

**EPISODE 238**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[0:00:09] 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 to the right journalists? Head to our website at [onepitch.co](http://onepitch.co) to learn more.

Our guests on today's episode of Coffee with a Journalist is Katie Atkinson, Exclusive Digital Director of the West Coast for Billboard Magazine. In this episode, Katie chats about her role at Billboard where she tackles tons of emails every day while juggling event coverage at night and explains how publicists can work closely with her to share timely pitches and make important connections.

[EPISODE]

**[0:00:43] BB:** Welcome everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger, a publicist as well of, quite a while actually, quite a while, working with all the wonderful reporters, journalists, freelancers, editors, and so forth who make frankly the media world go round. If it wasn't for publicists and journalists, I don't know how anything would get done in this world of media.

But anyway, that is why we're here to learn better how to work with our reporter friends, media, and so forth as publicists because we need each other, and that's why we're here. With us today, coming from Los Angeles. Oh, this is exciting because we don't have digital directors on here much, Katie Atkinson, the Executive Digital Director of the West Coast for Billboard Magazine, is with us. Katie.

**[0:01:37] KA:** Hi, Beck.

**[0:01:37] BB:** Hi, hi, hi.

**[0:01:39] KA:** How are you?

**[0:01:39] BB:** It's been a ballistic summer. It's not been boring. A lot's going on and wow, so here we are.

**[0:01:48] KA:** Yes.

**[0:01:50] BB:** First, first, first. For those who are not familiar, and I do like to ask this of everyone, how would you describe the coverage now for Billboard? Because a lot of people would be like, "Well, it's just music, it's just charts." But there's a lot else going on, so tell us.

**[0:02:04] KA:** Yes. We've got a good mixture of the music business coverage as well as fan-facing music coverage. That is my world in Billboard, but everything we do goes back to the charts, whether it's the business or the fan coverage. So, we kind of use that as our North Star for how we choose what we cover, who we cover. If you're on our charts, then we want to cover you.

**[0:02:27] BB:** Okay. This is so good. Now, for those, maybe it's not as familiar and we'll get to your inbox in just a second. Something like executive digital director, what does that all entail? Because publicists want to know, should I pitch you or not?

**[0:02:43] KA:** Yes. I feel like my title sounds a little more intimidating. I mostly am sort of in charge of our music consumer facing news coverage for digital. That entails making sure we have a website that is beautiful and works well, and also entails making sure that we are covering the right things, assigning the right stories, and just hitting our marks there.

So, digital director sounds like it doesn't quite tell you what I do. I'm also for about half my day our news lead, so I'm the person that is publishing every single story, assigning every single story during that portion of my day, and then the rest of my day, I am trying to catch up on many other executive responsibilities that I have. So, I am very much living in my inbox and

seeing all the pitches come through. I am a good person to come to because I'm sort of air traffic controlling for like a lot of people that work at Billboard. So, if it's not me that you need, I know who to get you to at Billboard.

**[0:03:44] BB:** Okay. Now, you mentioned your inbox, you live in there. What's going on in there? Is it crazy?

**[0:03:50] KA:** You mentioned the word ballistic back.

**[0:03:52] BB:** Yes, I did.

**[0:03:53] KA:** I think that that is actually a great adjective. No, it's a warzone in there. God forbid I take a vacation and come back to the tens of thousands of emails waiting.

**[0:04:03] BB:** Ten thousand? Okay.

**[0:04:06] KA:** Yes. I'm not exaggerating. Actually, when I went on maternity leave, that was like a real situation. But anyway, yes, it's a lot of email, but I literally go through every individual one every day.

**[0:04:19] BB:** Oh, my God, you do. Oh, wow.

**[0:04:21] KA:** I sure do.

**[0:04:23] BB:** Okay. But this sounds weird. But why?

**[0:04:28] KA:** Because I don't want to miss something important.

**[0:04:30] BB:** Oh, God, bless your soul.

**[0:04:32] KA:** This might be how my brain works. But I'm like, if I don't individually go through these emails, I mean, I literally click through every email and I go quick. So, there are things that I can still breeze over accidentally, but for the most part, I'm the one – I've been at Billboard for 10 years this summer, actually. So –

**[0:04:50] BB:** Yes, which is legendary in this industry, my God.

**[0:04:54] KA:** Oh, my God, yes. I thank my lucky stars every day. I think that because of that, people know to come me for things, and so I don't want to miss an exclusive, an embargo, something that I need to get to somebody immediately. So, there's just a lot of immediacy in in my inbox.

**[0:05:09] BB:** Wow. Okay. So, you open everything.

**[0:05:15] KA:** I do.

**[0:05:16] BB:** I mean, I've done now like 200 of these, and you think like, “Oh, there's a pattern.” There are some patterns, but my God, every journalist is definitely different in what they decide and how they do things and everything. So, is there a system for sorting, referring back, et cetera? Are you one of those people, for example, who three months later responds to a pitch? That's like the publicist's dream day. We're like, “Oh, my God, 192 days later,” we've had stuff like 8 months, 10 months. We're like, “Oh, my God, but someone responded.”

**[0:05:45] KA:** - Well, I use my flags in Outlook very religiously.

**[0:05:48] BB:** Oh, okay, you're a flagger?

**[0:05:50] KA:** I'm a flagger and I don't like when I have uncleared flags. It makes me uncomfortable. So, I'm not somebody who lets something faster. I really, like I said, since I go through every email, if I don't respond to you, it probably means you can assume it's a no, but please follow up one time and I might change my mind or maybe I missed your initial email,

which happens, of course. When it goes beyond one time, I'm like, okay, it kind of was an implied no. And if I have a relationship with you and know you as a publicist, I will try to get you a yes or no.

So, if you're somebody I work with regularly, we work with a lot of record labels, and just because a baby artist, they pitch me isn't, I'm not interested. I want to let them know because I probably am going to come back to them for a Dua Lipa request, down the line, like I want to stay in touch.

**[0:06:39] BB:** Yes. Do you find that that is part of the majority of your time is like, okay, wait, you're actually going outbound. You're making the requests to those groups, their labels to be like, "Hey, hey, hey, but I need to get to this person. Please help." I don't know.

**[0:06:53] KA:** Yes, I mean, as both the news lead and I also co-host a podcast at Billboard. As those two things, I am often making the first response. So, actually I probably understand the public's side of things more often, because I'm pitching too.

**[0:07:10] BB:** Yes.

**[0:07:10] KA:** I'm trying to get guests and I'm trying to get responses to breaking news, statements, et cetera. Obviously, I'm also fielding press releases and things like that, but sometimes I'm on the other end and just awaiting that response.

**[0:07:22] BB:** Oh, I love it. Okay, so what is then helpful for you as all the publicists are listening? I'm looking for [inaudible 0:07:31]. I'm trying to book my dang show. What are you looking for?

**[0:07:34] KA:** When I'm pitching things or when I'm accepting pitches?

**[0:07:37] BB:** When you're accepting the pitches specifically for the podcast, yes, because increasingly, this is the role of a lot of reporters and journalists is like, well, they also got now

this content to produce. And that's kind of a different pitch, of course, and guest. So, I want to increasingly on this show, like give some more insight into the podcast side of stuff.

**[0:07:58] KA:** Yes. I actually, like I said, it goes back to the charts. We actually implemented a rule, my co-host Keith and I implemented a rule that you need to have like a certain chart requirement to be a guest on our show, and it's easy because we cover pop music. So, if you are in the category of pop, you're most likely in our top 40 charts and things. But when we get a pitch for an artist that has yet to break into our charts, it's a pretty easy no back to the publicist to say, "Hey, we'll take a listen to the music, but until they impact our charts, we probably won't have them as a podcast guest yet."

It's kind of a double-edged sword, though, because I always am telling young artists, like, "You need to crack at our charts," and they're like, "But we need media coverage to get our music out, so it's rough."

**[0:08:47] BB:** Do that. Oh, it's the double-edged sword.

**[0:08:51] KA:** Yes.

**[0:08:52] BB:** Oh gosh. I feel you. Yes. Okay. Do you want to have any relationships with publicists? Yes, you're in LA, so a lot of the publicity around the music industry, entertainment industry is also in LA. Do you want to get on the 405 and get a coffee at somewhere or never in your life, it is okay.

[MESSAGE]

**[0:09:15] ANNOUNCER:** Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch.

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Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

**[0:09:38] KA:** We could have stopped that sentences.

**[0:09:39] BB:** That's right.

**[0:09:39] KA:** Do I want to get on the 405? No. But I have definitely gone out and gotten coffees with many publicists and typically the scenario where that happens is I've worked with them over email on multiple projects and it's like I've gotten to know them via email but never met in person. The other scenario might be that it's somebody I see at events but never get any sort of in-depth time with, but it's somebody I know face-to-face already. I'm happy to grab a coffee here about projects. Like I said, I think a lot of my value sometimes when I'm meeting with a publicist is like telling them who at Billboard they should be going to, because while I'll help them field certain things, like they want to go directly to the most valuable person for them.

So, a lot of it is like, "Oh, you're trying to get industry coverage, you have to go to this out of there. You're trying to get e-com coverage, you have to go to this out of there." Et cetera. I can be our like, Rolodex for Billboard basically.

**[0:10:38] BB:** How much of your time is that, would you say? Do you spend on that – and I ask that only because so many people that come on here who are more in this director, you're playing traffic control and you're helping connect people.

**[0:10:51] KA:** Yes, I would say that the in-person meetings are rare or they're proud. I would say like once a month or something. Like I said, with the news lead aspect of my job, I'm really pretty much tied to my desk one time when I'm editing and assigning and dealing with breaking news. So, it's hard to get away from my desk frequently.

I would say more often I like am asking to go out and cover a concert or something, and then I'm able to meet up with somebody ahead of the show. Let's meet outside your seats so we can say hi for 10 minutes. Or like, if I'm going to a red carpet or any sort of event, whatever publicist system invited me is always making sure that we have a moment to connect there as well.

**[0:11:34] BB:** God, you're doing – so you work in the day, you're doing concerts, I'm assuming, at the night. How are you keeping it together? Do we know? I don't know if we know.

**[0:11:44] KA:** I actually don't. Obviously, I don't get out maybe as much as I did early days in my career. But it is nice to, like those concerts are really great. Connections, not just talk to publicists for artists and record labels, but also venues here in LA. Our Intuit Dome just opened and I got a chance to go there last night. You're able to meet on the venue side and all the things that they're doing there to bring music to a bigger audience, et cetera. So, there's like a lot of different things that I can do by going out to a concert I would love to go to anyway. I can also turn that into a work night a little bit, a little work and a lot of fun.

**[0:12:21] BB:** Oh, gosh, wow. Here's to you, Katie. I just burned the midnight oil here. Oh, much respect. Much respect. Okay. Do you have any subject lines you particularly like? I heard you had some.

**[0:12:36] KA:** Yes. I dug through, thank you for the prompt. I dug through my inbox a little bit and I realized that something that really works on me. So, I guess this is a hot tip is literally when you put that word timely upfront in that subject line, I will pay attention to that.

**[0:12:51] BB:** Literally, the word timely?

**[0:12:53] KA:** Yes. People use it frequently for me and it's never – I haven't seen it misused and like I said, I'm digging through this inbox for things that I need to pay attention to right then and there, and so I need to see a word that's going to indicate to me that I should look at this now



or it might vaporize and not matter in like two hours. So, timely, urgent, things like that. I don't like when those are misused, but if you truly need my eyeballs on it –

**[0:13:21] BB:** Don't misuse that, don't abuse.

**[0:13:23] KA:** Yes, exactly. So, that's definitely something that when I was looking back through my own inbox, I'm like, “Yes, I responded to this and this and this because they got my attention with some sort of time element.”

**[0:13:35] BB:** Mm-hmm. Okay. What else is helpful? You got anything else?

**[0:13:39] KA:** Well, I also found some really crazy long subject lines that I realized I just like glossed over them because they were so long. It's like, and the important words weren't up front. It's like, I couldn't possibly. The way I'm navigating my inbox, I'm literally clicking through, I'm looking at the preview of the email on the right window and I'm just clicking through the emails with my cursor, basically.

If there's a long email and a subject line, and it doesn't get the meat of the situation up front, I'm likely going to full-blown miss it. So, yes, shorter and more important keywords at the front. Kind of like how we handle SEO text.

**[0:14:20] BB:** There we go. There we go. Okay. This is good to know. Anything else, Katie, that just like grinds your gears, to use my dad's favorite phrase, about publicists and then on the opposite? The opposite as well. Like, “Oh, I love it when.”

**[0:14:36] KA:** Well, I don't know. You tell me whether this is a good or a bad thing that I've been told before that like that publicist really like me and I'm like, does that mean I'm doing my job well or not?

**[0:14:46] BB:** Oh, yes. That's a huge compliment, I think. Oh, yes. Because I try, like I said to respond to things that are super – I try to respond to things in a timely fashion. I try to respond

when I know it's a fit. Like I said, if I have a relationship with someone, I respond when it's not a fit. Even when prompted, although I don't love that, I do get responses sometimes where it's like, tell me why you didn't take this pitch. I don't love the follow up question, but I will often indulge them and tell them the basic reason. Most of the time it's like, my team doesn't have time. Or like I said, it's not an artist that Billboard cares about yet.

But yes, so I guess the grind my gears part is the bothering for a response or a reason. But like on the other side, I have a lot of great relationships with a lot of great publicist friends because we're all in this together. We're all working toward similar goals. They're helping me. I'm helping them. It's a very symbiotic relationship. I don't think of it as being one side. I don't think I like sitting in a power position. Like I said, I often need their assistance for access to talent and I often need their assistance for timely responses just like they need for me. So, in that sense, I feel like they're colleagues that we're working toward similar goals.

**[0:16:05] BB:** You're collaborative with publicists.

**[0:16:08] KA:** Collaborative, yes.

**[0:16:09] BB:** That is really what we have to do and have to rely on because both sides need each other even though I don't know the intention between the relationships. But that's why we're here. That's why we're here.

Okay, Katie. I have my quick-fire list of questions. Are you ready?

**[0:16:23] KA:** I am ready.

**[0:16:23] BB:** Well, let's do it. Video or phone interview?

**[0:16:27] KA:** I'm a video interview person, especially when it comes to the podcast, because we try to have a conversation. I like to see people. A lot of times you can't tell if an artist is like finished with their answer if they're on the phone. So, I don't want to talk over them. I like when

you can use like visual cues to know like if they're still going. That being said, I'm very old-school when it comes to the interviews that I do that are written for a magazine or for digital. I probably would be just fine with a phone interview as well.

**[0:17:01] BB:** A phoner, there you go. Bullet points or paragraphs in pitches?

**[0:17:05] KA:** Oh, I like bullet points. I think I'm going to go with bullet points. I like things short and sweet.

**[0:17:09] BB:** Short and sweet. Well, that's the next question. Short or long pitches? Short.

**[0:17:12] KA:** Yes, I mean, I'm okay if you're sort of having to not say too much at the beginning, because that sometimes intrigues me. Somebody will say, "We have an A-list artist who's starting in a campaign. Can you agree to the embargo?" Sometimes just the question like that will get my attention.

**[0:17:27] BB:** But let me ask, have you ever been bamboozled by an A-list?

**[0:17:31] KA:** Of course.

**[0:17:32] BB:** Okay, I was going to say.

**[0:17:32] KA:** Which is why I always, I agree to an embargo, but I don't agree to coverage until I have all the cards in front of me.

**[0:17:41] BB:** That's right. By the way, can we just ask this because I'm sure it's so fun. I have not done that. I'm going to start doing this. I'm going to start doing this for this podcast. What's the raddest person you've been able to interview?

**[0:17:56] KA:** My favorite interview that I have ever done was with John Mayer, who I love. But also, I got to do that in person, which I also love. I guess to answer your question, video or

phone, my answer is in person, when possible. Yes, I've loved his music for decades, and then now he's with Dead & Company, and my dad was a huge – so I grew up with Grateful Dead music, and he was actually touring with them, and it was just the most fascinating conversation. I did that for the podcast and I'm obsessed with it. I love it.

**[0:18:24] BB:** Love it. I love it. I love it. Okay. Thank you for answering that back to our questions here. Back to our questions. Actually, images attached or a Dropbox zip file?

**[0:18:34] KA:** Oh, well, knowing how large my inbox is and the storage is limited by my company, I'm going to go with the link. Yes, because then I don't have to shoulder the burden of the image size in my Outlook.

**[0:18:47] BB:** There you go. Email or a DM of some sort for a pitch?

**[0:18:52] KA:** Email, no question. The one DM I can think of that I have accepted was like an invitation to be on a podcast, not like a professional publicist pitch. So yes, I'm going inbox on that one.

**[0:19:04] BB:** One follow-up or multiple? You earlier mentioned this one.

**[0:19:08] KA:** I like one follow-up. But I do miss things because of the volume of email. Just yesterday, I responded to two emails where people said like, "Hey, just wanted to flag this." And I'm like, "Oh, my God, I quite literally missed both of those initial emails and I was interested in both." So, yes.

**[0:19:24] BB:** Okay. Direct or creative subject lines? We talked a little bit.

**[0:19:29] KA:** Yes, probably direct. The creative does get my attention sometime though. So, I can't say like, no.

**[0:19:35] BB:** But it's bamboozlement. I don't know. Press release or media kit?

**[0:19:40] KA:** Press release. Just straightforward. And then I can ask for more if needed.

**[0:19:44] BB:** Yes. Anytime that you read pitches, it sounds like all the time, Katie, because you are in it.

**[0:19:51] KA:** I read them every day, every hour, every minute, potentially. I'm sure I've gotten probably at least 50 emails while we've been chatting.

**[0:20:00] BB:** Oh, my gosh. Wow. Wait, 50? It's been 20 minutes.

**[0:20:07] KA:** Okay, I'm actually checking, 38. So, I was exaggerating.

**[0:20:12] BB:** That's, oh, Katie. You might be the record holder. I don't know on this show. I don't know.

**[0:20:18] KA:** Oh, no. I don't know if that's a title I'd like to hold.

**[0:20:22] BB:** No, not that one, no. Okay, we didn't talk about this, so let's throw this into Sources. Is it ever helpful for you to have sources? Obviously, you want music industry people, but are there sources? Is there a professor of musicology that you want to have from Stanford University to talk to? I don't know.

**[0:20:37] KA:** Yes. We do expert-based stories all the time. I think the biggest example for Billboard is legal stories where we know about some big case and we are not going to be able to get the actual attorney to speak with us about this case, but we can get someone who's been involved in similar cases to speculate about what the chances are of either verdict or whatever. So that's a big one for us. Sometimes we'll do stories where we grab multiple legal experts to get their opinions. Another one is we'll do stories with crisis PR experts as well.

**[0:21:11] BB:** Oh, Katie. Well, hey, you can just call it any time, although music is really not my area. We got other music. Anyway, yes. Hey, everybody, you just heard. Katie's looking for her.

**[0:21:23] KA:** Yes. I mean, if we see like a really rough story for like a music star, it's like, where does that person go from here? Let's talk to the people who make that happen for celebrities.

**[0:21:33] BB:** Is that not every week that you have one of those, Katie?

**[0:21:37] KA:** Yes, it's frequent. It is frequent.

**[0:21:41] BB:** Wow, okay. Yes. Okay, we covered sources. Anything else that we can promote, tout, celebrate about you, Katie?

**[0:21:49] KA:** Oh, my. Well, I mean, I guess I mentioned the podcast. So, like I said, that's probably the thing that I most often am coming to a publicist for. If you think you have a Billboard Hot 100 charting, Pop Airplay charting artist that should be on the Pop Shop Podcast for Billboard, please bring them to me. I would love to entertain that.

**[0:22:10] BB:** Listen up though, top 100.

**[0:22:13] KA:** Yes. You got to be on our charts, like I said.

**[0:22:16] BB:** Yes, okay. You have to be on the chart. That's so clear, by the way.

**[0:22:21] KA:** It's nice. It's nice to have a criteria like that to be able to point to because we – sometimes like, there might be like personal tastes involved. “Oh, I don't like that artist or whatever.” But it's like if they are charting, especially on our Pop Airplay chart, that's like right now, top 40 pop radio, we are interested in talking to them about their music right then and there.

**[0:22:41] BB:** That's it. Done. Katie, thank you so much for being on here today.

**[0:22:46] KA:** It's my pleasure.

**[0:22:46] BB:** What a lovely conversation and all things music and fun and LA-ness and yay.

**[0:22:53] KA:** I actually did have coffee, so you all had coffee with me.

**[0:22:56] BB:** I love it. Mine was already gone, but it was all good.

**[0:23:02] KA:** Well, it's great to meet you, Beck, thank you.

**[0:23:05] BB:** Nice meeting you. Katie Atkinson, Executive Digital Director of the West Coast, not the other side, because let's keep in mind, she's in her inbox all the time. Billboard Magazine, there you go, Katie.

**[0:23:15] KA:** Thank you, Beck.

**[0:23:17] BB:** Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[0:23:18] ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode with Katie Atkinson, Exclusive Digital Director of the West Coast for Billboard Magazine. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter at [onepitch.co/podcast](https://onepitch.co/podcast). We'll see you all next week, but until then, start great stories.

[END]