

EPISODE 160**[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 in this podcast? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn more.

Today on the podcast, we're joined by Matt Safford, Managing Editor at Tom's Hardware. Matt started building PCs in the nineties and was a fan of technology from an early age. That love evolved into a journalism career writing for publications, including Popular Science, PCMag, and Digital Trends.

During the episode, Matt discusses his unique approach when it comes to product reviews, how to format pitches for his writing style, why he's skeptical of exclusives, and more. Let's hear from Matt now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:08] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. We have another fabulous, wonderful, straight from Jersey journalist with us today. In fact, he's beyond just a journalist. He's Managing Editor of Tom's Hardware, which we'll get into if you're not too familiar. But, Matt, thank you for being here on a sunny spring day you said

[00:01:31] MS: Yes, yes, yes. Happy to be here. It was much colder yesterday. So it's nice to be enjoying this hot spring weather, for sure.

[00:01:36] BB: Thank God. Spring is coming. Yes, please, and more. All this stuff. I do like, by the way, Matt, that you say mild-mannered, the tech journalists on your Twitter. That's nice to disclose upfront, mild-mannered.

[00:01:51] **MS:** Yes. I've never been the sort of super obsessive kind of nerd or geek. So I like things. I don't obsess.

[00:01:58] **BB:** You're not obsessive.

[00:01:59] **MS:** No.

[00:02:00] **BB:** Is that what you would call like hardcore nerd obsessive? Like they just get way too in the funnels of things?

[00:02:05] **MS:** At times, yes. I think that it's become more so. It wasn't really necessarily that way when I was like a teenager, but it seems much more so now.

[00:02:12] **BB:** Yes. What happened?

[00:02:13] **MS:** Everything is very territorial. Yes.

[00:02:16] **BB:** Yes. I don't know. People need to relax. Anyway, Matt, for those who may not be as familiar, how would you describe Tom's Hardware and what you all like to cover?

[00:02:26] **MS:** Sure. So it has definitely evolved. Tom's Hardware has been around for almost 27 years now. Online publication that covers the computer and makerspaces often from a very technical detail-oriented kind of angle. A lot of our core readers have been engineers or people in IT. But we also try to reach a more mainstream audience with our reviews and buying guides and some of our news coverage, so.

[00:02:53] **BB:** Speaking of reviews, that's what you seem to do a lot of. Yes, tell us more.

[00:02:58] **MS:** I mean, I definitely have in the past. I kind of tend to take up the slack and things that need to get done. So I do a lot of laptop reviews.

[00:03:06] **BB:** You just did one on HP Direct Dragonfly, which did not go well it looks like.

[00:03:11] MS: No. It definitely could have been better, but yes. No, I've reviewed everything from laptops to graphics cards, to CPUs. Those are all kind of core things that we cover and peripherals. You name it. I've been there and had opinions about it.

[00:03:29] BB: Is it fun, by the way? Do you love the reviews?

[00:03:32] MS: I do, yes. I mean, it's nice to, on the one hand, kind of get paid to play with the toys but also be kind of critical about what could be better and what could be worse. Also, kind of putting in the perspective of like – that a lot of people don't have, right? You might, and this is – I've been in conversations with commenters in the past, where they really liked something that I didn't like, and that's absolutely fine, right? But like have you tried the seven other things in this category and compared it to this, right. So, I mean, that's a big part of what I try to bring to it is perspective and depth and fairness to be sure.

[00:04:10] BB: Good. So how's your inbox?

[00:04:15] MS: I've never been great about the inbox. I mean, as someone who has been using Gmail since way early in the beta stage, I just –

[00:04:24] BB: Really? Oh, my God. What was that like? Wow, you are like tech OG.

[00:04:31] MS: I mean, I just use the inbox like Google, right? So I don't delete things. I don't open everything, and I know that it's there. My inbox is like doubly complicated because I was a full-time freelancer for like three and a half years and was using my personal Gmail account. So I still have people who contact me through there, and then I have a work account. So I just kind of rely on Google search and my amazingly, surprisingly good memory for just to tease out like, “I think I remember something about this.” Then I'll search in my inbox and find it, whether it was seven years ago or seven days ago.

[00:05:10] BB: So you're a let-it-ride.

[00:05:13] MS: Absolutely.

[00:05:13] BB: Let it ride. Okay.

[00:05:14] MS: In fact, I pay for extra storage in my original Google account because it's full, and I don't want to spend hours deleting stuff, so.

[00:05:20] BB: No. I think there's like a tipping point where it would take you 17 hours to do that.

[00:05:25] MS: No. I even like go staycation just to manage my inbox.

[00:05:28] BB: Wow. Wow. Oh, man. Well, how many emails are you typically getting a day that are pitches, let's say? I know you're editor, so that's a little bit different than being a reporter. But tell us.

[00:05:39] MS: I still get a lot. I mean, I would say probably at least 50. I mean, I don't normally count them. It could be a lot more. It could be a little less but – and most of them are completely irrelevant.

[00:05:50] BB: Fifty sounds okay. Oh, okay. Completely irrelevant. Okay, got you. What then gets you to open the email? It has to be the subject line. So how do you navigate that?

[00:06:01] MS: Sure. To get me to open, it could be very irrelevant and wild. I may open it. But that doesn't mean that that's helpful for anyone because I might just like share it in the company Slack and like look at this ridiculous thing that was just send to me.

[00:06:15] BB: Oh, no. You don't want to be that person.

[00:06:17] MS: Over the last year or so, I've developed this kind of drastic response too, as I said, because I get so many things that are kind of just off to the left field. Like if you pitch me something that is not anywhere close to something I would cover. Particularly, if you do that and then you follow up one or two times, I've just been blocking people.

[00:06:38] BB: Oh, you're a full blocker.

[00:06:39] **MS:** Yes, yes.

[00:06:40] **BB:** Oh, oh. [inaudible 00:06:41] beware. Yes.

[00:06:41] **MS:** I mean, and I just like – I've been doing it for like a year, and I feel like I do it at least three or four times a day, and I still get tons of pitches.

[00:06:49] **BB:** Oh, man. It's endless.

[00:06:50] **MS:** It doesn't seem like it's making much of an impact. But it makes me feel better. I just feel like if you can't take literally like a minute to look at what our site covers and –

[00:07:00] **BB:** Teaming up, right? Yes.

[00:07:01] **MS:** Yes. You're wasting my time and yours. So what's the point really, right?

[00:07:06] **BB:** I haven't heard of a full blocker in a long time. Matt, you're bringing up the level here a little bit. Okay. So what is a subject line you say, "You know what? I like it. Let me now open it."? Is there any components to that that stand out?

[00:07:24] **MS:** I think that the main thing is – the first thing is like is this in the wheelhouse of things that I cover. Then like I've been doing this for, gosh, like 15 years now. So a lot of the people in this business I know. So, obviously, if it's someone I know, if it's a company that I know, then that helps. But I think if it's a different company, different person, like I said, as long as it's in the wheelhouse of things that we cover, I think just telling me what it is, being succinct, and like telling me what's interesting about it is about the best that it can be.

[00:08:03] **BB:** Okay. So you like for the, let's say, publicist to say, "Oh, hey, Matt. Here's what I find of interest, or here's what is interesting," even though that's a little bit of an opinion. But that's your preferred.

[00:08:14] MS: Sure. I mean, I – on some level, that's what PR is doing, right? It's like trying to sell stuff.

[00:08:19] BB: Yes. Yes, it is.

[00:08:19] MS: It doesn't mean – I mean, I would say like at least 80% of the time, I completely disagree. But make your argument, right?

[00:08:27] BB: Yes, yes. Make your full pitch. I like that because in some pitching, it's like, “Well, I don't need to convince you or tell you what the news is. It's up for your discretion.” But in your case, you're looking for a little bit more flavor perhaps.

[00:08:41] MS: Sure. As long as it's not wild.

[00:08:44] BB: BS flavor.

[00:08:45] MS: Flavor. Yes, yes.

[00:08:47] BB: Okay. Then in terms of the structure of the pitch, you mentioned a little bit why is it important, so forth. Do you like bullet points? Do you like succinctness? Like what are the perfect pitch elements for you?

[00:08:58] MS: I mean, I think it kind of can depend on the topic and how complicated or truly innovative something is. But for sort of straightforward things, I think bullet points are great. If it's a little bit more complex, and maybe the pitch has a little bit more spin, like I'm happy. I read paragraphs of text and edit paragraphs of text all day. So I'm happy to adjust things that way. I think just like try not to make it several paragraphs long, and that's fine as well.

[00:09:28] BB: Succinct is good. Okay.

[BREAK]

[00:09:32] 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]

[00:09:56] BB: I don't usually ask this, but I'm just going to throw this out here, Matt. Are there any best practices that you really prefer within when you are engaging with the publicist? All right, you read the pitch. You like it. You're going to do it. But what makes you go like, "Okay, that was an interaction I would like to repeat."?

[00:10:12] MS: I'm going to think just basic stuff. Does the person clearly know what they're talking about? Do they respond in a reasonable amount of time? One of the things that I – in sort of all aspects of life is like I just try to treat people like people. So like throw a little personality in there. That's absolutely fine.

Again, like a lot of the people that I work with, I've been working with off and on a long time. A lot of people move around to different companies, right?

[00:10:40] BB: Yes, they do. They do.

[00:10:39] MS: So like try to come off as a decent human being, and I try to do the same.

[00:10:45] BB: Okay. Just tit for tat, golden rule, all the good things. I like it. Do you ever prefer or want, Matt, an exclusive or an embargo?

[00:10:56] MS: I mean, we get embargoes a lot. That's definitely helpful, particularly with products. So you know how long you have either to write about the product. Or if you're getting it for review, how long you have to test it and use it, things like that. That's definitely helpful because it helps me. It helps us kind of schedule our workflow and prioritize things because there's always 800 things going on. That is definitely helpful.

I mean, exclusives, I don't know. I mean, I feel like I don't like – this is just my – I mean, we do a lot of like very technical-focused things.

[00:11:32] BB: Yes, you do.

[00:11:33] MS: I mean, usually, when –

[00:11:34] BB: What would be an exclusive for you all?

[00:11:36] MS: I mean, we've had offers to like come see the inside of our design lab to see how we're designing laptops or whatever. It's like that can be interesting. But, to me, like, usually, when those things are offered, it's like you're pitching me a puff piece, which – it's not to say I'd never want to do that. But like I'm going to be skeptical.

[00:11:54] BB: Yes. I'm already on alert.

[00:11:56] MS: We have very vocal readers who will call us on stuff. I often don't agree with them, but they will do that.

[00:12:03] BB: The obsessive nerd. That's right. You're going to hear from them.

[00:12:04] MS: Yes, for sure.

[00:12:07] BB: Okay. What about building a relationship with you, Matt? Is there any ways or techniques people can do that, besides be a good human?

[00:12:16] MS: That's definitely the foundation. Yes. I mean, I'm trying to think of specifics. But really, it's just like keep sending me interesting things. Keep responding to me. Keep answering my questions. Don't nag me too much if I don't get back to you. Yes. I mean, usually, if that's the case, and I work with you a couple of times, then I recognize your name. We're off to the races of a nice work relationship. So, I mean, it's not – I don't think it's that complicated.

[00:12:48] **BB:** You're a fabulous human that is responsive and on the ball it sounds like.

[00:12:52] **MS:** Yes. If there is an embargo, don't not get back to me until right before the embargo. That's helpful.

[00:12:57] **BB:** Yes. Yes, don't be doing that. Yes.

[00:13:00] **MS:** But I understand there are circumstances beyond everyone's control in these situations.

[00:13:04] **BB:** Of course. Yes, of course. Yes. Okay. Matt, can we do a little rapid-fire question session?

[00:13:12] **MS:** Sure.

[00:13:12] **BB:** Okay. Perfect, perfect. Okay. Here we go. Video or phone interview?

[00:13:17] **MS:** I don't have a strong preference. I mean, if it's something like specifically that you want to show me that's visual, obviously, video is fine. I've done a lot more video stuff through the pandemic. So that is fine by me. Whichever is fine.

[00:13:31] **BB:** Okay. Whichever. Bullet points or paragraphs? We kind of covered it. But, you know, just to add.

[00:13:37] **MS:** I think I have a slight preference for bullet points. But paragraphs, if there's a reason for paragraphs is absolutely fine.

[00:13:42] **BB:** Okay. Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[00:13:46] **MS:** If it's one or two, attached. If it's a media kit or a bunch of images, Dropbox. Something like a Dropbox is better.

[00:13:56] **BB:** Pitches in the morning or at night or who cares?

[00:13:59] MS: I mean, I don't think it matters a lot. But I think late at night probably helps it to be at the top of my inbox in the morning.

[00:14:08] BB: Oh, good strategy. Email or Twitter DM?

[00:14:12] MS: Email. I don't use Twitter that much. So although I do have a couple of people that respond to me through Twitter, but I prefer email, for sure.

[00:14:20] BB: One follow-up or multiple?

[00:14:23] MS: One is usually plenty. Once it becomes – I mean, most of the time when I get more than one, it's because I'm ignoring you because your pitch is irrelevant to me. The only time I really get annoyed is when somebody is following up three or more times and that – yes.

[00:14:40] BB: Yes, yes. Not good.

[00:14:42] MS: I don't – sorry. I'm not –

[00:14:43] BB: Yes. It's a no. Yes. Direct or creative subject lines?

[00:14:49] MS: Direct, usually.

[00:14:50] BB: Yes. But personality, you said, is okay. Okay.

[00:14:53] MS: Yes. I mean, if it's going to be really creative, it better be really good.

[00:14:57] BB: Yes, yes. Also, your subject line. That's tight to get personality in their capital P. Okay. Press release or media kit?

[00:15:04] MS: Again. I mean, usually, if it's a news item press release, if it's something more complicated with more lead time, media kit is good.

[00:15:15] BB: Okay. Then lastly, anything you want to promote.

[00:15:18] MS: I've been reading Tom's Hardware most of my adult life. It taught me a lot of the things that I've learned in this business before I started working here and –

[00:15:27] BB: Like what a 360, coming all the way to it.

[00:15:29] MS: Absolutely. Yes. I haven't done a whole lot lately, but I do some writing and travel photography over the name Escaping America.

[00:15:38] BB: Oh, oh.

[00:15:39] MS: @escapingamerica on Instagram and escaping-america on the web, although that hasn't been updated in a while. But in my Facebook, there's a Facebook Escaping America as well.

[00:15:49] BB: Okay. Escaping America. Yes, Matt.

[00:15:54] MS: It's mostly Scotland-related. I'm a little bit obsessed with Scotland

[00:15:58] BB: Obsessed. Wait, you just outed yourself. You are a nerd. You are a nerd. Aha, aha. We found it. Oh, Matt.

[00:16:08] MS: I enjoy it. I still don't take it super seriously. But that's my –

[00:16:10] BB: No. I love the attitude. You're not serious about it, which the obsessive types, they can't be too serious, in my opinion. But anyway, Matt, thank you so much for doing this today. What a joy.

[00:16:21] MS: Absolutely. Thank you very much. This was great.

[00:16:23] BB: If I'm ever going to buy a freaking laptop, I'm checking with you first.

[00:16:27] MS: Absolutely.

[00:16:28] BB: Yes. Thanks so much, Matt. Appreciate it.

[00:16:30] MS: Take care.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:16:31] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Matt Safford from Tom's Hardware. 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.

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