

EPISODE 224

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:08] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, brought to you by the team at OnePitch. Are you looking for a more efficient way to find and pitch the right journalist? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn more.

Our guest on today's episode of Coffee with a Journalist is Sam Cole, Journalist and Co-Founder at 404 Media. During the episode, Sam discusses 404 Media, its coverage, and its founding in 2023. What makes a great PR relationship for her, and pointers for email and pitch etiquette.

[EPISODE]

[0:00:42] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger and we bring journalists, reporters, editors, sometimes deputy editors, and freelancers to our lovely little podcast to demystify the world of media and how publicists could better work with our lovely media, because we all got a job to do and we're trying to do it well without killing ourselves in inboxes. With us today is Samantha, but Sam, she goes by, Cole, who is a journalist and also the Co-Founder of 404 Media. We often don't have like the founder, the co-founder here, Sam. So, how exciting and welcome.

[0:01:21] SC: It's so good to be here. Thank you, Beck.

[0:01:23] BB: Yes. Thank you. Okay. I asked this of everybody, even if it's the New York Times. How would you describe the coverage of 404?

[0:01:31] SC: Yeah. 404 just started in August of 2023. So, we're a little bit new. It's only, so much time you can call ourselves new, so we're using it, but we are four journalists from Vice. We all worked at Motherboard, which is Vice's tech outlet. We left in August to start our own thing. We're working on a lot of the same beats that we did at Motherboard, so people who know that outlet are already familiar, but we've got a bit of a new twist on it.

Nowadays, we're writing about basically any kind of community, the people who are making places run, the stuff that affects humans in the real world, but as it pertains to technology and online spaces. I write about AI, the adult industry, sexuality online. A little bit of everything, really is like what we all write about. My colleagues write about hacking, and write to repair, and things like that, so it's a bit of a mix, but I hope folks can visit our website and click around a little bit, because I think, we're proud of it. We're really excited to still be going 10 months later.

[0:02:35] BB: Yes. My God. Congrats, congrats. Just congrats on your boldness of starting something yourself and doing that. Okay. I'm sure you get a gazillion emails pertaining to the joys of being a founder. Don't I know it, but how is your inbox as it relates to pitches? Do you get a lot of pitches?

[0:02:59] SC: I do get a lot of pitches.

[0:03:01] BB: Oh, okay. People have found you.

[0:03:02] SC: People have found me. People have found us for sure, which is nice. I appreciate that. My inbox is a disaster zone. I try to keep it under control. My colleagues are some of them are inbox zero people. I'm like, I can't. I can't do it. I'm looking at my inbox right now, I have 120 unread, which I think is not that bad.

[0:03:25] BB: That's a little hot. I'm an inbox zero, so I'm like, "Oh, God. Oh, God."

[0:03:28] SC: You know, they're just all sitting there waiting.

[0:03:30] BB: Yeah. They're all – okay. Okay.

[0:03:32] SC: I try to keep on top of it, but yeah, it's to stand out on my inbox, you have to be special. It's a little of a mess.

[0:03:41] BB: Okay. Is any publicist special?

[0:03:44] SC: Honestly, the publicists in the adult industry are fantastic. I think it is because they have to –

[0:03:50] BB: Wait. What?

[0:03:52] SC: Rise above. Yeah. Oh, yeah. They're my favorites.

[0:03:54] BB: What? Like the publicist for like Ashley Madison? Like, what?

[0:03:59] SC: Yeah. You'll have like a publicist who represents a bunch of clients. So, they'll have a bunch of people on their roster, basically. It might be like platforms, it might be individual performers who they represent, but yeah, they're always fantastic. The sources in this industry are always such a joy to talk to or always very open to talking and whether I'm writing a story or not. They're like, "Yeah. Let's hang out. Let's get coffee. Let's get on the phone. Talk through what's going on with you lately." Yeah. So, there are some standouts for sure.

[0:04:28] BB: Wow. I have not had anyone on here who said, "Oh, yeah. I'm the publicist from the adult industry."

[0:04:34] SC: Yeah.

[0:04:35] BB: Yes. Hey, every business and industry has publicists.

[0:04:39] SC: Oh, yes.

[0:04:40] BB: Okay. Inbox is a bit crazy and you don't follow suit to your colleagues who are the inbox zero maniacs. How do you at all, if anything makes sense of it? Do you flag? Do you save? Do you write people back four months later?

[0:04:57] SC: If I don't reply as soon as I read something, I will reply in four to six business days. It's like, it's really there is no in between.

[0:05:06] BB: Wow. Wow.

[0:05:08] SC: It's like, it either is immediately got my attention or I remember it a week later and I'm like, "Oh, shit. I needed to reply to that a long time ago." It's really chaotic, but I am on top of things if I'm in the replying mode, but it's a task that doesn't get done, if I don't write it down or write in my little like to-do list stuff, like reply to so and so. I star things a lot in Gmail, so like that's kind of a way to like get my own attention. It's like you have to look at this.

[0:05:35] BB: Oh, okay. You, self-star.

[0:05:37] SC: Yes. Doing a lot of self-starring, but there's really not a good rhyme or reason to it. It's something that I need to do some soul-seeking about.

[0:05:44] BB: I don't think anyone's figured it out. No one who's in this show.

[0:05:48] SC: Apologies to anyone who I owe an email to. This is why.

[0:05:52] BB: This is, totally. Okay. Now if they're not a special person, let's say, is there ever subject lines that you go, "Oh, I have to open that."

[0:06:02] SC: Yes. I think so. The ones that, so I was looking before the show, because I was like, "Oh, I should probably look at what I have here." Open up my spam and trash and see what's in there. Honestly, the ones that get filed away to trash and just spam are usually the ones that don't tell me immediately what's going on. It's like I want to know in the subject line what we're talking about and not like you won't believe this secret to whatever. It's like, let's just tell me upfront, because I really am not going to read this whole email to figure it out, like we're not doing clickbait in my inbox. That's insane.

Yeah. The ones that really stood out to me are just straight to the point in the subject line, who's doing the action, make it a good active sentence who were talking about what's happening to them. I don't love like when people like do all caps and or anything in subject lines. I think it's messy or like –

[0:06:55] BB: It is. Looks a little spammy. It looks spammy. Does it look spammy?

[0:06:57] SC: It looks spammy or like emojis. Things like that. Do end up getting, they end up going to spam automatically sometimes. Unless it's like a newsletter that I'm always reading. If it's coming from someone who has some news to share and they're not putting immediately what they want or what they're bringing me. It's not getting right. Unfortunately.

[0:07:17] BB: Yeah. Okay. Good to know. What's on your just story list or/sources? Who do you want to hear more from?

[0:07:28] SC: That's a good question. I mean, I think honestly the best, the best folks that work in public relations who I've had relationships with are the ones who bring me stories, or tips, or updates about whatever industry they're working in without really having something to sell or to promote. It's like, "Oh, I saw this thing and I thought you might be interested in it." Just in general or just text me a link to the story it's like, "Oh, did you miss this?" It's like, "I thought this might be interesting for you, your beat in general."

They're not like, I have someone for you to speak on that specifically, like I don't really go for the like, we have an expert on this topic that I just am not writing about. I've gotten a lot of, like "We have an expert on the Trump trial." It's like, that's not something I'm covering at all.

[0:08:16] BB: Yeah.

[0:08:17] SC: Yeah. It's like, okay. I didn't need that.

[MESSAGE]

[0:08:23] 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 CONTINUED]

[0:08:46] SC: But yeah, it's the people who are like, who aren't really pushing any kind of particular client, but if I did come to them and say, "Hey, I'm writing this story. Do you know anyone? Do you have anyone on your rolodex, your speed dial who would be a good fit to speak on this? They're like, "Yes. Absolutely." They take it out from there, but even when we're not really working on something particular, it's like, "Hey, this could be something good for you." It works both ways. It's like building that kind of relationship back and forth is, is always good. So, those are the folks that I always, I replied to their messages always.

[0:09:23] BB: I'm so glad you mentioned relationships. How do you like to make relationships with, let's say, publicists? Is it an in person? Is it just, hey, be consistent via email? Hey, eventually, I'll see you out in the streets. Maybe when I go rolling back to New York, whatever, like how does that look for you?

[0:09:38] SC: I think it depends on the person. I think being consistent over email, obviously is like great. I usually don't have like a lot of bandwidths to like get on a call every time there's something to discuss or like hop on a zoom. It's like, I don't want to really want to like block out a specific half hour of my day to like talk about something that I don't even know if it's going to be like, yeah, I'll do that for some people, but like not if I don't really know what we're going to be talking about. Over email is always great.

Texting, if we're like if we already have like an established relationship or like seeing people – I see people at like events, industry events and things like that. That's always really fun and fantastic. Just like seeing people organically and going from there is always really good. But yeah, I mean and it's also, I'm in LA now, so like getting around is a pain in the ass. It's like a coffee meet is like okay.

[0:10:32] BB: That's a three-hour affair.

[0:10:34] SC: I think your – wisely. Yeah. It's like I have to take the afternoon off.

[0:10:38] BB: Yeah, exactly. Oh, man. By the way, I mean, this is totally an aside, but how has the transition been? We were talking at the earlier part of the show and I was like, "Oh, my. Oh,

my.” Because I spent a lot into time in New York. I used to live in LA when I was at UCLA blah, blah, blah. It's like, “Oh, totally different planet.”

[0:10:56] SC: Yeah. I was a New Yorker for 10 years. I recently relocated to LA. I was trying to skip the winter basically was the idea. 10 years of New York winter really takes a toll. Although I'm finding out what May gray is. I'm told that June gloom is also a thing. I'm like, I feel kind of tricked. I don't know. I don't know about this.

[0:11:21] BB: Yes. It is the thing, like I'm looking out right now at my window. I just now see there is the sun peeking through, but it's, yeah.

[0:11:28] SC: The sun just came out. It's one o'clock.

[0:11:31] BB: Yeah. It's one o'clock. It's past one o'clock. For those who maybe don't know, there's this thing that is seriously 60 days. It's in May. It's in June. It is a blanket of gray that hits like the coastal for maybe three, five miles. If you're anywhere coastal, it's just, it's like a blanket every day, but it sucks, because it's not rain. There is no any of that coming. No, it's just this blanket and it's because of the temperatures and blah, blah, blah, but yeah.

[0:11:58] SC: Yeah. It's cold.

[0:11:58] BB: Well, yeah. Then it's chilly.

[0:12:01] SC: I'm already like, oh, like 65 is cold. I'm like, “Oh, I'm bundled up.” It's 65 degrees. I think my New York friends would be like, “Shut up. You're ridiculous.”

[0:12:10] BB: Yeah. They would be. They would be. Just keep that to yourself. Okay, Sam, so we talked about a little bit subject line. We talked about inbox zero. No. Okay, star system for flagging, whatever, whatever you'll occasionally get on a zoom. If there's like enough meat to what we are talking about, because we don't have time to be on zoom all day. How about, and we talked about then relationships and so forth. Is there anything that really just grinds your gears? It's like you just cannot, no, no.

[0:12:42] SC: I have a website and I have a Twitter and like a lot of different social media platforms and lots of services for people to find me. On all of them, I pretty much always say my personal email address, if you have discovered it is not for PR. It's not for pitches. It's not like I have my work email everywhere. On LinkedIn, I say this is not a good place to reach me. It's like, I'm pretty clear about like how and where to contact me. People just can't figure it out anyway. It's like, I get pitches in my personal email and they're always unrelated to anything I do. It's like fashion industry pitches, political pitches. It's like I don't, I have no interest in covering like the things that people are pitching me in my personal email and they haven't followed the directions. I assume they're getting it from a list that's out there.

[0:13:31] BB: Oh, you're on a listserv. Sorry.

[0:13:33] SC: I'm on a list, which is fine, but still, it's like, do you like a little bit of research into who you're contacting. I'm sure that's a gripe that you hear a lot, because you know, totally offbeat, like here's the latest dog treat. It's like, that's not at all anything that I have ever written about, but good luck to you. I'm deleting this. Then replying and following up and getting kinds of like antsy about why I'm not replying in a personal email address thread is like, please, get a grip. Then on LinkedIn, it's like people will pitch me things and I completely miss them on LinkedIn, because I have on my LinkedIn, like I don't check it.

[0:14:08] BB: Well, because LinkedIn is now a waste land. It's also, there's so much damn spam on it. They have not solved that. That's a big problem.

[0:14:16] SC: It's so much spam on LinkedIn. Yeah. So, I'm like, "Don't even try to like contact me here."

[0:14:20] BB: It is. I feel – sacred spot at one point, but I got away like three or four years ago. Now, it's just junk and bots, but okay, you know what? You bring up a point which I have not seen solved. This is not going to be something we solve in OnePitch, but that's okay. The point is, how do you scrub? How do you as a journalist go like, let me scrub? I mean, every media database is trying to have the most up-to-date stuff, as are we, for example, but I wish there was a way that you could self-select and be like, "Hey, heads up. I'm a journalist here's

legitimately who I am. I need none of these anywhere, these old emails or ones that still get to me.” You know what I mean?

[0:14:58] SC: I mean, how do I like get them out of my own inbox?

[0:15:02] BB: I don't know how that is or how that could be.

[0:15:04] SC: Yeah. I don't like a short, of like replying and being like, “Hey, this is not really my beat or what I'm interested in.” I don't know. It's like I'm deleting things as they come in and not responding if they're completely off base. I would be interested to know if that is like if that's not kosher. If that's very rude to just delete people's pitches, but when they haven't really like put any kind of like effort into reading about what I write about and pitching me. It's like, you haven't put any effort into why am I putting effort in this. I say, “Hey, no, thank you.” But maybe that would help select out the spam that I'm getting and make it – maybe I'm just contributing to the problem by not telling people, no. I don't know.

[0:15:43] BB: It's gracious to think that I would say though, even with, and many people have said this here is even though you spend the time even to reply. Hey, just so you know, this is not what I'm interested in. This is how not to connect me or whatever. They will still do it.

[0:15:58] SC: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

[0:16:00] SC: Because it's a bot, or someone ignored it, or someone sound monitoring this inbox, whatever, whatever. I feel like even the good effort that you try to make so often is ignored, which is sad, which is why we're here on this podcast. But yeah.

[0:16:12] SC: Doing the Lord's work.

[0:16:13] BB: We're trying. We're really trying. Okay. We talk about this usually on the show, but I wonder since you're a co-founder, Sam. But you tell us like is there a story approval process that you all run through? Because I think it's important for people to know whether it's an editor, a founder, in your case, a reporter, a string, or whatever, like how does this story actually get the green light to go?

[0:16:34] SC: Yeah. That's a good question. I think a big outlet, like Vice, from my experience was you have editors and the journalists bring pitches to editors. If they can have an easy kind of like a headline ready to go and say, "Here's my angle." Then that's usually how they're editor would respond. It's like a yes. Go for it. Here at 404 there's only four of us. We're all –

[0:16:56] BB: That's cool. That's easy.

[0:16:57] BB: It's like at school. That's easy.

[0:16:58] SC: Yeah. Yeah, it makes it easy. We also have a fellow joles until the end of June for the first time, so that's been great. There are four of us on stuff and its really just kind of like we throw things in Slack and say, "Do you guys think this is a – will you guys think this is worth going after?" Yeah. It's really casual. Honestly, one of the things that doesn't work as far as getting things approved is if it's been covered a bunch before, we don't really go for that.

I think, yeah, that's something that I see a lot, honestly in pitches is like someone will pitch and say, "You might be interested in this. It was also covered in the Wall Street Journal and Wired, and in The Verge." It's like, that's the opposite of what I want to see. I want to see that no one has written about this or that you're offering is an exclusive or that I would be the first to write about whatever this was. That's something we look for. It's like, if it's been covered a bunch, we don't do a lot of aggregating and like The Verge or Wired might, but yeah, we don't have a lot of time or energy to like write a bunch, so we are very selective. But yeah, that's the process. It's just like, "Hey, are you guys interested in this? This kind of grab your eye also or get a gut check and then go for it. Pretty simple.

[0:18:04] BB: Okay. Very helpful. Sam, we have a list of quick-fire questions, so here we go. Video or phone interview?

[0:18:12] SC: If I'm doing the interviewing video.

[0:18:15] BB: Okay. Bullet points or paragraphs in a pitch?

[0:18:18] **SC:** Bullet points.

[0:18:20] **BB:** Short or long pitches? Although, that could be solved by the bullet points, but you tell us.

[0:18:26] **SC:** Short.

[0:18:26] **BB:** Okay, short. Images attached or drop box zip file/

[0:18:31] **SC:** Attached, probably. Unless they're like huge images, I guess. Yeah.

[0:18:36] **BB:** Okay. Twitter or a DM of any sort? We already covered that, but just to clarify.

[0:18:42] **SC:** Yeah. I mean, people can DM me. That's fine.

[0:18:43] **BB:** Okay. Okay. One follow-up or multiple?

[0:18:47] **SC:** Multiple. I need multiple, unfortunately.

[0:18:51] **BB:** Okay. This is good. Say it out loud. Say it proud. Okay. Direct or creative subject lines?

[0:18:57] **SC:** Direct. Always direct.

[0:18:58] **BB:** Yes. Press releases or media kit?

[0:19:01] **SC:** Give me the whole kit, if you got a kit. Why not?

[0:19:04] **BB:** Let's do it. Is there any particular time you read pitches?

[0:19:08] **SC:** In the morning.

[0:19:09] **BB:** Okay. Morning. Morning. LA time. PT time.

[0:19:11] SC: Yeah.

[0:19:12] BB: Good to know. Sam, is there anything we can do to celebrate, to tout, to just give you a little spotlight on any of the great stuff you're doing? Tell us, tell us.

[0:19:23] SC: People can visit 404media.co. Obviously, that's the easiest way to find us and to get access to our work. We're a subscriber based. We rely on subscribers to keep the lights on. Yeah, if you're interested, sign up. If you want to support, sign up. Yeah, and keep up with us. We also have a comment section that I think is really fun. People can jump in and comment on what they find interesting. That's for subscribers too. Yeah, and we have a podcast. If people are into this podcast, they might be into the 404 Media Podcast. That's –

[0:19:53] BB: Right on the top of the website, by the way.

[0:19:54] SC: Yeah. Everywhere you get them, that's where you can listen.

[0:19:56] BB: That's perfect. Sam, thanks for being on here today. Sam Cole, she's a Co-Founder, wow, and Journalist of 404 Media. Check it out. Thanks, Sam.

[0:20:07] SC: Thanks, Beck. This was fun.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:20:10] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode with Sam Cole, Journalist and Co-Founder at 404 Media. 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, but until then, start great stories.

[END]