

EPISODE 229

[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 journalist? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn more.

Our guest on today's episode of Coffee with a Journalist is Todd Plummer, freelance writer with bylines in the New York Times, Vogue, Harper's Bazaar, Elle and more. During the episode, Todd discusses his career background as an attorney and writer, what he wants PR people to understand when pitching him, and his own process for pitching stories and staying organized.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:42] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. A little show we have that brings on reporters, journalists, editors, media people to talk about all the things that do happen crazy about publicists, to better educate ourselves. I'm Beck Bamburger, I'm a publicist myself, I'm done also on the other side of stuff writing stories and doing all types of things. I've been in both worlds. Actually, today with us is someone who's definitely been in another world. Todd Plummer is here today. He is a contributor to several outlets as a freelancer to Elle, Travel Leisure, Harper's Bazaar, but previously was a lawyer, I think. Todd, welcome.

[0:01:23] TP: Yes. Thank you. I am currently admitted to practice in Massachusetts, so I am still a lawyer, technically, but writing is very much my focus, it's my passion and what sparks joy for me.

[0:01:33] BB: I love it. Okay. So, first tell us about that. How did you make the switch and go? You know what, I think I'm going to do this other thing over here.

[0:01:41] TP: I actually started my career in New York City. I started my career as a society reporter for Style.com, which is one of those freelance beats that they put eager 22-year-olds

on, because it requires you to go out all night, every night, and turn around a story for 8 AM the next day.

[0:01:59] BB: This is through the gauntlet, yeah.

[0:02:00] TP: Yeah. I did that work for a little over five years for a good portion of my 20s. After two years of doing that, I mean, long story short, my parents pressured me into going back to school and – I had that in my life, law school just made the most sense for me and the way I was able to swing it and I ended up getting a full scholarship to St. John's in New York City. I was able to keep my –

[0:02:26] BB: Okay, Todd.

[0:02:27] TP: I was able to keep my writing career and do my party reporting work by night and be in law school.

[0:02:32] BB: Oh, my God. Oh, my God. That sounds like a lot.

[0:02:35] TP: Again, it's the kind of workload that requires the energy of someone in their early to mid-20s. I did that for a couple of years until I completed my law degree and the unanticipated consequence of keeping my writing career going while I was in law school with that by the time it came time to graduate, my writing career was really taken off and I was able to make a decent living at it. I graduated and took the bar exam and said, "I don't want to go sit in a cubicle making money for some partner for a hundred hours a week. I'm going to go –"

[0:03:04] BB: Yeah. Seriously.

[0:03:05] TP: Yeah. At that point, I gave up my apartment in New York City, bought a one-way ticket to Bali and stopped party reporting at that time and transitioned more to travel writing. Yeah. I left New York thinking it would be three or six months that I would be gone. I ended up being gone working from the road and using my career to finance my way around the world for two and a half years until –

[0:03:30] BB: Oh, fantastic.

[0:03:32] TP: I quit and I couldn't travel anymore at which time I moved home to Boston where I grew up and I am here now. That's the very abbreviated version.

[0:03:44] BB: Okay.

[0:03:45] TP: How I ended up where I am and why I'm a lawyer.

[0:03:48] BB: I like that. Todd, how is your inbox as a freelancer?

[0:03:53] TP: It is a horror show.

[0:03:55] BB: Okay. Okay. Honest answer.

[0:03:58] TP: It is inundated with pitches that are tailored to me, mass pitches that are not tailored to me. The behind-the-scenes production work of getting stories published with my editors and the photo editors. Yeah, it's just a lot all the time.

[0:04:14] BB: Do you have a sorting system or anything you do to manage this?

[0:04:18] TP: I use Gmail. I have a pretty elaborate tagging system. If I know that I'm working on a story that isn't due for a week, two week, a month, whatever. I'll file things away and actually go back to them a little closer to deadline and look at them then.

[0:04:36] BB: Okay. Does that system work for you?

[0:04:38] TP: It works for me. It doesn't always work for publicists who are looking for immediate answers and immediate understanding of whether it will generate a credit for their clients or not. But yeah, to be a freelancer who covers as many different things as I do, you need to compartmentalize your brain and your inbox in a way.

[0:04:59] BB: Oh. Absolutely. Absolutely. Now, what is it on the side of pitches you're doing, because as a freelancer, you're going up and down. You're getting the pitches from publicists and you got to be pitching yourself.

[0:05:09] TP: I am. Wait, so what's the question? Sorry.

[0:05:12] BB: Just how is it with the pitches instead that you're sending just from an email management system?

[0:05:18] TP: I mean –

[0:05:19] BB: Is it the same? It's all the same inbox, you're like, yeah.

[0:05:21] TP: My pitches that I send to editors, I think I actually don't pitch a ton.

[0:05:27] BB: That's nice.

[0:05:29] TP: I get the sense that publicists, more often than not, will send out a single pitch to many journalists hoping that it gets picked up. I've been freelanced my entire career. Going on 13 years at this point, which is unusual.

[0:05:44] BB: Oh, my. You're a unicorn.

[0:05:46] TP: Other media float in and out of freelance, but use it as a portmanteau for unemployed.

[0:05:53] BB: Yes. Yes.

[0:05:54] TP: But what I'm trying to say is that the editors that I work with, I've worked with most of them for going on seven plus years each at this point. We know each other. I know what they'll like. I'm not really sending out like a mass blasts that require complex organization systems.

[0:06:10] BB: Got you. So, you got your besties, you know them. They know you and what's coming.

[0:06:13] TP: Yeah. It's pretty easy to keep tabs on which pitches are pending where.

[0:06:19] BB: Good. Okay. Let's talk a little bit about pitches you get from publicists, because that's what we focus on here quite a bit. Are you a read every email that comes your way or you may be a master leader? What would you say?

[0:06:33] TP: I hate to say it, but I am a master leader.

[0:06:36] BB: Hey, hey, whatever keeps you alive.

[0:06:38] TP: I can tell from a subject line or from the first sentence of an email, if something is tailored for me or if it's respectfully spam.

[0:06:50] BB: Yup. Yup.

[0:06:51] TP: More often than not have a gut reaction to whether something will be useful to me or not.

[0:06:56] BB: Okay. Then those go to spam or those go to trash, because they are spam. That's what – they're spam. They go to trash. Okay. For you though, with ones you're like, "Oh, yes, that's good email. I like that." Where do you go?

[MESSAGE]

[0:07:12] ANNOUNCER: Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch.

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[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:07:35] TP: For a pitch to really catch my attention, I need to have a sense that it was tailored to me in some sense. I mean, a good analogy for this is to be a freelancer in this marketplace. There are many of us freelancers out there.

[0:07:54] BB: Oh, yeah. For sure.

[0:07:56] TP: I see the pitches that I bring to editors as existing in a marketplace. I don't like to bring an idea to an editor that I know 10 of my peers have also been sent, because I could –

[0:08:10] BB: Very competing.

[0:08:10] TP: Ask a person to be in line to raise my hand for a story. I don't like that. I like my editors to see me as someone who has good access, and is the first to come to a certain story, and has an interesting point of view and not just forwarding things that publicists send me, right? For a pitch to really catch my interest, first of all, it needs to say, “Hi, Todd.” Not, “Hi, XX.” Or “Hi, Writer.” Which happens way more often than you would think it would.

[0:08:40] BB: Yeah. It's so lazy. People. It's so lazy.

[0:08:44] TP: It has to have some connection to me, whether a personal connection, like so and so who you know really well referred me to you or I see that you wrote about this and you're interested in this or I see you are recently in this destination. This is relevant to you. Just some thought that makes it feel valuable to me is what's going to catch my attention.

[0:09:07] BB: Okay. This is good. Is there anything of late that you're like, “Oh, my gosh. Absolutely. I love this.”

[0:09:13] TP: You know, honestly, no.

[0:09:15] BB: Okay. That's honest too.

[0:09:17] TP: It's been a pretty slow summer in terms of receiving pitches for me. Yeah, nothing has really sparked too much joy. I think the nuance that I like my PR friends to understand is that something really has to appeal to me personally before I feel compelled to bring it to my colleagues. I'm not the right person for every item of news out there and I'm not interested in every item of news. I really like my PR friends to have a thoughtful connection to the subject matter to draw that out for me and make it clear to me. I think it's quite clear from what I post on Instagram and put on my website and what's linked on my muck rack, like the things that I like to write about.

[0:10:02] BB: Yeah. It's not mysterious.

[0:10:03] TP: No, it's not mysterious at all. When I receive a completely out of left field pitch about something I've never written about before, yeah, I'm like this clearly wasn't meant for me. Honestly, it doesn't even deserve a response sometimes.

[0:10:17] BB: Yeah.

[0:10:17] TP: Yeah.

[0:10:18] BB: By the way, totally different, but on your personal page, your personal website, there is this gorgeous photo of that mountain. Where is that with the lake? You know which one I'm talking about?

[0:10:28] TP: Yeah. I sure do.

[0:10:29] BB: Where is that? It looks Patagonish.

[0:10:31] TP: That was an assignment of –

[0:10:34] BB: Canada.

[0:10:36] TP: That was an – yes. Good. Yes, it's in Canada. That was an assignment I went on for cool hunting. I think in about 2018.

[0:10:42] BB: Is it Bath?

[0:10:43] TP: No. It is Yukon. It is a mountain range called the Tombstones.

[0:10:48] BB: Well, it's gorgeous. Everyone should take a look. Okay. Okay. Is there a way, Todd, you mentioned your PR friends. Okay. How does one become your friend?

[0:10:58] TP: Tell the truth.

[0:10:59] BB: Tell the truth. Amazing. Tell us more.

[0:11:02] TP: Yeah. I mean, I can sniff through BS pretty quickly. I can sniff through PR smoke pretty quickly. If a publicist is trying to invent a trend or they pitch me something that feels too advertorial for instance. I'm not interested in, I receive – I write a lot about hotels and travel. I receive a lot of pitches that come my way about “trends” and the only examples of such trends that arrive in the pitch email are from one hotel or one brand of hotels. It's very clear that it's only coming from their client. That's not super useful to me. It's – much more useful to me. For OR people to draw the connection between their client and what is happening in the world. That's a much more compelling trend story to me and I'll just, my client added a new menu item. This is a big trend. Write about it. It's yeah.

[0:11:58] BB: Yeah. My one. No, no. Okay, that's a good thing. Anything else you're like, besides you just tell the truth. Anything else.

[0:12:06] TP: Oh, there's so many. I mean, me and my writer friends, we talk all the time about the awful, like national hot dog day, five places to get hot dogs. 10 green drinks for St. Patrick's Day or happy –

[0:12:22] BB: Oh, God.

[0:12:23] TP: Just things that like don't really get covered for the publications we work for.

[0:12:31] BB: But they're really, really, really trying, like really.

[0:12:34] TP: You know, I honestly don't even know if they're trying anymore or –

[0:12:36] BB: I don't know, either. Yeah.

[0:12:38] TP: To be completely candid. It seems to me as like racking up the billable hours for their client and like look at this amazing list of pitches we sent out on your behalf.

[0:12:46] BB: That you're paying for. Yeah.

[0:12:48] TP: Yeah. That always goes straight to trash for me.

[0:12:52] BB: Todd, anything else on your mind, just publicist?

[0:12:55] TP: So much.

[0:12:56] BB: Tell us more. Tell us more. We're not here for five hours, but keep going.

[0:13:00] TP: You know, it's really not mysterious. I think it's useful to me as a freelancer to be reminded not all the time, not even monthly. It's like maybe quarterly or semiannually, which clients you're working on and what the news is. It's useful for me to be reminded of that, so I have a framework in my mind. If a story that I generate myself gets assigned, I have it in the back of my brain, like oh, so-and-so works on the Ritz Carlton Bali. They're the person I need for information about this. That is very useful to me, like an infrequent reminder of who you're working on is useful.

[0:13:40] BB: Infrequent. Yeah. So, like quarterly.

[0:13:41] TP: Yeah. Quarterly is more than enough, I would say.

[0:13:44] BB: Yes. Yes. Perfect. Okay. Yeah. You don't need to hear. How often are you changing clients? That sounds ridiculous.

[0:13:50] TP: Yeah. Exactly.

[0:13:51] BB: Yeah. I'll ask you more something, okay. I have a rapid-fire question set. Are you ready, Todd?

[0:13:59] TP: I was born ready.

[0:13:59] BB: Let's do it. Video or phone interview?

[0:14:02] TP: Phone. I'm old fashioned.

[0:14:04] BB: I am too. Bullet points are paragraphs and pitches?

[0:14:08] TP: Bullet points. Leave the writing to me.

[0:14:10] BB: Oh, short or long pitches?

[0:14:12] TP: Short. If I have to scroll and your email is too long.

[0:14:16] BB: It's bad. Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[0:14:19] TP: I'm so glad you asked this. The answer is Dropbox, because you would not believe how quickly I run out of Gmail space. I purge at least once a month. I have to do a massive purge in my inbox. It's because people without me asking send me high-res imagery all the time. It's such a new sense.

[0:14:36] BB: See, I'm glad we asked this. Yes. Email or a DM of some sort?

[0:14:41] TP: Email. Do not DM me. Those get deleted.

[0:14:43] BB: Nope. There you go. I feel you are enthusiastic, Todd. One follow up or multiple?

[0:14:50] TP: The correct answer to this question is zero follow ups unless it is something specifically tailored to me. If it's an exclusive that you've offered me and you have a time sensitive ask, then it's appropriate to follow up, but on something that you're emailing a hundred journalists, like please do not follow up. You cannot imagine that havoc. It wrecks on my inbox when every publicist in the world just wants to circle back and see if there's interest.

[0:15:14] BB: Oh, gosh.

[0:15:15] TP: Yeah.

[0:15:16] BB: Press release or media kit?

[0:15:17] TP: Press release.

[0:15:19] BB: Direct or creative subject lines?

[0:15:22] TP: Direct.

[0:15:22] BB: Any sources you're looking for.

[0:15:25] TP: Any sources I'm looking for. I'm always –

[0:15:28] BB: Travel to Bali. I don't know.

[0:15:30] TP: I write about all sorts of subjects. I write about travel. I write about entertainment. I write about polo. I write about all sorts of – I'm always looking for passionate people who love what they do and are trying to make a difference in what they do. That is a type of story that I can place and it's a story for me.

[0:15:50] BB: Okay. Anytime that you read pitches.

[0:15:53] TP: Anytime that I read pitches?

[0:15:54] BB: Yeah. Is there like, hey, you know what, I would just like to read them nine to 10 PT or I don't know. Some people are very particular.

[0:16:01] TP: No. I'll read them as they roll in through the day.

[0:16:04] BB: Okay. Ongoing, rolling. Okay. Great. Todd, is there anything we can do to celebrate, cheer, promote you?

[0:16:12] TP: Follow me on Instagram @eatgaylove.

[0:16:14] BB: Yes.

[0:16:16] TP: Tell every editor out there what a delight I am and that I'm available.

[0:16:21] BB: Yes. Yes, you are. Okay. Okay. Everybody.

[0:16:23] TP: Your freelancer friends, because we are very often the work horses that are not always celebrated.

[0:16:30] BB: Yeah. Yes, I feel you. You're alongside, I think, publicists who are not celebrated as well. I feel you.

[0:16:37] TP: Yeah.

[0:16:38] BB: I feel you. Todd Plummer, he's a freelance journalist for many, many outlets, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Vogue, Harper's Bazaar, Elle, just to name a few Travel and Leisure, as well. He's also a lawyer. Check out that. Todd, thank you again for being on today. It was really lovely.

[0:16:54] TP: Thanks, Beck.

[OUTRO]

[0:16:56] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode featuring Todd Plummer, freelance writer. 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]