

EPISODE 133

[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 who write topics including technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science, consumer products, business news, and beauty and wellness. We discuss the type of stories they cover, their thoughts on exclusives and embargoes, their favorite pitches, 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 Ben Bergman from Insider. Ben is a Senior Correspondent at Insider, covering venture capital and startups. During the episode, Ben talks about why he's working with familiar sources, the correlation between subject lines and headlines, advice for tying your pitch to recent stories, and more. Let's hear from Ben now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:13] B. BAMBERGER: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. Hopefully, you're here because you want to hear from a journalist. Maybe you're doing some publicity or some PR. You're a publicist, and that is the reason for this show. So we hear directly and live from our great publicists. Well, actually, our great media friends, hopefully, listened to by publicists. So we understand how to have better relationships with reporters in media. That's the whole why of why we started this little show.

I also started this OnePitch, this whole thing, because I wanted a way for more publicists to get to better relationships with journalists. I also run an agency named BAM, where we work with all venture-backed technology companies, and that's why we're here. By the way, I'm Beck Bamberger, and with us today is Ben Bergman, also another BB. I'm noticing on the screen that it says BB, is talking to BB. I love it.

Ben coming to us live from, actually, Seattle on a beautiful day it looks like. Ben Bergman is the Senior Correspondent now of all the VC and startup landscapes at Insider. Welcome, Ben, from sunny Seattle, shockingly.

[00:02:22] B. BERGMAN: So good to be here. Seattle's beautiful in the summer. Make sure to come in the summer. December, January, it's a different story, but nothing better than a Northwest day.

[00:02:31] B. BAMBERGER: Oh, yeah. With the trees and the pines. Well, Ben, thank you, again, for being here. I know we work with you at BAM. I know you. You've been to some of our things we've done. So hi, hi, hi. Real quick, I like to now ask at the top, just to orient the focus on the outlet. What does Insider cover, previously known as Business Insider?

[00:02:52] B. BERGMAN: As their name suggests, it's quite insider. So we are trying to talk about the things that people are talking about inside these companies. We're trying to appeal to readers who are smart people, who are interested in what's going on inside startups and tech companies, but also employees inside the companies themselves, and also the investors and the founders and executives.

I think we're going to do, as our name suggests, stories that are a lot more granular than you'd see in the New York Times or Wall Street Journal or other business tech publications. But our stories about how people are doing, who's up, who's down do really well. Our stories about money, who's raising, how much people are making, how people can make more money are always very popular.

[00:03:42] B. BAMBERGER: If you like the venture capital space, man, is Ben your guy.

[00:03:46] B. BERGMAN: You're too kind.

[00:03:47] B. BAMBERGER: This is the guy. This is a guy. Okay, Ben, your inbox, how crazy is it in there?

[00:03:53] **B. BERGMAN:** I'm scared to look, but I have to every morning, of course, and I look at it. But, yeah, it's a scary thing because there's just a ton of inbound, as they say, that comes in. I have to look at it all because there's things that come in that are not just spam but are really important to look at. Then there's, as you might expect, a ton of pitches.

[00:04:16] **B. BAMBERGER:** Yes. So how many pitches are we talking a day?

[00:04:18] **B. BERGMAN:** I would say I probably get about 50 pitches a day.

[00:04:23] **B. BAMBERGER:** Oh, only 50. I don't think that's that horrible. I've heard worse. Okay, 50. But like 50 legit pitches or 50 – Some including spray and pray ones.

[00:04:32] **B. BERGMAN:** I think a lot of those are spray and pray.

[00:04:35] **B. BAMBERGER:** Oh, interesting. Okay.

[00:04:36] **B. BERGMAN:** Maybe I've like filtered out the other ones by now. But, yeah, it's probably – Then maybe like 20 that are more like actually really targeted to me and what I do.

[00:04:47] **B. BAMBERGER:** That's kind of a low percentage. Not good. What do you do with the pitches that are like, okay, not a fit? Do you just delete?

[00:04:54] **B. BERGMAN:** Yeah. I delete them or just go on to the next one. I mean, I try to like, when I wake up in the morning, very quick – Because that's when most of the stuff comes in, especially since I'm on the West Coast. But I very quickly go through everything and, honestly, a lot of times will like not even make it past like the subject head because a lot of the stuff I get isn't relevant to what I cover. So I can pretty quickly dispense with that.

We have a pretty narrow focus here, and one of the overriding things about what I do and a lot of us do at Insider is everything I do is behind the pay wall. So it has to be something that people can't get anywhere else. We have to have a very clear idea about what our readers are interested in. So we don't do a lot of the other stuff I think publications do because we know our readers just aren't into that.

[00:05:53] **B. BAMBERGER:** You've got some salacious headlines too, by the way, Ben. Like for example –

[00:05:59] **B. BERGMAN:** I don't know about you.

[00:05:59] **B. BAMBERGER:** Yeah, I know.

[00:06:00] **B. BERGMAN:** We prefer the word salacious.

[00:06:02] **B. BAMBERGER:** Maybe salacious.

[00:06:02] **B. BERGMAN:** Impactful.

[00:06:03] **B. BAMBERGER:** But eye-catching, impactful, where you're like, "Holy cow." Like, "I want to read all of the – I have read many but like this. But new Walking Dead. Over 1,000 venture funds were formed in the past four years. Now, many could turn into zombies as LP fundraising dries up." Like, "Oh, God." Quote another one. It felt like the Black Mirror episode, the inside account of how Bird laid off 406 people in two minutes via a Zoom webinar. Oh, man. Anybody who's like, "Oh, what's venture capital like," yeah, you got to read up on Ben's stuff.

Okay, back to the inbox. Let's focus. Let's focus. What are some of the best subject lines you received like even today or that stand out in your memory?

[00:06:44] **B. BERGMAN:** Yeah. Well, I think, first of all, I mean, it's, in some ways, not about the subject line. But I was trying to think about like I almost never do like fundraising stories. But I've done two in the past two weeks or even this week. I had one today, and I think that was because I had a relationship with the people and like you. I know them, and they've been helpful, and I know that they send me stuff that is good and that is more targeted. So that's a lot of it. It's like, "Oh, I know this person," and it's a specific reason why I'm doing it.

But I think the best pitches, as you notice, like we're very into the headlines here. When we're pitching stories internally, a lot of it is like, "Okay, just write me the headline." Because if you

don't have a good headline and you can't sell your story in a headline, then you probably don't have a good story. So if I see like a pitch that has like something that I would see as a good headline for us, then I'm going to be a lot more likely to read that.

[00:07:52] B. BAMBERGER: So write your subject line like the headline.

[00:07:54] B. BERGMAN: Yes, yes.

[00:07:55] B. BAMBERGER: Yeah. Interesting approach. Okay. Are there three aspects you love or want to see in every pitch, Ben?

[00:08:04] B. BERGMAN: Yeah. I mean, I would say the main things to include are why it's important and also like who we can talk to. A lot of times, people will be like, "Okay. Like this company that Jason Calacanis backed raised such and such." I'm like, "Okay, great. Well, can I talk to Jason?" They're like, "Oh, no. He's not actually available." So I want to know like who's behind it but also like who they're offering and what's available.

Then also, want to know like the timing, like when is this happening, and as much like numbers and information about – Because I'm writing about deals a lot of times, so want to have like that as – But the numbers aren't enough. There has to be, for us, like an interesting and compelling story there that's not going to be told elsewhere.

[00:08:55] B. BAMBERGER: Okay. What else in the pitch, if ideally? Any like bonus like, "Ooh. When I see a pitch and it links the presskit." It really wins you over.

[00:09:05] B. BERGMAN: Well, I think it's like when people are like, "Oh. Well, you've reported on –" They can pretty easily see what I've done because everything is on my author page, and I tweet every story. So hopefully, you have like – It's helpful, I think, if you have a sense of like what kind of stories I can do and if you can genuinely say, "Okay, I saw you did this story about like employees being shortchanged on their startup options. Here's like another twist on that." Or, "I saw a story about like zombie VC funds. Here's a new take on that or someone else you should talk to." I think that's always like very helpful.

A lot of times, people try to do that, and it doesn't actually have any connection to stories I've done, and they'll be like, "I saw you did this story on VC funds drying up. Here's a story about a SaaS company raising \$12 million." It doesn't really connect, and we can like pretty easily see through that. I appreciate the attempt. But if you can actually like tie it to like stories we've done, I think that's very helpful.

[00:10:11] B. BAMBERGER: Yeah. Got you.

[BREAK]

[00:10:14] 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]

[00:10:38] B. BAMBERGER: Ben, you do have some stories on here that are exclusives. So I believe you do like exclusives, but tell us about your preference for exclusives versus embargoes or whatnot.

[00:10:50] B. BERGMAN: Well, yeah. I mean, it's a funny thing because, yeah, I mean, if we're going to do fundraising, which we don't do very much, just because, as I said, we're very metrics-driven, and we can see our readers are not really interested in that. But if we do it, it definitely has to be an exclusive, so we're not really going to do it otherwise.

But even if we get offered an exclusive, which we do a lot, we pass on the vast majority of those. But if we do it, having the exclusive and the embargo is helpful so that we have enough time to plan and to do the interviews and to write the story. If someone says, "Okay, we're giving you an embargo until tomorrow," that's not very helpful.

[00:11:34] **B. BAMBERGER:** Ideally, how much time would you want ahead of an explosive? Like, yes, I want the exclusive. How much time?

[00:11:41] **B. BERGMAN:** I think probably for like a just like fundraising one, probably about like maybe a week would be good.

[00:11:49] **B. BAMBERGER:** Okay. It's not too long. Okay. Yeah.

[00:11:52] **B. BERGMAN:** Yeah. I mean, we don't want like too long.

[00:11:54] **B. BAMBERGER:** Yeah, yeah. Of course.

[00:11:56] **B. BERGMAN:** But something maybe like a little bit more bigger or something. Maybe longer, but I think about a week is good.

[00:12:03] **B. BAMBERGER:** Okay. I like that. Ben, you mentioned earlier a couple of pieces you recently did because you knew the founders. They were helpful. You had a relationship in place. How does anyone build a relationship with you, especially when you're hanging out in sunny Seattle?

[00:12:18] **B. BERGMAN:** Well, actually, the relationships were with the PR people. They were not with the –

[00:12:22] **B. BAMBERGER:** Oh, okay. Okay.

[00:12:24] **B. BERGMAN:** I tell that it's inspiration, so yes.

[00:12:25] **B. BAMBERGER:** Been better. Let's hope. Let's hope.

[00:12:27] **B. BERGMAN:** I mean, there's a lot of great PR people who are helpful to me and, hopefully, some mutually beneficial to me. But, yeah, I'd say like meeting people at conferences like yours and all sorts of other things. I could go into Code Conference next week. I was just at like LA Tech Week, so always like seeing people in person is helpful.

But, yeah, it's also just about like providing like a mutually beneficial thing. I mean, obviously, we all have like – Our interests are not completely aligned, and we're looking for, I think, sometimes like different stuff. But I think there's overlap there, and that's what we can do it. I think especially if like people can be helpful on other stories that maybe they're not like as excited to pitch. But if I'm like asking for like some sort of comment or for some interview for like a story I'm working on, and then someone comes back and like pitches me something, I'm going to definitely be more likely to like be receptive to that than if I've like never worked with them before or if they've been like unhelpful for another story I've been working on.

[00:13:37] B. BAMBERGER: How would you define unhelpful?

[00:13:39] B. BERGMAN: Well, just I spend the bulk of my time doing like tech investigations and longer term stories. So if I'm like asking to like speak to someone – This happened recently with someone who was like pitching me a tech founder, and I was like, “Okay, I really want to talk to them for this story.” They're like, “No, you can't.” It's not the stories even about them or going to reflect poorly on them, but I just wanted to like speak to them, and they wouldn't. So I'm just saying that it's like we sort of remember if someone is like helpful in those situations where we're doing those kinds of stories.

[00:14:19] B. BAMBERGER: Noted, noted. And speed, I also hear often, is so helpful. Not –

[00:14:25] B. BERGMAN: Yeah. I mean, I've reached like – Yes. I mean, I reached out to like seven companies yesterday, just for what I thought was like pretty simple query. One of them got back to me very quickly. I was like, “You are the best.” Like, “Thank you.” They were like, “Just comment on the background.” But I was like, “This is super helpful. The other six like have still not responded.” So that one, I'm like there's a special place in heaven for PR people like that, who are able to just respond quickly and accurately.

[00:14:58] B. BAMBERGER: So good. Okay. Ben, I have a fun fill in the blank section here. Are you ready?

[00:15:05] B. BERGMAN: I'm ready.

[00:15:05] **B. BAMBERGER:** Are you ready? Okay. Here we go. My favorite sources always –

[00:15:10] **B. BERGMAN:** Tell me something I haven't heard before.

[00:15:14] **B. BAMBERGER:** You will never get a response from me if –

[00:15:16] **B. BERGMAN:** You are just spraying and praying.

[00:15:21] **B. BAMBERGER:** Yes. You can follow up with me if –

[00:15:24] **B. BERGMAN:** If you haven't heard from me. I would say it's okay to politely follow up in like two or three days.

[00:15:33] **B. BAMBERGER:** The appropriate amount of lead time for a story is – We covered that but just in general for you.

[00:15:39] **B. BERGMAN:** About a week.

[00:15:39] **B. BAMBERGER:** About a week. And my favorite stories to write are –

[00:15:43] **B. BERGMAN:** Are stories that are uncovering something that has not been covered before or something that people are talking about and kind of know is there. Kind of know but has never been written about publicly.

[00:15:58] **B. BAMBERGER:** Okay. That's a pretty good list. I hope everyone's paying attention, so we know. Okay, Ben. Totally unrelated but we like to ask all journalists because since your consummate story consumers and writers, you must also enjoy stories, we imagine. So are there any podcasts, Netflix series, stories, books? We'll take anything that you're loving and reading right now.

[00:16:23] **B. BERGMAN:** Yes. I mean, I really like Land of the Giants. My friends at [inaudible 00:16:28], and I'm always learning stuff from that. I would say I really loved WeCrashed, and I loved The Dropout. I just finished The Staircase.

[00:16:41] **B. BAMBERGER:** How was The Staircase?

[00:16:42] **B. BERGMAN:** Don't watch it at night. But, no, it's very good.

[00:16:44] **B. BAMBERGER:** Okay. That's what I heard. That's what I heard. Okay. Yeah. Miniseries.

[00:16:46] **B. BERGMAN:** It's great. Colin Firth and everyone and Toni Collette are also great.

[00:16:50] **B. BAMBERGER:** Another –

[00:16:51] **B. BERGMAN:** Yes.

[00:16:52] **B. BAMBERGER:** Another true crime one, by the way.

[00:16:53] **B. BERGMAN:** It is. Yes.

[00:16:54] **B. BAMBERGER:** This is another one that someone else just mentioned a true crime just earlier on the other recording, so yeah.

[00:16:59] **B. BERGMAN:** Then I would say also a little closer to what we do is industry.

[00:17:04] **B. BAMBERGER:** Oh, yes. I've been in just two.

[00:17:07] **B. BERGMAN:** I like that a lot.

[00:17:09] **B. BAMBERGER:** Yes, yes, yes, yes. Gosh. Ben, this is good. Thank you for telling us. I hear the sirens in the background, so we will wrap this up. Ben, what do you think is the future of journalism?

[00:17:19] B. BERGMAN: I mean, look. I would be a richer man if I knew exactly that. But I think it is becoming like more specialized, and you see like reporters who are knowing more for like what they do than like the outlet they work at, with like a lot of people who've gone to like Substack and other places in that regard and have more of like their brand than like a brand. Just the New York Times was still like a great brand, per se.

I think like a lot of other things, it's just becoming more narrow, very specialized. I think that is – There's so much out there, which is great. I mean, and there's actually so much great tech journalism right now. So I think you'll probably –

[00:18:07] B. BAMBERGER: There is a lot, for sure. It's a growing field.

[00:18:08] B. BERGMAN: Yes. So it's a little overwhelming, but it has to be really good.

[00:18:12] B. BAMBERGER: I agree. Yes.

[00:18:13] B. BERGMAN: To stand out from the pack. So hopefully, you will see more great journalism and more people paying for great journalism to sustain it.

[00:18:23] B. BAMBERGER: I hope so too, Ben, because then who else will I bug, like you? So this is good. Ben Bergman, thank you for being here. If anyone wants to know about all things VC, Ben is your person. As I said, he's Senior Correspondent at Insider, covering all the crazy shenanigans of tech and beyond. Thank you, Ben. Thanks for hanging out for a little bit.

[00:18:45] B. BERGMAN: Thanks so much. Happy to do it anytime.

[00:18:47] B. BAMBERGER: Enjoy that sunny, sunny Seattle. I love it. What an endorsement. I saw a little video of it that you earlier showed me, so I believe it. I believe it for real. Awesome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:19:00] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Ben Bergman from Insider. Make sure to subscribe for new episode updates on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. And if you have a moment, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts to share your thoughts about the show and today's guest.

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[END]