

EPISODE 118**[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.

Today's guest on Coffee with a Journalist is Jeena Sharma, a retail reporter at Morning Brew. Jeena covers retail and consumer trends from the B2B perspective for the Retail Brew newsletter. She was previously the beauty editor at Paper Magazine, and a fashion and beauty writer at NYLON. During the episode, Jeena shares about reader feedback, her honest advice for sending her pitches, how she seeks inspiration for her stories, and more. Let's hear from Jeena now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:19] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. We are here to discover how journalists can be our friends as publicists, and that's why we do this podcast. I made OnePitch to help, obviously, publicists get to better connections with journalists. That's kind of the theme of this. But this show in particular brings on actual real deal journalists to chat about what they don't like, what they do like, all the things about their inbox, where the future of journalism is going, and all the above, and more, usually a lot more.

Today with us, super exciting, we have reporter at Retail Morning Brew, Jeena Sharma, here. We have a lot to talk about, Jeena, because Retail Brew, well, specifically Morning Brew, but then the retail portion of it is quite large as well. So why don't we first start with what Morning Brew all encompasses, for those who maybe not as familiar?

[00:02:10] JS: Yeah. So Morning Brew is a business publication. We have two arms, the B2C arm and then the B2B arm. B2C is mainly business news, business features for consumers, very consumer-focused. B2B, which is where I work, we have several newsletters. We have Retail Brew, Marketing Brew, MTech brew, HR Brew. Each one of them focuses on different industries. Retail Brew is, obviously, retail. So we cater to brands, retailers, marketing professionals, salespeople interested in building a brand.

[00:02:46] BB: For you, Jeena, because you used to be at NYLON, you used to be at Paper, you are a freelancer, is it a little different now for you because you touch more on this B2B focus, or you still get to have the fun that you'd maybe have in your NYLON days?

[00:02:59] JS: It is quite different.

[00:03:01] BB: Yeah, okay.

[00:03:03] JS: Yeah. I mean, I won't lie because both at NYLON and Paper, they tend to be more entertainment-focused, more feature reporting, which was fun. But I think I got to a point where I sort of didn't want to do. I feel like a lot of like beauty, fashion, and entertainment journalism is very ecommerce-focused, and I didn't want to like [inaudible 00:03:27] about these are the five lipsticks you should buy. I was more interested in doing like investigative, bigger features, that sort of [inaudible 00:03:37], which is what I'm doing right now and [inaudible 00:03:41] consumer behavior and helping brands figure shit out.

[00:03:46] BB: Yes. It's needed. It's needed in this ever evolving world. Okay. Jeena, your inbox, is it crazy in there? How is it?

[00:03:56] JS: Crazy is – I mean, it's an understatement. Yeah. I can't take two days off or I come back to 100 emails.

[00:04:06] BB: All pitches in those 100 emails?

[00:04:08] JS: All pitches or follow-ups or sometimes complaints from readers who are like, "Well, maybe you could've written about this or written this and that."

[00:04:16] BB: No way. I have not heard on here, of all the shows we've done, people saying, "Oh, I get emails that are also complaints."

[00:04:22] JS: I mean, they're more like suggestions. They're like, "Oh, why **[inaudible 00:04:25]**." This friend that I love.

[00:04:29] BB: From actual like just readers, not publicists saying, "Why didn't you include my client?" But just a normal reader?

[00:04:34] JS: Yes.

[00:04:35] BB: Really?

[00:04:36] JS: Which can be kind of annoying. The other day, I got an email from this reader who read this piece we did on cannabis. He was like, "Well, I think that this source was incorrect because I have a vertical farm somewhere here. Or I have worked in the cannabis industry, and this is what you should say instead. Or this cannabis brand should be saying this instead." I'm like, "I can't force them. I'm sorry you disagree with me but —"

[00:05:06] BB: So does that warrant a response from you?

[00:05:08] JS: Usually no, unless it's something that's factually incorrect, which hasn't happened yet. So it's mostly people reacting because they don't agree with a certain brand's standpoint or a certain source's insight. So I'm just usually like, "Okay, delete."

[00:05:27] BB: So no acknowledgement. You need to add fuel to the fire on them. Now, what about pitches? So you get tons of pitches. Jeena, you cover quite the spectrum because it's those deeper dive pieces, but it's funding startups for beauty and retail pieces. You had something on **[inaudible 00:05:43]**. You're talking about DSW, so legacy brands. It's wide. Do you respond to every pitch? Do you mass delete? What do you do?

[00:05:50] JS: I try to respond to pitches I think that seemed like it's coming from a person either that I've worked with before, or it's a pitch where it feels like the PR person who's pitching to me has actually read the work that we do because sometimes they can be so off base. So

usually, I respond to that. Like the other day, I got a pitch from someone who is like this ex detective who now investigates fake reviewers on Amazon, and I was like, “What do you think I write about? Because that’s not what we cover.”

[00:06:23] BB: Yeah. I'm going to be generous with maybe the person of like, “Oh, it is a very long stretch, but I could see where they’re maybe going.” If you were going to maybe do – it's a long stretch.

[00:06:33] JS: Yeah. Sometimes you have to just not respond.

[00:06:37] BB: Okay. You just don't respond. Okay. Do you do any filing of them? Do you ever come back eight months later to something?

[00:06:42] JS: That has happened. Usually, it's embarrassing. It's when I miss something, and I'm like, “Oh, this would have been a great story.” But I'm a human being. So sometimes, I miss great pitches, and I go back, and I'm like, “I'm so sorry for my extremely late response eight months later.”

[00:07:01] BB: “But I still want to write a piece.”?

[00:07:03] JS: Yes. PRs are – They’re okay. They're good about it.

[00:07:08] BB: That's good. That's good. Okay. So for subject lines, is that important for you to see a gripping subject line? Do you look at the subject line as the indicator for you're going to open the email?

[00:07:19] JS: Yes. I mean, the best subject lines are really, as I've said, they're very to the point. So the other day, I got a pitch from this beauty brand that was raising money, and they were like embargo. This beauty brand is raising 250 million, subject line. I'm interested, so I opened the email. Yeah. Sometimes, the subject lines are just two sentences, and I'm not going to open that because –

[00:07:47] BB: No, no. Okay.

[00:07:48] JS: Figure your shit out.

[BREAK]

[00:07:52] 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]

[00:08:16] BB: Yeah. You know what? I haven't asked this before, but I will ask you because you're giving me the inspiration. If there's one thing you could tell publicists for their pitching, what would it be?

[00:08:27] JS: Just don't try to bury the lead and don't try to trick me. At the end of the day, if I want to write the story, if I think it's interesting, I'm going to write it. If I don't think it's interesting, I'm not going to write it. You trying to pitch it as something entirely else, which happens a lot, is not going to help.

[00:08:50] BB: Good. Let's all be listening, everybody. I like the pearls of wisdom coming here. Jeena, when you do your stories, you mentioned your cannabis piece, that was a recent one, obviously, it was on 420. I noticed that you had one on the precise skincare startup getting money. You had Meta, something with Facebook coming in with its real life story. Do you have a way in which you get yourself inspired to do a story? Do you do like walks or your shower or your coffee time, that things and stories pop up to you? Or is it more reactive and you're going off of pitches, let's say?

[00:09:25] JS: I try not to be reactive because I feel like that's a lot of people that are already doing that. I tend to usually look at what's going on around me. Going down the street, and I see Bloomingdale's with a great display or some store, where I go in and they have like an interactive thing going on. I want to know more about it. Sometimes, it's based off of pitches that

I get in my emails. Sometimes, it's a story I read from another journalist, and I start thinking about a different angle or even new stories. So I'd say across the board.

[00:10:04] BB: Okay. How good or how nice. You were in New York. You're like walking through the retail runways and seeing those displays and seeing it kind of live unfold for some inspiration perhaps.

[00:10:16] JS: Yeah. I'm lucky I would say in that respect.

[00:10:18] BB: Yes. So you just do a little stroll around Soho, and you're like, "Oh, got to write about this now." I mean maybe.

[00:10:23] JS: Yeah. I walk around, so I'm like, "Here's 10 ideas."

[00:10:27] BB: Exactly, exactly. It just pours on the street because the retail windows are sometimes nice.

[00:10:32] JS: Not all of them great, though.

[00:10:34] BB: Yes. The ideas not always are of that caliber. Jeena, what do you do consumption-wise, story-wise that is not, let's say, your beat? Do you watch Netflix? Do you read the Wall Street Journal? Are you listening to podcast on murder mysteries that we need to know about? We just like to know, where do you also get stories?

[00:10:55] JS: I think I do all of that. I mean, I think it's kind of restricting in some ways and limiting if you only stick to reading about your beat or doing things that have to do with your beat.

[00:11:06] BB: I agree.

[00:11:07] JS: I don't think that's how you get the best ideas. So I read about things that are way off from what I write about. I read a lot about social justice issues. I read a lot about women's rights. I read a lot of books about those subjects. I watch HBO, Netflix.

[00:11:25] BB: Do you have any favorite show, series, anything? We'd like to get actual titles. Shout out to journalists who also write books. Sometimes, there's like – Our journalists will be on here and then like, “Oh, I love this book, and it was written by a –” It's like, “Ah, more journalists doing more stories. I love it.”

[00:11:39] JS: My favorite TV show I would say is Twin Peaks, but that has nothing to do –

[00:11:46] BB: That doesn't have anything, but that's fine, and it's been kind of on my list. Okay. What do you like about it, by the way?

[00:11:51] JS: Everything. I'm like a huge David Lynch fan. I love the mood. I love the acting. I love the characters.

[00:11:58] BB: It's from the '90s, right?

[00:11:59] JS: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:12:00] BB: Yes.

[00:12:02] JS: It's something I really only got into five years ago. I would say it's not for everyone because it's **[inaudible 00:12:08]** going at some points.

[00:12:09] BB: Yes, yes. A crime drama mixed with healthy doses of the surreal. This – Oh, okay. I'm in. I'm in. You can get it on Amazon.

[00:12:18] JS: Yeah. You should try it.

[00:12:18] BB: An oldie but goodie. Okay, great. I love it. Okay, that's good. Anything that's like a little bit of an old thing. For example, since you are in New York, I will say it is a Treat, capital T, to watch Sex and the City, the original with all the New York stuff.

[00:12:34] JS: I recently watched it for the first time.

[00:12:39] BB: What did you think? I used to be someone who always used to make fun of people who loved it.

[00:12:46] BB: Yeah, me too. But then I'm like, "Well, let me look." It's hard to not get into it.

[00:12:54] JS: I know. I mean, I used to be like, "Ah, I hate Carrie. She's so annoying." But it's a great show. Now, I'm among those annoying people who always talk about it.

[00:13:06] BB: I do love it? I do love it. Well, Jeena, is there a position you have with exclusives versus embargoes? Do you like exclusives?

[00:13:15] JS: I love exclusives and I love when PRs are upfront about it from the beginning. This can be –

[00:13:23] BB: This is an exclusive. Just to be clear, what is an exclusive defined to you?

[00:13:29] JS: Like a news about certain a thing that a brand is doing, whether it's a funding news, or it's a new feature that they're adding to the portfolio, a new brand that they're adding to their portfolio. All of that is great, great exclusives.

[00:13:47] BB: Do you, though, feel an exclusive is you're the only one with the news forever? Or some publicists think like, "Oh, it's exclusive." But two hours after, your story goes live? I'm just going to pitch everything under the moon under it. Or are you one of those reporters? You're like, "I don't care once my piece is out. I don't care what you do with it." Or try to pitch.

[00:14:06] JS: I think yeah.

[00:14:07] BB: You're more on that front. Okay.

[00:14:09] JS: The latter, yeah.

[crosstalk 00:14:10]

[00:14:12] BB: The next piece is out. Great, great. I was feeling kind of weird. Some people really – They do not want to know or believe that then that piece could get further circulated amongst pitches. I'm always thinking like, "But you were first. It's already out. You're good, right?"

[00:14:31] JS: It's so unfair to ask that of someone. I feel like to be like you're going to be the only person to report it. Why?

[00:14:38] BB: Exactly.

[00:14:39] JS: So I don't believe in that.

[00:14:41] BB: Yeah. Okay. Good to know. We got that cleared up. Okay. Lastly, Jeena, what do you think the future journalism looks like?

[00:14:49] JS: My ideal future of journalism?

[00:14:51] BB: Yes, yes. Your ideal.

[00:14:52] JS: I think we're moving at or at least this is what I've seen. We're moving away from the whole breaking news culture, which is great because that's the type of journalism I don't want to do. Moving towards really investigative, deeply researched stories. Eventually, that's what's going to help your publication to stand out because there's too many people who can report the news first now because of social media. I think social media ultimately will become the primary medium and already is to get news. So to be a great publication, that's not really adding.

[00:15:29] BB: Yeah. That's a great point, but that hasn't been mentioned here much at all, which is that since social media can provide that venue, and you're getting your news source that way, as in wherein lies great journalism, and it's much more on the in-depth or the distinct or the nuanced and whatnot, that is a whole other level and a whole different type of existence as a reporter because you're not, "Oh, my god," trying to get it out. The second it hits or anything, it's much longer but do expand.

[00:15:55] JS: Yeah. I feel like it defeats the purpose of journalism. I don't think most journalists I know get into journalism, hoping that they become breaking news reporters because there's not that intrigue in it. There's not – You can't be seriously passionate about that. I think it has its place. Obviously, news does. So social media is not a great place to verify things. There's a lot of false, and a lot of it comes from like unreliable sources. But I just don't believe in the chase that news publications are in against each other, that we have to be the first one to report it. I don't think it's eventually going to get to you too far as a new publication.

[00:16:42] BB: Yeah. Interesting thought for those news outlets out there. What are they going to do? I have to say too, when I was doing my NBC days, local news, just emphasize, and you're like writing about stuff that just locally just broke something. Yeah. It wasn't for me in terms of getting fired up. I get though the like rush. I get the feel of like, “Oh. Yes, we're the first. My things –” That's just not for me, frankly.

[00:17:07] JS: Nobody even remembers eventually. They just remember the news.

[00:17:10] BB: That's the other thing too. Yeah. Yeah. You're on a wheel. It never stops.

[00:17:16] JS: Yeah. So what's the plan? Because it stresses you out.

[00:17:19] BB: Yes, exactly. It does. It sure does. Oh, gosh. Well, Jeena, I hope your job is far less stressful than that, being in live news. I just want to thank you for being on today and dazzling us with your retail creativity and all the great stuff you're doing.

[00:17:35] JS: Of course, and thank you for having me. This was really fun.

[00:17:39] BB: Excellent. Jeena, thank you. Everybody, do not pitch her on Instagram. Do not pitch her on Twitter. We heard that. See the little videos that we did. Maybe you'll see her on the streets in Soho, though. There you go.

[00:17:52] JS: Pitch me an idea there.

[00:17:53] BB: Pitch you an idea there on the street. Love it. Thank you, Jeena Sharma, beauty reporter at Morning Brew Retail. Love it. Thanks, Jeena.

[00:18:03] JS: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:18:06] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist featuring Jeena Sharma from Morning Brew. 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]