

****Jered:**** Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee With A Journalist and it's a podcast that's just that. You got coffee. We got Journalists. We got lots of good conversation. I'm Jered Martin. I'm the Co-founder and COO at OnePitch

****Beck:**** And I'm Beck Bamberger. I'm also the Co-founder of OnePitch, the CEO of BAM Communications, and I'm the host for today's show. Today we're talking to Josh Sternberg, who was the tech editor over at Adweek, and here's something for publicists all to listen in on- he reads, so he says, every single email he gets every day, which numbers in like the thousands he's saying. So, we're going to talk to him about that, how he manages that, how he's a former musician and also a recovered PR professional. Let's take a listen.

****Beck:**** Josh, thank you for being here.

****Josh:**** Thank you for having me.

****Beck:**** This is Josh, from Adweek, Sternberg. Did I get that right?

****Josh:**** You got it.

****Beck:**** Excellent. He's the tech editor at Adweek and has been at a variety of different outlets, also former journalists or former publicists. So you've crossed over to the journalist side. We're here to talk about that. And we're here to talk about whatever you want, whatever can help journalists, and also publicists, learn more about this interesting, intricate field of journalism and how the relationships with publicists work with that. So first off, let's start with where you landed in publicity and then how you passed the chasm or crossed the chasm into journalism.

****Josh:**** Okay. So I am sitting here because I am a failed musician.

****Beck:**** Yes. That was the first thing you have on your website, Twitter feed.

****Josh:**** I wanted to be a rockstar. I was in a jazz-rock improv band when I was in college, in Grad School.

****Beck:**** In New Jersey?

****Josh:**** New Jersey. Yep. And um, you might find this hard to believe, but there's not a very good market for a jazz-rock improv group.

****Beck:****

Did you discover this quickly?

****Josh:****

No, no. It took, uh, about nine years, slow slow learner. And when the band broke up, I needed to do something. And I was in graduate school at the time. I really loved education. I looked at learning, I loved diving into the theoretical and practical implications of how we communicate, and I started to teach. So I was an adjunct professor at a couple of New Jersey universities for a few years. But then I met a girl and she was living in New York and I was living in New Jersey. We dated and we hung out on the weekends and it was great. Then, it got to a point where we didn't want to be that weekend couple. She moved to Brooklyn into Park Slope and I was still living in New Jersey and-

****Beck:**** You had to make a move.

****Josh:**** I had to make- can I curse?

****Beck:**** Oh, oh yeah.

****Josh:**** Well, it was either shit or get off the pot. And we took a shit. Um, we moved in together and I quickly realized that it was not financially viable to cross two rivers to teach. So I had to find a job. And this was 2005ish and I just kind of tripped into public relations. It just, there was no plan. It was- this was a job, they made me an offer for money and I said, "Okay, I need a new job." I needed a paycheck and needed health insurance. So great. And that started my illustrious public relations career.

****Beck:**** But in all fairness, you were coming from a communications background. You went to college, undergrad, then you did your master's in communications. So it wasn't totally foreign.

****Josh:**** No, no, no, no. So I understood. So that the choices in front of me were advertising, marketing, PR. Journalism wasn't ever even on the radar. I enjoyed writing. I wanted it to be, I enjoyed the-the-the active writing. I didn't know much about the active reporting. Um, those two are very different and when I got into PR it was easy.

****Beck:**** Um, was it easy? Did it continue to be easy? Let's ask that.

****Josh:**** Yeah, yeah, yeah. 'Cause I understood what a story was. So when I'm looking in the media relations side, finding a story was easy. Finding a reporter and how to talk to a reporter was also easy. Uh, liquor helps.

****Beck:**** Pro tip. Pro tip.

****Josh:**** What was really interesting was when I wasn't doing media relations and understanding how strategic communications actually can work, when you are sitting with a client and coming up with your brand message and your core attributes to support that message. Then your proof points to support the attributes to support the message and work with the client to get that message out, whether through media or through speaking opportunities or through bi-lines or through networks or whatever. That was fun. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed the-the crisis communications of trying to put out fires and nothing that was a huge crisis. Uh, I've never been in an environment where, you know, if you want me to Facebook to comms team right now, that's ongoing.

****Beck:**** Job security.

****Josh:**** Yeah, that's for sure. So when I was in PR, I enjoyed the strategic thinking. What rubbed them off in the wrong way was how to take that strategic thinking and implement it in a smart and intelligent tactical way, which often didn't happen. So there was one agency that I was working at that was essentially a media relations sweatshop and it was. It was not enjoyable because you would walk in on Monday and the CEO would say, get us a press hit by the end of the week or you're fired, which sucks 'cause there's no strategic thinking and I was. I interviewed and I thought I was coming on to be a strategic thinker...didn't work. But you know, you get creative and you develop your bullshit lists. For us at the time was a, a spreadsheet of AM radio stations.

****Beck:**** God Bless radio stations.

****Josh:**** Because radio stations in the middle of nowhere love phone calls. So yeah. So I did not enjoy that. So when I left-

****Beck:**** So you left?

****Josh:**** So, I left. I started my own, my own consultant agency. I thought, now you believe I can do a better job, and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed working for myself and enjoyed the chase of the client.

****Beck:**** Well, you did for 4 years, almost five years.

****Josh:**** It got too much. The time put into cultivating a roster of clients, of being always on, was not healthy. Um, and this was in the very early days of social platforms and the very, you know, a, we'll call it like the-the middle late mobile era. It wasn't enjoyable.

****Beck:**** Well, I think also, it's because it's the entrepreneurial aspect of it too. It's not just doing the craft ? It's you're running a business, which has all of the things from the insurance and payroll, to making sure legal documents are signed, and etc.

****Josh:**** Give me one or the other. And I was, I was again, both dumb and naive to think that I can do, both the operations and the work, 'cause the work still needed to be good because if you did bad work you didn't get clients. And I had to pay rent, but what it allowed me to do, it allowed me to also write on the side. And that's kind of how I made that shift from PR to journalism. It wasn't a full chop, wasn't a full slice. I'm going to stop being PR and I'm going to go look for journalism. It was, I was doing PR, so this was around 2008 when I started my own little shop, but I was also starting to write a lot more. And that started to get eyeballs and those eyeballs turned into opportunities at other publications, which over a few years it built up sources and I built up a writing style and a voice. I think maybe, which just kind of pushed me forward down this path.

****Beck:**** So in about four years, you decided, "Okay, no more on the communications firm", and then you went and started at Digiday. How did you get that job?

****Josh:**** If my memory serves, I emailed Brian Morrissey, the editor, and said, “Hey, I saw that you're looking for a staff writer. I'm interested.” We went out for coffee and we did a three-month trial and that turned into two and a half years.

****Beck:**** Two and a half years. Okay. How was it being at Digiday?

****Josh:**** It was good. Yeah.

****Beck:**** Yeah. But you then left to go to the Washington Post?

****Josh:**** Yeah, I got-

****Beck:**** Quite different, I would imagine.

****Josh:**** I got a call. So at Digiday I moved over from the edit side to the content studio side and I was in there for a couple of months and I got a phone call from the then chief revenue officer at the Washington Post who said, “You know, you've been covering this industry for a while. You know what the playbooks are for a whole bunch of publishers doing sponsored content. You're doing sponsored content now at Digiday. We need to build and ramp up a sponsored content branded studio. What do you say?” I said “Sure”. It was a good opportunity to go learn more about the business, about how media operates and to work in an environment. Maybe it was like six months or a year after Bayzos bought The Post, so there was a runway, there was an optimism.

****Beck:**** There is money.

****Josh:**** There's money. Yes. We grew a team pretty quickly and it was off to the races.

****Beck:**** And what did you- and this is around, just for everybody to know, 2014 is about when this is happening. So just a few years ago, what were the things you learned? Just one or two about the operations of the media?

****Josh**:**

Well, I-I laugh because my, the impulse to say is that I actually learned now that it was a medium built on a house of cards, but there's a lot of qualifiers to that. It's interesting thinking back and learning how when I was media reporter and I was talking to salespeople, the conversations we had versus when I was on the business side and talking to salespeople and the conversations we had, they were similar but different. They were obviously less guarded, but there was a-a way that a business side thinks that was really intriguing to me to learn how a salesperson decides how they're going to approach a deal, how they're going to approach a pitch or content around that idea.

Beck: Tell us more, though. What do you mean with the "business people"? Just what they would do for the client that wants to pay to be on the platform?

Josh: Yeah, in some ways, right, so there's a- for a lot of salespeople, they fall under "Yes, and..." mentality, right? It's the improv-

Beck: The improv comedy.

Josh: Right. Where whatever you throw at me, I'm going to run with it. And on the business side, it's well we can do that and the challenge comes when the salesperson does that and then hands it off to the people that I need to execute and what they sold is not feasible or possible.

Beck: Would that happen a lot?

Josh: Yes. Oh, yes. It's one of the reasons why sponsored content and brand studios are in trouble right now within media organizations because the people running that are thinking as a "yes, and..." and my inclination is to go "no, but..." and that did not work out very well.

Beck: So, you left Washington Post and you then went to NBC News, also for branded content. How was that different from Washington Post? Obviously, you're now doing network TV.

Josh: In every sense of the way. This scale is enormous, right? 'Cause you're using, not just, you're using TV and digital. You're using NBCnews.com, today.com, cnbc.com, Msnbc.com, nightly news, meet the press, digital and linear. So, it becomes a much bigger deal. The deal sizes are significantly bigger. It's a much different animal.

****Beck:**** And in a good way of like, “Wow, there's so many possibilities” or almost in a suffocating way?

****Josh:**** I don't look at it as good or bad. It's different. So, The Washington Post is a newspaper, a single serving paper and the mission of the Washington Post is different than the mission of NBC. Even with NBC News.

****Beck:**** Let's, let me go back to this question of is it exciting for you to have all those options or is it more suffocating given the volume of all the things you could do? And then how do you navigate that with all the different channels that the NBC world consumes?

****Josh:**** It was difficult and I'm no longer there.

****Beck:**** That sums it up. Okay, well, now it seems like things have come full circle because now you're in Adweek and you were writing and talking about to some extent publicity and PR and the branding world and media and what it's doing and such. So has it, isn't it? Isn't that interesting how it dovetails into both your previous and now your current? Let's talk about that now.

****Josh:**** I am a postmodernist. There is no singular truth. With that, my career has been, as we've been talking about, has been, would you say circuitous? I say maybe. My wife or my parents might say more meandering, but it's, it's rooted in a through thread of communication of words, of talking with other people and understanding other points of view. Most journalists have a pretty straight path. Most PR people have a pretty straight path. Most academics have a pretty straight path. Because I'm a failed jazz-rock improv musician, which is defined as meandering or circuitous. You've got your head and then you got your jazz improv exploration and then you come back to the head at the end of the song. That's kind-of how I look at where I'm going with my life. I love what I do right now. I have not been happier at a job since I was a 24-year-old, 25-year-old professor.

****Beck:**** That is great.

****Josh:**** Yeah, it's, it's, it's weird, right?

****Beck:**** You love your job.

****Josh:**** Right. We're so conditioned to not love your job, right? You're conditioned-

****Beck:**** That's the popular thing.

****Josh:**** Right. I love my job. I love almost everything about it. I can't quite grasp with the best of them, but there's nowhere I'd rather be at this particular moment. That's also a hedge knowing that something really big can come tomorrow, next week and a year from now. Um, I learned a long time ago that I need to do what's in the best interest of me and first and foremost, and then my family. And if that means PR or journalism and it aligns with where my head is at at a particular moment. So be it.

****Beck:**** What do you love most about your current job?

****Josh:**** The culture. The people.

****Beck:**** Does this include publicists?

****Josh:**** Oh no, my people at Adweek.

****Beck:**** Just a clarification.

****Josh:**** Yeah, my team. Um, the newsroom, the broader organization. It's, it's just, it's fun. No, definitely not publicists. We can talk about that.

****Beck:**** Let's go into that because we have a lot of publicists who listen and for everybody who is listening. We just got a big shake of the head of like, no, no, no, no publicists. So what is it now, especially being a former publicist, I would think maybe you're slightly empathetic to them?

****Josh:**** That's part of the problem.

****Beck:**** Oh, okay. Let's elaborate.

****Josh:**** It's that I do respond to emails and when you send the bad pitch, I tell you why it's a bad pitch. And you would think that a PR person would take that into consideration the next time and they don't and part of it is them, but part of it is also the system of public relations. When you are in, and this is primarily agency, when you are at an agency and you're dictated by billable hours and you are a mid-level, 'cause senior level people don't pitch, and your mid-level, junior level person spraying and praying, your incentive is not to have a story. Your incentive is to get a client placed into media, which is why the AM radio spreadsheet existed because when I was in PR, I was not going to have to spray and pray to journalists that I respected. Even the ones I didn't like, I wasn't wasting their time because the goal is not to form a journalist's perspective, is not to get your client mentioned. I get pitches, obviously every day, that are, "Hey Josh, hope all is well. I have a client, the, I think you would be great for you to talk with. She can talk about A, B, C and D" and I respond and I say "Thanks, but no, there's nothing for me to talk about. What is the story?" Very rarely do they respond with a story. It's here's my client, this is why you should cover them. I think PR people forget that trade journalists are not PR people, that we are not writing what you tell us to write. If there's an interesting story. Cool. Tell me what the interesting story is. Tell me what the trend is. Tell me what the fad is. Tell me what the point of view is and oh, by the way, I've got someone that you should connect with that can tell you some stuff about this, but this is not about my client. This is about a broader story idea. Wink, wink, my client knows what they're talking about in this. That rarely happens because PR people aren't thinking strategically. They are thinking tactically. They are thinking about the press hit, they're not thinking about the story. Think about the story and it'll go a long way with us.

****Beck:**** Great advice. So no plating up your client. Especially in the first line.

****Josh:**** Yes.

****Beck:**** Or two. Your job isn't to serve the clients or them or?

****Josh:**** I get a thousand emails a day. I get a thousand emails a day, easily. Um, and I read them all.

****Beck:**** Do you? Okay, we need to talk about this. How do you manage this?

****Josh:**** I'm an inbox zero guy because I can't, like notifications give me anxiety. So, I read them and if it's something that I am interested in, I will respond right away. If it's something that I'm kind-of interested in, I'll put it into my kind-of interested folder and I'll come back to it at the end of the day when I'm on the bus ride going home. If I'm not interested, I don't respond.

****Beck:**** Okay. So you do read every single and then no response means you have read and you have passed.

****Josh:**** No response is because I don't have- I'm not responding to a press release that you sent out to your BCC distribution list.

****Beck:**** Who does that though?

****Josh:**** A lot of PR people.

****Beck:**** It's disappointing.

****Josh:**** If you send me a pitch and it's not a good pitch but I know that you sent it to me, I'll respond, but if it's a mass BCC pitch, I'm not responding which is uh, which is a majority of the pitches that I get.

****Beck:**** Wow. And you get a thousand a day?

****Josh:**** Well, I get a thousand emails. I don't necessarily get a thousand pitches.

****Beck:**** Wow. Okay. Then as you're compiling and thinking, let's just say your job is to write stories and get them posted up here and do good journalism, etc.

****Josh:**** My job is to edit my team who writes good stories. I write from time to time.

****Beck:**** Okay. 'Cause you do have some published stories, of course. Then isn't it interrupting you to go back and be pinging people back as you see it. How do you, how do you actually do this full of work?

****Josh:**** This is actually where being in PR was really helpful because when you're in PR, especially on the agency side, you wear many hats for many clients.

****Beck:**** This is true.

****Josh:**** And again, because you're on billable hours, you are bouncing across, you know, an hour for a client here an hour for a client there. You know, client A is doing an event, so you're trying to do outreach for that. Client B is writing a byline article for you know, Adweek. Client C is looking to put out, um, the news that they're acquiring a company. Client D is looking at as startup and they're looking for uh, some, some brand messaging and this is your day. So you're bouncing back and forth between different ideas and different concepts and different clients. That's something that my brain was able to grasp onto a, we call it multitasking. I mean, I don't think multitasking is right. If you're multitasking, you're not actually doing one thing at a time. I can do one thing for an hour and then do another thing for an hour and then do another thing for an hour. And after eight hours, I could be doing eight different things. That logic has helped me here. So, I get an email from a pitch, while at the same time editing a reporter and at the same time coming and doing a podcast.

****Beck:**** Like you did today and braving the rain and going to vote. You got the voting sticker.

****Josh:**** Well, I got the vote at 6:45 this morning, so we're good.

****Beck:**** I was in a place at 8am and the gal had on her sticker. I was like, damn, she's on top of it. Oh, it's early New Yorkers. They know how to wrong.

****Josh:**** I'm in Jersey now. So it's, it was, uh, I was trying to compete.

****Beck:**** And you have a daughter, lets just mentioned this. I love your pinned tweet here of your rainbow farting daughter.

Josh: I also, I also have a son. He doesn't fart rainbows yet, but he's only a year old so we've got some time.

Beck: As you think, so that context, as you think of the future of media, I like to ask, what do you think is the future for media? What is it going to entail? And maybe how does it relate to anything in publicity, if at all?

Beck: How are you defining media?

Beck: All of the platforms in which we consume news, quote on quote. So it's a broad view.

Josh: Okay. So, TV, print, digital, social...

Beck: Radio.

Josh: Radio, Ott, other...

Beck: VR perhaps, eventually.

Josh: I'm not big on VR.

Beck: A few people are at this moment.

Josh: I think it's fun too, it's fun. I just, until we can figure out the technology question of putting on a cumbersome headset to the content question of what can we do inside of it that's not just bells and whistles. What does the future of media look like? How far up? A year? Five? Ten? Twenty?

Beck: Oh, you like to clarify. By the time your daughter's 18.

Josh: Shit.

****Beck:**** When she can vote.

****Josh:**** I don't know. I mean it's, I don't think much will change in the sense of- we're still going to consume content. We're still going to get information, what the information is, who knows? But I don't know. It's, it's very cloudy in...

****Beck:**** No rainbows

****Josh:**** No rainbows. Uh, definitely not. Definitely not rainbows. Um, if you would've asked me in 1995 what media is going to be like. I would have said television, of course, newspapers. If you asked me in 2006, oh, blogs, absolutely. If you asked me in 2013, oh Facebook. Today, I have no clue. I just know it's going to be bad. Whatever it is, it's going to be, oh, you, you, you're online, right? You watched TV, right? No, it's not good. That's not good. The business model is a mess. The implications of fake news and false news is a mess. Not optimistic on that front. I am optimistic on being able to hopefully be a little bit more media literate where students can hopefully discern the difference, but also help educate their peers and their elders and their youngers on what to be paying attention to. That said, if we're still looking, if we're still here in 14 years between climate change and robots and who else knows, I would be surprised if we are happy with the media.

****Beck:**** Do you think you'd still be working in it?

****Josh:**** I have no idea.

****Beck:**** Wow. Well, I think we should end on that Josh. I have no idea. This is the wide world. Who knows?

****Josh:**** And it's, it's, I think it's, it's hard to be prescriptive here. You know, it's, if, if I knew what to do, I'd be a very rich and wealthy person, a powerful person, instead I'm not.

****Beck:**** You are the tech editor of Adweek in the meantime.

****Josh:**** I am the tech editor of Adweek, that is true. That is true. We have, um, and there-there are eight of us on the desk and I think when you look at the desk that can give you where I think media is going. This might be a better way in for you. Some media publications, traditionally, divided by coverage at brands, publishers and agencies. Right. The three legs of the media stool and my desk, which is a relatively new desk, actually cuts across all three. So we're not looking at stories about which agency lost an account or which media publication is doing this. We're looking at how technologies are pushing brands, publishers and agencies forward. So we have an AI, 5G, e-commerce, data platforms, AdTech, probably missing a report or two that are covering each of these. Oh, Blockchain and each of these slices and how the industry is looking at these technologies to build a product, to generate revenue, to make efficiencies where there might not be efficiencies at the moment.

****Beck:**** Well, don't you think of all people you would know, you have the heads up the soonest on what may be happening in the space of media for the coming years, perhaps?

****Josh:**** I don't know. Again, it's hard because look at a television network. You ask them what they are and they're not going to come back and say they're a TV network. They're going to say they're an Omnichannel, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Because they do digital and they do social and they do Ott. So for them, the idea of calling themselves just a TV network is wrong. For me, when you make your money from TV ad revenue, you're a TV network. But that can change. You can look at a company like... Bloomberg. What kind of media company is Bloomberg? They've got radio, they've got TV, they've got magazine, they've got Ott. Where are they in five years? I know I'm not helpful

****Beck:**** No, that's okay. I like it. This is real talk. This is what we're talking about in our little phone booth with coffee and hearing that even as a journalist, you know, you don't know.

****Josh:**** No. I don't, I would be shocked if any journalists said that they did. We don't, we don't have crystal balls. We don't know. We talked to a whole bunch of people. We can see where something might be in a particular moment, but to say, "Oh, this is where we're going to be in five years." It would be silly.

****Beck:**** I think we end it right there.

****Jered:**** Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee With A Journalist, featuring Josh Sternberg from Adweek. If you're a journalist who loves coffee or a publicist who loves this podcast, we'd

love to hear from you. Head to onepitch.co to drop us a line. Until then, let's end bad pitches and start great stories.