

EPISODE 169

[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.

Today on the podcast, we're talking with Jill Duffy, a columnist and Deputy Managing Editor at PCMag. She's been contributing to PCMag since 2011 and currently writes about work life, productivity, and software, with an emphasis on apps for productivity and collaboration. During the episode, Jill talks about PCMag's approach to vetting and reviewing products, her low-touch recommendation for building and sustaining a working relationship, why everyone should have a business mentor, and more. Let's hear from Jill now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:10] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Beck Bamberger, and this is Coffee with a Journalist, where we always have a journalist coming on to talk about pitching, publicists, their best friends who are maybe publicists. Well, not all the time. That's the point of this show.

Today with us is a fabulous person from PCMag, Jill Duffy. She's a columnist and deputy managing editor over at that fabulous publication. She's going to tell us all about it. Welcome, Jill.

[00:01:36] JD: Thank you for having me.

[00:01:38] BB: Yes, Jill. Tell us real quick. For maybe those not as refreshed on it, PCMag, what do you all cover? I know you've been around 40 years.

[00:01:46] JD: Yes. Formerly known as PC Magazine, PCMag is now online only. But we're kind of doing the same thing, the same mission. So this was a magazine started way back when to

help people learn and know about what's going on in the computing industry, which is now expanded to really technology in general. So we help people with product reviews, product recommendations. But we also have news and trends pieces about what's going on in technology. So if you're looking for a piece of software or you're not sure which phone you want to buy next, you can come on over to PCMag, read all about it, get the nitty-gritty details, and find something you love.

[00:02:25] BB: Oh, and find something you love. Oh, I like that ad, very good. Jill, you mentioned in our little call notes here that you really don't write any stories from pitches. Is this true?

[00:02:38] JD: Yes, very, very few.

[00:02:39] BB: Okay. And why is that?

[00:02:42] JD: I do have freelancers pitch me from time to time.

[00:02:45] BB: Yes, because you're in the other seat. Yes.

[00:02:48] JD: For the majority of the things that we do, it's really important at PC Magazine that when we cover a product, it's something that we have found in an unbiased way that we feel excited about or we think people should know about. Or we've heard it's getting some buzz, and we're like, "Okay, people are hearing about this product. We should do a hands-on testing session with them and tell them what's what."

The reason I don't like to take a whole lot of pitches there is because I don't want the companies telling me I should review their product. I want my writers and the other editors saying we are making independent editorial decisions about what we think are the products we should be reviewing.

Now, that said, there's always an opportunity for there to be an undiscovered gem, and that's what everybody thinks they have, right? Everybody wants to pitch me their undiscovered gem, their amazing fitness apps. I get so many pitches for fitness apps.

[00:03:41] BB: Really, still?

[00:03:42] JD: So many people have fitness apps. Yes. I get it. You know what? From time to time, I will look at them. I will look at them quietly. I'll say, "Does this seem like it merits, warrants any coverage? Is it interesting? Is it doing something different? Is it a really good value? Is there a reason people should know about it?" Often, this is the thing about the Internet now. If people should know about it, they'll find it. They'll find it before I find it. They'll find about it before I hear about it, so yes.

That's why like companies coming to me with their products that I've never heard of before is not really that helpful. The big companies, the Adobes, the Googles, the Microsofts, when they come to me, it's usually, "We have some information for you. It's under NDA. This is when it's going to release." That is helpful because if something new is coming out in Photoshop, and we can arrange to get coverage on the day that it's released, like that's great. That's helpful.

But those are usually long-standing relationships with PR teams or PR houses, not even individuals most of the time. They're just messaging everybody in the technology sector at that point.

[00:04:48] BB: Yes, because they're so major. Yes, exactly. Okay. So how's your inbox then?

[00:04:55] JD: It's so slim.

[00:04:57] BB: It's so slim. Oh, my God. I think you're the first person on this.

[00:05:02] JD: Yes. It's wonderfully, wonderfully slim. I also write about being organized with technology. So I've written for 10 years about how to manage your inbox, how to deal with information, how to create Slack interface in a way so that it's not overwhelming you. So this is really like an area that I feel strongly about anyway. But I don't get a lot of unsolicited email, and I would say more than half of it is just junk anyway. It's just spam. Yes, my inbox is slim.

I used to get a lot of pitches through Twitter. But I'm off Twitter, and I do have a web form set up for pitches that are like it could relate to PC Magazine. It could also relate to something that I do my own work on the side. I have a book about remote work called *The Everything Guide to Remote Work*. So sometimes, people pitch me about other things through a web form. But even that is very slim. It's very, very slim.

[00:05:56] BB: Excellent. Okay. Wow. You win the trophy, Jill, for this. My God.

[00:06:03] JD: I have to say, though, like I understand that a lot of other people get bombarded with pitches, and there are ways to certainly triage your email inbox or set up email aliases so that it's not overwhelming you. But if you're going to be productive at your job, and you're going to work on the pitches that matter or the products that matter or the articles that matter, you can't have email coming at you all day and feeling like it's all important. You need to be able to shut that off, quiet down the stream, and focus on what you're doing. I try very hard to really live that, but it's pretty easy when you're not getting many pitches.

[00:06:39] BB: Wow. I feel like you should teach a workshop to journalists about this of like what they can do because you're totally right too. You could just spend the whole day hitting refresh on your dang – you know what I mean. Yes, and just be drowning in that forever, so totally.

[00:06:56] JD: Yes. The problem with email is that it's interruptive. We feel like every time we get a message on our screen saying, "Here's an email message. You need to check it," like you've got to look at it now, but you're going to deal with it later. Now, it's just interrupted everything that you've been trying to accomplish.

[00:07:09] BB: Then your brain is on the other thing with – yes, yes. It's totally. It's not working. Okay. Then are there any subject lines, Jill, that you have seen or received where you actually were like, "Oh, that's intriguing. Tell me more."?

[00:07:23] JD: Yes. So I can tell you what I like, and I can tell you also what I don't like.

[00:07:28] BB: Let's do it.

[00:07:29] JD: Let me start with what I don't like. What I don't like is my product is the new Fitbit of X. My product is the new Kindle of Y. Your product is your own product. Don't try to tell me it is the hot new thing from six years ago in another space. Just tell me what you have. Don't tell me a buzzword that I've heard before.

I think that those subject lines are always trying to trick people into thinking like, "Oh, this is an email from somebody at the Fitbit brand." It doesn't help. It doesn't win you any favors because when that surprise wears off, and you discover the reality in the body of the message, people are annoyed. So don't do that.

I do like a subject line that tells me what's in the message. If it's a pitch from a freelancer, give me the headline. Tell me the headline of the article you want to write. If it's a good headline, that is always going to be the thing that hooks an editor, right? If you can write that headline in a compelling way. So just put that in the subject line and say article pitch: your headline.

[00:08:31] BB: There you go. Okay. Ooh, that's good for freelancers hopefully hearing on this sheet because, yes, they must be – they got to pitch editors to get their story, so all the good stuff. Okay, very good. Now, any other tips you would advise on subject lines.

[00:08:47] JD: If it's an NDA, tell me that in the subject line. Maybe keep it short. Keep it concise. I feel like more it's about having that relationship. So I'm more apt to open an email from somebody if I know them already, right? So establishing the relationship is what matters.

I also really appreciate not just the subject line, but when the body says, "Hey, I have X for you. Are you interested?" You don't have to paste the whole thing to me now if I'm not even sure if it's going to be interesting to me. I get how that that like will save you time, but I feel like I'm more likely to respect the person who says, "Hey, we have a relationship. Before I tell you more, let me just feel you out." Because 85% of the time, I'm going to be like, "No, that's not for me." I will have more respect for you if you just treat me like I'm somebody you know, and we've met before, which we have, hopefully, by crafting your email that way.

[00:09:44] BB: You're leading me to the next question. For people who don't know you, Jill, and you've been in the industry a long time, how do they go about making a relationship with you?

[00:09:52] JD: I think, again, reaching out in a genuine way. So tell me what products you represent. I like that a lot. If you are a PR person, and you represent three products in the tech space, tell me about all three of them. Don't tell me about the one that you think I wrote about last week. Tell me about all three. Maybe I'm thinking about something new coming up. That's another thing. A lot of PR people will send you pitches based on what you just did, what you just published, what you just edited.

[00:10:18] BB: I don't understand.

[00:10:19] JD: I can see where it comes from. It comes from, let's say, AI. AI is the big thing right now in tech. So you've seen that I've written about AI, and you're like, "Oh, she's on the AI beat. I should pitch her things about AI." I see how that makes sense.

But if you follow the body of work, if you know what PCMag does at large, you'll know that we're also interested in video editing software, for example, right? So reach out to me. Tell me what you represent. Keep it short and sweet. That's all. It doesn't need to be more than that. If it's more than that, you're probably wasting your own time. So let's develop a relationship first.

The other way that I develop relationships is, like I said, I don't take a lot of – I don't get a lot of material out of pitches that I get. Usually, I reach out to the PR firms, and the most frustrating thing for me is when I can't find a human being. So there's some generic press at such and such company.com. Nobody responds. That's really frustrating because here I am trying to write about your product or industry or your executive team or whoever, and I can't even get in touch with you.

If you represent a product, make yourself known. Try to get the companies you work for to put your name and email address somewhere on their website so that I can find you. Make it easy from both directions so that we can get in touch with each other and start a relationship that way.

I also – I don't mind having a short phone call with people or a short video call, just to get to know them. Tell me it'll be 10 minutes. Tell me you just want to find out what I'm working on. That's totally okay. I'm open to that. I think most people are. But if I'm looking for you, and I can't find you, that's a real problem.

[00:12:03] BB: Yes. I've heard that numerous times, just like ghosting and then also speed, just like, “Oh, you didn't respond, what, 18 hours later. What the heck? You're not going anywhere.” So, yes, I hear you. I hear you.

[BREAK]

[00:12:19] 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]

[00:12:43] BB: How were your favorite relationships formed, Jill? I don't usually ask this. But do you have like a little story of someone that you want to maybe even shout out like, “Oh, this wonderful publicist.”?

[00:12:53] JD: I don't know if I want to say anybody by name. I will say I've worked with a couple of people recently who represent two or three or four brands or products that are of interest to me. This person has done a really good job of kind of doing what I was just describing, sending a short email. “Hey, I've got something coming up from client X. Are you interested?” If I say, “No, that's not really the right fit for me,” or whatever, she gets that. She's like, “Okay, cool. I'll let you know.”

I feel like there's just like a lot of mutual respect there, and it's a person. I've met her on video calls where she shows up alongside the client. She's just good. Keep in touch once or twice a year. It doesn't need to be more than that. If we had no reason for our paths to cross, you can

send me an email and just say like, "Here's what's going on," in a couple of sentences. So the relationship is there. It exists. I know who she is. She knows who I am. I know what her email addresses are. So if it comes into my inbox, she's not going to get sucked into spam somewhere.

That's great. It's efficient. We get what we need from one another. We both know each other. It's not an overly close or complicated relationship. Earlier in my career, I've had some good relationships with people who would visit the city I was living in and take me out to lunch and want to come get a tour of the offices that we have. Sometimes, that's nice. But when those people then move on to another PR firm in a year or two, it's like, "Well, why did we spend all this time getting to know one another if you're just going to –" You have to move on with your career too. So I'd rather have that nice, tight, efficient relationship with mutual respect. That's the one that works for me.

[00:14:41] BB: Yes, and no time wasting. Also, just to your point of just like, "Yes, if I just say it's a no, hey, it's just a no. Keep on moving. Keep on moving." Do you have any suggestions further, Jill, for maybe aspiring journalist who wishes to be more efficient with their time and management, just because you're such an ace? Again, this is not what we usually ask, but I figure like, "Wait a second."

How – what would you just like your little – someone who's like three years into their job. They're drowning in email. They don't know how to establish relationships. What would you say is like, "Hey, hot tip from Jill right here, journalist friend. You got to do this."?

[00:15:18] JD: Get a mentor.

[00:15:20] BB: Go get a mentor.

[00:15:21] JD: I didn't really have a mentor coming up. I've been doing this for more than 20 years now in some fashion, writing and editing. I didn't really have a mentor. I switched jobs a lot because I was trying to move up and get ahead and all that. I didn't have one person who I could say, "Bring me to your meetings and let me just observe." I had a couple of colleagues

who would offer from time to time. But I didn't have like one point person or somebody to just bounce ideas off of or ask, "How do I do this better?" Having a mentor is so, so, so helpful.

I have two staff members that I've been mentoring lately, people who are much – they're not totally inexperienced, but they're still kind of learning the ropes and getting their footing in the publishing world. It's been really great to work with them because I learned so much from them too about what are the struggles now for people who are just getting into the industry.

I think for a lot of young people, it is the problem of I have a workload put in front of me. But what I'd really like to write about is dot, dot, dot. So how do you figure out a way to shoehorn yourself in to write the things you really want to write? I've been working with two people on that lately, which is a lot of fun because you can do it. I wrote an article a couple of weeks ago that was about dog mushing.

[00:16:40] BB: Oh, how fun.

[00:16:42] JD: For PC Magazine, it wasn't really about dog mushing. But that's what I was – the Iditarod Race was happening. I was kind of interested.

[00:16:48] BB: Oh, yes, yes. I've heard about that thing. How was it?

[00:16:51] JD: So I said, "Well, how can I write about this and make it related to the content that I actually cover?" I just kind of shoehorned an article where I talked about the Iditarod, and I talked about like pacing ourselves through our career. You can't run dogs all day long. They need to take long breaks, and they can't run during the middle of the day when the sun is out because they get too hot.

As a worker, you have to look at your careers, this long journey where you can't push yourself. You have to take appropriate breaks. You have to understand that like not every day is going to be the highlight of your career. You're going to have slow times, and you're going to have really productive times. So like thinking about that pacing. But anyway, a little off-point.

[00:17:31] BB: Well, that's the fun of being an editor. You'd be like, "Well, let me get this in somehow. This is great."

[00:17:35] JD: Yes. You can be creative. Get those interesting pitches out there. Figure out a way to take what it is, the opportunity that you have been given, and make it the opportunity you want.

[00:17:48] BB: Plus one on the mentorship. Oh, Jill. Oh, great. Okay. Before we get into our little like rapid-fire question thing, real quick, exclusives and embargoes, is that ever of interest for PCMag?

[00:18:01] JD: Yes, yes, yes, yes. Usually, it's a new product that's coming out, or an existing big product has something new and exciting happening to it. So we sign NDAs on – nobody signs NDAs anymore, but we agree to non-disclosure agreements all the time.

[00:18:19] BB: Oh, good. Okay.

[00:18:19] JD: Yes. But it's very much the typical technology hardware, technology software kind of stuff.

[00:18:27] BB: Yes, typical stuff anyone would be like, "Yes, that's par for the course. Yes." Okay. Then rapid-fire little portion here, Jill. I'm going to ask you quick little questions, and you let us know your response. Are you ready?

[00:18:40] JD: I'm ready.

[00:18:41] BB: Okay. Video, phone interview, or in-person interview?

[00:18:45] JD: Video, 100%.

[00:18:47] BB: A hundred percent. Meetings in the morning or the afternoon?

[00:18:50] JD: You don't know where I am. you don't know what time zone I'm in.

[00:18:53] **BB**: That's right, yes.

[00:18:55] **JD**: Just tell me when you're available. We'll work it out.

[00:18:57] **BB**: Perfect. Coffee or drinks?

[00:19:00] **JD**: Oh, coffee.

[00:19:01] **BB**: Amazing. Yes, yes. Bullet points or paragraphs in pitches?

[00:19:04] **JD**: Bullets.

[00:19:05] **BB**: Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[00:19:08] **JD**: Either way but not embedded in the document.

[00:19:13] **BB**: In the document, like in the pitch?

[00:19:15] **JD**: Yes.

[00:19:16] **BB**: Yes. Why would people do that? I don't know.

[00:19:18] **JD**: It's like a PDF, and I'm reading it, and it's supposed to be like a beautiful display. I get it. But if you want me to use those images, yes, you got to make them accessible as like already cropped and nice for me.

[00:19:30] **BB**: Agreed. Email or Twitter DM?

[00:19:32] **JD**: Email.

[00:19:33] **BB**: One follow-up or multiple, if at all?

[00:19:36] **JD:** One is good.

[00:19:37] **BB:** Yes. Direct or creative subject lines?

[00:19:40] **JD:** Ooh, both.

[00:19:42] **BB:** Both, okay.

[00:19:43] **JD:** Oh, yes. Be direct but show me what you got.

[00:19:47] **BB:** Get my attention. Get my attention. Okay. Press release or media kit?

[00:19:51] **JD:** I think I want the press release first and the option to download the media kit.

[00:19:56] **BB:** Okay. Then just last words here, Jill. Is there anything you want us to promote, talk about, highlight for you? You have that book, as you mentioned. Where can we get it?

[00:20:08] **JD:** Yes. I love that book. You can get it everywhere. It's available as an e-book or a physical book. It's called *The Everything Guide to Remote Work*. It talks about remote work really with like a very pro-worker point of view. So if you're somebody who's new to remote work or you've been struggling with it for a couple of years now, it is going to tell you.

It's really a guide. You can open it up and flip to the section that you need. So it's going to tell you like how to think about your setup, how to work with your managers and bosses to make sure that you're getting good face time with them, how to make work fun if you are somebody who likes work to be fun, and how to not spend a lot of time at work if you're somebody who likes to have your work life very compartmentalized and separate so that you can have your fun time be your personal life.

All that kind of stuff, digital nomadism, team building, tools that you need, everything, everything, guide to remote work.

[00:21:07] **BB:** Excellent. Do you have a preference of where we buy it or no, Amazon? I want to know. Anywhere works.

[00:21:13] **JD:** I mean, no free rise or anything.

[00:21:15] **BB:** No, of course.

[00:21:15] **JD:** But wherever you like to buy books.

[00:21:18] **BB:** Excellent. Excellent. Jill, thanks for being here today.

[00:21:21] **JD:** It was my pleasure.

[00:21:23] **BB:** Yes. I have to say, everybody, you must read the latest articles because there's a lot of spice to your stuff, Jill, and it's a lot of fun. I'm not going to tell more, people. I'm just going to let you have online fax services. But you also have like Don't F Around at Your Desk Job. So there you go.

[00:21:41] **JD:** No. It's do F Around at Your Desk Job.

[00:21:44] **BB:** Yes. That's what it says. Yes. Go On, F Around at Your Desk Job. You Deserve It. Latest article. You all need to read that, so excellent. Thank you, Jill. Appreciate you.

[00:21:55] **JD:** Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:21:57] **ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Jill Duffy at PCMag. 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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