



Episode 37

How to work with freelance journalists to get published



**Mirjam: [00:00]**

Welcome to Designer Discussions with Jason, Maria and Mirjam. Unfortunately, Maria is not here today because she has the flu, so we're sending our thoughts to her, so hopefully she can feel better soon. Today, I'm very excited to have Kelsey Ogletree with us. She is an independent journalist and covers design, food and travel for outlets from the Wall Street Journal to Condones Traveler, Southern Living, and many other ones. Aside from that, she's also the founder of Pitchcraft, which is a membership community that teaches you how to pitch and build relationships with freelance writers. And her audience is mostly PR professionals like me. And I've already learned a lot from Kelsey, so I'm excited to have her here so we can chat a little bit about what a freelance writer is and how we can work with writers to get PR coverage.

Intro: [01:05]

Welcome to the Designer Discussions podcast. Tune in each week where we discuss marketing, branding, PR and business advice for design professionals.

Mirjam: (01:15)

So that being said, welcome, Kelsey.

Kelsey: (01:16)

Thank you so much. I'm glad to be here.

Mirjam: (01:19)

Yes. So let's dive right in. I've been in PR for a very long time. Right. And I remember 10, 15, 20 years ago, however many years it's been there didn't used to be as many freelance writers as there are today. And I think the media landscape has shifted quite dramatically in that all the media outlets, especially the magazines, also, they have fewer and fewer people on staff, which means they don't really have the personnel to get all the content written that they need to publish. So more and more freelancers have filled that gap. And Kelsey, maybe you can just tell us a little bit about what because you are a freelancer. So what is a freelancer? What do they do? It's like, how are they different from an editor who works for a magazine or another media outlet and how do they work together?



Kelsey: (02:16)

Sure. Great question, Mirjam, and happy to talk us through that. So when you think of a freelancer, think about someone who is a business owner who happens to write. So what I do as a freelancer is I write for a wide variety of publications, and my ideas are my livelihood. So what that means is a freelance writer is that I come up with ideas that are a good fit for publications. I have to formulate those into a pitch very similarly to a PR pitch and basically sell myself as the writer along with the idea to the editor of whatever publication I'm pitching that to. So the goal is to ultimately convince the editor that it's a great story and get them to Commission me to write the piece, which is how I earn a living. So that's why I mentioned that ideas are a livelihood, because without good ideas, we have nothing to pitch to the editor to essentially sell. So the time that we spend pitching is freelance writers is essentially unpaid time. Right? And then once we get the Commission for the story, that's when we actually make it paid for the article, whether that's by the word or a flat rate for the piece. And then at that point is when we would begin reporting and writing the story for the publication. So the reason that I think it's a great idea to pitch freelance writers is because we are always on the Hunt for these ideas because we have to find those ideas to make our business work. Right. So I think one mistake a lot of people make when they're new to pitching the media is they will pull out a map hat or find the digital editor for a magazine, and they'll immediately pitch the person who's at the top because they think they're in charge. They're the ones kind of the geek keepers over the stories. But actually the opposite is true. I think that when you pitch a freelance writer, you have a lot better chance of getting your idea seen and possibly pitched to that publication. Because like I mentioned, us, freelance writers are always on the lookout for those ideas, whereas Editors, and especially those at the top, are a lot more focused on the publishing side of it and the business side of the publication, and not so much the day to day publication of stories, whether that's digital or print.



Mirjam: (04:46)

That was a great explanation. Thank you so much. And I think it's so interesting. And you're exactly right. I think most people, even PR people, for that matter, when they think about pitching, they always want to go pitch the magazine directly. And whereas in some cases, obviously, that makes sense. But when it comes to talking about trends or anything, that's idea based, it definitely is so much better to be pitching a freelancer. Right. I think where people get hung up is like, how do you know which freelancer contributes to what publication? Right. And it's something I also teach the interior designers that I work with in my membership. But if you want to give me your best take on how you can find the right freelancer to pitch for a certain topic or who contributes to a certain media outlet, I'd love to hear it.

Kelsey: (05:53)

Sure. And I will start by saying it's not as hard as it might sound to find freelance writers, because there are many, many of us, and especially during the past two years, throughout the pandemic, I've witnessed seeing in media a huge exodus of very talented Editors leaving their posts to go freelance. And a lot of publications have reduced their number of print issues, were refocused on digital efforts, and condensed their staff a little bit. So we're definitely seeing more freelance by lines in publications than Editors these days. Often, Editors are so busy with their day to day that they're actually doing very little writing at all. They're mostly spending their time commissioning stories to freelance writers. So that's one thing to keep in mind. And I will add really quickly, too, that many freelance writers contribute to a wide variety of outlets because to make this work as a business, like I mentioned, it's rare that you'd be able to pitch enough stories to make a decent living just writing for one publication. So one benefit to pitching a freelance writer that we haven't talked about yet is that you have the ability to build a relationship with them and possibly be covered in multiple publications.



Kelsey: (07:03)

Maybe you have a project featured in one outlet and then a profile on you and another one, and maybe one of your products featured in a gift card somewhere else. And those may all be written by the same freelance writer. So when you think about trying to find a freelance writer, the very best way to start is to just take a look at some of the publications that you're really targeting that you'd love to be featured in. So say you're looking at food and wine, for example. Just start going through the stories, looking at the headlines, but more importantly, looking at the bylines of who's contributing to them, and more and more. The publications newly within the Meredith umbrella are making a big effort to include BIOS for all of their writers. So that means that even freelance writers will have a hyperlink on their name where you can click through and read more about them. So over the past few months, all of us writers have been asked to fill out a lot of these BIOS, depending on the sites we're writing for, especially within that portfolio. And so you're able to find more information on the person who's writing the stories you're reading, which I think is really helpful because it gives them credibility and it lends expertise to the publication that shows that they are commissioning stories to writers who actually know what they're talking about and not someone out there just writing about something just for the fun of it.



Kelsey: (08:33)

So I would start by going through the publications, maybe selecting three to start, and just really making a list of the bylines that you're seeing, and then just go ahead and click on those hyperlinked names on the bylines if they have those and read more about them. Or you may want to just Google those names. You can also go search on LinkedIn. And most of us, I think active freelance writers tend to be pretty active on LinkedIn and posting what we're writing about. If you Google the writer, you can hopefully find they have a website. The typical format is to have your Name.com. So my website is Kelseyogultry.com. Not all freelancers have those, but the more established ones do. And that's a pretty easy way to find them. Hopefully on their website they will have a portfolio of clips that shows what stories they've written recently or more about them and the topics they like to cover. If they don't some things you can try are going to a website called Contently.com, which offers a free portfolio site for freelancers of all kinds. And so if you search someone's name and contently, that can pull up a portfolio page for them, that may help show you what publications they write for and the kinds of topics they cover.



Kelsey: (10:03)

And another way is to search a program called Muck Rack. Now this is a PR software tool you may be aware of. That is a paid service, but you can utilize it expensive. That's very true. You can utilize this, though, just as a without a subscription by just searching the writer's name and that term. So if you wanted to see what I was writing, you could search Kelsey Ogletree Muck Rack. And that would pull up my free public facing Muck Rack page. And what it does is it cross the web for that writer's violin. So it would easily pull up all of my recent pieces in one place and you would be able to click through and see a little bit more about where I'd been contributing and the types of topics I was covering. And of course, we can't forget about social media, right? I think Instagram has become more and more of a tool for finding people, and the more established freelance writers who are serious about the business will put freelance writer in their title or independent journalist, as I do. And you can easily search the person's name or that title on there and just kind of begin to sort through. And a lot of times you can see what people are writing about. A lot of people will have highlight reels where they share their recent stories. And that's a good way to just follow them and kind of get a little bit of a look at who they are before you consider pitching them.



Mirjam: (11:03)

I think you pretty much touched on all the things that I do when I look to find a freelancer. And I actually have a PR software that I use and it's not MuckRack, but I have to say it's not always very helpful. Googling the name of the freelancer usually gives me better information than searching for the person in my PR software, which is a little bit sad. But Google is very powerful and usually the Macrack link for the freelance is often one of the first ones that shows up. What I also like to do is put in the name of the freelancer and then click on the News tab and Google so you see more of the coverage that comes up. And I have to say it's like if a freelancer does not have a website or any other kind of professional representation on LinkedIn, it makes me much less likely to want to pitch them because it doesn't give me the feeling that they're serious about their freelance journalist career. Yes, but most of them it's like you say, most of them have their own websites. And even if the bio link on the publication site does not have the direct email is really easy to find out these days. It does. And this is a lot of information. And I will say that it's simple, but it does take a little time, but it's definitely worth it. And Kelsey, you can speak to this, too, because you don't want to get pitches that are not a fit for you. So as a PR person or even as an interior designer, if you want to pitch a freelancer, it's important that you really familiarize yourself with what the person writes about and what outlets they write about. So you can really make an informed pitch that's valuable to them. And that's how you end up building the relationship as well, as opposed to just sending something that you want to see published. But really, you have to think about what are the needs of the freelancer? What types of stories do they pitch? What types of stories can they sell, and how can you collaborate with them to make that happen so you can get the coverage that you're looking for for yourself or your business.

**Kelsey: (14:03)**

Absolutely. And I think I get probably close to 500 or so pitches a week, and I would say most of them is just crazy. Yeah. I think people underestimate people.

Mirjam: (14:25)

I'm so glad you read my emails. I feel very honored.

Kelsey: (14:29)

Well, sometimes it does take me a while to respond. I apologize, but I think people underestimate the number of emails that more established freelancers get. And it's great if you can find a freelancer who I have some friends who say they get ten to 15 pitches a week. I mean, that's sort of a dream at this point because it's hard, very hard at some point to sort through all the ideas you're getting. But I would say the vast majority of the pitches fall into the category of either sending out a mass press release or sending out the same email to list that people build off of these PR softwares. And the third way that I see people do it far less frequently that is much more effective is when you really take the time to even put in 20 minutes of research on that writer and think about just kind of sit with it for a minute and think about what is an angle that you could pitch a freelance writer, because that's one thing we haven't really talked about yet. It's like how to pitch them. You don't want to just reach out and say, here I am. Will you write about me or here's my company? Do you want to cover it? I always say just because you exist doesn't mean that's a story. And so it's all about finding an angle. Right. And that's the goal of researching the freelance writer and building a relationship with them is that you're seeing an approach to things, because when we pitch our Editors an idea, they want to be able to visualize, like, okay, what's the potential headline of this piece? Because that's really helps you determine whether what you're thinking is just an idea or a story angle. So that's one thing that I think is really helpful, too. When you do decide to reach out to a freelance writer, can you visualize what you're telling them in a headline? And if you can't, I think you need to spend a little more time thinking about what could be the potential story angle there.



Mirjam: (16:25)

Yes, I think that's an excellent point. And I know you have very many helpful blog posts on your website, Kelseyogatre.com, that people really should go check out if they want more details. But I wonder if you could just maybe tell us the three to five most important things. When people write a pitch in terms of very practical, it's like what should be included? What should not be included? Like the major dos and don'ts of sending a freelancer your first pitch, the first email you ever sent.

Kelsey: (17:29)

Sure, that's a great question. I would say always think about the why. Why now? Why me? So by that I mean, like, what is the why, what is this triangle that you're pitching for the why now? Why at this moment? What is timely about it? Is there a hook toward an event happening or an anniversary or a new product or something new coming out, a new line? Like, it doesn't have to be that something is brand, brand new. But if you can tie it as a timely hook to something that answers that question, why now? That is really important. And especially if you're pitching digital sites that tend to be a little more reactive to the news cycle, that's even more important. And then also answer the why me question. And by that, I mean why are you pitching this writer specifically? And the answer to that question could be maybe you're writing a story about maybe someone recently wrote a piece, something to do with baking cakes, and you're a company that has a new mixer out that is helpful for making cakes. Like, maybe that's why you selected this writer just as a totally random example, but provide an entry point as to why you're pitching them, maybe how you found them and why you're reaching out to them specifically over any other writer.

**Kelsey: (18:29)**

I would also say keep it short. Like, most people do not heed that advice, even though on my blog and my Twitter account, I am constantly saying, please keep your pitches short and to the point. And it's really hard to write short and concise. It's actually easier to write longer. But when you're considering the volume of pitches, when I'm saying like 500 emails a week, imagine if every one of those is 500 words. Like, how many words that is? That's 250 words you're asking. That's like half of the novel. When you put it in perspective like that, you can communicate your point and your idea in 200 words or less. And I would really challenge people to do that. Write your pitch in a word document, do a word count and make sure that you're falling within that range. And I would also say don't try to cram in everything. Don't put your whole story in the pitch. Don't spend 2 hours writing an email. Take 20 minutes. Think about what you want to say. Include the why angle like why now? Why me? Include a few links to whatever you're mentioning and please don't attach big images. That's a pet peeve of mine. When people send like ten megabyte attachments, I already have to pay for extra Gmail storage. And when I get something like that, I'm like, I just want to delete this because especially if someone submitted me project photos or something, just use a Dropbox link, use Google Drive. Those are there for a reason. And they're amazing free tools you can use. But don't try to cram in everything in the first email. The goal of reaching out is right. A catchy subject line, maybe put the writer's name in the subject line. Just be clear and to the point of why you're reaching out in the subject line. So don't use the subject line like Hi, Kelsey, or idea for you. Be specific and use that real estate in that subject line to go to work for you and help your pitch get noticed.

Mirjam: (20:34)

So you actually open the email, right?

**Kelsey: (20:39)**

Exactly. And overall, I would just say when you're sending a pitch to a writer, don't feel like you have to cram in your life story and everything you want to say to them in the first email. I mean, think about it like you're walking up to someone at a cocktail party and you wouldn't walk up to them and talk for 15 minutes before they have a word to get an edge wise, right? Just reach out to them and say who you are, why you're reaching out, what the timely hook could be, why it could be a good fit for you to tell their story and then open it up and say if you'd like to hear more details, happy to provide those. We'd love to answer any questions you have or connect further. And that kind of leaves the door open for them to think about it and let you know and get back to you and continue that conversation.

Jason: (21:23)

Actually, I have a two part question. So for the publications that you write for on the designer side, because that's mainly our audience. What are some topics that you are actually pitched that rarely ever get any type of publication or notoriety? And then on opposite end, what are some of the topics that, if they are original, will get?



Kelsey: (21:39)

That's a really tough question because it really depends. I would say for the Wall Street Journal for the mansion section. I'm always looking for unique stories around, like historic homes, neat backstories to renovations, or trends along that line. It's really hard to pinpoint exactly because it just has to be kind of like that really niche story that hasn't been told elsewhere. I will say that if you're pitching a major outlet for a design like project, it's really important that you don't post those photos anywhere else before you pitch. And the audience may already know that. But I know that sometimes Editors will disqualify things from being written about if the designer has even posted pictures on social media. And so that's one thing to really hold the photos if you're thinking especially for high profile projects. Exactly. If you're thinking you might want to feature it somewhere, really try to pitch it first before you share any images of that. And certainly if it has been featured elsewhere, you need to be transparent about that upfront in your pitch, because it would burn a bridge with a freelancer. If you tried to pitch a project or a story that had been told similarly in another publication and you were trying to kind of get it covered again in a similar way. That would be a red flag to me if I wasn't knowledgeable up front, because that would make me look bad to my editor. Right



Kelsey: (21:39)

If I didn't realize it had been published elsewhere 100% yes. I would say the one thing I'm looking for right now is I'm interested in writing some stories about professional organizing and kind of how that plays into design and how professional organizers and designers may work together. So I'm kind of looking for some interesting stories along that line. Another piece that I was in the process of researching was we're seeing so much interest in space travel and everything to do with the universe and looking to know if any designers are doing like sort of celestial inspired rooms in a more sophisticated way and then just starry wallpaper on a kid's room or something like that. So that's another one I was looking for. Also, just trend stories. If you're going to pitch an idea that you've been thinking about that you're doing rather than just pitching it as here, I'm a designer, and this is something I did think about. Are you seeing anybody else do a similar take on something like are you seeing people use, like, a particular kind of art in a certain way, or a unique style of window treatment, or just thinking about things in a broader scale than just yourself? And what freelance raters really love is if people can touch some ideas that help them become trend spotters. So if you're having coffee with your interior designer friends and you're all talking about something you've seen happening or that your clients are asking about, that's a great thing to let a freelance writer know, because we want to know what's happening in your inner circles. And how is this indicative of a larger trend in the industry? And that's something I really don't get pitched that often. Another angle I don't get pitched very often is contrarian takes on things say everyone saying, like, these new curvy furniture is the trend for 2022, and these soft lines and curves and windows and Islands. And maybe there's a designer who says these are tacky, and I'm all about these straight lines or someone who's totally just going against what everybody else is taking as popular opinion. Or if you see all those 2022 trend reports come out from some of these major outlets, and there's one that you just have the complete opposite take on. Those are things that make out of my ears perk up when I see that in my inbox, because I'm trying to come up with these original story ideas and not everyone else is writing about.

**Kelsey: (26:39)**

And if you have a contrary opinion on it, there's a good chance other people might, too. And so just kind of like thinking a little bit differently around rather than taking those trend reports and saying, oh, I have something that fits into this. How can you take sort of an opposite approach to that or maybe go deeper within it to something like on an even more granular level within that?

Mirjam: (26:33)

And I think those are all really interesting topics. And what I notice when I talk with interior designers is that they all talk about this all the time, but they just have to develop the awareness that those are stories that other people may not be thinking about. And that can be interesting to other people and to freelance writers in particular, because I think that's what an interior designer works with and thinks about a lot. And it's all there. It's just a matter of identifying it and then taking 20 minutes. I love the 20 minutes approach. I'm like, okay, when you write a pitch, take 20 minutes, that's it. Then it's not so intimidating because you don't have to write the article. Right. You just have to provide an idea.

Kelsey: (27:23)

Yeah. And that will only be the entry point to your conversation. Right? You're never going to send a 200 word pitch and instantly have a feature written about you.

Mirjam: (27:31)

That would be so nice. Oh, my God.

**Kelsey: (27:39)**

I will say, too. One other just idea I wanted to share for designers is that sometimes it works the opposite where we have the story idea and then we need to find sources. So maybe an editor finds me a piece about something, and then I need to find designers who have done that thing or are part of that trend. And one thing I run into a lot is when I'm researching designers, and if I reach out to them and say, what's kind of your specialty or what's your style? And so many say, like, oh, our style is whatever the client wants or something for everybody. And we do all styles depending on what our clients needs are. We tailor it. I mean, that's great if that's your business strategy, but it makes writers. It's really hard to find you if you don't have any kind of specialty. So say, I'm looking for a designer who specializes in California cool or midcentury modern or things like that, and it's just hard to Google those things. I mean, nobody has those kinds of things on their website. And everybody seems scared to box themselves in by saying that they specialize in a particular. But it can be really helpful. One thing you could even do is even if you don't have a specific story idea in your designer, reach out to a writer that you know, covers interior design trends and just introduce yourself, say, where you're based, because that's important, that we need to have geographic diversity a lot in our stories, how long you've been in the business, and if you have any specialties that you focus on. And that way, even if you don't have an idea, we can keep you in mind. Like, oh, the next time I have a story on Victorian houses, like, I'll know that you specialize in that. And I can contact you and interview you as an expert for this piece. And so just really thinking about maybe three to five areas where you feel like you are experienced and an expert on that's really helpful because otherwise, if I have 20 designers and they all specialize in doing whatever the client wants, I have no idea who to interview for my piece. I need to find someone who's actually an expert in maybe Southern architecture or all these different kinds of things. And being specific can be a better way to go when you're working with a freelance writer to get them to choose you for a piece.

**Kelsey: (30:39)**

Yeah. No, this is all super helpful information. Thank you for making it so actionable. I hope that everybody who's listening goes and researches a publication to find a freelancer and send them an email or her in 20 minutes just to introduce themselves. And I love the idea of defining five specialties that you focus on. I may steal that from you actually in the future. Sure. Perfect. Jason, do you have any other questions for Kelsey?

Jason: (30:36)

I didn't have anything, but if our audience wants to get in contact with you, Kelsey, how did they do so?

Speaker 2 (30:41)

Great question. I would recommend going to my website, which is just Kelseyagaltree.com, and you can get in touch with me via email on my social platforms there. And if you're interested in learning more about Pitchcraft, which is a business membership designed to help you find and build relationships with freelance writers, you can learn more about that at Pitchcraft. kelseyogletree.com.

Mirjam: (31:06)

Awesome. Kelsey, thank you so much for coming on and sharing with our audience how to best Pitch freelancers. We really appreciate it.

Kelsey: (31:17)

Of course, this is fine. Thank you.

Outro: (31:21)

We hope you enjoyed this episode of designer discussions. What was your takeaway care to share your thoughts and tag Jason, Maria and Mirjam on social media. You can and find them on all platforms@designerdiscussions.com. Don't forget to like, subscribe and leave a review or comment for this episode from wherever you are listening.



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