

EPISODE 189

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Hello, everybody, and welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by OnePitch. Are you looking for an easier way to pitch the right journalists? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn how you can generate a custom media list for every pitch you submit in five minutes or less.

Our guest on today's episode of Coffee with a Journalist is Annalee Armstrong from Fierce Biotech. As the senior editor, Annalee manages a team of reporters in the UK and US that cover daily and long-form news about the biotech industry. During the episode, Annalee talks about pitches and timeliness, circling back with sources about talking with new clients, the biotech and pharma industry's reliance on embargos, and more. Let's dive.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:08] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist, and this is episode 177. Oh, I just love it. We've been doing this a while here. Thank you for listening. Hopefully, you're a publicist that wants to get more inside scoops on how better to make relationships with journalists, how better to pitch. That is what we do here, and we have a lot of fun.

With today is the senior editor of Fierce Biotech, a really fantastic trade pub. If you're in the health tech space, you know it. We're going to talk all about it. Annalee Armstrong is here with us. Welcome, Annalee.

[00:01:41] AA: Thank you so much for having me.

[00:01:43] BB: Yes. Where are you calling in from?

[00:01:47] AA: I live in Charlottesville, Virginia, which is about two-ish hours south of DC, depending on traffic.

[00:01:54] BB: Do you spend time in DC at all?

[00:01:56] AA: I try to get up there as much as I can. I lived there for four years, so lots of friends and events to cover up there.

[00:02:01] BB: Great town, great town. Okay. Annalee, for those who are maybe not as familiar, Fierce Biotech, how would you describe it?

[00:02:10] AA: Yes. So we are an industry trade publication, as you said. We cover drug development, everything from drug discovery all the way until it gets approved. From that point, we pass it off to our friends at Fierce Pharma. We just get to cover all the cool science of discovering new drugs and treating patients. It's great.

[00:02:29] BB: Do you ever go dinner parties and people say, "Oh, what do you do?" You're like, "I cover drugs."

[00:02:33] AA: No. Everybody wants to talk about vaccines. I have my dinner party vaccine spiel.

[00:02:37] BB: Oh, still? Still?

[00:02:40] AA: Oh, yes. Yes.

[00:02:41] BB: Oh, still vaccines. Okay, okay. Fun. Now, as senior editor, and this is why we love having editors on, what is your mandate for writing, and what's your coverage? Because you write a lot but I want to make sure people understand the difference of maybe what you cover versus what others on the staff.

[00:03:00] AA: Yes. So I guess we're a little bit strange at Fierce. We don't have defined beats in the same way that maybe other publications would have. We all have our interests, of course, and like we all have things that we've become mini experts in. For me, my huge interests are Alzheimer's. I love covering central nervous system diseases. I do a lot of gene editing stuff. So those are the things I'm really, really interested in. But we have a really good team. We make

sure that if something is not for us, we pass it around. But, yes, in general, anything in the drug development timeline, we're going to cover that and find the right person for it.

[00:03:38] BB: Speaking of your inbox, how crazy is it in there?

[00:03:41] AA: It is a mess.

[00:03:42] BB: Yes, yes. Okay.

[00:03:44] AA: Yes.

[00:03:44] BB: Everyone really embraces that, by the way, on here.

[00:03:47] AA: Yes. You know what? I used to –

[00:03:48] BB: **[inaudible 00:03:48]** who were like, “Well, actually, it's pristine.” I mean, that's very rare of an answer here.

[00:03:52] AA: Yes. When I first started in business journalism, I was absolutely obsessed with clearing my email out to zero. Then as I got into it, I realized that was absolutely a fool's errand. I just couldn't keep up, and it was stressing me out to try to like clear out my inbox at the end of the day. So I embraced it. Now, it's a mess. I have 342 unread emails right now, and I'm okay with it.

[00:04:15] BB: You're just okay with it. Okay. So do you have a process, though, in like reviewing pitches? Break it down for us on the amount that our PR pitches, versus maybe freelancer pitches, versus your boss telling you something. What is the makeup in there?

[00:04:33] AA: It's mostly pitches. There's, of course, some junk in there. I will have some correspondence with my freelancers. But, yes, it's a lot of stuff to go through. I just – I have to be very quick. That's why I think it's really important to get me with the subject line because I have to know if I need to cover something right away.

[00:04:53] BB: Okay. Then do you, for publicist pitches, file them, tuck them away somewhere, do anything? Tell us more.

[00:05:03] AA: I've heard that a lot of people have their emails kind of auto-delete. I don't have that. I have this like endless archive just in my inbox, which is probably terrible. I have all of these nice folders where things are supposed to go, but I never do it. It's chaos.

[00:05:17] BB: Oh, you're an abandoned folder person or aspirational folder. Okay, okay. I love it. Oh, okay. So then do you ever look up, though, previous pitches where you're like, "I saw something four months ago that was about that, hmm."?

[00:05:33] AA: Yes, absolutely. I do that all the time. I was doing it right before I got on this because we're coming up on a new conference that we cover every year in January. So I was like, "Okay, who pitched us last year? We need to look. I want to see the quality of the pitches, who we were talking to, and that kind of thing now."

[00:05:46] BB: Now, that's a new insight. So for something over a year ago, you were looking and referencing who was pitching us for that event. Okay. This is good to know. Then what do you do about that? Do you then hit them up and say, "Hey, you coming to this conference again? Or what are you doing?"

[00:06:02] AA: Yes. We'll circle back on people, especially who we know have clients that we want to talk to. We'll make sure that we reach out to them ahead of time and if maybe they didn't have what we were looking for. Maybe they have new clients this year. We always – we know that things change, so we want to make sure that if there's anybody new that we get to talk to them first.

[00:06:22] BB: Fascinating. Okay. I would imagine, too, but you checked my assumption that there are a limited number of publicists that have the clients that are of interest for you all. Is that true would you say?

[00:06:36] AA: Yes, absolutely. Biotech is a little bit of a small world.

[00:06:40] BB: Great niche, yes.

[00:06:40] AA: There's quite a few of them. You'd be surprised, I guess, and I have really good relationships with a lot of them. I know that when they email me, they're probably pitching me something good. If it isn't for me, I will typically still click on their emails because I recognize them, and we have that relationship.

[00:06:56] BB: Okay. Then you said, oh, you'd be surprised. So would you say there's like hundreds of firms out there that have this niche? Or you're like, "No, I got five on my hand, and that's all the five I talk to."?

[00:07:07] AA: There's probably like 10 really specific biotech firms that I deal with like –

[00:07:14] BB: **[inaudible 00:07:14]**. Got it. Okay. So then that perhaps is kind of a next question, relationship building. How do folks make relationships with you?

[00:07:23] AA: We have a really intense deadline. I just got off it actually about 45 minutes ago. All morning, we are jamming, trying to get our newsletter out. So I have to make sure that my relationships are built well before that. So the afternoons are when I really have my time to meet people. I love a good like source meet-and-greet call or a PR meet-and-greet call. If they just want to talk about my beat, I think those are really helpful. I work virtually, so I don't get out of the office as much as I would like. That's changing this fall. Like they're finally letting me out of my office, so I'm excited.

[00:07:58] BB: What does this mean? You go to DC now a lot or what?

[00:08:00] AA: No. I get to go to two conferences. So I've been working for Fierce for two and a half years now. This is kind of the first time I've had the opportunity, so really, really looking forward to actually meeting some of these people in person.

[00:08:13] BB: Oh, great. Sounds good. Do you feel that's changing, by the way? Are more reporters stepping out and being more present at conferences? I feel it definitely in the tech world because that's the world I live in. But what would you say?

[00:08:24] AA: Yes, absolutely. I think healthcare and pharma, which is of my universe, I think that it was probably the last kind of industry to really go back to in person, just because of the nature of the COVID pandemic. They were the companies that were so heavily involved. They had to kind of be careful about their reputation in that time. So going back to early events was not something that they wanted to be seen doing. So, yes, we're finally, I think, back full strength.

[00:08:53] BB: I agree. Everyone wants to be together and wants to see people and so forth. So let me further ask you, though. Now that you're going to those, are you setting up meetings to meet publicists? What's your agenda?

[00:09:05] AA: Right now, I'm going to the – I believe it's the European Society for Medical Oncology. I probably have the M wrong. So the ESMO conference, that's the next one I'm going to. I've been reaching out to all of these PRs that I talked about that I have those previous relationships with, asking them who their clients are. I want to come with story ideas, so I can say, "Hey, do you have somebody with a TIGIT therapy? That might be something we're working on." So we're trying to get our themes sorted, which is a whole team effort. Even if one person's going, the whole team is involved in this kind of thing.

[00:09:36] BB: Oh, okay. So you're coming as a pack.

[00:09:38] AA: Yes.

[00:09:39] BB: Ah, I like that. Okay. This is something I typically haven't asked, but I'm going to start asking this in shows now because I think it's quite mysterious. So people want to know about this. Can you walk us through how you decide on the pieces you pick? For instance, hey, every day at 8am we get on a Zoom. We talk about what's up. We talk about what's happening, and then I sign out. Blah, blah, blah. You know what I mean? Like what does that look like?

[00:10:04] AA: We have an absolutely insane and wonderful teams chat that includes myself, our two staff writers, and my UK bureau chief in London. A couple of our freelancers are on there. Well, everyone else is, but they probably mute it because it's just absolutely insane.

[00:10:21] BB: Oh. So the freelancers are in there, too. Everyone's in there.

[00:10:23] AA: Yes. We shoot them assignments from there. So our day starts before I'm even up. Our UK bureau chief, he will start kind of the news flow. He looks at stories, gets our freelancers working. My day starts very early. I have two kids. They get me up at the crack of dawn. So my first pass at my inbox usually happens anywhere from 6am to 7. Today, it was five because we had a particularly early morning with the baby. So there's no bad time to pitch me because I am up at just absolutely insane hours. So, yes, we kind of have this morning thing where James might – the UK editor. We'll work together to get the assignments out.

My team over on the East Coast is Max Bayer. He's in New York, so he starts at normal Eastern Time. We'll get his assignment out. Then we have another person in Chicago, and we'll get her assignment out, so it just kind of like builds throughout the morning. Then we have this crazy deadline rush around 11:00, 11:30 where we try to get the newsletter out. So it's crazy. We send a lot of jokes and a lot of gifts and everything in our teams chat. It's really fun.

[00:11:28] BB: Okay. So it's just a busy frenzy in there, and that's how the communication happens. Okay. This is good because I think people may imagine. At least like I would imagine like, "Oh, there's still a gathering in person." No, I mean, this is like fantasy days and everything, where it's like everyone piles in. Then they all talk about things. The New York Times used to have something that was like legendary for this, like the meeting. But, yes, like a lot of things can happen digitally and without a freaking meeting.

[00:11:54] AA: Yes. We, of course, do at least monthly just Fierce Biotech team meetings, where we – that's when we get to talk about the really fun stuff, the features, the big interviews we're working on. So those are really valuable still. It's just we don't have time in our morning deadline to do that every day.

[BREAK]

[00:12:14] ANNOUNCER: Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to learn about the unique ways OnePitch helps brands

engage with the right journalists? Head to onepitch.co and create your own custom media list in five minutes or less. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:12:37] **BB:** There you go. Okay. When we got on here before we hit the record button, Annalee, you mentioned that you did have some pet peeves about pitches.

[00:12:47] **AA:** I do.

[00:12:48] **BB:** Do you want to spell them out?

[00:12:49] **AA:** Yes, for sure. So like I had never covered an industry that relied so much on embargos as pharma and healthcare does. It's absolutely wild.

[00:12:58] **BB:** I would imagine. Yes.

[00:13:00] **AA:** I can tell you right now, my afternoon is writing two embargos. That's the pace of it.

[00:13:05] **BB:** Why? Is that because it's an FDA thing? Is it like why, the regulation?

[00:13:12] **AA:** I have no idea. It's always been this way since I've been doing it. It just seems to be how the trade pubs and the industry just started interacting. I have to ask maybe some people who've been doing this for 10, 15 years and get a better answer. But it was a shock to me that there's so much new shared ahead of time.

[00:13:30] **BB:** Yes, interesting. My bet would be on regulatory reasons but –

[00:13:34] **AA:** It's not all – well, yes, they always like to release things before or after the market. They're pretty particular about that kind of stuff, so yes. I don't know. It's strange, and it's good and bad. We love having a head start. It allows us to plan. I can make sure I've got the

right people on it. We're not scrambling to push something aside for it. But they're rarely exclusives, and we know that.

But I think what bothers me the most is when a PR firm or a company doesn't respect my time or understand the ask. I recently got an offer. I was doing some late work. It was like 7pm, and I got two embargos come in. One of them, they said, "We have something coming. We don't know what the embargo time is yet, but here it is." So I'm thinking like am I supposed to wait up all night for this? What's – so I get things like that.

Or we'll get a lot, like sending me at like 4pm on a Friday. They'll say, "Okay. Well, we'll send you the press release on Saturday or Sunday." I'm like, "What is your expectation for when I'm going to get this done? Because, first of all, you're asking me to write this thing. Then I have to get an editor to edit it. And then I have to be online available for questions in case the editor has questions." So we're talking multiple people, multiple hours of weekend work.

I just really want to stress to people to just be aware of what you're asking. I know that news breaks all the time. I put in extra or late hours all the time. I was up – I was working till nine last night because I had some stuff to finish up. But I just need people to understand I have a life outside of my job, so it's – that can be really tough.

[00:15:06] BB: I hope that part of the show is about illuminating to people that journalists are people, just like publicists are people. Like we all got a job. We're trying to do the job. We're trying to survive the job.

[00:15:18] AA: One really good example is I once had somebody ask me. There was some breaking news happening, and they asked me if I could interview at 6pm. I said, "No, my son takes a bath at that time, and it's pure chaos in my house." I'll never forget this response. They said, "We're all parents. We understand," But then they offered no alternatives. So I'm always going to pick my kids because he's not going to remember the breaking news I covered when he grows up. But he might remember me singing the Octonaut song with him in the bath, and that's where I want to be, so.

[00:15:51] BB: It's good to know. It's just we got to keep that in mind. Okay. Are there any other pet peeves you wish to put out there?

[00:15:59] AA: You guys did a great job with this particular pet peeve, is the video versus non-video. I –

[00:16:04] BB: Yes. That's a preference question that we'll get to. But, yes, tell us.

[00:16:08] AA: I'm probably an outlier in this, but I do actually prefer like a phone call or a non-video call, just because of my work-life balance. I've got a baby and a toddler, so I'm always scrambling five minutes before an interview to fix my mom bun, so it can be seen. No video takes the pressure off. I can focus on my questions and responses, not everybody can see all the toddler junk behind me. So it's – I really appreciate when that is set in stone before you start. Like if you have it in the meeting invite, we're not doing video, I love that so much.

[00:16:39] BB: Oh. I was just going to say. Put the preference in the invite. Or even like for you, you might even put it in your signature or something.

[00:16:47] AA: Yes, yes, definitely. I think that's especially important when you're doing like quick interviews. When it's like something breaking, and it's like, "Okay, let's not do video, just so you know." I recently did an interview where my husband, who's also a journalist.

[00:17:00] BB: Oh, God.

[00:17:02] AA: I know. He literally threw a blazer at me over my laptop to cover up a David Bowie t-shirt I was wearing when I had like one minute to spare before an interview that I realized **[inaudible 00:17:11]** video.

[00:17:11] BB: That's love. That's love.

[00:17:13] AA: It really is.

[00:17:18] **BB:** Oh, okay. Annalee, I think we are ready now for the questions, the Q&A portion here, the fast fire, if you will.

[00:17:24] **AA:** Okay, let's do it.

[00:17:25] **BB:** So we just covered video and phone interview. So phone it is. How about bullet points or paragraphs?

[00:17:32] **AA:** Bullets.

[00:17:33] **BB:** Bullets. Is there a why to that?

[00:17:35] **AA:** I just need to know the information right up top. I love it when people have more detail later in the email. I will always circle back to that in the writing process. So write as much as you want but give me the highlights at the top.

[00:17:46] **BB:** Highlights at the top. All right. So then that probably answers short or long pitches.

[00:17:51] **AA:** Yes. Well, I guess it's kind of both short. Then feel free to write as long as you want, but make sure the top is very important.

[00:17:56] **BB:** Put it up at the top.

[00:17:57] **AA:** I kind of like that idea of like, yes, here's the three takeaway bullets at the top. Then scroll further if you want to have all the juicy details. I would imagine for your space, like there's lots of lexicon of drugs and all the things that need to be detailed. So I could see that.

[00:18:12] **AA:** Yes. I actually – I have an example of one that I had a couple days ago. It said, this is going to not mean much to most people but, “FDA accepts NDA resubmission for Takeda’s investigational TAK-721 for EoE.” That’s a whole lot of jargon, but it actually tells me like a lot. So resubmission, that tells me that there was drama the first time they tried to submit the drug. So I'm going to go back, dig in my archives, and find what happened to this.

Then investigational, that tells me that it's not approved. So it's likely for my team and not the pharma team. So like there's all these little industry jargon things that might not make sense when you're pitching to maybe NBC or some of the bigger pubs. But, for me, this is great. I love that.

[00:18:55] BB: Okay. This is good. Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[00:19:00] AA: Attached is fine.

[00:19:01] BB: Email or Twitter DM or XDM or whatever we're calling it now?

[00:19:05] AA: Email is the number one best way to get me.

[00:19:08] BB: One follow-up or multiple?

[00:19:10] AA: I don't mind one. Sometimes, it really truly does get lost in the haze of my deadline.

[00:19:15] BB: Direct or creative subject lines?

[00:19:17] AA: I like direct.

[00:19:18] BB: Press release or media kit?

[00:19:19] AA: Press release.

[00:19:21] BB: Press release. A reason for that, why is that?

[00:19:23] AA: I like to, again, just kind of have all of the information right in front of me, and I'll search for more if I need it.

[00:19:29] BB: Okay. So put it right there. Okay. You already answered this but just to emphasize perhaps. You don't have a particular time you read pitches. Is it all the time?

[00:19:39] AA: It's not all the time. Well, it kind of is. I'd be lying if I said it was. Like I said, I do a very early pass, so it doesn't really matter if you send me something late at night. But –

[00:19:51] BB: Because it'll be batched and then reviewed the morning, right?

[00:19:53] AA: Exactly, yes. I really, really do review as much as I possibly can. I go back and go to the previous day wherever I left off. So after my deadline, usually, around 11:30 to noon, that's when I really dig into my inbox and check for everything. So that's a really good time to pitch me.

[00:20:11] BB: Okay. That's a good insight. Okay. Remember, it's ET time, DC. Yes. Okay. Then are there any types of sources you particularly look for?

[00:20:22] AA: Yes. We love analysts. Sometimes, they don't like going on the record, but they always have really incredible insights. I love lawyers. I really love –

[00:20:30] BB: Analysts and lawyers, look at this.

[00:20:33] AA: I know, right? We really love talking to people from like venture capital firms, people who are kind of outside of a company but within the universe still. I always love talking to women CEOs. I always tell PRs like it's hard for me to turn that down. I always want to find out their story in the industry. So, yes, those are the type of people I like to talk to.

[00:20:57] BB: Then are there any last words, Miss Annalee, in terms of what you want to promote or highlight or send you or whatnot?

[00:21:07] AA: Yes. I love cool science. Like I said, I'm always writing about Alzheimer's and cool things like that. Yes. I mentioned that I'm going to be getting out of the office. I'm really looking forward to getting to some of these events. I know the rest of my team is going to our Fierce Biotech Summit in October.

[00:21:25] BB: Yes.

[00:21:26] AA: We're doing J.P. Morgan week, all this kind of stuff. So like we're –

[00:21:29] BB: You're doing the big ones. You're doing the rounds.

[00:21:31] AA: Yes. So we're going to be out there. We're really looking forward to meeting people and finally putting faces to names that are in our inbox.

[00:21:38] BB: Yes. Oh, I love it. Okay. Now, also, just now, this is totally out of left field, but you mentioned Alzheimer's. There's a lot of phenomenal research going on in there. What makes you so interested in Alzheimer's?

[00:21:49] AA: I mean, at this job, I kind of fell into it. But I did lose my grandmother to dementia, so it's kind of – I have this idea that if I can understand this disease as much as possible that it, I don't know, somehow shields me from it, which is not true. But, for me, I really – I just want to know everything I can.

[00:22:05] BB: This is why we love journalists, the most curious people on the planet, in my opinion.

[00:22:09] AA: Yes. What's strange about it is there have been all these breakthroughs. But just by the way my publication works, I cover it when it's in the clinic still. Once it's approved, it goes over to our Fierce Pharma team, and I always assist them. I'll do edits for them when it's something that's newly approved since I was the most recent person covering it. But I watch all of these amazing drugs go through the process, and then they get approved, and I say goodbye to them.

[00:22:31] BB: That's so cool. It's like birthed onto the market. Oh, I love it.

[00:22:34] AA: Yes, exactly.

[00:22:36] BB: Well, Annalee, this has been such a pleasure having you on, despite your insane craziness of days and everything there that we now understand. So just thank you and appreciate you so much.

[00:22:48] AA: Thank you. This has been really fun.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:22:50] ANNOUNCER: Thanks so much for tuning in to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode, featuring Annalee Armstrong from Fierce Biotech. 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]