

EPISODE 215

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by the team at OnePitch. Are you looking for a more efficient way to find and pitch the right journalists? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn more.

Our guest on today's episode of Coffee with a Journalist is Joni Sweet, a freelance writer covering travel, health, and wellness with bylines in Forbes, National Geographic, TIME, TripSavvy, Lonely Planet, and more. During the episode, Joni discusses her relationship to PR folks and pitches, including a preference for personalization, how she organizes her work with a busy inbox, and what effective PR engagement looks like for her.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:47] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. We are here to demystify the art of public relations and really working with our journalist, freelancer, and editor friends in the media because we all got a job to do, and we want to do it better together, everybody.

With us today is Joni Sweet. She's a freelancer. My God, Joni, you have written all over the place; National Geographic, Forbes, SELF, Lonely Planet, Prevention, Business Insider, USA Today, Where New York, Huffington Post. I mean, we can go on and on, but we don't have 45 minutes. Just welcome, Joni, and thank you for being here.

[00:01:28] JS: Hi, Beck. Thanks for having me. I'm so glad to be on the podcast today.

[00:01:31] BB: Yes. Okay. As a freelancer, now this is sometimes different for folks, how's your inbox?

[00:01:38] JS: My inbox is a living nightmare.

[00:01:41] BB: Okay, okay.

[00:01:42] JS: I probably receive a couple hundred pitches from PR folks every day.

[00:01:47] BB: Oh, you're a busy freelancer. That's for sure.

[00:01:50] JS: Yes. My inbox is very busy, but I do my best to keep up with it, and I try and respond to folks who send me very personalized pitches because I know how much work goes into that. But it would be impossible to reply to everybody.

[00:02:04] BB: Yes. I assume you do not, therefore, because it's crazy.

[00:02:08] JS: Correct. I wish I could.

[00:02:10] BB: Yes, yes. How do you manage then all of those pitches?

[00:02:15] JS: Well, I skim everything I get because a lot of my story ideas come from pitches from PR people. Yes. I greatly value them, but I can only give a quick skim to everything. Then things that seem interesting get filed away in certain folders in my inbox for later review or for potentially going back into later when I have a relevant story, or an editor is looking for something on that topic. Then others just get left in the inbox. I don't delete anything for the most part.

[00:02:49] BB: Okay. You're one of the, "Hold them till forever. Maybe it becomes useful."

[00:02:53] JS: Yes. I have probably 600,000 emails like that.

[00:02:58] BB: Wow. Are you serious? I think that's a record on here. I've heard the 50,000-plus. But the 600,000, wow.

[00:03:07] JS: Yes. Google's making good money off of me.

[00:03:09] BB: I was just going to say because you have a Gmail email. Wow. They're like, "Who is this Joni Sweet girl over here?"

[00:03:15] JS: Yes. I'm at the two-terabyte plan now.

[00:03:18] BB: Oh, my God. Wow. Look at that. Your folders then, how do you get into the folder?

[00:03:25] JS: Well, there are a few ways. I have a folder called story leads, and that's where I file things that I think could make a really good story. Maybe I don't have a publication in mind yet. Or maybe I do and I need to think about pitching them later. If there's a pitch I like and it hits the right notes, it goes in there. I also announce everything I'm working on on my Substack.

[00:03:50] BB: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

[00:03:51] JS: Yes. If anybody is responding to something specific, I've said, "Hey, I need a sleep doctor," or, "Hey, I need recommendations for a coffee maker for a story I'm working on." If you reply to that, your email will get filed into the right folder so that when I'm reviewing everything that came in, I can compare apples to apples.

[00:04:12] BB: Do you find this to be an efficient way to solicit the best PR publicist emails, as in you're kind of running your own little HARO?

[00:04:21] JS: Yes. Actually, my disappointment with HARO was what drove me to create a Substack. Yes. I started telling –

[00:04:29] BB: Tell us more. Tell us more, Joni. There was also a very ripe, juicy LinkedIn post about that because for all those – I'm sure I'm preaching to the choir here. Everyone knows this. But HARO, Help A Reporter Out, was bought by Cision, which is a big giant conglomerate software company in our space, in the publicity space, and maybe it's not going so well. Tell us more, Joni.

[00:04:50] JS: I think HARO's shut down now or in a new form. I haven't –

[00:04:53] BB: Correct. They renamed it. They put a new lipstick on it.

[00:04:58] JS: Yes. I used it for a very long time. For many years, it was a very helpful resource at connecting me with the right people for my stories. Then it got very popular, and it seemed like anybody could get on the platform. I write a lot about health and wellness, and that requires a lot of input from doctors and legitimate healthcare professionals. I would put out a call for pitches on HARO, and I would get really weird responses from lawn care professionals and SEO specialists and those –

[00:05:32] BB: Oh, no.

[00:05:33] JS: Saying like, “Oh, I know I'm not a doctor but –”

[00:05:36] BB: But –

[00:05:37] JS: But –

[00:05:37] BB: “I took one class in college, so I think I have an opinion on allergies or –”

[00:05:41] JS: Yes. “But I got AI to write something for me, so here's your response.” It became –

[00:05:45] BB: Oh, no.

[00:05:48] JS: I said I need a better way. I started tapping PR people I knew, and I put out a Google form saying, “Hey, I'm going to start emailing my calls for sources for stories. Here's the type of people I generally look for. If you work with those folks, please sign up.” I created an email list. I ran that out of my Gmail for a long time. Then about a little bit more than a year ago, I moved everything to Substack.

[00:06:16] BB: Since you're moved to Substack, how's it been?

[00:06:18] JS: It's actually been really awesome. It is very efficient to announce what I'm working on and give people a resource when they email me and say, "Hey, what are you working on?" I actually have something to show them now and be like, "Hey, this is the last thing I sent out a week ago. I'm still looking. Let me know if you have anybody." That's been helpful. But it's also been really helpful at relationship building, too, because I started writing a little bit about my own life and what I'm up to, just dabbling and experimenting.

[00:06:46] BB: Yes.

[00:06:47] JS: Yes. I get great responses from that. My PR friends love seeing that in a way that I was totally surprised and delighted by.

[00:06:56] BB: Well, it makes you perhaps more relatable and connected.

[00:06:59] JS: Yes. **[inaudible 00:06:59]**. I think everyone's looking for a deeper human connection in this email-driven world.

[00:07:04] BB: Aren't we all?

[00:07:05] JS: Yes.

[00:07:05] BB: Yes. You have your Instagram on your website. You have your Twitter, which now X, whatever, whatever, so yes, yes. You have your fabulous portfolio, which is quite encompassing because you have travel writing and a product – you do a lot. Joni, you do a lot.

[00:07:20] JS: That is the life of a freelancer, right?

[00:07:23] BB: Let's ask you this because I want people, publicists to understand the flip side of this of being a freelancer. You're not inside a newsroom getting handed something from your editor, "Hey, you need to write this up by 2pm tomorrow." You are out there fishing and getting your work. What's the flip side of your inbox, Joni, in terms of the conversations you need to have with, I imagine, editors and all these outlets you work for and getting your content to them?

[00:07:50] JS: Yes. That's a great question. I get work in one of two ways. The first way is my favorite. It's where an editor comes to me with an assignment they think I would be a great writer for.

[00:08:03] BB: Oh, hallelujah.

[00:08:04] JS: That's the best, and it happens a lot once an editor starts working with me. They like to work with me. I try and make their lives easy, so they'll come to me with assignments. The other way, which is another important part of my work, is pitching stories out. That will involve me pitching editors I've worked with before or pitching editors that are brand new to me and introducing myself, sharing an idea or two, and then inevitably waiting a while for a response.

[00:08:33] BB: But then you wait and then you get, hopefully, a response. Do you put these in folders, like your conversations with editors and publications?

[00:08:42] JS: I'm trying to get more organized with that. I have a good eagle eye. When I'm scanning my inbox, I can pretty much see an editor's name or an assignment –

[00:08:51] BB: You're like, "Ooh, ooh." Yes.

[00:08:53] JS: Exactly. Those are what I'm really looking for. That's how **[inaudible 00:08:56]**. Yes, I'm actually – for my story pitches, I tend to be bad about the follow-up myself. I'm trying to get more organized about putting those in a folder and checking in on that every week to see what haven't I heard –

[00:09:10] BB: Joni, you need to take a page from the publicist people who are great with follow-ups sometimes too much.

[00:09:17] JS: I know. I mean, truly, I really do. I really do. Sometimes, the follow-up is where the deal gets made.

[00:09:25] **BB:** Exactly. Okay. Actually, now, I have not asked this of a freelancer, but I'm going to ask it for you. How many is too many follow-ups to an editor?

[00:09:36] **JS:** Well, I recent – oh, to an editor.

[00:09:39] **BB:** Yes. I'm saying like you trying to pitch your story.

[00:09:42] **JS:** It depends. If it's a good pitch, if I've never worked with the editor before, I think two follow-ups after the initial pitch is fine, as long as I'm not sending them in succession. If it's a very timely story that is going to expire in a week, I might follow up a couple of times that week. Unless it's super timely and needs to be written right now, then I'm not going to follow up twice in one week. I'll give it a week, 10 days, two weeks. It depends on how busy I imagine them to be. Yes. That's how it will be with a new to me editor. With an editor I've worked with before and have a good relationship with, I will be more diligent with follow-ups because I know that they care about our relationship.

[00:10:31] **BB:** Yes. You have a relationship. Yes. You're like, "Hey. Hey, hey. It's me."

[00:10:35] **JS:** If they haven't gotten back to me, they probably want to and just need a reminder.

[00:10:39] **BB:** Yes. Okay. You already have that relationship established, so it kind of makes sense for you to kind of push them a little bit more.

[00:10:45] **JS:** Yes, exactly.

[00:10:46] **BB:** Speaking of relationships, how does a publicist make one with you, if at all?

[00:10:53] **JS:** I think, first, sign up for my newsletter, honestly.

[00:10:56] **BB:** Let's think about what you're going to say for that one.

[00:10:59] JS: No. I actually really enjoy building relationships with PR people. I think on X, a lot of writers complain about PR people, and I will occasionally throw something out there. But I generally really value this part of the work, and I like it. I think signing up for my Substack first because then you can get what type of things I work on and how we might work together.

[BREAK]

[00:11:22] 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 RESUMED]

[00:11:45] JS: I also like when people respond to something personal I've shared on my Substack like an upcoming biking trip or something like that. I like to hear from people on a personal level. That helps with relationship building. Then if you are so inclined to support me outside of my conventional journalistic work, that makes you stand out. I'm doing a bikeathon in August, and I'll be raising money for a cancer charity. I haven't announced this super publicly yet. It only got locked in last week. If somebody were to donate some money to my fundraising campaign, your name's going to be in my mind a lot. That kind of stuff goes a long way, I think.

[00:12:28] BB: Ooh, I know never thought of that angle to make a relationship with the journalists is like, "Ooh, if they're running a race or doing a cause, support the cause under their name or in their name."

[00:12:39] JS: Yes, yes. That stuff is so meaningful and **[inaudible 00:12:42]** for relationship building, I think.

[00:12:46] BB: New perhaps unlock there.

[00:12:49] JS: I have a lot about that.

[00:12:51] BB: You have a lot. Tell us more.

[00:12:52] JS: I think a lot of writers are doing stuff outside of their –

[00:12:56] BB: Oh, for sure.

[00:12:57] JS: Right. The more we can engage on that level, that's how deep true relationships get formed. It doesn't happen with the transactional nature of our work. But that stuff goes a really long way, I think. Yes, learning about people outside of their regular work and trying to find ways to connect with them on that level is really important for relationship building.

[00:13:19] BB: Are there any sources you're really looking for as of late?

[00:13:24] JS: I do a lot of writing for Sleep.com, which covers sleep health. No matter what, I never have enough sleep specialists in my roster of people to call on. Anybody with expertise on –

[00:13:37] BB: Seriously? I would think you would have – I don't know. For some reason, I think there's a gazillion “sleep people” out there but maybe not. Clearly, I'm not correct.

[00:13:47] JS: I think I have a lot in my network. But still, when I put out calls for sources for people to interview, I have to dig and dig sometimes for sleep folks. If you work for sleep professionals, a sleep medicine specialist or a neurologist, let me know.

[00:14:06] BB: Okay. What is the type of pitch in the subject line, let's say, that clearly indicates that? What would the dream pitch for that choice source look like?

[00:14:17] JS: Oh, it could be like, “Sleep specialist to have on your radar.” That would do it. I would probably open that. Then just truly two to three sentences about their background would be great. Sometimes, PR people just send me a link to their LinkedIn or their online bio. I'll take a peek but –

[00:14:36] BB: But with no context?

[00:14:38] JS: Yes, sometimes.

[00:14:39] BB: No, no, no.

[00:14:40] JS: Sometimes, it happens. It's not a deal breaker for me, but it definitely makes my life a little bit more difficult.

[00:14:46] BB: Yes. No, no. Speaking of, it sounds like you have some preferred ways in which you like to have a pitch, Joni. What in an ideal pitch does those elements include?

[00:14:59] JS: For a sleep specialist or general?

[00:15:01] BB: Or just in general. Just here's the type of pitch formatting I love to get from a publicist, if you have such.

[00:15:05] JS: Yes. I like a couple short paragraphs. Bullets are great because then I can just skim for interesting statistics or something newsworthy. A PR person I've worked with before has recently been sending me pitches that include a bunch of headlines she thought could work for **[inaudible 00:15:21]** on whatever she's pitching. I love that so much because sometimes you know like, "Okay, there's a story here, but what could it be," right? I need to send my editor some headline options for her to think about. If you're feeding me that material, I might not take it word for word, but it definitely helps get the wheels turning.

[00:15:43] BB: I do like that. I think that really can help a freelancer because you then have to pitch your piece, of course, to whatever. Oh, that's a good insight as well.

[00:15:54] JS: Yes. I'm loving that lately. Yes, if you have headline ideas, send them over.

[00:15:59] BB: Yes. Okay. Day in the life of you, Joni, is there a typical time you look at pitches or your inbox? Or is it all over the place?

[00:16:08] JS: It's a little all over the place. I guess I tend to be most attentive to it in the morning. I'm not a morning person, and email is pretty easy on my brain. That's a good time for me to start looking at that and getting through it, whereas in the afternoon I tend to go into writing mode and try to ignore my inbox. To me, it doesn't really matter when the pitch is sent because I just kind of read everything in the order it comes into my inbox.

[00:16:36] BB: Oh, that's good to know. Okay. It's first-in, first-out type of look.

[00:16:40] JS: More or less, yes.

[00:16:42] BB: Yes. Okay. For you, Joni, in regard to the story approval process, could you illuminate that a little bit? For example, yes, you have maybe an editor who comes to you whom you've worked with and they say, "Hey, Joni. We need this sleep thing. Here's the deadline. Here's how many words. Here's the topic." Okay, fine. But is there more a situation where you go, "Hey, editor bestie. I want to do this type of story. What do you think?" How's the pitching process for you look on the flip side?

[00:17:12] JS: Yes. Sometimes, it definitely works like that. For editors that I have a good relationship with, I can be a little bit less precise with my pitching and give a more general idea or something.

[00:17:22] BB: Yes. Throw it out there. See what happens.

[00:17:24] BB: Yes, yes, yes. That's the way we can start collaborating and finding the perfect angle. With new to me editors, I basically need to go in with the angle that I'm thinking about. It might change after we talk, but I need to give them something with teeth, so they can really consider what this might look like for their publication.

[00:17:43] BB: If you know them more, then you can be looser. But then for ones you don't, more precise.

[00:17:49] JS: Exactly, yes. Then from there, it might take days, or it might take weeks or months. It really depends. Last week, I sent a pitch to a new to me editor, and she got back to

me the next day and said she wants the story. We negotiated a fee and a deadline. Now, I'm reviewing the contract today, and I'll be starting the work this week.

[00:18:11] BB: There you go.

[00:18:13] JS: That happened delightfully quick.

[00:18:15] BB: Okay. I like that, delightfully quick versus quick-ish.

[00:18:19] JS: I should say atypically quick but –

[00:18:21] BB: Atypically quick. But I like delightfully because don't we all want things quicker? Okay, Joni. I have a short rapid-fire question segment. Here we go if you're ready.

[00:18:35] JS: I'm ready.

[00:18:36] BB: Let's do it. Video or phone interview?

[00:18:39] JS: Phone, 100%.

[00:18:40] BB: Yes. Bullet points or paragraphs in pitches?

[00:18:44] JS: A little bit of both. I don't think exclusively bullet points is going to give me enough information. I like to break up the text a little bit.

[00:18:52] BB: Okay. Short or long pitches from publicists?

[00:18:55] JS: Probably short at least to start off with. You can always tell me like, "I have a more detailed pitch. Do you want to read it?" That would work.

[00:19:02] BB: Email or XDM or whatever the heck we want to call it? Yes. Any DM of any sort.

[00:19:09] JS: Email. I find it very violating to receive pitches in just social media because it's like a personal space. Yes, I talk about work and it's public. But if you want to do business with me, you need to get in my inbox.

[00:19:24] BB: Direct or creative subject lines?

[00:19:26] JS: I think it depends. I got a great subject line a few weeks ago.

[00:19:31] BB: Do you want to share?

[00:19:33] JS: Yes. It just said, "Half of campgrounds expanded last year." Like, "Huh, that's pretty direct, pretty interesting. Let me see what this is."

[00:19:42] BB: Wait, wait, wait. Half of campgrounds expanded?

[00:19:46] JS: Yes.

[00:19:48] BB: Never seen that stat before.

[00:19:50] JS: Yes. A campground review website put out a study where they surveyed a bunch of campground owners. From that, they all expanded. Not all but half of them expanded their campgrounds last year. I write a little bit about the outdoors and travel.

[00:20:04] BB: Yes. You're like, "Oh."

[00:20:06] JS: Yes. That was compelling to me, and I did sell a story on it. That was a great direct headline that worked. But if you can make me laugh a little with something creative, I like that, too. I have one example of that.

[00:20:18] BB: Ooh, perfect.

[00:20:20] JS: It said, "Stirrup," for horseback riding, a stirrup. "Stirrup some libations with Kentucky Derby cocktails from Woodford Reserve and Tequila Herradura." I'm a writer. I like to

play in puns, and so that made me laugh. I don't cover a ton of spirits, so it's probably not going to go anywhere, but it did draw my attention and made me smile.

[00:20:43] BB: That is nice. Thank you for the real examples. Okay, back to our rapid-fire questions. We did a little. We went off the path there a little second. Okay. We talked about follow-ups. Do you have a follow-up number from publicists that makes sense?

[00:20:56] JS: I recently received six follow-ups in one week. That was a no for me.

[00:21:01] BB: That's a no.

[00:21:02] JS: Generally, one follow-up is fine. Then after that, it starts to get annoying.

[00:21:07] BB: Too much.

[00:21:08] JS: Yes.

[00:21:08] BB: Press release or media kit?

[00:21:10] JS: Press release for news. Media kit if you're just telling me about the brand.

[00:21:15] BB: Time that you read pitches. We covered that a little bit.

[00:21:18] JS: Yes. Mainly in the morning but you can send them whenever, and I'll read them when I can.

[00:21:21] BB: Okay. As you said, in order of what you receive. It's good to know that. Then is there anything that we can highlight, promote, tout, et cetera for you, Joni?

[00:21:33] JS: Yes.

[00:21:33] BB: Obvious, the race you're doing, but tell us more.

[00:21:36] JS: One thing I'm promoting is my new interview coaching service. I envision it as a complimentary service to media training that PR professionals are already offering their clients. This is a one-and-done session where I get on the phone with a client for about 50 minutes an hour, and we do a mock interview. I give them a lot of tips based on my experience as a real journalist who's interviewed hundreds of people. I help them define their messaging a little bit. I give them tips on what to say, what not to say, how much detail is too much. Then I give them a follow-up report with some action items and takeaways.

[00:22:18] BB: Quick out-of-the box media training. Boom, boom, you need it done. This is your – you're the gal.

[00:22:24] JS: I interview so many people, and I find that even the best experts can throw the interview off if they're feeling nervous, and they don't really understand the journalist side of it. This would be the opportunity to do real-life practice with somebody or an actual working journalist.

[00:22:42] BB: How wonderful is that? Where can people find that, by the way? On your website?

[00:22:45] JS: Yes. It's listed right on my website. You'll see **[inaudible 00:22:47]**.

[00:22:48] BB: As well as your adorable cats, as well as your adorable book about New York City into 48 hours, all this great stuff. Everyone, check her out, Joni Sweet, freelancer of many, many, many publications. We don't have time to list them all, but there's quite many. Take a look. Thanks for being here today, Joni.

[00:23:07] JS: Thank you, Beck. I love speaking with you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:23:11] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode with Joni Sweet; travel, health, and wellness freelance writer with bylines in Forbes, National Geographic, TIME, TripSavvy, Lonely Planet, and more. 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. Until then, start great stories.

[END]