

EPISODE 225

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] 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 journalists? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn more.

Our guest on today's episode of Coffee with a Journalist is Tanner Saunders, Senior Hotels Reporter at The Points Guy. Tanner covers all things travel, including how to redeem points for max value, the latest and greatest in credit cards and perks, and scenic stays around the globe to check out. During the episode, he discusses his history in travel reporting and what The Points Guy beat reporters cover, how he builds symbiotic relationships with publicists, and what travel stories and trends are most compelling to him right now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:51] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist, and I'm Beck Bamberger. We're here to demystify the world of PR and really working with our media friends and reporters, editors, freelancers, et cetera, all the people that make the media happen frankly on a day-by-day basis. It is a job, and it is a lot of work, so we are here to understand it more and make better relationships.

With us today talking about travel and hotels and don't we all want to talk about hotels, we have the Senior Hotels Reporter from The Points Guy, Tanner Saunders, here. Wow, Tanner. I'm excited to chat with you.

[00:01:31] TS: Me too. I'm excited to chat with you.

[00:01:31] BB: Because I love hotels, and I like the hotel space. Let's get into it. First off, for maybe those not as familiar, what would you describe as The Points Guy coverage and focus?

[00:01:43] TS: Yes. The Points Guy way back in the day started out as a blog. It was a blog, and now we are a major travel media company. We have a ginormous audience. We have a huge editorial team. But we cover everything from how to use points and miles, how to earn points and miles to travel specifics, where to go on those points and miles, just travel without points and miles across the board, which is kind of where I fit in. But it's fun. I think we're one of the last publications that still have true-beat reporters.

I write a little bit about everything, but my beat is hotels. We have an aviation team. We have a cruise team. We have a full credit cards team. We really are just like an all-encompassing travel site with that niche of points and miles.

[00:02:27] BB: Can you imagine your job? Well, I mean, this is the fun of media, where it's like, "I write about credit cards and how best you can use them." That's wild to me. That's wild to me. But just as wild as my only coverage is Meta and everything that Facebook is effing up and whatever else. So, yes, totally makes sense.

[00:02:46] TS: Yes. I mean, we do it all. It's fun, too, because one of the cool things about The Points Guy is, yes, we are all beat reporters, but we do really get the chance to kind of dabble in everything that we want to. I had never really written about credit cards, so I went to The Points Guy. Now, I can whip out a credit card article like nothing, so right? As journalists, we're always growing, right? We're always learning. It's our job to figure out something you don't know and then distill it down to everyone.

[00:03:11] BB: In case anyone's wondering, it's like there's eight million-plus readers a month to The Points Guy. I just want to throw that out there. That's on your website, so putting that out there. A lot of people consume and are on the site all the time because it's usable information I imagine. Do you ever get good feedback like that? Yes, tell us.

[00:03:27] TS: Oh, I was going to say, but actually this ties into that, what you were going to say. Probably our best product is our daily newsletter.

[00:03:32] BB: Oh, okay.

[00:03:34] TS: I don't know the exact latest numbers, but we have – I want to say it's like 1.2 million subscribers, and our open rate usually sits around like it's high, like over 60%. We reach that many people every day. But what's fun about it is we kind of take turns and shifts. I will write the newsletter for two weeks. When you're getting it, it might be kind of hotel-heavy because that's my beat. But it's fun. You get to know me as a journalist. You don't just see like, “Oh, it's The Points Guy.” It's like you're talking to Tanner at The Points Guy. With that, our readers love to email us, and I love to get the emails back from them. They're so funny. Most of them are highly positive.

[00:04:17] BB: Okay, yes. We don't usually hear this part, so tell us. Tell us.

[00:04:20] TS: Yes. We hear back from readers like, “Hey, Tanner. I took your advice. I went and stayed at that hotel.” I write a lot about all-inclusive resorts, and I've got a bunch of emails that were like, “You talked us into it. You got us to the right one, and that's amazing.”

Sometimes, it's the opposite. I've also had people say like, “Hey, I don't know what you were thinking recommending that hotel. But I went and my experience wasn't great.” Well, that's not the fun part, but it gives us a catalyst to be like, “Okay, what's going on with this hotel,” and gives us an opportunity to say, “Let's get someone back there to check it out.” It's fun. Our readers are really engaged. They're smart. They're active travelers.

[00:04:52] BB: They'll tell you.

[00:04:53] TS: Yes. They want to know. Also, I like to say part of what I do as a travel journalist is I'm helping people spend money, a lot of money sometimes. There's a lot of responsibility that comes with that, so I want to hear it. I want to hear their feedback.

[00:05:06] BB: Yes. Oh, I love that, the reader feedback. Okay. Now, what about PR pitches?

[00:05:13] TS: Yes. Oh, my gosh, which is why I'm here today.

[00:05:15] BB: That's right. That's right.

[00:05:17] TS: It's such an interesting world, right? My career, I've been in-house my entire time. I've had so many different interactions with publicists and sort of learning how they operate. My first job, I was an editorial assistant at Thrillist. One day, I just noticed like, "Oh, I'm starting to get a lot more emails than I ever did." That's when I realized like, "Oh, your name is on a list."

[00:05:43] BB: Yes. Your name – yes, yes. Yes, it is.

[00:05:45] TS: But let me tell you. I love PR people and those emails because when I first started, I was so poor living in New York City and working at a food and drink website.

[00:05:54] BB: Oh, my God. Right.

[00:05:55] TS: That's when I started realizing like, "Oh, these publicists want to feed me."

[00:05:59] BB: That's right. They do.

[00:06:00] TS: I don't know if I could pay my electric bill. But me and my roommate were eating at the best restaurants in New York every single. I had it lined up. Yes, that was sort of my first introduction. Now, man, I've been in the industry for a minute, and there's the good. There's the bad. But mainly, there's the many. I would say there's the many.

[00:06:20] BB: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Thank you for mentioning that and just giving us an under the cloak of what's going on. More specifically, though, your inbox and how you manage it. What does that look like? Because now you're telling us, "Okay, I got reader feedback coming in." You probably have your day-to-day editorial stuff going on. Where is the percentage of pitches from PR people, but also how do you manage them?

[00:06:47] TS: Yes. Man, oh, man, oh, man. I would say probably like 70% of my email every day are PR pitches. It's nonstop, and I don't know. I think at The Points Guy, we take a little bit of a different take or at least my team at The Points Guy. I don't want to speak for everyone. Also, speaking for myself mostly but my team kind of operates this way. But we're in the mindset that the more, the merrier. I personally get a little confused by a lot of –

[00:07:17] BB: Well, Tanner. Yes.

[00:07:19] TS: Yes. Well, I think I get a little confused by a lot of my other people in the space who are so protective of their email. I get it. There's a lot to look through. But once you're established, when would say I'm pretty established, I'm looking for the names that I know are going to deliver. I'm looking for the subject lines that are going to click me in. If I get 15 emails in a row and they're not – the subject doesn't get me. It's not a name of someone who I trust is going to just have it there right for me. Then I just select all, unread. That's because, otherwise, we would all spend all day reading every single email.

[00:07:53] BB: Yes, you would.

[00:07:53] TS: You have to get me. But I say the more, the merrier because I like to know what's going on. I also write a monthly news column. Sometimes, those emails that I might have passed on first glance end of the month when I'm trying to fill that column up, I'm back there looking for those stories. I want to see it. The travel space is extra interesting, right, because we're dealing with every hotel in the world, every airline. There's so much to cover.

[00:08:20] BB: Every day it's changing. Every day it's changing. I mean, sure, if you're writing about AI, yes, that's changing, too. But my God, travel? Are you kidding me? Yes, I'm with you on this. How it evolves – yes, go ahead. Keep going.

[00:08:32] TS: Oh, there's every hotel. Hotels are a really interesting space, right? Say we're talking about a luxury hotel. That property might have an agency that represents them. Then the brand might have an agency that represents the whole brand. Then we're talking about like a Hilton or a Hyatt. They have their collection, like the luxury collection at Marriott. They have their [inaudible 00:08:54]. There might be like five different people pitching.

[00:08:56] BB: But then you have regional ones. Yes.

[00:08:58] TS: Exactly. There are so many layers.

[00:09:00] BB: There are, and this is very publicly known. I do travel writing totally as a fun thing of the 10-plus years. Yes, you got the agency, regional agency, regional head, regional director. It's a lot. It's a lot. Now, not the small, independent, three hotels in the whole group type of thing, typically not. But when you're talking about more the big boxes, oh, it is vast and wide. I'm like how do you organize that just from a agency perspective?

Anyway, okay, Tanner, this is good. Bottom line is you like to get emails. You open them up. You go back.

[00:09:31] TS: Yes. I don't – I wouldn't necessarily say I love to get emails, but they're there. The good thing I like about it is when I need something, I can go back and find it, right? Say I'm updating an article. I just need a picture of a St. Regis in Hawaii. Search the name of the hotel. Look, I've got three emails. Hopefully, there's already images in there. I can update that, knock it out, and keep moving.

[00:09:53] BB: Yes, exactly. Yes. Okay. That's another thing we have found so many times on the show just to reiterate. A lot of journalists use their inbox as their own personal search file. They'll look back at things six months ago and go, "Oh, great. I do need that expert on that." I'm sure you're not going way back to six months maybe, Tanner. But it sounds like you do search to find what is relevant for what you need.

[00:10:17] TS: Yes, exactly. Yes. Sometimes, actually, I have gone back six months.

[00:10:21] BB: Oh, see.

[00:10:23] TS: If it's back there and I'm looking for a contact, that's the best way to do it.

[00:10:28] BB: Okay. What about relationships? Now, you're based in New York City, correct?

[00:10:34] TS: Yes.

[00:10:35] BB: Great. Capital of everything. Do you want to still – I should say still. Do you want to meet for a happy hour, for a coffee, for a lunch, for a dinner, da, da, da, da? Is that a way to make relationships in your mind? Or, no, just please email you and get the hell out of my space?

[BREAK]

[00:10:54] 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]

[00:11:17] TS: Yes. I'm definitely of the let's go grab a drink. Let's go grab a coffee. I have to be at this point like a lot more selective. I mean, sometimes it's a little tricky being in New York because it's where everyone is. But I don't know. I think, to me, it's symbiotic, right? We are helping each other out. We need each other often times to get the things that we need to tell the stories. At the end of the day, it's all about telling the story or writing the article to give the information to plan the trip. But, yes, I've gotten some of the best opportunities by spending time with publicists.

Also, another thing about it is we are competing right against other major brands, and so we want to win those exclusives. I have found that I've gotten those exclusives just by keeping strong relationships. If that means let's go to lunch and also thank you for lunch, I would always go to lunch. I love lunch. Then those have helped me get some big wins down the line. I try to do that frequently. Our editorial team is pretty remote because we're sort of everywhere.

[00:12:17] BB: Yes, of course.

[00:12:18] TS: I pop into my office. I try to pop into my office on Tuesdays here in the city to show my face at the office and say hi to everyone. But then, really, I use that time –

[00:12:25] BB: Show up. Yes.

[00:12:26] TS: Yes. I really use that time to have meetings throughout the day. They might see me like I'm running in like, "Hey, guys. I'm just here to use the bathroom, but I promise I'm working." Yes. [inaudible 00:12:35].

[00:12:35] BB: You saw my face.

[00:12:36] TS: You saw my face.

[00:12:37] BB: Yes. You saw my face.

[00:12:38] TS: [inaudible 00:12:37] was to see my face. Then my poor husband, he's like, "When do I get to see your face?" I'm like, "We'll worry about that later."

[00:12:44] BB: Oh, oh. I take it he's not a journalist.

[00:12:48] TS: He is not, but he's a photographer.

[00:12:50] BB: Oh, well. He's adjacent-ish. Yes, yes.

[00:12:53] TS: Yes. We're kind of in the same world.

[00:12:54] BB: Yes. Ooh, he must be fun to travel with, though, because then you could be like, "Hey, babe. Take all the photos. I need this, this, this, this, this, and this."

[00:12:59] TS: Oh, my gosh. Yes. We are the dream team in that way. Actually, just publicists have been pulling out for us lately, getting him gigs, shooting events and stuff. A lot of that is just because of relationship building. They trust me, so they trust him, and then –

[00:13:18] BB: Yes. They trust by extension. That's right.

[00:13:21] TS: Yes, yes.

[00:13:22] BB: What better endorsement then? Here's my husband, my partner.

[00:13:25] TS: Yes.

[00:13:26] BB: Okay. You like lunch. You like to go out and about. But selectively, you only have so much time. Sometimes, it's a flyby. Totally get it.

[00:13:34] TS: Yes.

[00:13:35] BB: How do you know for your own sake when a story is worth pursuing? You get a pitch let's say. You're like, "Huh, interesting. Okay. Can I do something with that?" Is there a process you run?

[00:13:48] TS: Yes, multiple facets to this. Obviously, there's your gut intuition. Part of it, I think, being a good in-house journalist is that you really have to have a feel for your brand. I know my audience forwards and backwards and what we try to do. We, like many publications, start with a morning pitch meeting. If I see anything that's come through, a story idea, then we go with it. I love just a hard news release. This hotel has opened. That's – honestly, if every hotel could just send me like – I'm always working on a list of hotels that are open. Just like, "Yes, here it is. I can knock this out in 300 words." That's going to be a quick yes.

Then it starts to get a little more dicey as you're going into feature ideas or profiles. I think one thing that's really hard and I feel for the publicist in this space is you might represent 20 hotels or 20 destinations, right? You're trying to figure out a way to weave these altogether. But unfortunately, those are often the emails that get ignored by me because what am I supposed to do with a list of –

[00:14:55] BB: Your 20 properties in 17 different countries. Yes, yes.

[00:14:58] TS: Exactly. But it's nice. I think a lot of publicists find really interesting ways to sort of get into that. Leaning on the trends and sort of digging into what people are actually searching about and talking about. I think a really good example of that would be this kind of phenomenon that's happened in the last year and a half with concert tourism, right?

[00:15:19] BB: Oh, big time.

[00:15:21] TS: Yes. Here's Taylor Swift hotels in Europe that you can book last minute. Cool, I'm going to jump into that and see, oh, what is still available. Is there a story I can dig out of that?

[00:15:32] BB: Which, by the way, we heard you're a Swiftie fan, right?

[00:15:35] TS: I am mega – I'm actually wearing my Swiftie, my Taylor Swift [inaudible 00:15:39]. We went to Paris to see Taylor for our honeymoon. [inaudible 00:15:42].

[00:15:43] BB: Okay. That's the level. Okay. You're like, "Yes, I will research the hotels available. Yes."

[00:15:48] TS: I sure will, yes. I don't know. It's like a mix. But one thing I think that's hard in the travel space that you don't see as much of but I really buy it when I find a good one is the stories of the people behind the scenes. If I get a subject line that's like – I'm just making this up but like, "This has been the doorman at The Mark for 40 years." I want talk to him. Let me talk to him.

[00:16:11] BB: Yes, yes, yes. Oh, I think it was the New York Times. They did a profile on the bartender there. Do you know which one I'm talking about? I'm going to find it for you because I was like, "Oh." It was a great, beautiful profile piece of someone who has the decades of seeing every celebrity, every person you can imagine. It was like, "Ooh, ooh, dang." The property is the second piece of it. It's really the person. That's the –

[00:16:34] TS: Yes, exactly. That's a great way to put it. I think that's the thing that gets lost sometimes is that the whole point of travel is oftentimes the people that you encounter along the way. There are so many little stories waiting to be told, but I'm always battling against the fact. Like I just said, there's 40 gazillion hotels in the world, and there's just me to see it all. You got to help me find them.

[00:16:59] BB: Yes, yes. Okay. Ooh, I really liked that point on the people, the person. Well, we'll talk about this later. But nothing is like a story of this beautiful hospitality, a special way the tour guide made you feel or that concierge or something. God, it's so missed I feel in a lot of properties. But then when you do experience that, oh, man, you remember it for life.

[00:17:25] TS: Yes, yes. You will always remember that.

[00:17:26] BB: You really do. You do. Yes.

[00:17:27] TS: Exactly.

[00:17:29] BB: Okay, Tanner. We have a quick-fire couple of questions. Are you ready?

[00:17:33] TS: Yes.

[00:17:34] BB: Video or phone interview?

[00:17:36] TS: I think video. I like to see the person, but it's just honestly at the rate that I go and travel, I might be doing an interview in a phone booth at an airport.

[00:17:45] BB: There you go. There you go. Yes. Okay. Bullet points or paragraphs in a pitch?

[00:17:49] TS: Bullet points.

[00:17:50] BB: Bullet points. How long or short for a pitch?

[00:17:54] TS: This is what I would say. Hit me in your subject line with a great paragraph. Put the press release at the bottom if it's that type of pitch. If it's longer than two or three solid paragraphs, then I might check out halfway through.

[00:18:09] BB: Might. Emphasize might. Yes. Images attached or a Dropbox zip file?

[00:18:15] TS: Oh, doesn't really matter how they are, just as long as they're somewhere, and I can download them. That's my number one pet peeve is just have the photos in there. I might have story published by the time you wake up the next morning. If I have to wait for a photo, it just gets – it just – It's such a –

[00:18:34] BB: Oh, my God. It drives me crazy, too.

[00:18:37] TS: Yes.

[00:18:37] BB: It drives me – the top thing for me is the link that you sent for the photos for me to download is now deleted or expired. I just did this this week. Now, I have to ask you, “Okay, could you resend?” I'm like, “What? Oh, God.” Yes. I feel you on that. Okay. Email or DM of any sort?

[00:18:57] TS: Do not DM me.

[00:18:59] BB: Great. Noted.

[00:18:59] TS: Do not DM me Instagram. LinkedIn, sure, that's fine. Send me an email. I have gotten a voice memo on Instagram that was pitch, and I blocked the person because I was like, “This is not cute. It's not fun, and this isn't important.” I don't know. I just think that it's so strange.

[00:19:17] BB: It's not the right portal. It's not the right portal. Yes. I understand.

[00:19:21] TS: Also, in contrast to that, I think I might be one of the last people who still just picks up the phone and calls. If I'm working on a story, I will call a publicist and say like, “Hey, it's Tanner.” I think not very many people do that. But once we have that relationship, call me. If I don't answer, leave a voicemail. I'll call you back. I still like and that's – my phone number's there.

[00:19:41] BB: Yes, yes, yes. Great. One follow-up or multiple?

[00:19:46] TS: I think one follow-up. If I don't respond by the second time, ship has sailed. But it's still there waiting. It doesn't mean it's dead. I just don't need you to follow up.

[00:19:55] BB: The ship's in the ocean.

[00:19:57] TS: Exactly. I don't need you to follow up 15 times.

[00:20:00] BB: Okay. This is a little bit similar to the photos but press release or media kit?

[00:20:04] TS: The press release is totally fine, as long as that link to the images is somewhere in it.

[00:20:09] BB: That's right. That better work. What time do you usually read pitches? Or is it really all the time?

[00:20:16] TS: It's all the time.

[00:20:17] BB: All the time.

[00:20:18] TS: Yes. There's not a yes or no time to send an email. Just I'm looking whenever. Also, travel journalist, you don't know what time zone we're on, so don't think about that.

[00:20:28] BB: That's right. That's right. It's a good point. Yes. Then types of sources you're looking for. For example, are you looking for, I don't know, drivers of celebrities, hotel architects? You're, obviously, not needing an MD who specializes in brain cancer. No, no, no. But what if, if any, are there source-wise for you?

[00:20:52] TS: Yes. I think the cool thing like we were just talking about, the travel space that it's everyone.

[00:20:58] BB: It's everyone.

[00:20:58] TS: I am kind of looking for all of those different things. I wish whoever drives Taylor Swift around would have their publicist pitch me.

[00:21:06] BB: Right.

[00:21:07] TS: But then there's the obvious like hotel general managers. That kind of wraps up into a whole thing. If you have a really amazing hotel and you have the manager in New York, I would love to go get coffee with them. That's someone that I end up building a relationship with and then use for stories down the line when I need to talk to a GM.

Or even randomly, I got pitched by a company that makes amenities for bathrooms, high-end. Their publicist was like, "Hey, there's really not an angle here, but we just would love to tell you about it." I was like, "Well, that's fascinating. I don't really know how behind the scenes that works."

[00:21:42] BB: Nothing is worse than you were in a nice place and the robe is crap.

[00:21:47] TS: Oh, my God. Yes. You don't have to tell me.

[00:21:47] BB: Let me tell you. You're just like, "What?" Tanner, we have many things to talk about. Perfect. Is there anything we can promote, tout, highlight further for you as we wrap it up? You mentioned the newsletter. How do we get it?

[00:21:58] TS: Yes. If you just go to the homepage, to thepointsguy.com, you can sign up for our daily newsletter. It's a fantastic product. Whether you're a points and miles person or you're not, if you love to travel or you're just getting going, reading these emails every day will help you become a better traveler. I guarantee you that. If they don't, email me personally, and we'll take care of it.

[00:22:19] BB: And give them a call even. Hey.

[00:22:21] TS: Yes. Tanner Saunders, thank you for being here today, Senior Hotels with an S Reporter from The Points Guy. Give him a ring. Maybe he'll –

[00:22:31] TS: Thank you. Thank you so much.

[00:22:33] BB: Thanks, Tanner. I appreciate you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:22:37] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode, featuring Tanner Saunders, Senior Hotels Reporter at The Points Guy. 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]