

EPISODE 113

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by OnePitch. The guests on our show include some of the most notable journalists from the top US-based publications who cover topics including technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science, consumer products, business news, and beauty and wellness. We discuss their role, the types of stories they cover, what their inbox looks like, and how they connect with sources. Head to onepitch.co and look for the video page to learn more about our new video series featuring journalists from the show.

This week on the podcast, we're talking with Melinda Fakuade, an Associate Editor of Culture and Features at Vox. She has written for New York Magazine, The Outline, Rolling Stone, and MEL Magazine, among many other notable outlets. During the episode, Melinda talks about how to effectively approach her with a story, her extremely high email open rate, her sincere interest in what she covers, and more. Let's hear from Melinda now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:20] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist from OnePitch. I'm Beck Bamberger, the Founder of BAM, an agency that works with all venture-backed technology companies for good. Let's emphasize, double underline good. I'm also the founder of OnePitch because we need to work better with our wonderful journalists and further understand why they want good pitches and not bad pitches. Hence we are here.

Today with us is Melinda Fakuade from Vox. She's the Associate Editor of Culture and Features. We're going to get into Vox. We're going to talk about her inbox of a million pitches and how people can be nice and how that stands out. We were just talking about that. Melinda, welcome. Thank you for being here.

[00:02:04] MF: Thanks for having me. I'm so excited.

[00:02:07] **BB**: Yeah. We're already having some good chats on this. I would love to actually go back to what we were just commenting on, which is just the level of being kind and smart and conversational, is how a pitch can stand out. So let's just start with that, and then we'll get into your inbox. If your conversational, how does that help you with your pitches?

[00:02:26] **MF**: When I get an email that is on the conversational side, and I can see this person's personality, and they don't feel like they're afraid of me or what they're saying, it makes me believe in their [inaudible 00:02:36] for the entire thing, instead of skimming it or trying to like figure. It's a lot easier when you feel like you're reading an email from a human person and not a robot.

[00:02:47] **BB**: Okay. So you're talking like formal language, and it's like perfect five paragraphs or whatever be it. Describe how do you know it's like fearful?

[00:02:56] **MF**: I think this just kind of goes back to what a lot of people learned in J school, which is that [inaudible 00:02:59] like, "Hello, Ms. Fakuade. Good day." [inaudible 00:03:05] every time. Just say like, "Hi, Melinda. I want to [inaudible 00:03:11] Vox for this story." Tell me the pitch. We don't need a lot of lead up. We don't need a lot of formalities. Just tell me what –

[00:03:18] **BB**: Yeah. What is it? Yeah.

[00:03:20] **MF**: That we should be covering in at VOX. Yeah.

[00:03:25] **BB**: Okay. That's a good tip right off the bat. Okay. So for folks who do not know, perhaps, what would you say Vox entails, and what also does it not entail as a media outlet?

[00:03:36] **MF**: Well, I would say at Vox, we're really big on explainers. We're known for explaining the big issues in this –

[00:03:44] **BB**: The world.

[00:03:45] **MF**: Yeah, in our world that you might not have the answers to. We don't come from a place of this article and this article is the definitive answer on a topic, but we want to help people

understand why an issue or a topic might be becoming prominent or be a part of the way we live. I'm the Associate Editor of Culture and Features, so I work with our culture team, where we cover entertainment, TV, books, movies, and things like that. I also work with our team at the goods, which is our consumerism article, and that's a lot about finance and the way we live. There's a lot of things that go on there, crypto.

[00:04:26] **BB**: It's expansive.

[00:04:27] **MF**: Yeah, it's pretty expansive, which is why I like working in both sections.

[00:04:31] **BB**: That's fun.

[00:04:31] **MF**: We will try to just like make sense of the world for people. Make it clear and tell people things they might not know about complex topics. So that's how I would –

[00:04:42] **BB**: I like that overview. Yes. The explainers are fantastic. If you're like, "What is going on with Ukraine," go to Vox. You can get all the download. Okay. Melinda, your inbox, seriously, how many pitches do you get a day?

[00:04:55] **MF**: It wildly varies. I'm an associate editor, so some days I get zero. Other days, for whatever reason, I'll get like 40. That's not necessarily a high amount, but an inbox builds on itself day by day, week by week. I tried to be an inbox zero person. I'm not anymore ever since I started working at Vox. I tried to have like maybe 10 emails in my inbox at the end of the day just – Usually, there's stuff about what we're working on, so it's kind of treated like my to-do list.

Right now at Vox, what's unopened is a few stories from people in house that I need to go and edit today. So that's my to-do list. When I open them, [inaudible 00:05:35]. I have pitches. How many pitches do I have right now?

[00:05:40] **BB**: How many? Let's see.

[00:05:42] **MF**: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven right now. But I have –

[00:05:49] BB: Okay, right now live. Okay, got it. Okay. Now, you said, okay, you'll get in bed down to maybe 10. It was like 10 unread. Are you basically like a let it fly, and you'll just accumulate a bunch of read pitches, and you'll have like 27,000 in your inbox? Are you like a mass delete? You got to get them out.

[00:06:09] MF: No, I've got to get them out within one or two days like.

[00:06:12] BB: Okay. So you're on that line.

[00:06:14] MF: Yeah. Because I'm associate editor, I'm – What we do at Vox is very collaborative. If there's a pitch that I think that would work for us, I'll forward it to other editors and kind of talk about that either on Slack or via email, until everyone's kind of said their piece on it. Or if I think it's a pass, I might go into the Slack and say like, “Hey, guys. I got this pitch on -- Let me think.

[00:06:37] BB: M&Ms. You recently did a story on M&Ms. Yeah.

[00:06:40] MF: I did recently do it. Yeah, I did a story on the green M&M, which I get lovely emails about all the time about how **[inaudible 00:06:45]**. But I go into the Slack, and I'll say, “Hey, guys. I got a pitch on M&Ms. We already covered that. Just so you know, I'm going to pass on it.” But I might say like, “Oh, but they have an angle that we didn't really consider. I think I'm going to pass on it. What do you guys think?” Then it gets hashed out like that. So a lot of the time it is just talking to the other editors and taking a vote, talking back and forth, which is what makes answering – everybody's so hard or getting to people within an hour or whatever like very **[inaudible 00:07:17]**. I'm waiting for input from other people. It's not just me who makes the decisions. It's a group effort.

[00:07:24] BB: So that's a good distinction too for everybody who's listening. Sometimes, we're just talking with reporters, and then they send it up the chain and say, “Hey, editor. I want to do this. This is my one story.” But then as an editor position, it's a little bit different. Because sometimes you can kind of parse out the stories to various people or see who wants to pick them up because you are not going to be doing all the stories just in your role. Yup. That's good to know. Gotcha. What is then a subject line that stands out to you, Melinda, that will get you the open? Or are you a seriously open every single email type of person?

[00:08:01] **MF:** I try to open every single email.

[00:08:04] **BB:** Wow. Okay. Wow. The extremes of this are getting good. Okay. Every single email. Okay.

[00:08:11] **MF:** But I would say I probably have a 85 to 90 percent open rate, I would think like. I try to open everything. Now, if it's like something that I instantly know isn't for us, let's say it's a PR company pitching me about waffle fries at Chick-fil-A, I know we're not covering that. That I'm not opening. But a pitch from like a human person, someone who's trying to like a writer out there, I almost always open it. It might be hard to get back to everybody, but I try to open everything.

[00:08:48] **BB:** Okay. Wow, this is encouraging. I like it. Okay. So when you're doing a story, such as the M&Ms, Melinda, or you've covered quite a variety of other things, if everyone's looking at your array of what you're covered. I'm going back to one of your other stories here. You talked about Wendy Williams just recently. You're talking about Astroworld. You have American beverages. I mean, this prom. We got all types of things.

[BREAK]

[00:09:12] **ANNOUNCER:** Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to see the unique ways OnePitch helps PR professionals and marketers pitch journalists? Head to onepitch.co to learn about our new OnePitch score and see how easy it is to find the right journalists to pitch your news to. Sign up for your free account today. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:09:36] **BB:** What is the pitch that makes your stories come alive? Or are you oftentimes taking a walk thinking about something or hearing from a friend and going, "You know what? I do need to do that M&M story."?

[00:09:47] **MF**: It varies. With the M&M story, we –

[00:09:50] **BB**: Yeah. How'd that happen?

[00:09:52] **MF**: We in the news – Well, in our virtual newsroom on Slack. Somebody dropped it in from Twitter like, “Oh, my god. They changed that M&M.” Then we were all just kind of like laughing and joking and riffing in Slack, as colleagues do. Yeah. I think I guess everyone found like my quips pretty funny because they're like, “Oh, you should write about this. You're kind of on a roll here.” That was like a timely news piece. That M&M story was fun and was great, but that the thing that was dominating the news cycle like that **[inaudible 00:10:21]**. We kind of like –

[00:10:23] **BB**: So you jumped on it.

[00:10:24] **MF**: Yeah. For the rest of my stories, it's typically about something that I've been noticing. For example, like my story about dining room tables and how no one has that. It's just something I've noticed going to friends' apartments. Now, being like a 20-something, you start realizing like, “Hey, my parents had a dining room table. No one I know does at all.”

[00:10:46] **BB**: Wow, really? Wait a second. Okay. I'm looking at this piece now. The death of the – Wow. Okay.

[00:10:53] **MF**: Yeah. It's not to say that they're non-existent. But to me, **[inaudible 00:10:57]** to be a dwindling idea, so I write down like this. When I start thinking about something like that, I write it down. I leave it in like a running list on my phone. Then if I keep running to it, I go back to the list and see my notes. I was kind of like, “There might be something here because this is just –” That's how it is with a lot of my stories. With the beverage aisle thing, it was definitely that way. It was something like the world –That's something where I just was like so kind of outraged by that particular news story that I've really wanted to write about it.

The Wendy Williams piece, that was something that I believe I was assigned that, but we were kind of just talking in Slack and talking about like kind of wild like the way daytime TV has

changed. That's something that we also realized that I don't know if I've ever read anything about Wendy Williams in depth, so that's kind of a gap in the coverage.

[00:11:51] **BB:** There's a gap. You've live with the gap. Got it. It sounds quite organic, the process it sounds like.

[00:11:59] **MF:** Yeah.

[00:12:00] **BB:** I think culture is. It is what are you observing, what's happening, what is [inaudible 00:12:04] guy saying. You're just listening to what's abounding. Does that make sense?

[00:12:09] **MF:** Yeah. For me, like that's why I have a main interest in culture and understanding [inaudible 00:12:14] because like it's so much about like the way we live and interact with the things that I do. I was never really cut out for that hard news kind of journalism, politics type of thing. First of all, that coverage is so important. People are much smarter than – It's kind of just depressing. It's hard for me to write something about like sad news and bad news and stressful things.

I find that the stuff that I like to cover is stuff that's fun and stuff that makes you think about the [inaudible 00:12:46] and about what entertains us and what makes us tick. That is more interesting to me personally than writing about policy, where every sentence feels so high stakes because like it's something the American people about issues that affect their real lives like bills and money. That's just a lot harder for me personally, and that is extremely like important and respectable. I have more fun doing this.

[00:13:13] **BB:** Yes, yes. I'm glad you know that, and I've discovered that you're sticking in like, "This is my area." I wonder about that for some people where it's like, "God, do you –"? Well, I will share this too. For me, when I was doing like local news stuff, I was like, "Oh, my. I do not give a crap that at 4:00 AM on 59th Street and Palm, there was a kitchen fire." It just did not appeal to me, so totally get that. Go with what works, basically, in your journalism desires. Yeah, that's good. Do you ever then – Melinda, I like to always ask us just for people because this is a

big hang up point, and people like to discuss it. But do you all ever get exclusives or embargoes?

[00:13:57] MF: We do. Actually, I have an embargo in my inbox right now. I have to say I have not gotten an embargoed story yet that was like super spicy. Embargoes are things that I typically don't even care about like this celebrity is working with Apple on this new like – I don't know. Something that's like even lower stakes than a new TV show or something. It will be like, "This celebrity is teaming up with Pepsi in an Apple-sponsored commercial for like a brand new pair of shoes." I'm like, "Well, thanks for letting me know."

[00:14:39] BB: Yeah, thanks. I'll make sure to, yeah, pass over that. Okay, then we don't need to get into further detail on that. Sometimes, this could be a hot area. Okay. I am so happy to ask you about this next part because this is right up your area, Melinda. I'm sure. So what are you reading, watching, listening to like for fun or for work that you can tell us about? Because this is where I personally get all my inspiration and all my recommendations, and I pull up my Audible link right now to get ready. What do you got?

[00:15:11] MF: Okay. Well, right now, I'm not reading any books. I'm reading a lot of magazine and a lot of open tabs. I also at any given time probably have, and this is like very chaotic, at minimum, I have 20 tabs open every day, if not more. I'm like very serious about my tabs. I know like my computer run like way slower, and it's like bad for a lot of reasons, but I'm obsessed with my tabs.

[00:15:35] BB: Yeah, I got it. I'm a tab overloader too. I love it. I got to have them open because I want to click.

[00:15:43] MF: Yeah. So in my tabs for upcoming reading for the day and probably partially tomorrow is a story in The New Yorker called Retirement the Margaritaville Way. It's about active living community for Jimmy Buffett enthusiasts.

[00:15:56] BB: I read that piece. Fascinating.

[00:15:57] MF: Isn't it good? I'm so excited for it.

[00:16:00] **BB**: There's quite the political slant. At first, I was like, "Oh, why am I going to read this article about where these –"? No, it's a whole like inter warfare of that group of like the extreme right people, and then the people who are Democrats have their own little carve out. It's all heated in this piece. It's something. It's something. Yes. Take a look.

[00:16:20] **MF**: Wow. Yeah. I'm excited. I love also the illustration at the top. It's just like amazing, so I was like –

[00:16:25] **BB**: Yes, very good. Yes, excellent. Okay, what else?

[00:16:29] **MF**: I also have this vice article open about like this new diet that people are into, where they just like anti-seed oils, and it's like a lot of big [inaudible 00:16:41] are like into it.

[00:16:41] **BB**: What? Oh, my god.

[00:16:42] **MF**: Yeah. [inaudible 00:16:43].

[00:16:44] **BB**: The new Soylent. Okay.

[00:16:46] **MF**: Yeah. Where people are just like, "I'm –"

[00:16:47] **BB**: Wait, wait. It's like anti seed.

[00:16:50] **MF**: Yeah, anti –

[00:16:51] **BB**: Don't eat seed?

[00:16:52] **MF**: Like canola oils and like anything that is like seed-based oil. It seems like the brewings of this kind of on TikTok, so I definitely want to read that. I definitely want to read further on it. But I'm like not sure.

[00:17:10] **BB**: Interesting, interesting.

[00:17:12] **MF**: Yeah. So I can look into that further.

[00:17:14] **BB**: Okay, that's good.

[00:17:15] **MF**: I have two left articles that are on the longer side. One is from early February I did not get to read yet called How to **[inaudible 00:17:26]** Less, where it's like I need to be in the minds of people and read something like that. Additionally, another eclectic article, which I've heard great things about, but I want to be in the headspace for it, which is called – It's a culture piece by Jennifer Senior, and it's called It's Your Friends Who Break Your Heart. I think there's been a lot recently, especially even here at Vox, about our friendship and the values of friendship and like the relationships other than romantic relationships that we rely on. It's something **[inaudible 00:17:52]** about in my personal life, as well as in my work life in terms of things to cover, so I'm definitely –

[00:18:02] **BB**: I got to read that piece because when you think of friendship, like nothing binds you. There's no commitment. There's no blood. There's no obligation. I think friendships are one of the most interesting forms of human relationships by far, by far, by far.

[00:18:20] **MF**: Definitely.

[00:18:22] **BB**: I love it. Okay. These are all great. Thank you, Melinda. Okay. Now, for just our last part here, what do you think the future of journalism looks like?

[00:18:32] **MF**: Well, I would hope that the future of journalism is more diverse than it currently is. I think in some ways, strides are being made in that direction. But I have like bigger strides to be made. So I think –

[00:18:45] **BB**: Do you feel it's getting better, like minutely or like a step or a leap or just a baby step kind of sideways?

[00:18:54] **MF**: I think minutely. I think that a lot of journalism publications have an interest in diverse candidates and journalists and in a way that they maybe did not before, and it's hard. I

think it's still going to take a while to see if that will be a continued thing or if that's just something that they feel is trying to be at the moment or they feel sole pressure to do that. I mean, in some cases, it's unclear if the higher motives are actually genuine. It's really hard to **[inaudible 00:19:26]**, but I do hope that it continues because the newsrooms need more candidates and journalists who are diverse and writing about things that don't always get written about.

I think right now, there's a lot of changes. It's a very critical and stressful time in America, and a reflection of that is what we write about and what we read and what we consume, which is why working in **[inaudible 00:19:56]** right now. Yeah. So it's like interesting, and the stakes in some ways feels higher than they were, five, eight, or whatever years ago. I hope that strides for diversity continue to be made, and I think the future of journalism is really based in keeping and writing honest and interesting and fun.

Because people are into reading, for example, print magazines the way they used to be. How can we get to be interested in certain publications when a lot of people, the tops of these companies are really just concerned about ad-money, if that's like the struggle in journalism is ads versus the hard-working journalists who are at that company trying to write and make good work. So I think that's a role that will continue, unfortunately. But I hope that in some way it can be worked out. It's hard to say.

[00:20:53] BB: Yeah. I don't know the solution, solutions, and no one has on this entire show of the 139 episodes we've done. So, Melinda, all I can say is we're trying to figure it out.

[00:21:07] MF: Yeah. It's a really long question.

[00:21:10] BB: Billion probably, probably, and so much more. I'm sure. Well, Melinda, thank you for being on here today. This has been so lovely. I hope everyone checks out your stories, the M&Ms to the Wendys and all these in-betweens, and know to pitch you with some kindness and some sincerity. That'll go a very long way. This has been just great.

[00:21:34] MF: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me. This was so fun, so yeah.

[00:21:37] **BB:** Excellent. Melinda Fakuade from Vox, she's the Associate Editor of Culture and Features. Pitch her in her inbox. She'll probably open it.

[00:21:47] **MF:** Yes, I will.

[00:21:48] **BB:** There you go. Thanks, Melinda.

[00:21:50] **MF:** Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:21:52] **ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Melinda Fakuade from Vox. If you enjoy listening to our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. And if you have a moment, please leave us a review to share your thoughts about the show and today's guest. To learn more about the latest tools on OnePitch and to subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter, head to our website at onepitch.co. We'll see you all next week with a brand new guest and even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]