

Meet the Media: Ghost Writing, Advertorials and Crazy Cocktails with Ruksana Hussain

SPEAKERS

Lexie Smith, Ruksana Hussain

Lexie Smith

Hey guys, Lexie here, travel enthusiast, lover of puns, pizza and wine connoisseur and founder of THEPRBAR inc., and you're tuning in to the Pitchin' and Sippin' Podcast, from behind the scenes interviews with the media to honest conversations with other PR pros to a look at inspiring brands and entrepreneurs that are rocking the world of PR. In this podcast, we talk tips while taking sips and talking about all the things that make those in the world of PR tick. Let's get started. Today we're talking with Ruksana Hussain, an award winning journalist with 20 years of experience working with local, national and international print and digital media for consumer and trade markets. As a magazine editor, features, generalist, and contributing writer for outlets such as Apartment Therapy, Luxury Travel Magazine, California Apparel News, Dining Out, Delta Skylines, Edible Business Insider, Traveler and Tourist which is her own publication and many more, Ruksana covers diverse beats and topics spanning from lifestyle to travel cuisine to culture, business, wellness, technology, and much more. In today's episode, we chat through advertorials, ghostwriting marketing content versus journalistic content, pitching preferences pitching pet peeves and the Queen's Gambit. Yes, the show and so much more. Her tastebuds are as diverse as her portfolio. And you guys, I honestly had such a fun time geeking out with this incredible Media Pro. Alright, let's get started. Ruksana, first, I have to give a shout out to whatever Facebook group I found you through and quick backstory for everyone. I do not go on to Facebook often at all. But I randomly went on one day, maybe about a month ago. And in doing so opened a random social follow thread of some sort, saw Ruksana and naturally learning we are in similar fields, I had to reach out. I also don't think I've been back into that group since. So basically, I feel like there's a little bit of virtual fate involved in our meeting. Anyways, officially welcome to the show. I'm so excited to have you here. And before we get in all to the career talk, I'd love to learn a little bit more about who you are, quote unquote, outside of the office. So where is home base, favorite hobbies, really anything that comes to mind?

Ruksana Hussain

Well, thanks for having me, like for you and I, I do think that Yeah, we definitely had a little internet fate online fate, I guess. And connecting that day through that group. Again, you never know where these connections leads. So it's wonderful that we're here having this conversation. I am currently right now in in Los Angeles, California. But I am originally from India, and I was raised for a couple of years outside in the Middle East and Oman. I moved here to the US in 2006. But basically called the United States my home for about 15 years or so now. But outside of work, I mean, I I like a little bit of everything. I really do think variety is the spice of life. And I love trying new experiences. I love travel. I haven't been able to do much of that this past year. But hopefully we will get there soon. But I love you know I love

up culinary experiences. I love meeting people. I love networking. Just really open to any and every experience. I can't I'll try everything one, that's for sure.

Lexie Smith

I hear you on that. So one of my favorite or Fun fact intros is I'm a travel addict. And now I have to go when it's safe or former or well, pending. So I hear you I too am a food and travel lover. And one of the main reasons why I had been brought down to LA what part of La Are you in?

Ruksana Hussain

I am here in the heart of Hollywood. So minutes from the walk of fame and Runyon Canyon and all that fun stuff.

Lexie Smith

So for those of you familiar with Los Angeles, you will know why I asked that question because it's incredibly spread out and five miles away can be one hour away. So that's why I always when people say they live in LA, I have to ask where I used to live in Santa Monica myself, but I did work in Hollywood took sometimes over an hour to get there anyways. Very spread out. Okay, so now we're going to kind of hone in on the career stuff. So first off, what is it that you do today and then let's backtrack and kind of walk through the journey of what got you to where you're at today?

Ruksana Hussain

Sure. So currently, I work as a freelance journalist, I am a writer and editor with a couple of different publications. Here in the US, I have been published internationally as well. I write for both consumer and trade publications, print, and digital. And I cover really a broad range of topics. I'm more of a features writer, a generalist, if you will, so I don't have a specific beat. And then along the way I picked up I'm not going to see a fascination for it, but really like an addiction for AP Style. But eventually, yeah, that just led to me being really professional in AP Style, and working as a copy editor for a couple of outlets as well. So currently, I write for a couple of different publications, I'm an editor with one, I'm a copy editor with another, I work in content marketing, as well and like create a content for a couple of companies too. So a lot of writing and a lot of working with words. That's really where I'm at right now. And it's a good place, I'm in a good place, I'm liking where my work has taken me and I'm enjoying everything that I write, I, again, it comes back to variety, I enjoy writing all these different subjects that maybe I wouldn't have picked up on my own. But in the span of you know, working with different outlets, different clients, I've learned all these really fascinating things about, you know, fields as to versus like, from construction to nonprofits to tech to travel. So I'm enjoying that.

Lexie Smith

Okay, so I laughed everyone when she said AP Style, because I literally was the girl who posted graduating from college brought my AP Style book to my first job and had it proudly on my desk, but I don't think everyone knows what that is. So can you give them a quick like, high level definition of what is AP Style, what we're geeking out over here about

Ruksana Hussain

AP Style is the Associated Press Style Guide. It's followed, it's mostly primarily followed by all publications here in the majority of them, at least, primarily the outlets I've worked with, print and online have all followed AP Style. And then also had a custom style guide. That's you know, sort of taken from the AP Style, but then fine tuned for in house style as well. But it's you know, everything from to use an abbreviation here where you do not can you use it on first reference or not? I mean, today I was doing an article about the NFL and for a minute there, I was questioning myself like, Can I just use this on first reference or So hey, AP Style guide. So I'm online looking at AP Style. It's almost like the second window that I have open when I'm doing any kind of written work. And really, yeah, that's that's AP Style guide for you.

Lexie Smith

I used to have AP Style tests in school too. So like, I don't know, if I brought that book with me because I was traumatized and like afraid of what would happen if I didn't have it with me. But people listening, you know, at least for press releases, if you're going to write it's good to know what that is. So go ahead and do a quick Google search. So I'd love to know what got you into writing? Do you even do you remember the first time you ever wrote professionally and what that was for?

Ruksana Hussain

The first time I wrote professionally was actually right out of college. I did not know a single thing about chess. But I did find a job as an assistant editor with a chess magazine. And this was back in India, when I just graduated from college. That was my first job. And that was the first time I got paid to do any kind of writing or reporting work. But it was fun to go attend some of the chess tournaments. This was in South India, and you know, just be there in that sort of atmosphere. So now that we see Queen's Gambit, I was literally

Lexie Smith

I just wrote that on my paper. I'm like make Queen's Gambit reference.

Ruksana Hussain

Yeah, I know, I saw that. And I brought back memories because I remember going to cover these events. And you know, just being in the middle of all of that and just that whole scene of them playing clocking their time getting getting up and walking away while the watch they're open and like play their next move. It can be it can be very nerve racking if you're standing there and watching it in person. So it was that was the first time I got paid for written work. But yeah, that was my professional foray into writing. Yeah.

Lexie Smith

And if you had told me That three months ago, prior to me watching the Queen's Gambit which by the way, everyone, it's on Netflix, if you haven't seen it highly suggest I have a whole I think the world has a new appreciation for chess after that show. So now I think that's a really cool first job.

Ruksana Hussain

Yes.

Lexie Smith

Today, I was kind of checking out your, your website and notice that you offer really a diverse range of services. So from the production of white papers and brand journalism, to marketing emails, and ghost writing, to trade publication stories, and much, much more. I would love to know how you would describe the difference in styles or even technical differences that are involved when you write something from a journalistic lens versus a marketing lens, or are there any differences?

Ruksana Hussain

There's definitely differences before I think over time, people have those those lines have sort of really become very, very, what's the right word I'm looking for? They're kind of that I mean, it's really a very thin line, I think there's still a lot of people that are focused on brand journalism to the extent of Yes, this is going to be marketing copy. But there's also a lot of people that have come in looking for journalists to do more journalistic writing and make it sound like it's a story. And it's a piece where you've interviewed sources, and then you're kind of weaving in the brand. I've worked with both sides. And it really at the end of the day is dependent on the what first the client who you writing for, you know, and then secondly, who is the audience? Because you do have things like advertorials. So that's really a very fine line. And you have to at the end of the day, go back to what will what is the outlet? Who's the audience, what is your editor want? What is your publisher want? And then you write based on that. So I can't say that it's written in stone, I think it totally depends on who you're writing for and who you're working with on each project, pretty much.

Lexie Smith

Gonna do another definition poll here: Advertorial. Do you want to give us kind of an overview of what that means?

Ruksana Hussain

So advertorial is when you've got a piece of content that you're creating for a publication is intended to make your client happy, make your advertiser happy, but you want it to read, like, it's part of the stories that you've produced for the magazine. So it kind of brings in like what I mentioned earlier, you you're bringing in your journalistic writing skills, do you want it to sound like a feature that wouldn't be out of place if you weren't reading through this outlet, but at the same time, it has to fulfill certain criteria that your advertiser was looking for, he wants the brand name to be mentioned a couple of times you want, they want you to talk about what the brand does. And they want you to kind of weave it into the story in a way that a reader is not necessarily going to know that that was maybe content that was paid for. But that's kind of where an advertorial comes in.

Lexie Smith

Yep. And just to give everyone a little bit of a visual, For those unfamiliar, it kind of can look just like an article. And really, that's, I don't want to call it the smoke and mirrors of it. But a little bit the smoke and mirrors of it. And, you know, I've worked with companies who have opted, it's, you can call it smart. You can call it cool on a lot of things depends on your opinion. But that is a thing, and it's much more, much more common. Hey, guys, Lexie, here interrupting the show really quick to drop a note. Did you know that in a study produced by Nielsen, it was reported that PR is almost 90% more effective than advertising? Well, it is, I swear, Google it. So if you've been enjoying learning about all things, pitching

and sipping, I wanted to give you an official invite to visit my website, theprbarinc.com spelled t h e p r b a r i n c .com. To learn even more about how you might be able to work with yours truly to increase your influence, impact and revenue with PR. If you're not sure where to start on the site, consider booking a free consultation. All right, I'm done back to the show. I'm gonna go one more definition for you. I think this is the last one. But I think it's so important because it's a topic actually that I haven't talked about on this podcast yet and it's something that you do and that is ghost writing. So first, can you give us a quick overview of what that is and then what really that entails on your end?

Ruksana Hussain

Sure. So ghostwriting is when you are hired to write a an article, a feature, it could be, you know, a blog post even. But essentially you don't get recognized for the work in the sense that your name does not come up as the byline. So the author credit goes to someone else. That's possibly the person that's hiring you usually, but sometimes it's you know, companies hire you to go strike for their blog posts. So you're, you know, when you're reading it, it's going to sound like it's something that someone from the company wrote it very well could be a freelance writer like me that was hired to write that. So that's sort of what ghost writing is. And what was your second question?

Lexie Smith

Just kind of the process. And let me give you a little bit of context. Back one of when I was in an agency, I had a we often wrote, we often ghost wrote, Ghost, Ghost, Ghost wrote, for our clients, and I had an intern one question is on the ethics of that, like, what Wait, is that allowed, like magazines allow someone else to write for you? And so really kind of what's the process from the journalists side? Is there ethics involved? Or is that something just that is a thing within the industry, just curious kind of on your take?

Ruksana Hussain

I have not ghostwritten form magazine features. As such, the majority of the ghostwriting I've done has been for corporate clients. So as I mentioned, I've had companies that have hired me to write more from a journalistic sense, but haven't go up on their blogs, you will not see my name there. If I told you I write for that company, you wouldn't find any way to link me to them. It's entirely written as something coming from one of their staff members. So you probably see someone else's name there. That's on the payroll. I have heard of, and this is where the ethics question I think comes in is what you were referring to. I have heard of times, and I've seen, I think calls for pitches are calls for writers on a couple of job boards that ask for journalists who can go strike for certain, let's say, well known clients, people whose names are out there as thought leaders, you know, experts or gurus as we like to call them. I don't like that word. But anyways, um, yeah. And sort of the the fascination of being able to work with them. And, you know, being able to say, yeah, I've done a project with ABC company that might hold some value to someone in the future. But I don't know about I haven't worked on such such projects before. But I've heard a lot about this. And that's definitely one where the ethics comes in of writing a story and making it sound like it's someone's viewpoint unnecessarily. They might not even know or understand sometimes what has been written in that particular industry or that take on a certain topic sometimes. So yeah, that's, that's very interesting. But I've seen I've seen those posts, and I know what you're talking about in terms of ethics, I have not worked with any of those. There's another situation that somewhat, I guess a take off on this is I've seen ads, I've never applied to them, because I've just

been, I don't know how that it just doesn't sound right. But I've seen companies looking for journalists to place stories for them in the outlets they work with. So essentially, the company is trying to hire you as a content creator, and then use you as somewhat of a placement provider for the outrage for and then on the other hand, if you are a journalist that takes an on you're pitching that to editor, then you're going to get paid by them as you know, a writer would as a journalist would, and I've, I've not been in that situation, but I've definitely seen a lot of posts for such opportunities. I'm not comfortable with that. With that.

Lexie Smith

That though, definitely rides a line and it makes it hard for consumer I think one of the things that it's kind of in that gray pay for play area and which makes it sometimes confusing for writers. What are they reading that's paid for what are they really a genuine article on? So I would agree with you that that gets sticky. For sure. I'm not sure how I feel about ghostwriting. I could probably in the sense of the second situation we were referring to I could probably see both sides. But it's an interesting thing to think about. And for those who aren't aware, well, now you are it's a thing, very much a thing. Now, non ghostwriting when we talk about you and your bylines you've written for so many different outlets. I'd love to learn a little bit more about how you've secured bylines in so many different outlets. What's that process? Like? Is it being kind of a butterfly effect? Do you apply each time?

Ruksana Hussain

Well, I, yeah, I kind of have varied interests. So I think that's the first thing. And I think that anywhere that I see an opportunity, I do apply for it. A lot of the opportunities I've had, I've sort of created for myself in a way, not necessarily applying for a job but saying, Oh, hey, here's an outlet looks interesting. Let me look at if they work with freelancers, the majority of my bylines have come from me introducing myself to editors and saying, Hey, this is me, here's my work, take a look at my portfolio, I'm happy to work on assignment, if you have it, or if you want me to pitch, I will let you in on the secret that I hate pitching. So my, my go to mode of operation is to introduce myself to folks and build a relationship and work from there. And you will see if you go to my website and see my bio lines, a lot of the places I work for I had sustained relationships with editors, and published with that same outlet for sometimes months at a stretch or years even. So that's sort of how that kind of comes about. So I'm open to writing on any topic that's interesting to me. I will leave out politics and spirituality and religion and a couple of other other topics that might not necessarily be easy to kind of delve into. But I'm always happy to do my research and you know, put out a good good story, a good article, if I'm assigned one. So I, I've been open to where my opportunities have come from. Yeah.

Lexie Smith

Aside from you having to proactively pitch or reach out, is there like a job board for writers or where do you come across opportunities?

Ruksana Hussain

There are multiple Facebook groups for writers that a member of for journalists, I mean, just looking for them on a simple search on Facebook will bring up a bunch of results. I have couple of newsletters that I subscribe to, again, for writers or for journalism jobs. And I think I have a few listed on the blog, in my website as well. But I look for opportunities everywhere, you know. And sometimes, like I said, it's not

something that's openly mentioned. But I will still go ahead and introduce myself to an editor. And you know, put a little put a little feeler out there and say, Hey, this is you know, if you ever think you might want to work with someone, and just the fact that I offer so many different services, you never know, I have had instances where I've introduced myself to an editor, they might not have needed a writer, but they needed someone to help with copy editing. Are you know, I tried to pitch a story, but they were like, hey, this isn't working for us right now. But we have this advertorial. Maybe you want to do that for us. So it's it's worked out in a bunch of different ways. And then being able to build that portfolio over time, I've then been able to reach out to other outlets in a similar industry and show them my work and say, Can I write for you as well? So it's, it's been a slow process, but it's built up to a pretty good business. Yeah.

Lexie Smith

So you don't love pitching. But I'm also guessing you get pitched first. Am I correct in that assumption?

Ruksana Hussain

Yes, I do.

Lexie Smith

Okay, so I'd love to learn a little bit more about your biggest pitch pet peeves. And then flipside of that some things that you appreciate when they hit your inbox?

Ruksana Hussain

Are you talking about pitches from PR pitches from writers

Lexie Smith

pitches, people asking you to write about them? So from PR or companies

Ruksana Hussain

Right, right. Okay. pet peeve. Oh, the latest one that has been the most annoying. I don't know, this has increased over the last year. And I wonder if it's just because of how much we are trying to do things virtually. But I've had the most random pitches land up in my inbox of things that I've never worked on. topics that I just don't cover at all, which if anyone had spent a minute looking at my byline, or visiting my website, what would have figured that out? But then what I love is when they send a follow up saying, Hey, did you see my email from two days ago? Are you still interested in working on this? And it's like, I don't think you realize I don't cover this at all. And in the event that I do find something interesting, and I say, Oh, yeah, I think this might work for one of the outlets like, Can you send me more information about, you know what their latest awards are? Or do they have any recent recognition? And I get a response saying, great, yeah, we'll send you all of this. By the way, what outlet is this for? Us? Like, Which one did you pitch me for in the first place?

Lexie Smith

Right? Because you write for so many places? Actually, that's a kind of a perfect follow up question. Do you expect people to indicate which outlet they're pitching you for? Or do you like them leaving it more kind of open ended?

Ruksana Hussain

I think if you are looking for a certain outlet, I would definitely like that to be mentioned. So in response to that, also, there have been instances where someone has reached out to me and said, XYZ is, you know, a great source for you to include, and I see that you do these stories. And in my head, I'm thinking the whole time they want me to write for outlet a. And I reach back to them and I see Yeah, great. Send me this information. I'll share it with my editor for outlet a, and they come back with Oh, no, we were thinking about what B, we wouldn't be interested in outlet a right now. But meanwhile, I might have already sent my editor feelers about this person. And so there goes that, right. So I'm not expecting that every single time just given the kind of work the amount of like different outlets are at right for I'm not expecting that every single pitch has to be perfect. But knowing that I have never covered anything about how was it that came in with the most annoying noise? Is food being too loudly with like with your mouth open? Or it's some pitch today? It's just like, I haven't I don't know which outlet you thought that would go for. But I don't know why. And that was a follow up pitch. In fact, from someone saying, Hey, I sent this to you two days ago, do you? Do you want to cover this? And I'm just like, I don't know where you think this is going. But I don't cover anything to do with food habits or... I don't know, this is a psychology or became

Lexie Smith

I know, who's that even forward? What are they trying...?

Ruksana Hussain

I don't know. So some of that some of that. I'm just you know, it's not that I understand that sometimes people are just grasping for anything they can get just the market is competitive. But at the same time, I'm also like, this is not the best use of your time and efforts. And I think that if whoever was sending that information would just sit down and block a half hour to really hone in on the journalist they want to work with the outlets they want to be and build that relationship again, then I think they'd have much better success, as you know, at getting some kind of exposure for their clients. Like free for all.

Lexie Smith

Yeah, it's not a quote I I'm a big advocate with my students of its quality over quantity.

Ruksana Hussain

Exactly.

Lexie Smith

Yeah. So I think that just kind of goes to your point, again, people it's not about sending out 500 pitches, it's probably not going to work. Send out five that you've really thought about.

Ruksana Hussain

Yeah,

Lexie Smith

I'd say exactly those numbers. But that concept,

Ruksana Hussain

the concept, definitely, definitely.

Lexie Smith

So kind of on that theme of preference. I always like to do a bit of rapid fire preferential questions when I have someone who is in the media field. So if you're up for it, I'd love to kind of just hammer through them. There's no right or wrong answer. It's just a personal preference. All right.

Ruksana Hussain

Okay.

Lexie Smith

Do you prefer a certain day of the week to be pitched?

Ruksana Hussain

No.

Lexie Smith

No, any days? No goes

Ruksana Hussain

Any day is fine.

Lexie Smith

Any day. Do you prefer to be pitched at a certain time? So morning, evening, doesn't matter.

Ruksana Hussain

Any time is fine.

Lexie Smith

You're easy. I like this. You're a nice journalist. How important are photos to you in a pitch? Or does the subject need to be able to offer or provide photos?

Ruksana Hussain

They definitely need to be able to offer photos, professional photos would be great, especially this past year. I think that's been really difficult for a lot of outlets to organize photoshoots so having professional you know, headshots, just the basic prescot pictures of your product or services. That would really make the job easy. Yeah.

Lexie Smith

Do you actually look at people's press or media kits?

Ruksana Hussain

Sometimes, yes. If they sent me a link, which a lot of people are doing right now and I I appreciate that. I definitely do look at their media kits. Yes,

Lexie Smith

Do... Okay, so you told us kind of some follow ups you don't like but how do you feel about follow ups in general and is there you know, is one follow up okay, it's two follow ups Okay?

Ruksana Hussain

I'm good with follow ups. I think sometimes it does happen that you are busy and you haven't looked at something. Something landed in your spam folder, a trash folder. I've had that happen, and they've been really good stories that I've ended up working on. I definitely think it's great to have two or three follow ups. But yes, if you don't hear from a journalist after that, it's good to assume that you need to give them some time before you think of following up on the exact same topic again. Yeah.

Lexie Smith

last little rapid fire question. Doesn't matter to you if you're being pitched by a publicist or a founder? Or do you even notice if one or the other?

Ruksana Hussain

Doesn't matter to me, No, no.

Lexie Smith

Okay. Cool. Okay, so I have one more. I have one more fun question for you. And if you've listened to this podcast, you might have an idea of what I'm about to ask. So we've talked about all things pitchin. Now, I'd love to learn what you're sipping. So what is your favorite beverage alcoholic or non alcoholic, of course

Ruksana Hussain

it depends on the time of day, it depends on the time of year. variety, we're coming back to it again. I am currently doing a dry January spell. So I'm drinking coconut water. But actually hasn't been so bad to try and do a dry January at all, because we're mostly home. So it didn't it didn't really affect me big deal. But I do love I do love a good glass of bubbly. And I enjoy cocktails. I like to try something new wherever I go.

Lexie Smith

Do you have a favorite cocktail? Or are you someone who just goes for like the craziest conclusion on the menu?

Ruksana Hussain

Exactly. That would be me. That will be me.

Lexie Smith

Crazy cocktails,

Ruksana Hussain

the more unique the name or the more playful on words, I'm probably going to jump on that cocktail.

Lexie Smith

When I wish I had known you like seven years ago, I used to be the PR director for a Hospitality Group in LA and I got to make cocktail menus, oh, my dream job. And I got to taste them name them. And obviously they're funny, because I can't help myself. Anyways, another lifetime ago. So kinda last question. Are you working on anything right now that you are looking for sources? If so, what and then how can people get in contact with you?

Ruksana Hussain

Oh, my gosh, what am I working on? Right now that I'm looking for sources. I am actually the editor for a diversity focused publication. And this year, we are expanding our coverage to from just the US to more international stories. So I'm definitely looking for folks in the diversity and inclusion space, that work in companies that have international operations, they can share with us what they're doing on a more of a global scale, as opposed to the companies we've been covering, which have all been us base so far. So that's definitely something I'm looking for, for the rest of the year, in fact, so all of our upcoming issues are going to be focusing on that. So thank you for asking that would be wonderful. If I could have a couple of folks reach me out about that. And how can people reach me I'm on rukhsanawrites.com. I'm on Ruksana Hussain on LinkedIn. Definitely love to connect with folks, mostly on LinkedIn. All of my professional networking happens on there. But shoot me an email anytime on ruksanah r u k s a n a h @gmail.com I'm happy to collaborate. I'm happy to help you if there's anything I can help you with. And I'm just looking forward to connections more connections in this virtual world of ours right now.

Lexie Smith

Well, I will give you a drinking kombucha so in order of dry January here is

Ruksana Hussain

Yeah,

Lexie Smith

Coconut water Kombucha, cheers. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Ruksana Hussain

Thank you for having me. This is a lovely conversation. I appreciate it.

Lexie Smith

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