

EPISODE 164

[INTRODUCTION]

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

Today on the podcast, we're joined by Samantha Maldonado. She's a senior reporter for Climate Change at THE CITY, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, digital news platform dedicated to hard-hitting reporting that serves the people of New York. During the episode, Samantha shares an inside look at THE CITY and what they focus on as a publication, why embargoes can be helpful for reporting stories quicker, a few tips on what exactly to include or exclude in pitches, and more. Let's hear from Samantha now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:00] BB: Welcome, everyone. I'm Beck Bamberger. Thank you for joining us. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I hope you want to hear from a journalist because that's what we do here. Today with us is senior reporter from THE CITY, which we're going to get into in just a second. Live from New York City, in fact, Samantha Maldonado, who is a senior reporter from THE CITY, as I mentioned. Samantha, thank you for being here.

[00:01:24] SM: Thanks for having me.

[00:01:25] BB: Yes. Can you first give us, for those maybe not as familiar, what THE CITY covers and encompasses?

[00:01:32] SM: Sure. So we are a nonpartisan, nonprofit news outlet started about four years ago. We cover New York City. Sometimes, that means covering outside of New York City, but always with an eye to relevancy and news for New Yorkers. Often, our stories are in-depth. We focus on explainers, accountability pieces, investigations, some quick breaking news. But often we just try to go deep and really have some color in our stories.

[00:01:59] **BB:** Yes. Also, I love the cleanliness, I guess, you could say, the clean look of the website.

[00:02:06] **SM:** Thank you.

[00:02:06] **BB:** You see the logo, and there's THE CITY and the dove and all the things. Or I think that's a dove. Is it a pigeon? Is there a difference?

[00:02:13] **SM:** It's a pigeon.

[00:02:14] **BB:** It's a pigeon. Yes. Okay, great. It is perfect.

[00:02:18] **SM:** It's dirty in the City.

[00:02:19] **BB:** I believe so. Yes, exactly. Anyway, the tagline is reporting for New Yorkers. I love it. Okay, Samantha, how is your inbox?

[00:02:28] **SM:** Oh, it's kind of a mess.

[00:02:30] **BB:** Okay, okay.

[00:02:32] **SM:** Yes. I had been sort of heads down doing a longer investigation with a colleague and been ignoring everything else. I was also out of town for a little while. So it's coming back together. I try to keep it maybe not an inbox zero but usually like inbox 40. Yes, I'll just try to delete things or go through them and mark them unread. So that's kind of where I'm at right now.

[00:02:53] **BB:** Okay. Do you then have a filing system? Are you an open-every-email person? Or what would you say?

[00:03:01] SM: I will mark them as unread. Some of them I open and read others. I just check that box, just so I can search it later if I need to. Then I have a sort of loose system for categorizing emails, just so I can go back later on.

[00:03:16] BB: Oh, okay. Well, tell us your loose system, whatever it entails.

[00:03:21] SM: Yes, I will. It's very loose. I should probably make it a little bit more strict. If it involves, for example, a record request, I'll flag it one color. If it's a picture, a press release that I think is interesting, but I don't want to deal with it now but maybe later on when – for example, if a program is announced that haven't implemented anything, I'll just flag it so that way later on, if I'm looking for stories, I can go back and see like, “Oh, has this been implemented? What does it look like? Can I do something a little bit more **[inaudible 00:03:49 cross talk]** a day one story?”

[00:03:51] BB: Okay. Oh, I don't hear that often on here of like, “Oh, wait. You sent me a pitch about that thing you were doing. But I'm not going to cover that. But I want to see after what that actually look like or entailed.”

[00:04:02] SM: Yes. I feel like I get those a lot, especially because I cover climate often and a lot of policy. Sometimes, there's always plans to do things. But my accountability reporting has showed me that things don't always happen the way they're promised or they don't work out. So I don't love to cover. This is happening sometimes, but I don't see it actually happening. Is there a shovel in the ground? Is there other people involved that are actually doing the work?

[00:04:29] BB: Yes. How would you explain accountability reporting?

[00:04:34] SM: Yes. For us at THE CITY, I think it's about holding feet to the fire about promises that were made or responsibility that government or other people with power have and really asking the question. Are they are they doing what they promised? Or are they living up to their responsibilities? If so, great. What does that look like? Are they deviating, or are things falling through the cracks? Things like that.

Are there projects or other sorts of commitments that have fallen through, or they've ended up in sort of a mess? That happens a lot. Are dollars getting spent the way they should, especially when their public tax dollars? Who's getting harmed? Things like that. Being able to sort of call out what is actually going on. This can be positive or maybe a little bit more negative to some people —

[00:05:24] BB: Okay. That's good to know. I wanted you to disclose that because people on here listening, all the publicists will be like, "Well, isn't all the reporting accountability, like holding people to the fire of what they're saying or what they're doing?" But maybe not necessarily so. So there you go. Okay. Do you ever get exclusives?

[00:05:43] SM: Yes. And I like that. Yes. I have a lot of thoughts about that.

[00:05:48] BB: Oh, tell us. Tell us everything.

[00:05:50] SM: Yes. I mean, exclusives are great. So at THE CITY, we try to cover things. We have a somewhat robust media landscape in New York City compared to other places. What we try to do or what I try to do as a journalist at THE CITY is cover things that other outlets are not going to cover. Or if I am going to cover something that I know maybe other outlets will cover local outlets or The Times or whatever, I want to have a certain angle to it that is different, whether that's explanatory, or there's some sort of detail or angle that I take that others don't take.

But also a way to do this and sort of elevate and make it different is by having. So that is a way that I am more likely to take a pitch, knowing that I am the only one with access to it. I will get the news out first and break it, especially if I can get access to different kinds of people to talk to. Sometimes, it's unclear whether I'm getting pitched an exclusive. Sometimes, I'll ask. I've heard from some publicists like, "Oh, yes. It's an exclusive to you and like these two other people." I'm like, "That's not an exclusive."

[00:06:54] BB: Yes. That's why we ask about exclusives on here because I don't know why that's confusing. It's just one and only, the one and only. I think it's the way to do it. But it's amazing what's out there. Okay. Do you also get embargoes then?

[00:07:08] SM: Yes, I do. Are those of interest, and how much do you like those?

[00:07:12] SM: Those I'm less enthusiastic about because I know that probably a lot of other people are getting them. It also just depends on can I go early with it. What do I get that others don't get in terms of access to sources? If there's an embargo on something, there's been instances where like I am reporting something out separately, and I get something with an embargo. That just makes me try to like report the thing out even faster.

It's helpful, especially, there's circumstances where there'll be, for example, a press conference. It would have been really helpful to get, say, this report or something like that, whatever they're announcing on embargo. Just to have that information, so I can sort of pre-write a story, and my questions are better. Also, my story will be more comprehensive if it's something I'm going to definitely report on. But if it's some sort of announcement or program or something on behalf of like a company, I'm less interested in that.

[00:08:07] BB: Okay. Good to know. I also am so fascinated with the types of maybe exclusives, embargo for climate with New York as such as specialty outlet. Do you have an example of one of like an exclusive that you're like, "Oh, I loved it, and this is what I did. This is what I did." Any recently? I'm looking at all your articles. I'm like, "Oh, there's so many." But I don't know which one is an exclusive necessarily.

[00:08:32] SM: Let me think for a second.

[00:08:34] BB: Yes. Think for a second. I mean, I love this one like kelp farming may help clean New York City's polluted waterways and fight climate change. But I'm like, "Maybe that wasn't an exclusive, but that's pretty cool."

[00:08:45] SM: Yes. I have to say most of my stories I don't get through pitches, and I can talk maybe a little bit later.

[00:08:50] BB: Let's talk about it now. Yes.

[00:08:52] SM: Okay. Well, this one I think I accidentally got added to a community group's listserv. That's how I realized this was going on. I was very interested in it and having read other articles about kelp and just sort of their potential in terms of climate. So I immediately contacted that person who had accidentally – I don't know. Maybe it was on purpose. I never asked. But he added me to that listserv, and I just did the story pretty quickly.

I think sometimes I find out things like accidentally or sort of in a sideways way. If I'm listening to a press conference, and someone says something that's off-topic or only tangentially related. Or if there's, for example, a hearing or something or a budget oversight situation, and someone just goes through a bunch of programs that their organization does, and one strikes my attention. So that's kind of interesting.

Yes. Often it's – I have to sort of dig to find stories, and there's very few that I've done that have come from straight pitches, at least in the sort of angle or focus that the pitches kind of want me to take, I guess.

[00:09:56] BB: Yes. I would imagine people who don't necessarily want to be held accountable are coming to you like, “Hey, Samantha. Hey, you want to check this out? How are we doing with that budget spent?”

[00:10:08] SM: Right.

[BREAK]

[00:10:11] 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]

[00:10:36] BB: Samantha, for those who perhaps want to build a relationship with you, they think they have something climate, New York-focused related, how shall they go about meeting with you? Do you want to go on a coffee?

[00:10:47] SM: Typically, no. I don't have time for coffees too much. I mean, I really love meeting with people. Usually, it's after we've sort of spoken on the phone or if I've gotten a pitch that I have questions about, things like that. Then I'll usually be like, "Oh, yes. Let's have a coffee date. We've been talking for a little while." But I frankly just don't have time to get coffee with like folks in PR too often. Yes.

But, I mean, if there are pitches, like I love getting them sent to my inbox or getting a text, just to sort of like turn my attention to something that's happening. I, obviously, can't respond to everything. But sometimes, I do find interesting things that way. People have been really good resources, even if I'm not sort of writing exactly on what they pitched me. Maybe something related and that's kind of a way I've been able to connect with some experts or companies that they represent or anything like that.

[00:11:36] BB: Okay. So don't ask her to coffee, but give me a good pitch. Straight to it probably. Actually, I would love to get a little into that, Samantha, for maybe a story you do do that comes from a pitch, which is rare, as you said. Are there elements to pitches where you go, "All right, good pitch. I'm interested, or at least I appreciate that pitch." What are those elements would you say?

[00:11:58] SM: Well, definitely knowing that it's only going to me. That's a huge thing.

[00:12:03] BB: There you go. Yes.

[00:12:04] SM: That's big. Also, just knowing that it is relevant to what I cover, which is I can't tell you how many like pitches I get about things outside of New York City, maybe even across the country. If it doesn't have a New York City lens or relevancy, then I can't do that. Sorry, I should speak positively about the things that actually really work. Exclusives.

[00:12:25] BB: Hey, that's okay too. We'll take the other side.

[00:12:27] SM: Just being clear on what it is that is being pitched. Sometimes, it's really just not clear up top. Then also making sure that there's easy access for me in terms of talking to people, and those are experts or people at a company or people who are working on the ground. But often, I also would love – I mean, this is really the thing that makes stories. Just people who are being affected by the thing or can take advantage of something, whatever it is.

Actually, one of the first stories I wrote for THE CITY I think really did all those things. It was pitched by somebody I did have a relationship with. She and I had spoken in the past. This is someone in PR who I did get coffee with because I had known her for a while. We also had a good friend in common. So that helped out.

[00:13:13] BB: Oh, yes. Well, that is helpful. Yes.

[00:13:15] SM: Yes. That's definitely helpful. She had pitched me a story about basically this thing that was happening where if somebody goes to vote in the wrong place, like at the wrong polling place, and they – I won't get into it too much. But essentially, a reason why their vote wouldn't count in New York City and how there was a law on the books to sort of correct that. She was able to also get me in touch with the person who this had happened to. So it was a perfect story in that way. It was very clear. The person I talked to was just really great to talk to. It was a perfect fitting example.

Then, of course, I could write about the policy that I think she was the one. This is what she wanted to push. Often, there's a problem, and there's some sort of policy proposal to fix it. But that in itself is not that interesting of a story. So really to elevate it, I think it was the person who I got to interview who, yes, just like he was affected, and he was really angry about it. That made for a really great and compelling story. So that was one of the few stories I've done like straight from a pitch.

[00:14:16] BB: Okay, good example. Also, the person had the assist. Hey, here's the actual person who's impacted that you can speak to live. Do you want to – like excellent tip. Good job. Good job, publicists. Okay. Samantha, we have a fun rapid-fire question series. So are you ready for it?

[00:14:36] **SM:** Oh, I'm ready.

[00:14:37] **BB:** Okay. Okay. Okay. Here we go. Video or phone interview?

[00:14:42] **SM:** Phone.

[00:14:43] **BB:** Bullet points or paragraphs?

[00:14:45] **SM:** Maybe a strategic combination of the two.

[00:14:47] **BB:** Okay, good. Short or long pitches?

[00:14:50] **SM:** Short in the beginning with some more information at the end.

[00:14:54] **BB:** Okay. Well, I was going to go into how short, but that's pretty good. Okay. Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[00:15:01] **SM:** Neither. I would say no images unless I asked.

[00:15:05] **BB:** Oh, okay. Good. Pitches in the morning or at night or doesn't matter?

[00:15:09] **SM:** It doesn't matter.

[00:15:10] **BB:** Okay. Email or Twitter DM?

[00:15:12] **SM:** Email.

[00:15:13] **BB:** One follow-up or multiple?

[00:15:14] **SM:** Just one.

[00:15:15] **BB:** Direct or creative subject lines?

[00:15:18] SM: I guess direct.

[00:15:20] BB: Okay. Press release or media kit?

[00:15:23] SM: Press release. That concludes our little rapid-fire section. But, Samantha, do you have anything you want to promote, hype, talk about, et cetera, just to wrap this up here?

[00:15:35] SM: I would say sometimes it's really great to have just background conversations with people without sort of a story in mind or being attached. If I can just hop on the phone with whoever you're representing, awesome. If the press person is not there too, just we can speak freely, and I can just really get a sense of what are you working on. What's on your radar? What are the challenges you're dealing with now? What are you excited about?

This is often how I get stories because people can just speak freely. It's on background. Then if there is something interesting, that's what – I can sort of just tell what it is, and that's – if it piques my curiosity, I will follow it, and there will be a story. That's happened to a bunch.

[00:16:14] BB: It's a non-pitched interview.

[00:16:16] SM: Yes, exactly. Yes. Sometimes, I get in my inbox some invitations to talk with people, and I can't always. But there are some people that got my flag on that email. When I get some time, I will call them to get something set up. I'm sure I will end up with stories out of that, or even just they become resources later on if I'm working on something relevant. So that's really helpful.

There was actually an example that comes to mind if you want something concrete is that I had a background conversation with somebody who was working for a sort of like major environmental nonprofit. He was telling me about some of this work he was doing. It was basically to rebuild houses after a hurricane. It was one specific way of doing that. But there were other strategies that were being done. I was like, "Okay, okay. Sure."

Then he, just in the way he was talking, just said like, “Oh, it's like the three little pigs,” and blah, blah, blah. That really stuck in my mind and became –

[00:17:12] BB: Yes, it was just awesome.

[00:17:13] SM: Yes, it was awesome. I mean, and he wasn't trying to pitch me. He was just telling me about what he was doing. But that, to me, became the story. I was like, “Oh, yes.” This is how you couch this strategy of rebuilding to make it relevant and to make it accessible to people who are – maybe they just don't care about rebuilding, but they care about the three little pigs, and that's kind of a way into the story.

[00:17:33] BB: That's great and what a fun visual that everyone gets. You're like, “Oh, I totally know what that's about.” Okay. Now, back to you, Samantha, on anything you want to hyper-promote about yourself. Do you have an Etsy store? Do you have a book coming out? What can we do to support you?

[00:17:50] SM: Yes. Well, I think if you subscribe to THE CITY Scoop, you can find that on thecity.nyc. The Scoop is our daily newsletter. That's how you can see all my reporting and all of my colleagues reporting. That comes out every day. It's not a very long newsletter, but it's – everything's there, and it's kind of fun. Read THE CITY. Donate to THE CITY if you're so inclined. We are a nonprofit digital news platform. Feel free to follow THE CITY on Twitter. Follow me on Twitter @sssmaldo. Yes. If you have any tips or pitches, I would love them. We also have a tips inbox. So just tips@thecity.nyc.

[00:18:26] BB: Perfect. tips@thecity.nyc. Love it. Samantha, thanks for being on today. How fun. How lovely.

[00:18:35] SM: Thank you so much for having me.

[00:18:36] BB: Yes. Just go New York City. I happen to be here right now, and it's just every time I'm here, it's the best.

[00:18:43] SM: Hit me up with any housing, resiliency, or climate questions that you have.

[00:18:48] BB: Perfect. I don't have any. But you know what? I'll be thinking of you for exactly that.

[00:18:52] SM: [inaudible 00:18:52].

[00:18:53] BB: There you go. Thanks, Sam. Appreciate it so much.

[00:18:56] SM: Thank you so much.

[00:18:57] BB: Take care.

[00:18:57] SM: Take care.

[00:18:58] BB: Bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:19:01] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode, featuring Samantha Maldonado at THE CITY. 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]