

EPISODE 126

[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 Mark Matousek, a reporter at The Information. Mark covers HR and corporate culture in the tech industry. During the episode, Mark shares his thoughts on a real pitch he received, how you can make your pitch relevant to The Information's coverage, his thoughts and timelines for embargoes, and more. Let's hear from Mark now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:13] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Beck Bamberger, and you are here at Coffee with a Journalist, where we drink coffee. We chat with journalists. We learn how to better work with journalists and understand how they do their jobs, so we can be helpful as publicists across the nation, the world, wherever you're listening to. So here we are, and with us today, super exciting. I already messed it up once, Mark, but we're going to get it this time. Mark Matousek, he's a reporter at The Information, covering HR, corporate culture, all that good stuff, which has to be absolutely fascinating, especially now.

Mark, thank you for being here.

[00:01:50] MM: Yeah. Thanks for having me.

[00:01:52] BB: Yes. Man, Mark, what a time to be reporting on HR and corporate culture. I was going to start with your inbox, and then I was thinking, no, let's start with The Information. But actually, first, what is your overarching thoughts on the state of HR?

[00:02:10] MM: That's a good question. One of the things that I found very exciting about this role is, to your point, the future of work, and the way we're changing has become a really hot topic right now in the tech world. This is more broadly. I mean, the best way maybe to sum it up is it seems like right now, since the beginning of the pandemic, the way we're working seems like it's changing more than it has in, I don't know, 100 years. Yeah. I mean, this is one of those rare periods where a large number of things, of substance of things are changing all at once. So, yeah, there's a lot going on right now.

[00:02:46] BB: You are not bored. I am sure. Okay. So Mark, for those who are not as familiar, can you give us an overview on The Information and what you're all covering?

[00:02:53] MM: Yes. So The Information is a subscription-based tech publication that covers everything in Silicon Valley and has a very tech-interested audience. So I think we go into the weeds on some sort of tech-oriented topics that maybe the average general interest publication might not get into as much.

[00:03:12] BB: Exactly. This is good. I'm a subscriber. I love it. It's meaty content. Okay. Now, your inbox, Mark, which is where we normally start, how crazy is it in there?

[00:03:23] MM: It's pretty manageable.

[00:03:27] BB: I love this answer, Mark. I think this is like the first time. Go ahead.

[00:03:31] MM: Yeah. I aspire to be an inbox zero person. It's happened about three or four times in the last five years. So in the morning, I will usually go through – Mark is read and archive everything I don't need or everything I can read and respond to quickly. The reason I'm rarely able get to inbox zero is I like to save things that I want to either keep tabs on or flop on at some point in the near future. Usually, that means it's a source, for example, that I've been

trying to schedule a call with, and we're going back and forth and/or maybe they've stopped responding.

I'll usually have one or just a story I'm working on and someone I want to keep close by that I want to remember to keep in touch with. I like keeping it in my inbox, so I don't forget. Then throughout the day, emails are always coming in. So while I never almost never get to inbox zero, it's usually relatively manageable. I also don't get a crazy number of pitches too, so the house is small.

[00:04:28] BB: Really? Oh, my. I find that fascinating because that is the opposite of what usually has happened on here. So what's not crazy?

[00:04:37] MM: I would say in a given day, I probably get like somewhere in the range of 50 to 100 or so emails, which is – In an absolute sense a decent number of emails. But compared to other business reporters, particularly those who work at – So I used to work at Insider before I was at The Information, and I still never quite got to like the all-time crazy levels I've heard of. Some people who work for other publishers do, but this is a little bit less than that. I've heard people getting hundreds or even literally thousands. I think I've heard someone who gets around like 1,000 in a day. So, yeah, this is manageable compared to that.

[00:05:21] BB: I don't think I've ever had 1,000-plus in a day person on here, not that they've admitted, at least. But there's definitely the spectrum of the let it ride people who have 279,000 unopened emails and then the absolute down to zero, ruthlessly every single day by 3:00 PM. It's really interesting. There's no consistency in this journalism field, so it's really quite the preference that people have.

Okay. So Mark, in those 50-plus, maybe 100 emails that you do get, what is one of the best subject lines that you've recently received, where you're like, "Hell, yeah, I'm opening that email, and I know it's a pitch."?

[00:05:58] MM: Yes. The best one I've seen recently is why late stage layoffs mean hiring opportunities for early stage startups.

[00:06:06] BB: Oh, that was the whole line.

[00:06:08] MM: Yeah, that was the whole thing. It's right to the point. Yes. Now, I had recently, not too long ago, wrote a story generally along those lines. So it was not relevant to what I'm working on now, but I really liked that it's short. It's concise. It gets straight to the point. If I happen to have been working on a story about that right now, that's definitely something that I would have immediately identified as something that might be helpful to me.

[00:06:32] BB: Got it. So for that situation, which is a common pitch, "Hey, reporter. Yes. I saw you did a story, and I have something that's really similar to that." You're like, "Yeah, cool. I already did that." Did you save it? Did you like put it in your little like let me come back to it? Because you said like, "Okay, cool. Yeah, that was a good pitch." But what are you going to do about it? Come back to it maybe at some point?

[00:06:54] MM: Probably not. I think in this case, it had been so – I appreciate the technique. I'll say that. It had been – I'd probably write about one story every week or two. Given out recently, I'd written about that. It seems unlikely that I'll be reading that story for a very long time again, and so that point is **[inaudible 00:07:13]**. But I like the technique.

[00:07:17] BB: All right. Okay. We like the technique. So timing is everything, as usual with a lot of these things. Okay. Mark, do you have, if you had to have, three elements of a great pitch? So you got past the subject line. What's a great pitch for you?

[00:07:32] MM: Concision is definitely key. Purposefulness, so getting to the point immediately. I think that the pitches I like most are the ones that don't do any of the like, "Hey, how's it going?"

[00:07:44] BB: "Did you have a good Fourth? I hope it was great. How are you doing? Yeah, maybe someday. Yeah."

[00:07:50] MM: It doesn't bother me that much. I understand the spirit behind it. But the dream pitch email for me is something that's first sentence immediately explains to me what is happening and why I should be interested in it. It has few words as possible. Concision,

purposefulness, and then the third will be relevance, which, honestly, is hard because I think at The Information, we're obviously trying to write about the major themes in the tech world.

But we also try to go a little bit more off the beaten path and try to kind of find the stories that other people are telling. So the relevance point, I realized that I think it's probably rather difficult when consuming information relative to other publications because it's very difficult for someone to guess what I'm working at any given moment.

[00:08:31] BB: Very true. Okay. These are the elements. By the way, is that like three sentence max do you want this in? I know some people have like, "I better see that in like three sentences, and I don't read anymore."? Or are you particular about your sentence count?

[00:08:44] MM: I don't know if I have a particular sentence count. I'll be frank. I might be the wrong person for this podcast. I very rarely open pitch emails because I think part of it is because, as I mentioned, I usually won't open them, unless I'm working on something directly related to them. Given that I'm probably not working on the thing that they're sending all the emails about, I generally have enough to do in the day that I –

It would probably be better of me to be more responsive. But usually in the morning, I'm like, "All right, I've got like seven things I want to read, 40 things I want to respond to. I've got to sort of figure it all out."

[00:09:17] BB: Yeah. You're kind of slammed. You're busy. Yeah. Okay. This is good. So for any of your recent stories, Mark, now a lot of them have been layoffs, and they're like big, big company layoffs like Tesla. A couple in Tesla, I'm sure you're busy with them. Okay. Bird scooters, all this, PayPal laying off, laying off. Like that's the thing of the day, Coinbase. Assuming not those, okay? Those are like hard news. Oh, well. They laid off 20% of their staff. Do you have any stories, though, of late where you're like, "Oh, that did actually come from a pitch. Thank you so much."?

[00:09:48] MM: No.

[00:09:52] BB: That's okay. That's okay.

[00:09:54] MM: It's nothing from a pitch. I actually did find someone through **[inaudible 00:09:59]**, the website.

[00:09:59] BB: Oh, yeah. That little portal, yeah.

[00:10:03] MM: So I've been trying to interview as many chief people officers at **[inaudible 00:10:07]** tech companies I can. I had noticed that Databricks' chief people officer was. I think I just did a search of people officer. I noticed that she was on **[inaudible 00:10:15]**, which suggested that she might be interested in an interview. Well, not quite from a pitch. I did do my initial reach out because I saw it in a sort of a PR-oriented –

[00:10:26] BB: I see. Okay. Mark, this is where you can be deadpanned honest. So this is the point and this is the place, so I love this. Okay. Then exclusives or embargoes, do you care? Do you ever use them?

[00:10:39] MM: Not really. I mean, I don't really mind if something is embargoed. It's very rare that information that is embargoed from a PR person is something I'd want to get up in the next 24 hours. I would imagine, usually, if I'm using something from an embargo, I probably have at least a couple of days or a week before I will need to publish whatever I'm publishing. So I don't particularly care too much either way when it comes to embargoes.

[BREAK]

[00:11:07] 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]

[00:11:31] BB: Given what you've recently covered, I'm sure no one's saying, "Hey, Mark. I got an exclusive on how we laid off 27% of our staff." So are exclusives just not even like on your radar?

[00:11:41] MM: Not really. If someone were – I guess the kind of publishing bar for The Information is really high. So if someone were to offer an exclusive that was compelling to me and my editors and met that bar, great. But I think that's probably kind of hard to do.

[00:11:56] BB: Yeah. Then it's something with The Information. It's not a breaking news place. It's not for that necessarily, so more deeper reporting type of pieces. Investigative is more the jam.

[00:12:08] MM: Yes, exactly.

[00:12:09] BB: Cool. Okay. We talked about subject lines, Mark. We talked about the exclusive stuff. What about just building a relationship with you? Let's say I am a chief people officer. You are a great reporter in my tech industry. How would you approach making a relationship with you, especially in this day and age?

[00:12:26] MM: I generally am the one driving reach outs. This is probably something I can get better about. But there's so many people I actually want to talk to that I – Basically, all of my sort of source building time, whether it's on the record experts or people who are talking to me through back channels, I kind of devote all of my time on that to talking to people I've reached out and recommended to be my sources.

But one source or expert that's very valuable is I do like having sort of on the record experts that know what they're talking about and that I can turn to when I need a certain kind of voice to the story. So I guess I would say being available. Also, this something I don't run into a lot. But also, honest when you're not – Don't feel like you're kind of qualified or the right person to comment on a particular story.

People are almost always good about this, but there have been a couple of times in the past where I've reached out to someone who looks like based on what they were doing or what their

business did that they might be a good person to comment on something I'm writing about. Then it's immediately clear once I get the phone that they have no idea what I'm talking about **[inaudible 00:13:31]**.

I totally get that. Like I don't begrudge that at all. But just from my perspective, it makes me a little less likely to reach out in the future because I'm thinking I don't know if I'm reaching out about something. I don't know if they're going to be frank about whether they're the right person to talk about this.

[00:13:47] BB: Oh. Now, this is a good insight because if you have that person who's like, "I'm just trying to get my damn quote in, so I'll say whatever the hell I want to try to finagle some fluff piece into the piece," that actually basically gets you a demerit on your list.

[00:14:01] MM: Yeah, yeah. A little bit. Thankfully it happens very rarely. But, I mean –

[00:14:04] BB: Oh, that's good.

[00:14:05] MM: If someone doesn't think they're the right person, I'm always fine with it. Hey, I don't think I'm the right person for this, but here are things I would like to talk about or keep in mind and, obviously, people in mind.

[00:14:17] BB: Got it. Okay. So now, that's a little bit of a pivot, and we've talked with a handful of reporters here on just becoming that resource on the shortlist, basically. How does one then – You alluded to it a little bit, Mark, of like, "Oh. Well, you're doing a bunch of the reach out." So is it in becoming a trustful resource for you? Is it consistency of response? Is it you give me good quotes? You say, "Hey, nope. I'm not the person to speak to that. But I can send you to so-and-so. I don't know." How do people get on your shortlist of being a resource for you?

[00:14:51] MM: I would say quality of insight is number one. I don't particularly care about quotes, per se. They're nice to have, but I would much rather paraphrase something thing that is I think very thoughtful and precise and sheds light on something. **[inaudible 00:15:05]**. So definitely quality and depth of insight is key.

[00:15:09] BB: Depth of insight. Okay.

[00:15:10] MM: If you say something, being able to explain why you picked that is very helpful. So that's by far number one. Id' say number two is availability or, yeah, I guess –

[00:15:20] BB: Speed perhaps.

[00:15:22] MM: Speed, actually not quite as much here because I usually will have at least a couple of days or a week to do reporting it. Definitely, it's better to be available quickly than not. But if I'm reaching out to someone, I will usually have at least three business days after that in which to complete interviews. So I would say just generally being available and responsive.

[00:15:47] BB: Cool. Okay. This is good. Okay, Mark, I have a little fill in the blank part. Let's see what your answers are. Are you ready?

[00:15:54] MM: Yes.

[00:15:55] BB: My favorite sources always –

[00:15:57] MM: Give me tips that could lead to scoops or interesting features.

[00:16:02] BB: Okay. You'll never get a response from me if –

[00:16:06] MM: Your email isn't relevant to my beats.

[00:16:08] BB: Yeah. Have you gotten – By the way, what's like the most off email you have gotten of a pitch like, “Hey, I'm from supply chain management company so-and so.” I don't know.

[00:16:20] MM: I got a number of those. They sort of don't really register in my brain. But let's see. Let me go through what I have right now. Here's one that isn't super, and it makes sense. They cover transportation. “Tactical fleet sponsors mammoth invitational.”

[00:16:36] **BB:** Oh, god. That's horrible.

[00:16:40] **MM:** Yeah.

[00:16:41] **BB:** Oh, god. Yeah. Okay. Perfect illustration. Thank you for pulling up a live example. We love that. Okay. The appropriate amount of lead time for a story is –

[00:16:50] **MM:** I would say a week or so. I usually have around at least two weeks, not always. But if it's a story that's not coming together very quickly, like a scoop or something like that, usually have at least a week.

[00:17:01] **BB:** Okay. Okay. At least a week. And my favorite stories to write are –

[00:17:06] **MM:** Inside looks at companies and the people behind them.

[00:17:09] **BB:** Okay. Very good. Okay. Now, Mark, what are you reading, watching, consuming, listening to, basically anywhere else you get stories from? What you got?

[00:17:20] **MM:** In terms of what I read, like if it's work-related, I read all the standard big business publication as The Journal, Bloomberg, The New York Times, Insider. That's the standard roster of business publications. Outside of that, in my free time, I'll definitely read some of that as well.

I'll read – I also love the kind of standard big name magazines, New Yorker, the Atlantic, York Magazine. Books-wise, I've been reading largely nonfiction for the last like year or so for whatever reason. I used to split fiction and nonfiction –

[00:17:55] **BB:** Me too. That's what I usually do, 50-50. But nonfiction huh? Okay.

[00:18:00] **MM:** I'm getting back into it. So for whatever reason, I just didn't have much of an interest in fiction for reasons that I don't understand, just like something I can't explain. But I've just started getting back into fiction recently, which is exciting. I found – For whatever reason,

my desire to read it is back. So that's good. I've started reading this book of short stories by Alice Munro of *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*.

[00:18:24] BB: Hateship. Oh, wow. Wow. Okay. Oh, I see it right here. Okay. Loveship, Marriage. Wow. Do you like it? Oh, it's not available on Audible. Damn. Okay.

[00:18:34] MM: Yeah, I really like it so far. So I'd read this because I had come across a famous short story of hers that was in the New Yorker a while ago. **[inaudible 00:18:41]** is published before I read New Yorker, but it's called **[inaudible 00:18:45]**, and it was like maybe the best, like most devastating short story I've ever read, so – I need to read more of this.

[00:18:52] BB: Oh, my. Wow. Wow. A devastating story, and you were like, “Yes, more please.”

[00:18:58] MM: Yes. Devastating. Very emotional involving and extremely well written.

[00:19:03] BB: That's hard in a short story to like get so into it. Damn. Now, you're – Okay. This is why I love this question because everything I've now consumed and watched and listen to has been from the show. By the way, that's my hack. Okay, good. Anything else? Are you watching anything? What you got?

[00:19:18] MM: Yeah. So one more recommendation on the watching. So I just recently started the third season of Atlanta. That had been sitting around for a while. I just watched the first episode last night, and it was spectacular. So that's another recommendation.

[00:19:32] BB: What's it on?

[00:19:33] MM: FX. But it's streaming on Hulu.

[00:19:36] BB: Oh, it's on Hulu. Okay. Okay. Great. Atlanta. Okay, cool. All right. It's a comedy drama. Oh, that's good. It's three seasons. You know what I can't stand? When you're like, “Damn, it's good. But it's only one season. What am I going to do now?” You know what I mean? You're like, “Ah, so disappointing.”

[00:19:55] MM: Aactually I generally tend to have the opposite problem more often. I'm the kind of person, if I start a show and watch enough of it, I have this urge to watch the entire thing. I find that there are a number of **[inaudible 00:20:07]** that I like that either ended at a good place or just kind of – Then restarted and sort of kept going on forever.

I recently was catching up with Curb Your Enthusiasm, which I love, especially the original run. But it's at a certain point. Of all these shows, I can't think of any shows that have been really great after nine seasons, and I feel like – In sort of the streaming age now, I feel like given the amount of money that people are throwing at these established properties, I find my problem was too many shows that I like.

[00:20:36] BB: It's very interesting.

[00:20:39] BB: Yeah. Where they pick up pieces that are like, “Wow, that was from long time ago, and you're paying that price. Wow.” I don't get – There must be some – Someone's job is calculating the math on that. I like the value of a show that's 20 years old or 13 years or whatever. Anyway, really interesting. Okay. Mark, maybe as a transition, what do you think the future of journalism is?

[00:21:00] MM: I think it's definitely becoming more relatively – The key word is relatively more stable than it's been over the last, say, 10 to 15 years. I initially first wanted to get into journalism. Initially, I originally wanted to be a movie critic. That's a different story. But when I first became interested in journalism broadly was around like '07, '08, when the bottom was sort of falling out.

[00:21:24] BB: Yeah, I was there.

[00:21:27] MM: My timing ended up being very fortuitous because I kind of graduated college right around the time. I think things started to kind of stabilize a little bit, at least within business journalism. I've definitely felt a major improvement since '08, '09, at least in terms of my following it. It seems like the industry is starting to kind of figure out the right balance between advertising-based revenue models and subscription-based models.

I'm also lucky to be in business journalism, which I think generally has an easier time making money and other kinds of journalism because there's, I would imagine, always going to be a number of people who are willing to pay for exclusive or novel information about what's going on with them and their competition. So I think that helps us well.

But I also know that there are I think particularly people who work for newspapers, who are excellent reporters for decades. But for whatever reason, their skill sets isn't seen as valuable by a lot of media companies now. So I realized it's not the case for everyone, and I realize a lot of people who are struggling for reasons that are out of their control.

But I think broadly, it seems like things are becoming relatively more stable, which makes me broadly optimistic.

[00:22:38] BB: Broadly optimistic. I think that's the way to go. It's never boring. What a time of how it's evolved. I now doing this for a little while, a couple of conversations were, oh, about all the sub stacks. Oh, that's changing. Then, oh, local media has gone away. Like, oh, but then there's so many – The Information is a great example of niche subscription-based journalism that is deeply valued, that is growing, that is hiring, all this stuff. It's really something. What a time. What a time, Mark. That's all I could say.

[00:23:08] MM: Indeed.

[00:23:09] BB: Wow. Well, Mark, thank you for being on today. We've so enjoyed it. Mark Matousek, thank you so much for being here. Reporter from The Information. Check it out, everybody. Send him some good information that is good sources, not annoying. Check out that subject line example. I'm going to go back and think about that, Mark. That was great.

[00:23:30] MM: Well, thanks, Beck, for having me. I appreciate it.

[00:23:32] BB: I appreciate it. Thanks, Mark. See yah.

[00:23:34] MM: Take care.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:23:37] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Mark Matousek from The Information. 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]