

EPISODE 226

[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 Nathan Burrow, the Senior Deals Editor at Wirecutter, part of the New York Times. During the episode, Nathan discusses how Wirecutter identifies and recommends the best products on the market, his goal to always serve his readers in coverage, ways to craft a winning subject line, and more.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:41] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. We do this show to help journalists and publicists, mostly publicists, let's be frank, better understand how they could work with our journalist friends that are out there, editors, freelancers, writers, reporters, however you want to say it. The people doing the damn hard job of getting media coverage out there and making the world better understood because that's what media helps do, in my opinion.

With us today, very exciting because I want to hear some hot takes on some deals here, is the Senior Deals Editor of Wirecutter, Nathan Burrow. FYI, Wirecutter is the product reviews portion of the New York Times, in case you didn't know. Nathan, thank you for being here.

[00:01:27] NB: Thanks so much for having me Beck.

[00:01:29] BB: Nathan, I look at Wirecutter, frankly, all the time, just big fan here. Could you please, though, describe for folks who maybe are not as familiar what Wirecutter encompasses? We all know the New York Times. Tell us more about Wirecutter.

[00:01:43] NB: Yes, absolutely. Wirecutter, we extensively test products in all sorts of categories from large appliances to headphones. Our goal is to surface the best out there for readers of the times. Now, what that involves is extensive testing, comparing multiple sets of headphones, comparing all appliances in our testing space in Long Island City. My specific beat at Wirecutter is deals and sales, and so my job is to find discounts on those things that our experts recommend. If somebody in our electronics field has recommended a set of headphones, it's my job to go out there and find the best price possible for our readers on those headphones.

[00:02:33] BB: Okay. By extensive research, can you give us an example? For example, you have something on mattresses. Now, this is from earlier this year, but what did that entail? How did you test all the mattresses?

[00:02:45] NB: Yes. Our mattress testing is extensive, and we have a testing space in Long Island City. We have an office in Long Island City where we will actually have our writers and testing folks come in. We have paid testers of all the different body types as well who will come in, and they will try out mattresses, take a nap on their lunch break. This is all about determining how a mattress holds up over time, determining the different experiences of different people with different mattresses, and ultimately coming to a recommendation that is going to suit different people with different needs and most people who are looking out for the best option in a given subset of mattresses like people who are looking for spring mattresses or people who are looking for hybrid mattresses. We have a pick in each one of those individual realms so that we can, hopefully, serve readers the right option for them.

[00:03:38] BB: Okay. That's a great overview. I know people want to know as publicists here, "Oh, well. Nathan, how do I get my thing reviewed from my client? Can I just mail it to you?" Can you break down that process? As some of us know, but I want to have this explained here, not every journalist, many of them, cannot just randomly accept things sent to them in the mail, although publicists do damn try their hardest. What's the process like there because we need to know?

[00:04:07] NB: The first thing you should know is that we are not allowed to accept those products. I get those emails all the time. Unfortunately, it's not something that I really pursue. It would be – I know that when we pursue testing of mattresses or anything else at Wirecutter, Wirecutter puts the bill for those products. We purchase the products. We test the products. We do not keep the products that we do a form of long-term testing on. Many of them, we ultimately relinquish the products at the end of either short or long-term testing, whether we're donating those or whatever. It's really about objectivity. We don't want to accept things to create the perception of some sort of quid pro quo. That's just not something that we do.

[00:04:52] BB: Speaking of that, do you then even – it's probably not advertised but even mention like, “Oh, hey. You know what? In the spring, we're going to be looking at lawn mowers. So, hey, in November, send us your –” Is there any understanding of what you will be reviewing? Or is it anyone's best guess as a publicist?

[00:05:14] NB: One of the things that we do in advance of refreshing guide contents at Wirecutter is we will often drop an update box on the specific piece of guide content saying that we're going to reassess USB microphones, or we're going to reassess lawn equipment in the months to come. That can be an indicator to folks that it might be time to start pitching but think seasonality. There are really times when folks are looking to refresh bedding. There are really times when folks are looking to refresh lawn and garden. You take that, and you work backwards a couple months to when the guide writers are likely thinking about them.

[00:05:49] BB: Got you. Then from a pitch, and now this is going to lead us to your inbox. Actually, let's just go right to your inbox. How is it in there?

[00:05:58] NB: Busy. It's busy. I get a lot of pitches. I get a lot of emails. In truth, the vast majority of them I do not follow up on.

[00:06:07] BB: Yes, okay. Are you an inbox-zero person? Or what do you do?

[00:06:11] NB: Every morning.

[00:06:12] BB: Every morning.

[00:06:13] NB: Every weekday morning, certainly. I will go through. I might have some catching up to do on Monday, but I go through. I look at our own internal emails, and of course, I look at publicist emails along with those.

[00:06:23] BB: Okay. Now, you said you look at publicist emails. You look at every publicist email. Tell us a little bit of how do you delete. What do you do?

[00:06:32] NB: I'm going to scan subject lines.

[00:06:34] BB: Always scan, great.

[00:06:36] NB: I think that that's pretty standard practice for us. I think that what I'm looking for when I see those subject lines, for me, I'm very, very practical. I'm looking – a creative subject line, as compelling as it might be, if I don't know specifically what it's about, I'm probably going to move on. On a Monday morning, I've got upward of 150 emails to go through, and so it is going to be –

[00:07:00] BB: To be clear, that's after. On Friday, you cleared it all out, and you were at zero.

[00:07:03] NB: Correct. That means that whatever it is is going to need to catch me immediately. It's going to need to be something that is very practical. For my specific beat, I'm looking for brands. I'm looking for dates of upcoming sales. I'm looking for things that are based in data. They can say that there are analytics around what a certain merchant is doing. That's of interest to me. That can compel rather than a headline that might be a little bit more playful. While I think they're fun, it's just practically speaking, I have to grind through these emails to get to the media things.

[00:07:41] BB: Basically anything, yes. Okay. Can we go back to that? What do you mean about data of a retailer? Like, “Oh, you represent.” I'm making this up. “I represent Home Depot. Did you know? At Home Depot, we are seeing people buy jack-o'-lanterns in June off the shelves.” Oh, my God. Everyone's on a pre-Halloween. I don't know. A pre – interesting insights on that [inaudible 00:08:04], like what are consumers doing.

[00:08:06] NB: Product category trends are definitely [inaudible 00:08:07]. Those are things that I will keep an eye on because what it can help to do is it can help to direct the searching that my team does for sales and deals out in the world. An example of a subject line that I got was –

[00:08:22] BB: Tell us. Yes. We love examples.

[00:08:24] NB: Yes. Insights on the latest Amazon pricing trends. I open that one because I wanted to get a sense of product categories that were trending upward in price, product categories that were trending downward in price and –

[00:08:38] BB: Inflation, things of that sort.

[00:08:39] NB: Yes, exactly, and to get a sense of whether my own anecdotal experience and our own in-house data was being confirmed by these findings.

[00:08:49] BB: Okay. I love that you mentioned that and gave a clear example because so often I think, as publicists, we're just like, “Oh, oh. I represent headphones. Let me just pitch the headphones. I represent present this new bottle of water, so let me just –” It's not – but wait a second. If I have retail tech clients or consumer, big box retail clients, the data could be of interest to you all. I kind of like that approach.

[BREAK]

[00:09:14] 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

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[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:09:37] BB: Is there another pitch you've gotten lately that you're like, "Ooh, that was good."?

[00:09:41] NB: I almost opened the –

[00:09:43] BB: Almost. Oh, no.

[00:09:45] NB: Well, I went back and I looked through some pitches that I got. The pitch had, let's see, study in brackets to open. 82% of Americans are fed up with bad customer service. If this had been specifically retailer-based, I probably would have opened it because part of my beat's responsibility at Wirecutter is when we surface a sale from a given retailer, especially if it's on an individual product, we have to ensure for our readers that the retailer and customer service practices are legit and viable. Getting a sense of who might have some questionable practices is always of interest to me it's just that it was more general than it was specific to any given retailer. As a result, I was curious about it, but I didn't bite right off the bat.

[00:10:31] BB: Is there a pitch, and you don't have to tell us where it came from, but that you're like, "Oh, no. This really bugs me."?

[00:10:38] NB: Any pitch that promises me something, just simply because I can't take it, is one that is like, "Yes, I've seen this before. Don't offer to send me things." But also just things that are totally out of scope for not just my beat but for Wirecutter at large, like when somebody hasn't done their homework. I got a pitch that said, "Cars.com's 2024 American-Made Index." Wirecutter doesn't presently have –

[00:11:02] BB: You don't do cars.

[00:11:03] NB: An automotive beat.

[00:11:05] BB: Exactly. Yes. [inaudible 00:11:06] and lifestyle and health and baby. There are so many other things. But, yes, no.

[00:11:12] NB: Yes. I think that to an extent, I don't expect any publicist to dig deep into a Wirecutter cannon and find all the stories that are three years old. But my hope would be that they, generally speaking, acquaint themselves with what we do and let that steer how they pitch us.

[00:11:29] BB: By the way, it is extensive. For instance, under style, women's underwear, period underwear, boxer briefs, thermal underwear. I mean, this is like detailed reviews in specific. In other words, it's very easy to see what are the categories Wirecutter is covering and what they are not, so that's awesome. I do like that.

Okay, Nathan. Is there anything for publicists to know about how to make a relationship with you? Or you're like, "You know what? I don't need – I don't want to know any of these people." That's totally fine, too.

[00:12:04] NB: I think approaching me with service in mind. I mean, that is really Wirecutter's MO is reader service first. If they can angle a pitch that way and approach me via email, that's really the best way to reach me. I've had folks reach out to me via Twitter DM. I've had folks reach out to me directly on LinkedIn. I find that I am somebody who pays attention to my email, and I think most of the editors at Wirecutter are. It's a good way to reach us.

[00:12:30] BB: I'm hearing email is preferred, although you get it from everywhere else.

[00:12:34] NB: Yes. Email preferred and I'm very engaged with my email because not only do we have – we live in our email. We're a mostly remote company. We live in Slack and email, and so I would say that's the case of most editors.

[00:12:45] BB: It's the case of most journalists, too. As we've been doing this for now 200-plus episodes, people, majority, do not want a DM over here, a thing to my personal Gmail, a phone call, all over. It's just – it only lives in one spot. Thank God. Preferred as an email, so that's good.

Okay. I have a little short list, Nathan, called our rapid-fire questions that I love your take on if you're ready. Are you ready?

[00:13:16] NB: I am ready.

[00:13:17] BB: Okay. Then we'll get to some other things, so okay. Video or phone interview? But, first of all, do you ever do interviews?

[00:13:23] NB: I do, yes. I've done things for some major TV stuff. I've been lucky to do some GMA and stuff along those lines.

[00:13:32] BB: Yes, some media. Does media, yes.

[00:13:35] NB: Video is a great way to communicate, but I'm fine with phone if that is somebody's preferred medium. I've done radio. I've done video interviews. It is something where I'm very flexible, but video is always great. I find that it really engages people.

[00:13:51] BB: Okay, okay. Bullet points or paragraphs in a pitch, and why is that?

[00:13:56] NB: Bullets just so I can quickly absorb the information. That would be my preference.

[00:14:01] BB: Got you. I'm assuming then that's a short pitch compared to a long pitch.

[00:14:04] NB: A short pitch, three bullets or sentences or less, preferably.

[00:14:07] BB: Okay. Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[00:14:11] NB: I really prefer a image attached, something I can see the preview of. We have to be careful because we just get a lot of stuff, and we get our – we were constantly trained up on avoiding fishing attempts and stuff like that. Things that you have to download are – I mean, that's a little sketchy.

[00:14:29] BB: Yes. That's a no. Okay. Also, this is my preference, too, I don't want to click to another link that then I have to put in an email to get to the thing and then find out that the link is expired. Now, I got to talk to the PR person and say, “Oh, by the way.” It's like, “Oh, my. I don't want to click on things.”

[00:14:43] NB: Yes, 100%. I don't want to have to overcome any sort of technological hurdle.

[00:14:48] BB: Yes, yes. No. Okay, attached. Attach them. Great. Email or Twitter DM? Now, we already talked about this. Email, email, email. Okay, great. How about follow-ups? One or multiple?

[00:14:59] NB: One.

[00:15:00] BB: One and done.

[00:15:00] NB: I would say that two is too many. I've already looked at it.

[00:15:03] BB: Okay. We touched a little bit on subject lines, but direct or creative subject lines?

[00:15:10] NB: Direct. Get straight to the meat of the matter for me. I'm a numbers guy, and so – I mean, that comes with the territory of my work. If you can hit me with data, I'm compelled.

[00:15:21] BB: Okay. I like this use of compelled. That's my word of the year, by the way, so this is – I'm feeling it, Nathan. Okay. What about press releases or media kits?

[00:15:29] NB: Depends on the pitch but press releases can grab me if they're the right thing. I will occasionally get messages from publicists that are sending along press releases from major merchants, retailers, what have you. Those can get my attention because that's very part and parcel with what I do, which is I need to know when the next Target sale is. I need to know if they have a new event around their circle program that they didn't have last year, et cetera, et cetera.

[00:15:58] BB: By the way, okay, I have to know, does this ruin shopping for you?

[00:16:03] NB: It ruins in-person shopping for me .

[00:16:06] BB: Yes. That's what I mean. You cannot walk into a Target and be like, “Oh, I already heard about what's going on here.”

[00:16:11] NB: Yes, sadly. Not only did I already hear about it, but I also know all the tricks to get the best prices. I go in there, and it's hard for me not to roll my eyes. It's definitely hard for me to bite my tongue when I'm with somebody like a partner who's very into whatever sale. I don't want to be like, “Oh. Well, I could probably find that for you 15% cheaper if you gave me a week.”

[00:16:33] BB: But how fun are you as a shopping companion for people who are deal people? Oh, my God.

[00:16:38] NB: I make myself available to family and friends. Sometimes, [inaudible 00:16:41], my door's open.

[00:16:43] BB: There you go. There you go. Okay. Oh, I love it. Sources, are you ever looking for sources, and who would they be?

[00:16:51] NB: Yes. We look for data and reporting we don't have, as I touched on. But we've also located sources within the Times organization itself. Back, for instance, in 2021, 2022, we were looking at inflation and global logistics sort of sourcing so that we could provide accurate information to readers about what they could expect in the way of price hikes and delays. I talked to some Times journalists who were covering that specifically.

[00:17:21] BB: Okay, okay. Are there any others that you're out there looking for? For example, I don't know, pricing economists from NYU or I don't know.

[00:17:30] NB: I wouldn't be averse to it. I think that it has to be our realm is very specific which is people shopping on the Internet. If they're able to speak to that specifically, I'm very open to having conversation with those folks.

[00:17:43] BB: Got you. Okay. This is helpful. Nathan, is there anything that we can do to promote, tout, et cetera anything that you're doing? I mean, obviously, go to the website and buy stuff, but what else?

[00:17:55] NB: Well, there are a couple things.

[00:17:56] BB: Oh, tell us.

[00:17:57] NB: Wirecutter has a newsletter that we send out with regularity. That newsletter is not just deal-specific. But it does include deals, and it includes some deal roundups that we put together, so I think it's a great resource. You can also follow deals at our X handle. We send out every deal that we find.

Finally, when you think about deals, you think about those tentpole shopping moments like a Memorial Day or like a Presidents' Day or like a Labor Day. That also includes things like Prime Day.

[00:18:26] BB: Oh, good point.

[00:18:26] NB: You can follow our coverage. While Prime Day has not been formally announced, we're projecting that it's going to happen sometime next month, and so that's coming up soon. It's coming up in July, and so we're going to be extensively covering that event and all the competing sales from retailers like Best Buy, Target, Walmart.

[00:18:45] BB: Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Hold on. Competing sales.

[00:18:49] NB: Yes.

[00:18:49] BB: There's now competing sales against Prime Day? I am getting this like a hot press release. What? Wait. What? Oh, my God. Are we –

[00:18:55] NB: Yes, 100%.

[00:18:58] BB: What is happening? What is – we are in a new dimension.

[00:19:01] NB: Amazon decided they were going to have Black Friday in July. Or it was June one month, and all the other retailers have now, more or less, followed suit.

[00:19:06] BB: Everyone else. Wow. This is how Black Friday started, huh? I need to look up the history of that, but some ding-a-ling was like, “Let's do this 6am after this national holiday in America because what else more do they want to do than eat? They want to shop.” Wow, wow. Okay, very insightful. Anything else that we can do for you?

[00:19:31] NB: I am always open to ongoing pitches from publicists. It's like there are going to be ones that annoy me. If folks follow up multiple times, if folks are constantly offering me things rather than offering me ideas, it's going to be a non-starter for me. Eventually, I'll start to recognize the names. I'll start to ignore them. But if people are coming to me in good faith with

something that actually fits Wirecutter to a good degree and is based in fact and data, I'm always is going to at least skim and take an interest.

[00:20:02] BB: Nathan, thank you so much for being on today for our little pod called Coffee with a Journalist. We're not drinking coffee, but that is okay because it's hotter than blazes where both of us are, so that's not happening.

[00:20:13] NB: Iced coffee maybe.

[00:20:14] BB: Oh, iced coffee. Yes. But, Nathan Burrow, he's a Senior Deals Editor at Wirecutter, which is the product review's whole entire portion, pretty much the department for the New York Times. You better be looking at the categories of what Wirecutter does because don't be pitching him, I don't know, categories of bananas or something silly. I can only imagine. I can only imagine, Nathan. In fact, could you just end with what's the silliest most absurd thing you were pitched as a review item?

[00:20:44] NB: Oh, I've been pitched so many. I've been pitched so many. I can't focus on just one because people will pitch products all the time that they think that we should review and which is great. Other beats welcome that. I don't actually make any of the picks myself. All that I'm doing is building on the work of these expert journalists by highlighting the sales and deals that are on them. When folks pitch me a product to review, that's really wasted on me. No matter how amazing or ridiculous it is, unfortunately, I can't do anything about it. All I can do is forward it.

[00:21:15] BB: There you go. Just forwards. There you go. Great. Nathan, thank you for that.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:21:20] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode with Nathan Burrow, Senior Deals Editor at Wirecutter. 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]