches.

[00:03:56] BB: Your morning is 70 pitches already.

[00:03:58] MU: Probably. Now, I'm doubting.

[00:03:59] BB: Wow. Okay. Yeah.

[00:04:01] MU: I mean, but I would say like a good number. Maybe majority are sort of generic pitches in a way, like –

[00:04:08] BB: Spammy?

[00:04:09] MU: Yeah, a little spammy. They've just clearly been fired off to as many outlets as possible. So in terms of like truly like tailored pitches, it's definitely a smaller number. Maybe like 15 to 20 every morning.

[00:04:22] BB: Max, can we talk about the spraying and praying that happens and why it happens? Because I don't understand why it still happens. Do you have any reason why it happens? I don't know why.

[00:04:33] MU: I mean, I suppose it might work. It never works with me. I don't know. If there's a pitch that's clearly just being sent out to everyone, like as an editor, the immediate question is like what's going to make us stand out, right? If everyone's getting the same pitch, they probably don't want to publish the same thing everybody else is publishing. It's kind of not a great use of time.

There are exceptions. If you get a pitch with, let's just say, like some sort of embargoed news about a huge tech company, we might have to cover it. That's where our job is to figure out how we can make our coverage distinct from the others in some way. But, yeah, I mean, generally, I would strongly suggest a more curated and tailored approach to pitching.

[00:05:21] BB: No spray and pray. Don't be in those 40-ish pitches that are clear spray and pray. I had to get into that because it boggles the mind. It boggles the mind how that can be

effective. I don't know anyone who's ever been on here has ever said, "Yes, I responded to one of those. Oh, my gosh. It was great." No, it's never worked. I just wonder, and I'm wondering, like who tells people to do that?

[00:05:41] MU: Right. I don't know. I mean, yeah. I suppose like maybe – Yeah, I don't know. I don't know.

[00:05:48] BB: Who knows? It just boggles the mind, as we would say. Okay. So since you are an editor, though, do you also get pitches for like freelancers or pitches even from your own staff saying, "Hey, Max. I want to do this."? Or does that happen somewhere else?

[00:06:04] MU: No. Yeah, that happens all the time. Freelancer pitches are certainly sort of a big part of the day. The sort of challenge there, which is a fun one, is figuring out how to kind of do a little bit of what I would call pre-editing. So like talking with the writer beforehand to kind of make sure they're on the right track and not sort of send someone into a story blind. Because as the years have gone by and editing, more it seems like it's always helpful to have that kind of table setting conversation. Actually, with a writer, maybe you're not – You don't have a working relationship with.

[00:06:40] BB: Yeah, yeah. Make sure everyone's on the same page, so more time is not being wasted, perhaps. Okay. I believe you sent this to Jared, and maybe I'm confusing you with someone else that we have lines up. But didn't you pick out some really good subject lines that you were going to share with us?

[00:06:57] MU: Oh, I think I – Yeah.

[00:06:59] BB: You did. Okay. It was you, Max. I knew it. Okay. So we did want to hear, especially the best, or you heard a real live one. What were subject lines that you were like, "Huh, I got to open that email." You can maybe look right now in your inbox and tell us what you see.

[00:07:15] MU: So of the three I sent you, one that I think jumps out because it's sort of the most obvious in a way, but sometimes like you can't overthink things. So I got an email that

basically said like it was pitching a conversation with Matthew McConaughey. I don't know if that's the one you're referring to but if –

[00:07:32] BB: I don't know. I don't know. But that one sounds great.

[00:07:34] MU: Yeah. I mean, I was just sort of like, “Why wouldn't we have a Q&A with Matthew McConaughey?” That one, it's one of the few stories I actually wound up writing myself at Fast Company, just because it was – I mean, A, because I just really wanted to but –

[00:07:48] BB: Yeah. You're like, “Oh, darn. No one else can write it. I guess it's going to be me.”

[00:07:53] MU: Yeah. I think it just shows like sometimes the subject line, if you have a splashy thing, like people are going to –

[00:07:58] BB: Yes. Okay. So celebrity poll, that clearly helps. Got you. What else? We might not have that in the arsenal every day so –

[00:08:07] MU: Right. I do not get a Matthew McConaughey pitch. Only one time ever. So what's generally working? Yeah. I wish. I would say anytime there's a good sort of spin on a trend. So it's not just mentioning a product or company by name, but it's also explaining like how they are doing something to further one of our areas of coverage. As an example, like –

[00:08:35] BB: Yeah. Example, please.

[00:08:37] MU: Yeah. If you're bringing up, let's just say, a company that does – Just making something AI with pet care or something, given that we are – My cat. It's helpful to not just talk about the raise round or something like that in the head or in the subject line, but to instead kind of talk about what it actually does. I get a lot of pitches that just talk about whatever valuation or whatever raise a company just did. There's just so much money going around constantly. It's not necessarily that interesting.

[00:09:07] BB: It's not, and we talk about this all the time in BAM. It's no longer, "Oh, they raised \$20 million from so-and-so, and so-and-so said this is really exciting." No one wants that story anymore. I think that could have worked maybe 10 years ago. So it needs to be like why does it matter? What's important? What's going on with it? How is it tied to the greater society or something?

[00:09:28] MU: Yeah, which is a tall task. That's hard to get **[inaudible 00:09:31]** headline, but that tends to be the most effective way of I think –

[00:09:36] BB: So you just mentioned the funding rounds, and you're on the tech beat, Max. Do you take exclusives, embargoes, any of the sorts?

[00:09:45] MU: We do take both. I mean, I'm always trying to nudge reporters toward getting the exclusives, which is no surprise. Embargoed news, I mean, there's a bit of editorial judgment that goes in there. If it's the sort of thing where we make a call, but like if we don't cover it, we're going to appear as if we were kind of caught flat-footed, then we're going to cover the embargoed news. Having said that, a lot of big companies will send embargoed news that's more like iterative product updates.

[00:10:14] BB: Yeah. It's not really embargo on anything. We changed the color. Yeah.

[00:10:18] MU: Yeah, exactly. Right. I mean, there's literally stuff like that, where it's like we change the font, and like we're probably not going to cover that. But, I mean, certainly, it helps with anything. So we have to be exclusive. I mean, there have been many instances where someone will come and say, "We have this under embargo." We'll say like – I mean, we'll request the exclusive, and that works sometimes.

[00:10:42] BB: So if you see something, I'm sure it's rare, you're like, "Oh, that's under embargo. But wait a second. Can we just have the exclusive?" You'll ask for that.

[00:10:50] MU: I have.

[00:10:50] BB: I have not heard of this before.

[00:10:52] MU: We have asked for it, and it usually doesn't work.

[00:10:54] BB: So that doesn't work. Usually, that's a yeah. Yeah.

[00:10:56] MU: Usually, it probably doesn't work. But it's worth asking.

[00:10:59] BB: You can try. Yeah. Okay, and you get the not interesting.

[BREAK]

[00:11:06] 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 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]

[00:11:31] BB: What – Like this Matthew McConaughey piece, which by the way is a recent piece, for everyone listening. You click on this piece pretty quickly here. I also like the Austin tie, Max, because you're in Austin. Very good win there, very good. What is the making of a great story to you? Does it ever come from a pitch? Does it come from a walk that you're doing by the river over there in And Austin? Are you thinking about it in the shower and you're like, "You know what? I really would like X."? How does that come to be?

[00:12:00] MU: Yeah. It usually doesn't come from a pitch. I mean, I find we get plenty of good stories from pitches, but they're usually like fairly straightforward. It's like a company or a person did X. They're not necessarily like multilayered. A great story to me, which is usually a bit more multifaceted and probably a little bit more kind of wide in scope, that comes from –

Yeah. I mean, kind of like you said, like just chewing on something and also having reporters who are really well-versed in their subject areas, which I think we have that luxury at Fast

Company. So often it's one of our writers or a freelance writer saying, "I've been covering this for however many years, and I can tell you that this is an interesting angle on something that no one's talked about." The veteran maybe is like, "Here's a scoop within this industry, within –"

[00:12:56] BB: Oh, yes. So a scoop. You love a scoop.

[00:12:59] MU: We do. We do.

[00:13:00] BB: Well, let me ask you. So do you all get together every day on Slack? What do you do all for your reporters to understand what the beat, what the level of stories is going to look like?

[00:13:14] MU: We don't get together every day on like a formal call. We do have pretty – We have regularly scheduled calls, but we do all talk on Slack every day. It varies kind of with each writer. But generally, there's kind of like a – Maybe it's weekly or even more frequent than that. But there's like a quick update on what the person is working on or what's developing that is particularly interesting.

I mean, they're kind of, broadly speaking, two types of stories, I would say that we work on, which is the news/analysis. So that could be the exclusive news. Or if it's like, let's just say there's some update with Elon and Twitter, where we're probably not going to get like some kind of exclusive there, we would like a cool scoop, so to speak, right? **[inaudible 00:14:07]**. So that's like one bucket.

Then the other I would say is just the enterprise type recording, a little bit more kind of shoe leather and often takes longer to put together.

[00:14:19] BB: The shoe leather. Yes.

[00:14:21] MU: So we're kind of keeping tabs on both those avenues.

[00:14:25] BB: Got it. Okay. So that does happen. Okay. So it's happening on Slack. You have these meetings. Okay. I always think about like what's the newsroom like these days because

you're not in a newsroom really, except actually – Well, no, you're not in Austin going to a newsroom. Is the team going back, some of them, to at least the New York office at all? Are there any souls in there?

[00:14:43] MU: Yeah. There are souls in there. Yeah. We've got quite a few people on the New York office. I mean, the tech team is kind of weird because we're kind of spread out through the country, really. So we've got two people in San Francisco and one in New York. I'm in Texas. Then we have a network of columnists and contributors who are really all over the US. So getting everybody together on a time zone, on one time zone is a fun challenge.

But I think it helps with tech because there are so many emerging industries and interesting companies that are popping up outside of New York and San Francisco. So it helps to have like a foot in all these different –

[00:15:29] BB: Oh, that's a good question. We haven't looked into that before. I think this is an unusual one because we don't always have like a tech person necessarily on here. How do you accommodate for that? Because, for example, I was talking with the VC today who's in Israel. Then I have another one later today. She's in France. How – Now, I know Fast Company is mostly for like US type of stuff. But how do you address the situation? When tech is now emerging everywhere, not in the New York, SF landscapes that I think have been the 10 years ago narrative.

[00:16:02] MU: Right. Yeah. I mean, it's challenging. I mean, right now, I'm working with a reporter in Nigeria. I'm working with a reporter in Buffalo, much closer but also very much New York City or San Francisco. I mean, people really all over. Yeah. I mean, I think the key with those stories is to make sure they are – There's like the reporter has access to the relevant characters because they're there.

But it has to still be sort of national or even international in focus. So it's just making sure that those pieces are very clearly positioned as being relevant to everyone, which is, honestly, as you said, like given that the landscape's kind of shifted so much, it's not really too much of a challenge.

[00:16:53] BB: No. I was going to say. Yup. Wow. Okay. It's hard to keep up with all the tech things. I know. Max, besides having a fun time with your cat and moving to Austin, which you are in the midst of, what are you reading, writing, obviously, not writing, watching, listening to? We just like to hear, what other stories do you like as a journalist?

[00:17:14] MU: Okay. I'm watching Better Call Saul.

[00:17:17] BB: How is that? I've never watched that. Isn't that sad?

[00:17:20] MU: It's really good.

[00:17:21] BB: Is it?

[00:17:22] MU: Yeah. My wife was a Better Call Saul evangelist, and she has –

[00:17:29] BB: She kind of converted you.

[00:17:30] MU: Yeah. I mean, I like Breaking Bad, but I never got into it. I never got into Better Call Saul, but it's really good.

[00:17:36] BB: Both are on HBO, right?

[00:17:38] MU: No, it's on Netflix.

[00:17:39] BB: Oh, it's on Netflix. It must be in my queue. I've got like 17 things on each channel. That still is one point in time going to happen. Yeah. Okay. Okay, great. So that's an old school, throwback a little bit. Great. Anything else?

[00:17:53] MU: Let's see. What am I reading?

[00:17:55] BB: If you are.

[00:17:56] **MU:** I am. Actually, so I've already read this book. But I picked it back up again to scan through it. It's called *Say Nothing* by Patrick Radden Keefe. It's actually a book about the troubles in Northern Ireland.

[00:18:11] **BB:** Oh, yes. With this harrowing photo on the cover of this man. Oh, yes. This is on my list. It's a true story of the murder, right?

[00:18:20] **MU:** Yes. It's –

[00:18:21] **BB:** Of a – Yes.

[00:18:22] **MU:** It's an incredible book.

[00:18:25] **BB:** Some good true crime, right?

[00:18:27] **MU:** Yeah. It's really good. I just watched a movie, Belfast. So that kind of –

[00:18:34] **BB:** It won best nonfiction book of the year, Time Magazine. Downloading right now. Great.

[00:18:40] **MU:** Yeah. It's a really, really good book.

[00:18:41] **BB:** Awesome. Wow. Good. Good. See, that's my favorite part of this podcast. Getting all the tips and the insights from our journalist people who, obviously, are experts in stories because that's all you do all day. That's fantastic. Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to mention in this realm? Even trash we'll even take like.

[00:19:01] **MU:** Trash. Okay.

[00:19:02] **BB:** Just because we want to know. Oh. Well, because we're in the process of moving, we've been watching like house hunting TV.

[00:19:10] **BB:** And any that you like?

[00:19:12] MU: Yes. What is it called? I can't remember. I can't remember the name. I can look it up and let you know.

[00:19:19] BB: Okay, let us know. We'll put it in maybe in the show notes because I'm sure people want to know. We love to know. Okay. Max, you have spent some time being in journalism. You were at WIRED before. You were at Medium. You're now with Fast Company. You've been around the bend a little bit, beat around the bush, round the bend. I'm getting my phrases messed up. Okay. What do you think the future of journalism looks like?

[00:19:46] MU: Oh, God. I don't know.

[00:19:48] BB: I know. I know. It's a big one. It's a big loaded question for the end.

[00:19:51] MU: That is a loaded question. I think we will see probably among the major outlets more consolidation, and kind of like you saw the acquisition of the athletic by the New York Times. I think you'll see more things like that. At the same time, I imagine we'll continue to see a lot of regional nonprofits pop up. Those have been doing some really, really excellent work, and they're kind of smaller newsrooms, often kind of helmed by often like newspaper veterans. I feel like that is probably the – I'm way out of my depth here, but I would suspect that's kind of like the future of local news.

[00:20:37] BB: Yeah. Like community-generated but community-supported nonprofits type of stuff, which I think is a shame. But I don't know how we get out of this.

[00:20:47] MU: Yeah. Me neither.

[00:20:49] BB: It was the problem or conundrum. Any other thoughts on that? Max, what would you say, for example, to a journalism major right now?

[00:20:57] MU: To a journalism major?

[00:20:58] BB: Yes. Who's like, "I want to be a journalist, Max."

[00:21:02] MU: I would say that's a tough question. I guess I would just say if you're able to kind of move around for work, I would suggest going to a smaller market publication to start. I started in newspapers. I worked for the Virgin Islands Daily News, which was pretty – It's a cool gig. I lived in St. Thomas.

But I think going to a smaller place like that often gives you more opportunity to kind of try a little bit of everything, versus I think like the sort of more established like internship fellowship track of just like the major New York outlets. I think if you can start small, you might be able to kind of make a bigger splash.

[00:21:46] BB: So start small is what you would say.

[00:21:48] MU: The long-winded answer is start small. Yeah.

[00:21:51] BB: Yeah. Start small. You have to start. It's kind of I feel like journalism, and I was in TV. Like you start at the bottom. There's definitely some pain of dues to get going on, and that's what you got to do. Overtime, you make a career, if you're lucky.

[00:22:07] MU: Yeah, if you're lucky. If you're at a smaller outlet, at least in my experience, they're going to give you more opportunity to do work that will ultimately produce like clips that you're proud of and can use.

[00:22:22] BB: Max, thank you so much for being on with us today and calling in from Austin and bringing on your cat. He made it. I'm so proud of him. Loot at you, also making it over there, and I love it. No one should call you Mark ever again. Now everyone's listening to this podcast here, so we got that cleared out. Thanks for being here. This is a lot of fun.

[00:22:45] MU: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me.

[00:22:47] BB: Appreciate you so much. Everyone, this is Coffee with a Journalist. Please pitch your journalists correctly and definitely spell their name right. Thank you, all. Thanks, Max.

[00:23:00] MU: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:23:01] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Max Ufberg from Fast Company. Make sure to subscribe for new episode updates on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. If you have a moment, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts to share your thoughts about the show and today's guest.

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[END]