

EPISODE 259**[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 the right journalists? Head over to our website at onepitch.co to learn more.

This episode, you'll meet Sean Malin, comedy columnist and writer at Vulture, New York Magazine's Culture Vertical. In this episode, Sean pulls back the curtain on his multifaceted career and gives us a sneak peek into his upcoming book, *The Podcast Pantheon: A Definitive Guide to the Most Influential Podcasts of our Time*. We dive into the essential and sometimes tricky role publicists have played in Sean's journey, why he's grateful for almost all of them, and candid about the few who've earned a spot on his blacklist. Sean also shares expert tips on what makes a pitch stand out, the importance of boundaries in media, and how to build genuine, long-term relationships in this fast-paced industry. Whether you're a fellow journalist, a publicist, or just someone who loves smart, funny conversation, you won't want to miss this one.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:09] BB: Great. Welcome, everybody. This is Coffee with the Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger, and we're doing this show so that we know as publicists how to better work with our journalists, reporters, freelancers, editors, all the people that are helping us do our jobs, which is so important. Today, this is a first, because I've never had a comedy columnist, or a comedy writer, especially from New York Magazine on with us. We have Sean Malin. Look, he even spelled it out for us on the bottom there of the screen. Sean, thank you. Thank you for being here.

[0:01:42] SM: Nice to be here.

[0:01:42] BB: How fun. I'm like, we're going to have a fun time, because you have to.

[0:01:45] SM: Looking forward. Yeah. Big smile.

[0:01:47] **BB:** I hope so. Okay. First off, you got a book coming out.

[0:01:51] **SM:** That's true.

[0:01:52] **BB:** Tell us a little bit more. What's the book about? All the things.

[0:01:55] **SM:** Well, it's related to this, because it's called *The Podcast Pantheon*. It's the first ever comprehensive canon in the history of podcasts. 101 podcasts profiled, exclusive behind the scenes, stories that you've never heard, images coming out from Chronicle book September 16th. This book never would have happened without publicists. The publicists that made this book happen get special thanks at the end of the book.

[0:02:15] **BB:** Gah.

[0:02:16] **SM:** We're the best.

[0:02:17] **BB:** Oh, okay. Wait, wait. It's a book about podcasts? The stuff you've never seen? Like, give me an example. What?

[0:02:25] **SM:** Well, we've had podcasts for 20 years. There's over 5 million English language podcasts, including this one. This book basically sets in the stone, the first ever pantheon of all of them. Think Rolling Stones 500 greatest albums of all time in those first 20 years. We're in the Golden Age of podcasts now.

[0:02:44] **BB:** We are.

[0:02:45] **SM:** Everyone's got one. But what are the true champions and the most influential, important shows of our time, of our lives back? That's what the book's about.

[0:02:54] **BB:** Wow. Okay. Well, that must have been horrendous to put together. Fun, but horrendous at the same time.

[0:03:00] SM: It was hard work, but the podcasters were amazing people. Everyone who appeared in the book was profoundly enthusiastic. Then, of course, you have the influence of the gatekeeper people, the PR people, the publicists, the press. You know that a book is going to make a good impact when every publicist gives you an immediate yes on getting access to – there's some very, very big people in the book. Yeah, any opportunity to sling some praise on my PR friends and colleagues is an opportunity I don't take lightly.

[0:03:35] BB: Love a PR. Shout out on the show, which is rare. Excellent. Okay. Sean, for those who are maybe not as familiar, I do ask this pretty much of everybody. New York Magazine, what you all doing over there?

[0:03:48] SM: Well, I specifically am a columnist for New York Magazine's Culture Vertical Vulture. I write the Start Here column there.

[0:03:55] BB: Yes. Just fabulous. Yes.

[0:03:58] SM: That column is a deep dive into the world's most amusing podcasts. We take individual podcasts and dissect them through the lens of a single key episode that showcases what it is. I do write about other pieces of comedy. I break news. I've interviewed comedy luminaries over the years there, but I write about culture generally for Vulture.

[0:04:18] BB: Exactly. Vulture is freaking fantastic, for anybody who's wondering, yes. Okay, now, what about your then inbox, Sean? Because I can only – that must be an interesting inbox of pitches, perhaps.

[0:04:30] SM: Yeah. I have one of the most diverse inboxes of anyone I know in this industry.

[0:04:35] BB: Yeah. I was going to say. Yeah.

[0:04:36] SM: It's fun.

[0:04:37] BB: What are you getting in there? What are you getting in there?

[0:04:39] SM: Well, I started out as a film critic. Then, I also wrote travel material to the point where I'm now, I call myself a culture critic more than a general reporter, or a journalist. I'm getting pitches on products. I'm getting pitches on people. I'm getting pitches on stays in fancy hotels around the world. I'm getting pitches on ice bath products, all sorts of wellness. It's everything, Beck. It's the strangest combination of things. It's mostly delightful. Every so often, I get something that really doesn't apply to me. Most of the time, they're fun.

[0:05:12] BB: Wait, wait, wait, wait. You sometimes get stuff that doesn't apply to you? Because usually on the show, I get tons of stuff that does not apply to me at all, whatsoever. You're saying, most of your pitches are relevant-ish?

[0:05:24] SM: I can always find an angle. I mean –

[0:05:26] BB: Okay. Okay. That's generous. I applaud you.

[0:05:30] SM: I don't like to throw anything out before I've done my best to make it a thing. I mean, people have taken the time to write to you. You can show some respect and try and write about it. That's my best offer. I can't always do it. I have limits on my time, like everybody else.

[0:05:47] BB: Mm-hmm. Of course. What do you do with all the pitches you get? Are you read every single one? Are you, what do we do?

[0:05:54] SM: Yeah. I read every single one. I try to respond to every single one.

[0:05:57] BB: Oh, my God. You want to meet people.

[0:05:58] SM: Listening to the show, people don't do that. They just scan. I hear people scanning –

[0:06:03] BB: No, they're bulk deleters on here. There are dedicated filers. There are, let it rollers. They got 80,000 unread emails there. Yeah.

[0:06:14] SM: I heard something once. A famous person that I interviewed, I won't say who it is, but it may be known. This person, I emailed a question for a newspaper. Within 20 seconds, this person responded directly. When I interviewed him, he told me, "If I don't respond now, I'll never respond." I take that mentality. I respond to everything, but I'm going to do it now. If I forget today, it's never happening.

[0:06:36] BB: Wow. Okay. Then, one of the questions we ask, and just like, oh, when do you review pitches? Are you just constant? Is it every five minutes for you?

[0:06:44] SM: Yeah. Every day.

[0:06:46] BB: Oh, okay. You're saying every day, but no, through the –

[0:06:48] SM: Throughout the day.

[0:06:48] BB: Throughout the day. Okay. All the time.

[0:06:50] SM: Yeah.

[0:06:50] BB: Okay. Okay, wow. Okay. What's a good pitch for you? What makes you go, "Yes. Ooh, I'm going to open that one right up"? This is like looking at the subject line, of course.

[0:07:02] SM: There are a couple of things I'm looking for., exclusivity in terms of access to somebody is always a positive. I love when someone says, "You're the first person I've thought of for this." I also love eccentricity. I really respond to the esoteric, weird angles on things. If you have an idea around a famous person, or product, or show, or comedy special, or food, and it's never been out there before, I'm usually the person who's going to chase that story.

[0:07:30] BB: Mm-hmm.

[0:07:30] SM: Then, the third thing is kindness. I don't respond well to urgency, or aggression. Don't rush me. Don't push me. Don't be rude, and we'll get along.

[0:07:40] BB: Okay. Don't rush me. Don't push me. Okay. Good. Good rules. This is good. Okay. Okay. What do you not like in a pitch, besides these rules here that get busted, perhaps?

[0:07:53] SM: I heard somebody else mention this on your show. I don't like being called by the wrong name. I don't like mass emails that say, "Dear, insert here." I like personability and I dislike mass contact. It makes me feel small.

[0:08:09] BB: It does. Right?

[0:08:10] SM: Like I don't exist.

[0:08:11] BB: You ever respond to this by the way and be like, "I know you're sending me this along with 500 other people."

[0:08:16] SM: I try not to be smarmy. Every so often if I have a relationship with a publicist, I'll be nice. I have had publicists who make mistakes in bookings and then take accountability and apologize. They respond to things. Then, I'll still be their buddy. If they don't, probably won't hear from me again.

[0:08:35] BB: Okay. Okay. What about relationship building for you, Sean? You mentioned you have some publicists and stuff. Do you want to actively make relationships at all, and how so if that's the case?

[0:08:47] SM: Yeah. Beck, I consider publicists and writers, especially if you're a critic to be members of the same tribe and family. You are writers as well. You write to a different audience towards us. You create pitches, stories. None of my career from when I worked in film to food to travel to comedy and culture writ large, it doesn't happen without the support and the hard work of publicists. I love hanging out with publicists. I love getting a burger with some, some relationships I've had for years and years just over the phone, or over email. I don't go for a purely transactional relationship as the only way to be with publicists. There are some publicists that I have that relationship with and that's the nature of our dynamic, but if you are friendly and supportive and helpful, I don't mind becoming someone we have rapport with over years. I don't have any best friends who are publicists, but I have many good friends who are.

[0:09:46] BB: Okay. That's a good clarification. No besties, but good. Okay. If I was such a publicist and I'm like, well, I want to be on Sean's get a burger with me list. How does that happen?

[0:09:58] SM: Yeah. Well, first we have to build trust through the – you have to do your job well, which means provide access to what you're promising. Don't dilly dally. Don't make my life difficult while I'm on deadline. Be funny. Don't be cold. Have a sense of humor about things if they go wrong. One thing that I really resent is when publicists send me products. I don't have a chance to write about the product, or go to the restaurant or it doesn't get written up after I go to a comedy special, and they then express that they're upset that something didn't happen. This is how it works. You're just showing a lack of professionalism if you yourself are –

[0:10:37] BB: You really are.

[0:10:37] SM: - blaming the writer when that happens.

[0:10:39] BB: You are. You are. You are. I'm sure you don't write back to those.

[0:10:44] SM: Well, I've actually personally blacklisted a few, where they say something to me that blames me, or makes me feel guilty. That's it. That's the end of our personal relationship.

[0:10:55] BB: Yeah, it has to be, because otherwise, life is too short. No, I don't have no time for this. Yeah.

[MESSAGE]

[0:11:03] 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]

[0:11:25] BB: What do you enjoy the most with the relationship you have with a publicist? I mean, obviously, they send you good content. They send you the good things. You see them as a colleague, but is there anything else that makes you go like, “Hell, yeah. That's right.”

[0:11:38] SM: Well, I appreciate good copy. I am thinking of an example of a publicist a couple of years ago who was representing a silverware company. His pitches for these pieces of silver are very fine spoons and tweezers and things. They were cooking implements. Wow, they were just hilarious. I love a great sense of humor. I love someone coming out of left field on a subject. Like, be joyful. Be funny. This is a strange job. Your job is to send me emails. Enjoy. Take pride in your product.

[0:12:09] BB: Well, we always like to say like, take pride in the pitch. If you are not excited about the pitch, you probably shouldn't be sending it, right?

[0:12:16] SM: I agree with that. If you don't like what you're talking about, it's going to come through in your language.

[0:12:23] BB: It does. Unfortunately, so many people in our industry, I know you all know what I'm talking about. It's like, “Oh, God. Okay. I'm going to send that.” It's like, no. Push back on that. Be like, “I can't be sending that. That's not —”

[0:12:33] SM: We all got to work. I respect it, but it's like, I am somebody who I don't take my work home with me. I'm on when I'm on. I'm off when I'm off. If I'm reading your email, please add a little joy to my life. I'll try to be polite and friendly to you. I don't get in arguments with any publicist ever. We're not going to have a problem.

[0:12:51] BB: I love that. I'm not getting in arguments. It's good. Okay. Yeah. Okay. I don't hear often on this show, Sean, where people say like, I'll leave the work. What's your boundary on this? By the way, especially with someone like you, who I imagine you're going to shows, you're going to things.

[0:13:09] SM: Correct.

[0:13:10] BB: Leave all the time. How are you doing this?

[0:13:13] SM: I mean, it's not that I can shut off what my role is when I go to a comedy show, or when I'm interviewing somebody for a podcast. If we're having a social occasion, I will make very clear, I'm off record here, we're not on background. We're not doing any work. We're just getting to know each other as collaborators.

[0:13:34] BB: Good.

[0:13:34] SM: In terms of hours, when I sit down on my computer in the morning is usually around 9.00, 8.30 sometimes, my email is on do not disturb at 7.00. That's it. You can't access me.

[0:13:48] BB: Okay. That's it. how long have you held that boundary up?

[0:13:53] SM: I went to graduate school and then graduate school for media studies. If you checked your phone, you weren't getting your work. It was a 14-hour day. I also worked on film and TV production sets. It was like, you had to have your phone open all that time. After I stopped that, I said, I'm never going to do that again. I mean, it was purely painful to work 12 hours, 14-hour days. I'm not that person. Are you that kind of person, Beck? Are you a 14-hour a day person?

[0:14:21] BB: I am a high performance, high intensity person. Thanks for asking, Sean. No one usually asks me questions. This is fun. I have a lot of capacity, a lot of energy and I love what I do. My thing as a founder, right, which is you're just loving what you do. You get into it and you just love it, and so forth. I have to have the discipline with myself as many founders have to eventually learn of like, okay, tonight, I'm going to my Krav Maga class. I got to go physically to the class when I'm there and I'm punching people, choking people, guess what? You're not doing an email. You can't be doing an email. I'm really disciplined now on it, because you for

me, and I imagine this is the case with some reporters, you could just go on. You could just go on.

[0:15:03] SM: That's true.

[0:15:04] BB: The biggest fallacy I think in adulting is learning like, oh, there's always work. There's always more work.

[0:15:10] SM: That's right.

[0:15:10] BB: I could work more.

[0:15:12] SM: Yeah, and my work is also at home, I consume culture for a living. I watch TV for a living. I watch comedy specials. It's not like –

[0:15:19] BB: Just constantly.

[0:15:20] SM: When I say, I'm going to turn off, I mean, I'm turning off access to me. It's not that I'm not still consuming or absorbing, but I'm not responding to emails. I'm not taking phone calls. I have in the past, every so often, recriminated, or sternly wrote back to a publicist saying, “Hey, you sent me something at 10 p.m. that just arrived at my house. I was asleep. Please don't do that. Please, have some conscientiousness of the fact that I'm a human being in my house at that time, napping.” People have boundary issues in this industry. Some publicists, especially. I think if you just have really clear boundaries with them, almost all 99.9% respect it.

[0:16:02] BB: Yes. I think honestly, a lot of people would like more boundaries for themselves and to know them for others.

[0:16:08] SM: It's true. It's not easy to learn. You can only learn the hard way by stepping over somebody's line.

[0:16:14] BB: Yes. Yes. I agree. Okay. What's the best pitch you've gotten lately, Sean? I know you came prepared with some pitches you liked.

[0:16:22] SM: Yeah. Well, pitching me is a really easy thing to do, because for my column, I always have to produce. Of course, I field pitches for food, for comedy, for travel as a culture writer. I got one. This was one that I got not for New York Magazine, but for a different publication that became a feature story in the New York Times. The subject line was Dick Pics Not Welcome. Profile Managed by Mom. It was about a Jewish dating service that is managed by your mother.

[0:16:52] BB: Oh, my God. Oh, my God.

[0:16:55] SM: It became a full happy spread in the times. I mean, it was a great, great pitch. I mean, so good.

[0:17:01] BB: High five to that publicist. Oh, yeah.

[0:17:05] SM: Then, I just a very simple, somebody sent me end of year podcast coverage. Would you consider? They just say, would you consider? Very nice, very polite. Maybe even a little genteel.

[0:17:17] BB: Wait, was he asked, would you consider including this in your round up?

[0:17:22] SM: Yes. Exactly.

[0:17:23] BB: Oh, I like this. That's nice. Okay.

[0:17:26] SM: It's almost gentlemanly.

[0:17:27] BB: It is. Yes.

[0:17:29] SM: Would you consider?

[0:17:30] BB: Okay. On that point though, there's some pitches and a lot of people on the show are like, "No, I don't want to hear, "Oh, Sean. I hope your weekend was great. Did you see any

fun shows? Okay, now I want to talk.”” Do you want straight to the point? Just get into it. Forget that. I don't want that crap.

[0:17:46] SM: I like a little salutation. It's nice to say, “I hope you're all right.”

[0:17:51] BB: Okay. I hope you're alive. Okay. Good. Yup. Yeah.

[0:17:54] SM: Have you heard this thing where people, there's the meme of how your email finds me. I hope this email finds you well, and then there's a picture of a dumpster fire.

[0:17:59] BB: Oh, God. Yes. Yeah, exactly.

[0:18:02] SM: I actually really like being asked, hope you had a good weekend. Here's my pitch. Again, we're human beings talking. We're not automatons. Treat me like one, I'll treat you like one.

[0:18:14] BB: It's good. It's a good reframe. Yes, Sean. Okay. Not usually what I talk about on here, but are you doing any publicity for your book coming up? What are you PRing for it?

[0:18:25] SM: Yeah. We haven't announced anything yet, so there's nothing I can mention now. But the book comes out September 16th and we will be having events all over the country. I'll be live with some special guests and there will be virtual events supporting the book. I'll announce these on social media. There will be press releases going out. We'll make sure that you're on every email.

[0:18:48] BB: Let us know. Let us know. Sean, okay.

[0:18:50] SM: Yeah. There will be a lot. If you like anybody who we mention is in the book, if you like WTF with Marc Maron, or the serial people, or Conan O'Brien, those are the kinds of people profiled in the book. You can imagine the caliber of guests that we'll have in some of our events.

[0:19:07] BB: Oh, gosh. Oh, gosh. Oh, how exciting. Okay. I would like to do my quick-fire list with you, Sean. Are you ready for it?

[0:19:18] SM: I'm ready.

[0:19:19] BB: Okay. Video or phone interview?

[0:19:21] SM: Video all the way.

[0:19:23] BB: Why, by the way?

[0:19:25] SM: I love talking to people.

[0:19:26] BB: You love talking to people. I feel like, you're an ace in your place is what I like to say, Sean. You just love –

[0:19:30] SM: What is that?

[0:19:31] BB: It just means like, your gift for the world, you're doing it and you're doing it hard and you're loving it. You're in it. You're good.

[0:19:38] SM: I do like being in the world.

[0:19:40] BB: Oh, I'm freaking on it. Cool. Okay. Bullet points, or paragraphs in a pitch?

[0:19:45] SM: I'm fine with both. I send paragraph emails when I pitch stories to my editors. if I'm receiving one. Bullets are simple, but I'll read both.

[0:19:54] BB: Okay. Short or long pitches?

[0:19:57] SM: Same thing. Short is nice and to the point, but sometimes it's not enough. I will apologize for long email. I'll say, sorry for the long email, but it's important.

[0:20:06] BB: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Okay. Images attached, or Dropbox zip file. Do we have a preference?

[0:20:10] SM: Yeah. Images attached, please.

[0:20:13] BB: Okay. Okay. One follow up, or multiple?

[0:20:16] SM: Two follow ups is acceptable. Three is where I draw the line.

[0:20:21] BB: Okay. Then, I bet I know the answer to this, but just to be clear, direct, or creative subject lines? I mean, I think it's going to be creative.

[0:20:27] SM: I like both. Direct is important for some of the stuff that I do, but I will usually respond better to creative.

[0:20:34] BB: Yeah. I was going to say, juice it up.

[0:20:36] SM: You got me pinned.

[0:20:37] BB: Juice it up. Okay, what about press release or media kit?

[0:20:41] SM: Press release almost always. Media kits are too long.

[0:20:44] BB: I agree.

[0:20:45] SM: Too much material.

[0:20:45] BB: Okay. Yeah. Yeah. Well, we already talked about this. You read the pitches all the damn time. Except when you're boundary to time. Okay. Then, any sources you're looking for?

[0:20:55] SM: Yes. Absolutely.

[0:20:56] BB: Who are we looking for?

[0:20:57] SM: I reject almost all attempts to go on background from most people. We are looking for sources who will speak on the record. We are looking for exclusive interviews, mostly talent. If you are the founder of a restaurant, or the creator of an invention and food. If you are a comedy booker, if you are a comedy club owner, if you are a comedian, these are all the kinds of people from every facet of these industries. If you are a filmmaker, film editor, film composer, I want to talk to you. I don't want to talk to a representative for you, nor do I want to talk to a close friend of yours. I'm looking to speak with you. The individual.

[0:21:33] BB: Right. Not a close friend of yours. Nope. Nope. Yup. Good. Okay. Sean, we already talked about your book and promoting it. We know the date, all that good stuff. Anything else you want to mention, promote, etc.?

[0:21:44] SM: Well, please do come out to the events for the book, September 16th for Chronicle Books, and follow Start Here at Vulture. That's my monthly column.

[0:21:53] BB: Start Here. Vulture. Let me make sure I'm signed up for it myself. Okay. Thank you so much, Sean. What a joy. What a pleasure.

[0:21:59] SM: It was awesome, Beck. Thanks for having me.

[0:22:01] BB: How fun. I love it. Everybody, this is Sean Malin. Look, see, it's on the bottom of this thing. From, let me ask you, do you prefer comedy columnist and comedy writer for New York Magazine, or do you prefer from Vulture?

[0:22:13] SM: They're both accurate. Whatever is easiest for you. But we usually say Vulture, because Start Here is run through Vulture. Or you could say, New York Magazine's Vulture, either of them is fine. But comedy columnist at Vulture is perfect.

[0:22:25] BB: All right. Sounds good. Thank you again. Awesome.

[0:22:27] SM: Thanks, Beck. So nice to be invited. I appreciate it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:22:30] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist with Sean Malin, a comedy columnist and comedy writer at Vulture, New York Magazine's Cultural Vertical. 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]