

EPISODE 158

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious how OnePitch can help you find relevant journalists to pitch, including some of the guests on this podcast? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn more.

This week on the podcast, we spoke with Ray Wong, Deputy Editor of Reviews and Guides at Inverse. Ray covers consumer technology, including product reviews and investigations into AI technology with the aim to uncover the larger story. During the episode, Ray talks about exclusives he writes related to products and people, why he prefers to work with sources he already knows, how you can model your pitch off an existing article he's written, and more. Let's hear from Ray, now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:59] BB: Welcome everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. Hopefully, you want to listen to a journalist, otherwise now would be the time to not listen. My name is Beck Bamberger. We've been doing Coffee with the Journalist for some good time now, and increasingly we have a wonderful array of journalists here. I run OnePitch and also BAM, an agency. Today with us is Ray Wong. He's the Deputy Editor of Reviews and Guides, which I definitely want to get into from Inverse. Thanks for being here, Ray. How's it going?

[00:01:36] RW: Hello, nice to meet you. Thanks for having me on the show.

[00:01:40] BB: Yes. I did like, just because I'm going to steal this, Ray, when we first got on, and I was like, how are you? You're like, yeah. Like that's the perfect response. I'm going to use that, because that's accurate, it seems, and tells everything. So I will be using that. Anyway, real quick.

[00:01:55] RW: Go for it.

[00:01:57] BB: For those who are maybe not as familiar with Inverse, how would you describe this particular outlet?

[00:02:02] RW: Inverse is a website that covers entertainment, gaming, science, and technology. The latter vertical for which I recently joined several months ago to help build out. We cover it deeply and with a lot of enthusiasm.

[00:02:17] BB: Yes.

[00:02:19] RW: You'll see our tagline is the coolest place to get smarter.

[00:02:22] BB: Yes.

[00:02:23] RW: If you've got interest in any of these verticals, you'll see that we go pretty nerdy, pretty deep, and hopefully you'll learn something.

[00:02:30] BB: Yeah. It's definitely nerd, bomb, central here. I love it. Also, I love the design.

[00:02:35] RW: In a good way. In a good way.

[00:02:36] BB: Oh, yes. In a good way. Absolutely. Gorgeous imagery, beautiful layout. Everything going on here is just fantastic.

[00:02:46] RW: Thank you. We just rolled out a brand new site redesign this week.

[00:02:49] BB: Oh, this week? That new. Okay, no wonder, because I'm like, wait a second. I don't remember seeing all these. Oh.

[00:02:55] RW: Yeah. You'll see that the home page is all new. There are beautiful sections all throughout and subverticals within the menu and everything's very well curated. We've upped the photography for our product reviews and our interviews.

[00:03:11] BB: I mean, it's stunning.

[00:03:13] RW: It's a great design. I'm really excited and happy with it.

[00:03:16] BB: Well, I'm so glad we're here. Ray, how is your inbox?

[00:03:20] RW: It's always packed, but I somehow freakishly allow myself to reach inbox zero as much as possible by the end of the day.

[00:03:29] BB: You are in the inbox zero club. Wow. Okay. Let's talk about it. How do you do that? You're a rare breed here.

[00:03:37] RW: I guess I am. Am I?

[00:03:38] BB: Yes.

[00:03:39] RW: It's something that it just bothers me personally. I don't like seeing too many emails in my box. I know that people just, they allow their inboxes just overflow and just say, okay, I'm just going to allow the machines and algorithms to sort it and search for what I need, but I personally like to delete emails. I know it's maybe a crime to some senders, but that's the only way I can block up the noise and just take a look at what I really need to reply back to by the end of day. I guess I have – I'll leave one tip if anybody wants to know.

[00:04:12] BB: Yes.

[00:04:12] RW: Obviously, you can go into Gmail and just select all and just weed out the ones that you want to save.

[00:04:18] BB: Yes.

[00:04:18] RW: I checked my email as they come in almost every couple of minutes, maybe like every like 10, 20 minutes, maybe that's a –

[00:04:26] BB: Every 10 minutes, sir?

[00:04:28] RW: Yeah. Maybe it's a bit much, but I use Outlook on iPhone, which is a fantastic app. I know it's sacrilege against the iPhone users.

[00:04:36] BB: I know.

[00:04:37] RW: It has a great feature called, that lets you swipe with your fingers and you can swipe with up to, I think, four or five fingers. I've set the gesture to swipe to delete or archive. I'm literally like using all my fingers to like swipe and delete multiple emails.

[00:04:53] BB: Oh, wow. That is nerd central, big time. You should do a piece on that.

[00:04:58] RW: It looks like I'm a maniac on the subway.

[00:05:01] BB: Yes.

[00:05:02] RW: Swiped it at my phone, but that's how I clear through my emails pretty quickly.

[00:05:05] BB: Wow. That's it. I haven't heard that here. My God. Well, we're at a new level here today on this show. Multi-finger systemizing to get to inbox zero. Okay. Then are you a filer at all?

[00:05:21] RW: I do not, unless it's something really important. I have like a, I just flag it or star it or star it.

[00:05:27] BB: Oh, you flag and star. Okay.

[00:05:29] RW: That way I know I can go back into that folder and see if those are still high priorities later.

[00:05:35] BB: I admire the discipline here. Quite unique. Quite unique. Okay. What is a subject line then that works for you?

[00:05:43] RW: Yeah. In my area of expertise, I'm Deputy Editor at Reviews and Guides at Inverse. I cover up consumer tech and we do a lot of reviews. We do a lot of guides. That means we work with a lot of PR agencies and brands on receiving products on loan for review. For me, it's just about cutting through noise and making sure that you get PR or brands get an opportunity to even like, for me to even like, take a look at their emails. I guess in the subject line, because I work in the area of reviews and guides, just putting review or review units in the subject line can make a big difference. It's a matter of seeing it or not seeing it. Seeing it or deleting it. I also like to write a lot of exclusives on products and people, the people behind the products.

[00:06:31] BB: Yeah.

[00:06:32] RW: Including exclusive inside of it, inside the subject line is really helpful. Then obviously we all attend and I personally attend a lot of events. So just putting upfront invite and what the details are, short description of what the details are, instead of having to go into the email, click it, open it, then like look through a wall of text and find what you're trying to tell me.

[00:06:55] BB: Yeah.

[00:06:55] RW: Just tell me upfront is really important.

[00:06:58] BB: Tell you upfront, be direct. Sounds like you definitely prefer the most direct succinct subject line.

[00:07:03] RW: Yeah. I mean, if it's like for example, a demo to say you're having a demo an event, just tell me that you're inviting me to an event. Like, let's not play games and let's not like be, try to be too cute with the subject line. You only get one chance and when I'm just pawing my way through my inbox with five fingers.

[00:07:22] BB: You got to pass the five fingers.

[00:07:24] RW: You got to pass the five finger test.

[00:07:28] BB: Oh, wow. It sounds so stressful. I'm sweating right now. Okay. I do love that. Go back to reviews for a second and for guides, because I know there's quite a number of publicists on here that do pitch reviews, do pitch guides and they're a different beast. Is there any magic sauce to what gets your attention for those?

[00:07:47] RW: I think it's really a matter of knowing what I've covered before and understanding my beats. That's really simple. All you have to do is go to my site, byline page.

[00:07:56] BB: Yeah.

[00:07:56] RW: Author page and see what I've covered recently. If you want to do a thorough deep dive, you can absolutely go there and see what I've written in the last couple of years. I don't think it's a hard skimp. You can definitely find the exclusives, the deep dives I've done, the reviews, they're all marked accordingly. It's a super easy process to do that. One of the keys is just that a PR person or a brand pitches me and just has no understanding of what I cover and what I don't cover. For example, I don't cover enterprise and I don't cover –

[00:08:28] BB: That's right.

[00:08:29] RW: Pitching me that is just a waste of space in my inbox and also a waste of time for their part. It sucks more if they actually went through the trouble of crafting an email that's personal to me, but didn't do the legwork of understanding that this is just something I have never covered and do not cover for this publication.

[00:08:50] BB: That's a sad pitch. I got your name right. I know who you are, but then I didn't look to see your content. Not good.

[00:08:59] RW: I mean, tech is pretty broad and reviews is pretty broad, but also understanding what I specialize in is key.

[00:09:07] BB: Yeah. That makes sense. Okay, you did mention exclusives, maybe embargo too. Are you looking for those and how do you like them teed up?

[00:09:15] RW: Of course. Yeah. I mean, who does – what kind of journalist doesn't like an exclusive, right? It's an opportunity.

[00:09:20] BB: A real one. That's the little extra asterisk there. Yeah.

[00:09:25] RW: It's an opportunity to get your stories read and in front of more readers. It also helps put a brand that might not be well known to one specific reader and put it on their radar. So for me, exclusives really come through and as we establish, as I establish a relationship with a PR person or brand, it doesn't usually happen overnight and it takes a little bit to understand and like really figure out what exclusives I'm looking for. There are different types, obviously. Some are just simply puff pieces, which I don't tend to write and others are more deeper dives, right? Really add additional value to those types of content that we cover.

I love being pitched on exclusives and I like it more when I have an established relationship with this PR person or brand. We just have some like mutual trust there and they trust that I'll do a good job. They also trust that I will be as brutally honest as possible. It's my job as a journalist, their job as PR marketers to try to craft in such a way to get the best exposure or whatever they're pitching, but also it's my job as a journalist to do my due diligence, do my research and do the digging to make sure that the story is fair from both sides. I'm happy with the result and they are also happy with the result in the end.

[00:10:54] BB: I was going to say, do you ever get people mad at the review you did, like the PR people, the brand itself?

[00:11:02] RW: Yeah. I mean, I've been a journalist for 12 years now.

[00:11:05] BB: Oh, wow.

[00:11:06] RW: I've been covering this space for a very long time. When you've been doing it that long, you definitely get some angry emails. Sometimes I definitely go hard and I'm just holding no bars and just go all out. I think it ultimately depends on the comfort level of your publication and the voice of your website, right, your publication.

[00:11:27] BB: That's true, too.

[00:11:28] RW: There's a way to, I guess phrase what you want to say without it being extremely harsh. I think that's just something you learn with experience, right? You toe the line between what is and isn't acceptable and at what point you're being just a jerk or you're being unnecessarily harsh, because you can say in, I'll be at toned down words, but still get your message across. Yeah, I've gotten a lot of emails over a lot of years, throughout my entire career, some very nasty ones. But I've never written anything for the sake of being malicious.

[00:12:02] BB: Yeah.

[00:12:03] RW: I'm not trying to just be a complete jerk. I always try to be honest and respectful and back my opinions with facts.

[00:12:12] BB: Yup.

[00:12:13] RW: When you have facts that you can back it up with, it's really hard to argue objectively why you had to write this piece, even if it does sound like a hit piece.

[00:12:22] BB: Yeah. I feel so bad for journalists sometimes. You're just out there trying to tell the truth and here come all these people. I don't like that. I don't like this, and all this crap. But, man. The reality of being, I think, a journalist is part of that.

[00:12:38] RW: Yeah. I think the lines have definitely blurred a lot. Now you have brand managers and social media managers and in-house bloggers even, who run their own company blogs. So they can all provide outreach directly to their audience and shoppers and consumers. Also at the same time it makes the job of a journalist even more important, because it's our job to be objective. We have no stake in the companies that we write about.

[00:13:03] BB: Exactly.

[00:13:04] RW: We're not investors. It doesn't matter to us whether these companies succeed or fail. It's ultimately up to us to relay this information and let the audience make a decision.

[00:13:16] BB: That I think is something, I haven't mentioned this yet on a show, but that is something that I don't think AI or ChatGBT is going to be able to do.

[00:13:23] RW: I agree.

[00:13:24] BB: Fingers crossed. Awesome.

[00:13:25] RW: Yeah. I mean, there's a lot of experimentation in the journalism world right now with AI, chatbots, having machines write content. The one thing that AI will never be able to replace is original reporting and interviews. It can sound authoritative. It can even paraphrase and aggregate what's already out there, but it can't go out there and actually do real reporting, talk to people, talk to people who are designing products. The intent behind that, really get those conversations. It only understands things and synthesizes them when journalists have done the job already.

[00:13:58] BB: Very true. I'm optimistic and short. Well, see what happens.

[MESSAGE]

[00:14:04] 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 CONTINUED]

[00:14:28] BB: You mentioned a little earlier, Ray, with exclusives. Oh, if I have a relationship with you and that helps and so forth. Let's say, I don't have a relationship with you. I've never met you. How does one begin to build one with you?

[00:14:42] RW: Yeah. Like I said, definitely reaching out and with the understanding that you've done your homework, show that you've done your homework, you know what stories I've written before. I get a lot of emails where it says, "Hey, I saw that you wrote this and about this and this." I'm like, "I've never written about that in my life."

[00:14:58] BB: No. Wait.

[00:15:00] RW: I absolutely did not publish that story.

[00:15:02] BB: Oh, what a bomb. Oh, no.

[00:15:05] RW: It's just so obvious. This is a copy paste job.

[00:15:08] BB: Oh, it's a copy paste. Oh, God. Yeah.

[00:15:10] RW: It's a copy paste job and it's just the email blast and it just frustrates and disappoints me so much. I'm just like, well, that's a person that I'll probably will either never email again or their emails go straight to the trash, because you really didn't do the homework, right? To build that relationship, all you need to do is, I'm not saying to stock a journalist, that some journalists find that a little creepy.

I personally like it when a PR person or brand rep has seen the type of projects I've done, the types of stories I've done, even if it's from a competitor and say, "Hey, look I saw what you did here. We have an opportunity to give you access to XYZ designer or engineer or product manager or leader. We think that you would be a great fit to tell our story." Then it goes from there, right? Obviously, there are no promises, but that's a good way to start a conversation when you show that you're familiar with my work and the type of content I'm interested in making and you're not wasting my time.

[00:16:09] BB: Okay. Show you did your homework, don't be wasting my time.

[00:16:13] RW: Yeah.

[00:16:14] BB: Then from there, you can maneuver. Speaking of Ray, I do like to ask some journalists since we're in this post COVID or whatever thing we're going to say. Do you want to be asked for coffee? Do you want to go to an event? Do you want to be out and about?

[00:16:26] RW: Yeah. I personally like going to events.

[00:16:29] BB: Okay.

[00:16:29] RW: One of the best things about being a journalist is just going out and meeting people and talking to people, not just people that are behind the scenes who work at companies, PR managers, but other colleagues getting the ability to meet and run into other colleagues in the industry. It just builds a community. Again, it also builds that trust and establishes a relationship, something that you just cannot get, I think, authentically and genuinely through a Zoom call. I'm not saying that me and you haven't established a relationship through a Zoom.

[00:17:03] BB: Thank you, Ray. Thank you.

[00:17:06] RW: I think as a journalist, there's something inert that drives you to want to talk, to like, talk to people, right? Find the humanity in the story.

[00:17:14] BB: Yes.

[00:17:14] RW: Because, too often, I think journalists think that – I see a lot of entitled journalists, especially younger journalists who just think that PR and brand should just cater to them indefinitely. It's a two-way street. Everyone's a human being here. Let's be respectful and let's be professional and let's try to understand where they're coming from so that they can also mutually understand where we're coming from and our job. The more that we can understand how our roles are the better we can work together in the future for more ambitious stories.

[00:17:45] BB: You're in New York, correct? That's what we see on LinkedIn.

[00:17:48] RW: That's correct.

[00:17:49] BB: Okay. New York publicists, this is your guy. He wants the invite. Of course, if it's what you cover, only, only, only when I emphasize that. Okay. Ray, we have a last little part here that's a fill in the blank. Are you ready for this?

[00:18:03] RW: Yeah.

[00:18:04] BB: Here we go. Video or phone interview?

[00:18:06] RW: I prefer a video and mainly because I see enthusiasm or emotion. For a phone interview, it's usually a last resort if there are no other options like there's no in-person, there's no on-camera or a video call. I'll do the phone interview, especially if it's someone really prominent or someone essential for my story. Otherwise, I want to know that you're a human being and also like understand why you care about this product or this story. Why should I care, right? Make me care.

[00:18:40] BB: Yeah.

[00:18:40] RW: That's usually expressed through the eyes, the face, by language.

[00:18:44] BB: That you're not a bot.

[00:18:46] RW: I think that could be a concern in the future. Yeah. I mean, I like seeing raw motion and you can sense when a person is very passionate about what they're talking about or they're reluctantly on this call, because a PRS person has put them on this call. I prefer a video.

[00:19:04] BB: Okay. Video it is. Bullet points or long pitches?

[00:19:07] RW: I think, I love like a good mixture. Give me the bullets, but also give me the depth after. It's really no offense if like I just don't accept your pitch. I think using every possibility to give you a succinct, this succinct pitch on what you're trying to communicate to me and then also giving me that additional depth without me having to ask for it is a good medium.

[00:19:32] BB: Short or long pitches.

[00:19:34] RW: I'm going to say, I mean, I prefer short medium pitches, to be honest. Like I said, having bullets or just –

[00:19:40] BB: No one says long gray, just to be clear. We just have this as a little fun thing here, but yeah.

[00:19:46] RW: Yeah. I mean, a short pitch is good. Get right to the point, especially if you're on point with the subject line. Then in the email body, you're just like, "Okay, here's what I'm trying to pitch you on." I actually brought an example today of a good pitch that just completely gets straight to a point, doesn't waste my time, provides all the details. This is one that I responded back to, because I was like, okay. They gave me everything I need to know. I didn't have to go back and forth responding to get additional details. Something as simple as like, "Hey, Ray. I hope you're doing well. I want to reach out to run a feature idea by you. I'm going to redact this company, right, gearing up to launch the next evolution of their flagship redaction. We'd love to work with you on an exclusive interview/deep dive on a proxy."

This person clearly has seen that I've done exclusives recently. I am very interested in deep dives. They gave me an example and linked out to that piece, which is by another brand for another brand. They also gave me additional details on like when this embargo is lifting, why they think that this product is important and why I should specifically cover it, because I've covered the similar products in the past, the embargo at lift time. Then here's the part that's really important to me, details on who I would be talking to and what like, access I would get, right?

Oftentimes I get a lot of emails saying, "Okay, I've got an exclusive for you." But then it's like two or three emails back and forth to find out who they're going to give me access to and when. I just don't have the time for that. Nobody wants to be sending emails back and forth and you're, one email of hundreds that are incoming every day. So just getting straight to a point and tell me, "Hey, it's this guy, Charlie. He's head of an industrial design. He's worked on this product line for X, Y, Z years and you've done reviews on X, Y, and Z."

[00:21:36] BB: You did the work.

[00:21:38] RW: Yeah. I mean, this is a perfect pitch.

[00:21:39] BB: That's a strong example. Thank you for sharing that. You know what else I like, this is supposed to be like a very quick little. Yes. Yes. Rapid fire question, but that's okay. We keep going right. We're almost wrapping up here, but I just want to say on that note, with why it's the perfect pitch, because the way I'm pitching you already tells you, I know what's up. I know you do reviews. I know you do exclusives. I don't have to waste time with, "Hey, Ray. So I know you do exclusives and you really review. So this is what—" It's like, no. The research is implied. It is set. That I agree. Great pitch, forever. That team there. Okay.

[00:22:16] RW: All right.

[00:22:16] BB: How about images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[00:22:19] RW: I've no preference either or is fine. Just as long as you include it.

[00:22:22] BB: Pitches in the morning or at night or it doesn't matter.

[00:22:25] RW: Mornings or afternoons. Nobody wants to be looking at their emails. I mean, I'm a lunatic. I am looking at my inbox at night. Yeah, I would say if you send an email at night, expect the email response in the morning or after the next day afternoon. I won't be responding unless it's something killer.

[00:22:42] BB: Email or Twitter DM.

[00:22:44] RW: Definitely, email. You can just say more in an email. Also, Twitter is like, I know a lot of people use Twitter as a professional outlet, myself included.

[00:22:53] BB: You have quite the following there.

[00:22:55] RW: I will say Twitter is just – Twitter DMs are not into encrypted. If you have sensitive information there, I definitely would not use that channel.

[00:23:02] BB: Or perhaps at all given everything going on we see. Story is still out. Okay. One follow up or multiple?

[00:23:08] RW: I put down one follow up every two to three days or one per week. Ultimately, it really depends on whether I've replied to this email. If I have not given you a response in a week and you haven't gone back and wondered why I haven't responded, maybe because you pitched me on say, enterprise, right? Then please don't respond and bump it up a million times, because it's just like, especially email that say, "Hey, have you seen my email?" No. Yeah, I have seen your email and I deleted it.

[00:23:36] BB: Yeah.

[00:23:40] RW: Not too many.

[00:23:41] BB: Okay. Direct or creative subject lines? We already talked about this, but just for the record.

[00:23:45] RW: Yeah. Direct subject lines. Let's save everybody some time.

[00:23:49] BB: Then press release, or media kit?

[00:23:52] RW: Press release or media kit?

[00:23:53] BB: Yeah. Or no preference.

[00:23:55] RW: I have no preference. I prefer both. If you have both and including the media kit, that works just as well.

[00:24:00] BB: Ray. Is there anything you would like to promote, tout, celebrate, high five yourself for? We'd take everything.

[00:24:08] RW: Yeah. I'd love for everybody to come to inverse.com and click on every article that you can.

[00:24:13] BB: Click on them all.

[00:24:14] RW: Yeah. Just go there and click non-stop, especially the gear article through product reviews. Our team has been putting in extra time to make sure that content is original with the original photography, premium writing.

[00:24:27] BB: The photography is stellar. You all are killing it in the game there, for sure.

[00:24:32] RW: Because we've got the redesign. Yeah. Just come and click a million times if you can, until your fingers bleed.

[00:24:37] BB: Come and click a million times. That's very good. You can even put that in your email, right? I click a million times. Please accept my pitch.

[00:24:45] RW: Might actually look at that. If you can show me, you actually click a million times.

[00:24:48] BB: See, he'll look at that. He'll do the data research, I'm sure. Ray, thank you for being here today. This was such a joy and now everyone knows you want to be invited, something good in New York City. I love it.

[00:25:02] RW: Thank you for having me. This was a lot of fun.

[00:25:04] BB: This was fun. Thanks, Ray. Take care.

[00:25:06] RW: All right. Bye-bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:25:08] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with the Journalist, featuring Ray Wong from Inverse. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter at onepitch.co/podcast. We'll see you next week with even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]