

EPISODE 139

[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 ranging from technology to lifestyle and culture, health, and science. 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 this week on Coffee with a Journalist is Samantha Stokes from Insider. Samantha is a startups and VC reporter at Insider, focusing on health tech and mental health tech companies. Previously, she was on Insiders finance team, where she wrote about Wall Street. During the episode, Samantha talks about the timeliness of pitches, interest in specific health tech companies and the people involved in them, how to connect with her without asking for coverage, and more. Let's hear from Samantha now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:19] BB: Welcome, everyone. I'm Beck Bamberger. You are listening to Coffee with a Journalist. I love it. I don't have coffee, but it's great. Today, because now I know it's going to be great, live from New York is Samantha Stokes. She's the startups and VC reporter over at Insider. We know Insider pretty well, but we'll talk about all the things about insider real quick. Samantha, welcome and thank you for being here.

[00:01:44] SS: Hi. Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to be chatting today.

[00:01:49] BB: Yes. By the way, is this one of your first podcasts? A lot of journalists tell me this.

[00:01:54] SS: This is my first podcast. Yes.

[00:01:56] BB: Wow. I love it. I love it. That is so exciting. Your debut, Samantha. Your debut. Okay. Samantha, for those who don't know too well, how would you describe Insider?

[00:02:10] SS: Insider is a digital first, fast, ever growing media organization. It seems like we have reporters who cover anything and everything these days, which is really, really exciting. So if your dream is like me, to cover healthcare, startups and VC, that's pretty niche. I was able to come here and do that. We have people covering transportation and people covering big tech companies, retail, politics. So it's really kind of a full service at this point news organization, fast-growing. I think one of the biggest and the best in the business right now.

[00:02:47] BB: Indeed. Everyone – You need to look, people. You need to look at Insider's vast, vast array of outlets, topics, etc. You really can find quite the treasure trove. So by all means, yes. Samantha, I know you are new or ish to journalism and even Insider, you could say, because it's been about since April. How is your inbox?

[00:03:12] SS: It's kind of a mess if I don't take care of it. I am an inbox zero sort of person. But it's kind of interesting because I joined Insider startup and VC team in April. But I've actually been at the company for about two years, so it's been –

[00:03:28] BB: With finance right?

[00:03:29] SS: Yes, on the finance field. So I'm kind of fielding pitches still from some of my finance contacts, like trying to make it work when it does or kind of traffic controlling over to my colleagues over on the finance team who are better served to cover some of those stories and then kind of dealing with this influx of like new sources and new PR folks to get connected to. So it's definitely a lot to deal with. But it's a lot of fun, and it's very, very busy.

[00:03:58] BB: Now, with your inbox zero, so on this show, there seems to be quite the wide array. There's the inbox zero club. There's the let it ride to 792,000 unread emails club. There's the intricate sorting and flagging process club. So how are you getting to zero like every day? How often is that happening?

[00:04:21] SS: The goal is every day, and that definitely doesn't always happen. Right now, how many do I have in my inbox? I have 16.

[00:04:28] BB: 16. Okay. And it's like seven o'clock. Okay.

[00:04:32] SS: I used to kind of do the intricate filing things away and the labels and stuff, but I found that what works for me is I have a few times throughout my day, and I'm constantly monitoring. But I have a few like chunks in the middle, the beginning, at the end of my day where I'm going through the emails in my inbox. I'm archiving or deleting things that don't make sense to me at all. I'm normally archiving them.

Then the things in my inbox, I know that I – They're an action item for me basically. That's how I treat them. So it's things that I need to be pitching to my editor, either for a yes or for a no. There are things that I just need to respond on. So I normally try to get into the habit of like every single day, those are action items for me. So they have to stay there in my inbox until I'm ready to deal with them. That's a good motivator to kind of go back and to deal with them as soon as possible, so I can get back to an empty inbox.

[00:05:27] BB: What are the three elements you'd say for a great pitch?

[00:05:33] SS: So I think that it being topical for me. VC is really, really big, and I'm fortunate to be on a big enough team, where we have people covering EdTech, FinTech, Web3 and crypto, consumer. I cover healthcare. So for the most part, it's kind of has to be in my world. It has to be timely, unless you're just pitching just an intro, "I'd like you to know this person or I'd like to introduce you to either myself or to a client."

But if it's for a story that you're pitching, it really needs to have a timeliness element, and there needs to be enough information in the pitch. I know this can kind of get tricky if something's under an embargo. But there needs to be enough information to immediately catch my interest. Like sometimes, pitches are so vague. If I don't kind of immediately see the story, I'm getting so many inbounds every day that there's kind of that chance that there's not enough information there. I might just archive it and move on, if it's not right in front of me.

[00:06:32] BB: What do you mean by vague? Like they say, “Samantha, I have a company that raised maybe some money maybe sometime this year.”

[00:06:40] SS: Yeah. Or even vaguer than that. It's like I represent –

[00:06:44] BB: Vaguer than that?

[00:06:45] SS: Yeah. I represent a company that has some news to share. Like at least if I knew what the funding round story, I can – You might pique my interest. Again, if something's under embargo, I realize that I have to – We have to agree on that before you can send me more information. But I worked with a women's health company that's about to raise a sizable series A or a sizable seed round and would love to share a pitch deck or to send you the press release under embargo when it's for next week.

But those kinds of clues that it's a funding round or there's some news there or it's women's tech or mental health or another area that you've seen that I've covered before, those things are all really, really helpful when it comes to piquing my interest and giving me enough information that this is something that I should pay attention to.

[00:07:31] BB: Okay. Noted. Is there anything that you've read lately that you particularly love, either as a subject line or just a pitch where you're like, “Ah, yes. Loved it.”?

[00:07:42] SS: Yeah. I wrote a couple down, actually.

[00:07:44] BB: Oh, yes. Share, share, share.

[00:07:46] SS: Or we could talk about –

[00:07:46] BB: We know we gave you homework, but I just want to know this.

[00:07:48] SS: Yes. I would say that something that I have really enjoyed is, I guess, a way – It's not a pitch for a specific story. But anytime a subject line, when I don't know somebody, this happened recently, it's like checking in from so-and-so. So I'm like, “Okay, I don't know who this

person is checking with me.” They make it really clear upfront that they're just trying to connect me with some people on background to chit chat. They include a little bit more information about the companies or the VCs or the founders that they're interested in connecting you with.

But they make it really clear upfront that they're not asking for any coverage or they're not maybe necessarily pitching me a story. But they're trying to play the connector role. So I always really like to see that in the subject line. It's like, “Okay, great. I'd love to meet for an on background kind of intro in like three weeks. This is really, really nice.” But they kind of make it really clear that we're in it for the relationship building, and maybe a story will come out of that soon. But it's just for the relationship.

When it comes to a pitch or to a story, I like ones that are – Again, one that I recently had was women's health tech raised a series A exclusive. Like it included all of those buzzwords like right there.

[00:09:05] BB: There you go.

[00:09:06] SS: Yeah. Right in the email subject line, where I was like, “Okay, yes. This is right up my alley. This is not something that I'm going to spend a lot of time in, and then it's going to be popping up on a competitor three hours before I cover it.” So you kind of have insurance up front. Yeah. Those were a couple that I ended up either covering or, in the case of the first one, I've set up meetings for, which has been great.

00:09:29 BB: Excellent. You've mentioned exclusives and these embargoes. What are your pet peeves about either?

[00:09:37] SS: I think that sometimes when I get pitched on an exclusive and I asked for more information, sometimes I might decide if I get a little bit more information on even something that's exclusive or under embargo, that it's automatically assumed that if those are offered, that I will be writing a story. So I've had in certain cases where people have set me up to talk to somebody, and I made it very clear that I'm not committing to a story. I'm still interested in learning more. This is interesting to me, but I need some more information.

Then I get like followed up multiple times about when a story is coming out, which is really awkward. But it also kind of puts you on my bad list if I didn't agree to anything. So I think that can be tough. Then again, like with embargo, lead time is really important and is really helpful. So you can offer me an embargo until tomorrow morning. That's probably not something that I'm going to be able to accommodate if it's 4:00 PM. So it's great that you gave it to me under embargo, but there's just not necessarily enough time to do anything about it. I can think of, frankly, few stories that rise to the importance of being able to cover it on such a short time turnaround.

[BREAK]

[00:10:56] 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]

[00:11:20] BB: Oh, just for fun, just for fun. How many times has someone like the record of asking you like, "When is it going to be live? When is it going to be here?"

[00:11:30] SS: Normally, I think people are really good about that. I really, really try to set expectations when it comes to stories. So if it's under an embargo, it's going to go up when the embargo lifts. If it's not and it's a story that I'm working on, and maybe you've connected me to a source or to an expert, I really try to be upfront that this is something that I'm going to have going up in the next couple of days. Or this is something that I'm going to be working on later this week. Or this is a bigger project that I'll be working on over the course of the month.

So I try to set expectations upfront, and I found that that's really helped kind of just – Yeah. I found that that's helped people not feel the need to follow up with me. If I've said that it's going to be for later in the month, I think I would really have a problem if somebody's like emailing me daily or every other day to check in about a story. I would probably have to say something. But

that's not happened, anything that's coming to mind. But I hope I didn't just give myself like bad karma saying that to me.

[00:12:36] BB: Okay. Noted on that. You mentioned this on the video recordings that we did, Samantha, about – And a little bit here so far. But just like on mental wellness and women founders and so forth. Dream scenario, what are you like, “Ah, I love, love writing about X. Please pitch me that.”?

[00:12:54] SS: Yeah. I would say that the specific slices of the health tech feed that I'm most passionate about are women's health and mental health. It's really lucky for me that those are things that I like writing about because it seems like the last few years, both of those areas have really, really exploded, just in terms of founders founding companies in the space in terms of VCs, like seeing the value in these companies maybe where they didn't before and are investing money in funding rounds that it's pretty new.

So I would say anything that is kind of showing or that's within that trend, so whether it's a female founder with a really incredible story about the women's health tech startup that they founded, especially if it's kind of in a niche area that goes beyond just telemedicine, which is also great. But nerding out over like a really, really specific health problem I think is awesome. It's so creative to me. So anything like that is wonderful.

Again, same with mental health. It's been such an important conversation, especially over the last couple of years. I'm so happy that more people are willing to engage in that, and it seems like we've gotten over some stigma of talking about mental health. So I –

[00:14:15] BB: Yeah. I think that has changed.

[00:14:16] SS: Yeah. That's really great. So again, anybody who can kind of talk about how that cultural shift has impacted them or has helped them, inspired them to start a company, or has helped their company maybe get a resurgence of interest or breathe some new life into a startup that they're trying to fund or help them change direction. I just feel like both of those topics are at a really important cultural shift, and I'm really, really interested in the people that are taking advantage of that.

[00:14:45] BB: So you like something detailed, nitty-gritty, into the weeds?

[00:14:50] SS: Yes. I say that with the caveat that I don't have a background in medicine.

[00:14:55] BB: Okay. Yeah. You're not an MD. Okay.

[00:14:57] SS: Yeah. I'm not an MD, and there are certainly some health tech journalists who do have a background in – I have a couple of colleagues who both have undergraduate degrees in something science medicine-related, which is very, very cool. So I'd say like the nitty-gritty is great, but it has to be that kind of like driving founder story or CEO story as well. So it's kind of this mix of I'm in the weeds about a topic that I really care about fixing and a problem that I want to solve. But you can also – I'm a human behind this, and I have a humanizing story to tell too.

[00:15:29] BB: Yes. Okay. Oh, I like that. Interestingly too, as we've had more – Well, we've done hundreds of – I don't know. 200-plus of these interviews now. Yeah. I love when it's a journalist who has that robust background of like, “Yeah, I was on New York. I was on Wall Street for 10 years. And then now, I'm doing finance over here.” You're like, “Damn. Way to merge that background within the journalism side of things.” I always think that's cool. But there's ways to, of course, learn on the job and interweave other things.

Samantha, what are you reading, watching, listening to, any other stories that just captivate you right now would you say?

[00:16:08] SS: Yes.

[00:16:09] BB: What you got?

[00:16:09] SS: I have to shout out to my colleagues on the health team at Insider. So we have a separate health team that they do some health tech reporting. Then what I'm going to talk about is a call out, and I've been very, very lucky to kind of have their expertise, as our beats have overlapped a little bit. It's another great thing about Insider is that there's a lot of collaboration.

I had some colleagues on that team who did some really, really wonderful reporting a few months ago on Cerebral, which is a mental health startup. I definitely recommend. Like they were really at the forefront of that coverage, and it's really kind of raised some questions for me about what I should be asking startups that I cover or people in this space. Like how do we get prescription controlled substances? How do we get that right? I don't know what the answer is. That's like part of the reporting.

But I just think that all of those stories were so well done. But I think what I really liked about them is that they kind of raised this bigger question about this isn't just this one startup. This is an entire space that right now is a little bit kind of like the Wild Wild West in terms of nobody's really been able to figure it out yet, which is why you kind of have all of these stories about things not going very well. So I think that's been really, really great.

I read TechCrunch really, really regularly. I read everything, obviously, that my team produces, and we have some reporters, like I said, who do great reporting on EdTech, on crypto, Web3. It's really, really great to kind of learn what my colleagues are doing, especially if you kind of hear them brainstorming a story idea, and then you see it a week later on the website. It's really, really cool.

[00:17:48] BB: That's fun. You watch anything on Netflix?

[00:17:52] SS: I went through the whole spring and summer, watching all of the like founder documentaries. They're like documentaries. So the Theranos one on Hulu with Amanda Seyfried was the best. I think there was like that Anna Delvey one, which is not a –

[00:18:11] BB: Falling – What was it? Finding Anna? Following Anna?

[00:18:13] SS: Yes. I think so. I think so. But that one was – I think I binged-watched that one. There was an Uber one. There was a WeWork one. It's like you have to – I like got all of these subscriptions to watch all of these really kind of big founder startup stories. So it's been really fun to see. Yeah.

[00:18:31] BB: I have thought about this of like just imagining the writer's room at these places. Like you're a writer over at HBO. You're just like, "I can't wait to see what's coming out next of this shit show of startup world." You can't even make it up. Like your job must be easy in a way. It was like, "Ah, just waiting for shenanigans happening and we'll pick it right up."

[00:18:51] SS: Yeah. It seems like there was a whole slew of them that kind of like right around the same time, there was kind of like founder shit shows like in 2018, 2019. Now, it's nice to see a few years later. You're getting these like really wonderfully produced like television miniseries on all of them. So that's really fun to watch.

[00:19:13] BB: You can't make it up. That's the, just, the best part. Oh, my gosh. Okay. Samantha, what do you think the future of journalism looks like?

[00:19:23] SS: Oh, boy. Well, I hope it is bright, and I hope it lasts a long time. I have faith that it will. Digital news I feel like always kind of goes through these like ebbs and flows of like being in kind of a tough spot and then really flourishing and really, really doing well. Frankly, I think Insider does this really well, and this kind of makes me excited about the future of journalism, is letting people go deep in on what they care about, not forcing anybody to be like a generalist reporter if they don't want to be. We do have some people who are like dynamite, just breaking news reporters, who could hop onto a wide array of topics on just business or finance.

But I think what Insider does really, really well that I'd love to see it at more organizations is just letting people go as deep as they can on a really, really specific beat and letting them really, really own it. I think that's – People are writing about what they care about. We're not making people write about things that they're not interested about or spend time covering just things that are outside of their own interest areas. I think driving coverage that way, they make for better stories. People are asking more interesting questions. They're connecting with people I think on a deeper level. I think that makes the work better, and I think that it's a really good way forward. I think that's what I'd love to see from more journalism.

You see it in other outlets too. I have to shout out Insider because I work here. So I think kind of like that just deep, deep coverage on specific areas is really great to see.

[00:20:59] BB: That is something more often being said on this show that the narrow focus and the depth because everyone can get breaking news, and 100-plus outlets get whatever your flavor is. But the depth of a certain reporting niche is very curated, and you really have to work to get to that level, in my opinion, and know the players, the details, and all the things. That's hard to do, and that's just not an easy, "Let me just pick that up on the side, and I'm going to try to be a journalistic –" What? Citizen journalist or something. That's not what that's about.

[00:21:35] SS: Yeah. It takes a long time and a lot of work to get there, and I'm very hopeful that the future of news is news organizations are interested and willing to invest in culture or invest in like that culture and cultivating that type of talent because I think that's how you get good quality journalism, which is the only way that people are going to pay for it.

[00:21:57] BB: That's right. That's right. Keep the standard high. Samantha Stokes, thanks for being on here today. Samantha is the VC and startup reporter with mental health, health, women-funded companies particularly of interest to her. She likes to go to coffee and lunch. By the way, watch one of our videos on you'll hear more in New York City. Thanks so much for doing this, Samantha. I'm so glad we were your first podcast.

[00:22:21] SS: Yes. Thank you so much for having me. It was really, really great to chat with you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:22:26] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Samantha Stokes from Insider. To learn more about the latest tools on OnePitch and to subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter, head to our website at onepitch.co. We'll see you all next week with even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]