

EPISODE 161**[INTRODUCTION]**

[0:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this weeks' episode of Coffee with a Journalist, brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious how OnePitch can help you find relevant journalists to pitch, including some of the guests on this podcast? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn more. Our guest this week on Coffee with a Journalist is Russell Contreras. Russell is the Senior Race and Justice Reporter at Axios, where he covers the policies and agencies at the heart of the administration of justice and how it impacts people of color. During the episode, Russell talks about practicing brevity in pitches, how and what to pitch when it comes to embargoes and exclusives, why you shouldn't pitch him local news, and more. Let's hear from Russell now.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:59] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. Hopefully, you're here to hear about what journalists like, because that's what we cover here. I'm Beck Bamberger. Today with us, ooh, I'm excited about this, because Russell, this is the first person that actually I've talked to that has this fabulous title, Senior Race and Justice Reporter at Axios. Today with us, Russell Contreras is with us. Hi, Russell.

[0:01:25] RC: Thanks for having me, Beck. Appreciate it.

[0:01:27] BB: Yes. Sir, how did you get this fabulous title for race and justice reporter? This is a new one.

[0:01:34] RC: Well, covering race and justice became something that a lot of media outlets were looking for.

[0:01:39] BB: Yes.

[0:01:40] RC: After the death of George Floyd. Covering race and ethnicity and minority affairs as it used to be called, it's something I started almost immediately getting into this field of journalism. When I got one of my first jobs at the Conroe Courier in outside of Houston, Texas, I was covering a county beat. One of the things that the then editor asked me to do was to develop what they called a minority affairs beat, sub-beat. Because the county north of Houston was growing at such a rapid pace, they were having a large number of Hispanic residents move to the area and they didn't know how to cover them, how to respond to them, what their needs were, and they didn't want to miss stories.

This county also had a historic black population that had been ignored for decades. The editor said, "Let's come up ways, creative ways to try to get them into stories. Just tell their stories. Tell them what's going on. If you could do that, I think this could really expand our readership, not just in the newspaper, but overall." It made good moral sense, but also, made good business sense.

Ever since then, whenever I went to a beat, that was always on my mind, to look for populations that were underserved and cover them. What I found that it became very easy, because there was always a gold mine of stories to be mined.

[0:03:00] BB: Oh, yes.

[0:03:00] RC: You can go up there, whether it was covering education in Albuquerque, New Mexico, or covering towns in northern Massachusetts, I would find that there were populations media outlets has just ignored. If you spent time with them, they had stories to tell.

[0:03:16] BB: Mm-hmm. You've found no dearth of stories, it sounds like.

[0:03:20] RC: Absolutely. One of the things I looked at when I was, say, at the Boston Globe, I covered one town called Lawrence, Massachusetts. It's right at the border of Massachusetts and New Hampshire. The town, or the city was 80% Latino. Mostly Dominican and Puerto Rican. When you tell people that, it throws them off, because here's the town in the middle of the heart of New England that's majority minority. In fact, it's all Hispanic. What's going on here? How did this happen?

At the time, this was 2005, it was 80% Latino, but they had yet to have a Latino mayor. They had Latino city counselors, but they didn't have someone who was elected a Latino mayor of this town. How can this happen? Then the series of stories of how this happened in terms of discrimination, in terms of infighting. Then later on, as I was covering it, they did elect the first Latino mayor. It was the first Latino mayor elected in Massachusetts and then the new mayor became a historic story.

[0:04:19] BB: This is unique, Russell, because of course, on the show, we talk about pitches and what bugs you about publicists and such. I wonder how your answer is going to be for this. Do you get a lot of pitches?

[0:04:30] RC: Oh, I get a ton of pitches every day.

[0:04:31] BB: Really?

[0:04:32] RC: I wake up in the morning, it doesn't matter if it's the weekend, a Friday. Even on holidays, I'll look at, my inboxes flow with pitches.

[0:04:40] BB: Okay. Then how do you organize such pitches?

[0:04:43] RC: Well, I immediately go in and I try to empty my inbox as fast as I can. If there's pitches that have nothing to do with my beat, they have nothing to do with me, or nothing to do with my coverage area, I immediately delete them. Most of the time, because I've got a lot of stories on my plate, if they're mass pitches where they've pitched a lot of different reporters, and I could tell they changed the font where they say, "Dear," and then it's my name. My name is a different font, I'm going to delete that. That doesn't work. I know it's easier for those sending those pitches, but if it's not a personal message to me when they know what I'm covering, then I immediately delete them.

[0:05:22] BB: Yes. Okay.

[0:05:23] RC: I usually keep the government pitches, like say, the ones coming from the Census Bureau, because they're hitting up a number of reporters and that's usually information that needs to get out.

[0:05:31] BB: Well, and it's the government. Yes, yes.

[0:05:34] RC: Exactly.

[0:05:35] BB: What I'm hearing, though, is you open every pitch.

[0:05:38] RC: Exactly. I look through everyone. I open up. In Axios, we really pride ourselves on the smart brevity. I wish that a lot of PR professionals would read a book by our founders called *Smart Brevity*, and it's by Jim VandeHei and Mike Allen, where they talk about ways how Axios writes in smart brevity, but how you as a business, you as a communicator can use smart brevity to get your message across faster. If I get a pitch with a long anecdote before with the pitch buried deep in, more likely, that's going to get deleted.

If I get a pitch where it immediately tells me, "Oh, this is the pitch. This is what about. This is why it's in your coverage area," 80% more likely to consider it and read through it. If it's a long thing – if I have to scroll through your pitch at least twice, more likely, I'm going to delete it, because it's too many words.

[0:06:34] BB: Yeah, it's too much. Yeah. That's a good point for anyone who's not familiar with Axios, which I'll ask you about in just a second, Russell. The style of it is quite distinct. In bullet points. It's not long-form paragraphs. That said, how would you describe the style and what Axios completely covers, because it's quite different?

[0:06:52] RC: Smart brevity, if you think about it, if anybody has taken a journalism course, even if you're a PR professional and you think back in college and you took journalism courses on how you construct a story, think of it as the basics. When you first learn how to write stories, you put your stories in the outline format, and then you filled in the blanks with the meat. Think of it as that. It's like an outline, but it's designed for you to be read on mobile devices. The smart

brevity is basically a lead, what the news is, and then a bulletin point on why it matters. You're reading this, why does this matter? Why do I need to keep continue reading the story?

We explain to you as overt as we can. Then you scroll through and say, here's the details, here's the state of play, zoom in, zoom out, here's between the lines. Let's explain a little bit more, what are they saying? Here's some quotes and then you're out. In that format –

[0:07:48] BB: You're out. Yeah.

[0:07:48] RC: Yeah. Before you can even go forth, if you read the lead and the why it matters, there's a little nugget right at the end right there. It says, if you want to continue, it's about a one minute read, or a two-minute read.

[0:08:00] BB: Yes, yes.

[0:08:01] RC: We're very cognizant of your time. Everybody's busy.

[0:08:05] BB: Everybody is.

[0:08:06] RC: Yeah, you're going through your social media feed. You need to get back to your TikTok cat videos. You need to get back to looking up from the real estate listings to buy your next home, or sell your next home, right? In that format, we try to – it's a valuation of your time and trying to make your time as most valuable and get you in the stores and get you out. Then hopefully, maybe you look through Axios and say, "Oh, I like that. Let me see if I can read more, because I need – we're going to give you as much as you can in the morning of what you need to know to start your day." Are they in your day? Or to meet you in the middle of the day?

If that is successful, you'll come back. We write these stories and we send them out in email formats of newsletters, so you'll get, if you get Mike Allen's AM newsletter, we'll give you the top stories, what you need to know in the morning. If you subscribe to say, a local city, where we have a local branch, like say, Houston, or Dallas, or Seattle, you'll find what you need to know in those cities. Same thing with business. Same thing with, say, we have one called Axios Latino,

which I have added. It gives you the top stories of Hispanic news across the country on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

In that format, we've also – when Axios, we had spin off another company called Axios HQ, where we give software and teach businesses, how to write emails in smart brevity format to their employers, or to clients, to try to do business better. It all goes back to this, Beck, we're all on our mobile device and we're reading on our mobile devices. That's where we're consuming news. We're consuming everything. It's very hard to consume a news story like we did, like our grandparents did. We get the Saturday evening post at an armchair with a pipe. That's not happening anymore. If you're sitting in an armchair with a pipe, more likely, you're smoking marijuana and you're not going to be reading, right?

[0:09:59] BB: Yeah.

[0:10:00] RC: You're more likely just laughing at Instagram videos. If we were able to get you to click on our content on a mobile device where you're consuming content, anyway, we want to make it as mobile friendly as possible. We're one of the first mobile first media outlets, where everything was drive to you consuming them on mobile device. That's where smart brevity lives and thrives.

[0:10:24] BB: Oh, that's a good overview, Russell. Smart brevity. We're learning so much on here. Okay, Russell. Subject lines I assume don't really matter, because he already said, you open up everything. Would you say that's true? Just to confirm for everybody?

[0:10:37] RC: Yes and no. Subject lines do matter. If I see a subject line that someone obviously doesn't know what I'm covering, or they'll say something just outrageous, something about sexuality. I mean, I'll get pitches about sex toys. I don't cover sex toys. I'm not going to read it. No. Or I'll get pitches like, "I see you cover race and justice. Are you interested in this race car that's happening in Mississippi?" No. They obviously didn't read through my bio and they're consuming race as race car driving. That's going to get deleted. A good catchy headline in a email can go a long way.

[0:11:16] BB: Helps. Okay. Okay. Fabulous. Okay.

[MESSAGE]

[0:11:22] 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 journalist to pitch your news to. Sign up for your free account today.

Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:11:46] BB: Now, you mentioned a little bit, but also to clarify, so in the elements of the pitch in the actual email, you like the smart brevity, but is there anything you would further like to point out for just people? Do you want, for example, just pitches in bullet points and five bullet points and done? How would you say?

[0:12:04] RC: Yeah. Tell me what the story is. Tell me what it's about. Tell me if there's an embargo, right? More importantly, they get some – my earsprick is like, “Hey, we want to give you the exclusive on this.” If you give me the exclusive, then that's going to go up. Yes. If you're offering me the exclusive and I can't do it, usually I'll respond to you right away, because I know that you've got other things. If I don't take the exclusive, you have to go pitch it somewhere else. I'll tell you immediately, “Hey, I really appreciate the exclusive. I'm not able to get to it, because of I'm busy this week.”

[0:12:38] BB: XY. Yeah.

[0:12:39] RC: Yeah. “But thanks for offering it.” I just want to hit you back because you're offering me exclusive. If there's an embargo, tell me when the embargo is, or when can a lot lift, and then I'll agree to the embargo. It's like, “Oh, can I see your report then?” I will honor the embargo. One of the things I do like to tell folks that if there is an embargo, keep in mind that if it's an exclusive, it's an embargo, I try my best to write for Mike Allen's morning newsletter that

goes off at 6 a.m. Eastern time. If your embargo is at 7 a.m., or 7:30 Eastern time, it's not going to make Mike Allen's newsletter.

A lot of folks will say, "Well, can you mention Mike called his newsletter?" No, it's not happening, right? Because he's got Trump news. He's got stuff in Congress. Your exclusive about skincare is probably not going to make it. Keep that in mind. If we can negotiate, that's great. Then if you come at me and say, "Well, it's 9:00 embargo." If I agree to it and I do it, it's not Mike and Mike Allen's newsletter. It's probably not making any newsletter. The impact of your story, it won't have the same impact. Your client may say, "Well, we want a 9:00, because we're having a press conference at 9:00 in Philadelphia." They may not work for all the requirements of your particular client, but it won't work for us, and so we may not be the best person.

Also, the newspapers and television stations may not work, because they may not necessarily start at 9:00. You have to make sure all these things are. Then what usually gets frustrated for a lot of folks is the client will tell the PR folks, "Well, hey, nobody showed up." Well, no, because you put these parameters in that aren't conducive to a mobile-friendly world now.

[0:14:30] BB: Yeah, that's right. That's good. Good point. Okay. Do you have an ultimate pet peeve about pitches? You mentioned the name being in a different font, for example. What's your ultimate pet peeve?

[0:14:43] RC: The font one is the ultimate one.

[0:14:44] BB: That's up there. Yeah.

[0:14:45] RC: Yeah. Where they obviously change your name. Or they say, "Hello, Russell.Contreras."

[0:14:52] BB: Oh, boy.

[0:14:52] RC: With basic from your email, right? Or, "Hello, Russell&C," right? Where they obviously have picked your name from somewhere else, or they misspell your name, which is fine. I mean, that happens. I misspell names, too, but it's not on purpose. It's just the way we –

we're in a busy world. The others have long giant pitches that take four minutes or five minutes, or 10 minutes to read.

[0:15:15] BB: Yeah. You can't do that.

[0:15:16] RC: Yeah. I'm not reading it. You wasted your time. You're wasting my time. You don't waste my time much, because I just see that it's a long pitch and I see it's a lot of text and I just push the delete button. Those are pet peeves. Those that will call, the worst one is I get a pitch, it hits my inbox, and 30 seconds later, I get a call. "Did you see my pitch?" Right?

[0:15:38] BB: Wait. How do people get your number?

[0:15:40] RC: Yeah. That's the worst because I –

[0:15:44] BB: Where is it? I don't see it on the website or anything. Oh, man. Oh, God. That's bad.

[0:15:49] RC: Usually, this only happens with people I have a relationship with. Send it and then maybe a daily, or "Hey, did you see my pitch?" Only if I have a relationship with you does that work, where I've worked with you on some of the stories. Or if they're constant calls. Like, "Did you see it? Did you see it? Did you see it?" Well, if I haven't seen it, then I'm probably not interested, right? That's not going to work.

That hurts you later for other pitches going like, "Oh, here's this crazy again." Then there are people who pitch me stuff that are so local and I'm a national writer. I can't get to it. One particular woman will pitch me stuff out of California because she's got a lot of California clients. I will avoid. I'm not going to say her name here, but I will avoid her at all costs. She sends in. Ever.

[0:16:36] BB: Oh, no.

[0:16:37] RC: From night, from now, until the end times is ever going to get hit. She's always pitching me local things. "Oh, here's something great out of Fresno." That's great. Unless it's

something impactful nationwide, I'm not going to do it. Or, "Hey, here's something California." And it's nothing. Polls. We're very strict in Axios on what polls we can use.

[0:17:00] BB: Yeah. Tell us. Tell us.

[0:17:00] RC: Yeah. You have to have at least a thousand or more respondents. It has to be scientifically based. You have to tell us –

[0:17:09] BB: Yeah. Third-party, right?

[0:17:10] RC: Yeah, the plus or minus. It can't be a poll that you did. It has to be commissioned by –

[0:17:16] BB: Third party.

[0:17:16] RC: Yeah. Third-party. We also have to be, if it's from an organization pushing, say, immigrant rights and you send me a poll that says, everybody supports immigrant rights. Well, of course, you phrase that in order for you to support your agenda, and then we have to see the questions.

[0:17:31] BB: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

[0:17:33] RC: If somebody else, like a research firm that's pushing on a poll that is telling us something new, yeah, we'll always consider that. We usually don't do polls around election time, because there's a horse race and everybody's trying to get off the horse.

[0:17:47] BB: Yeah, of course.

[0:17:47] RC: Yeah. Those ones we avoid.

[0:17:49] BB: Yes. Okay. These are all good details. Russell, how does someone make a relationship with you, you just hinted at that, if they don't have one with you.

[0:17:58] RC: Usually, just send down an email, and then we'll say, "Hey, I'd like to have some virtual coffee with you next week. Can we do that?"

[0:18:05] BB: Okay. Oh, virtual coffee.

[0:18:07] RC: Yeah. "Because I've got a lot of clients that are in your coverage area. I just like to know what would work. What are you looking for?" That one goes a long way. I've done that a lot, even with organizations, like say, the ACLU, or the ADL. They'll come to me and say, "Hey, I'd like you to sit down with our new incoming director of blah, blah." I think some PR professionals could learn from and some have done. Then I sit down and, "Sure. Love to have virtual coffee." We're all remote still and we sit down and I'll say, "This is what I'm covering."

Usually, those people, if they're really good and you don't need to do this with me, you probably need to do this with other reporters. They'll spread the butter. "Oh, I loved your story on X." Or, "Hey, I really liked the story on Y." They'll usually flatter the reporter. That reporter will say, "Wow, they're really reading me." To me, you don't have to do that. If you do acknowledge that you understand my coverage area, okay, cool. Then I can tell you, "Hey, I'd really like some help. I'm doing some stuff on family, family DNA. Do you have anybody in that area?" They'll say, "Well, actually, we work with say, PBS, finding our roots. Would you like to get an interview with our host?" Or, "Hey, I'm doing some stuff on criminal justice reform. Actually, we have a client who we work pro bono with, who's working on some stuff about incarceration rates and working with families. Would you be interested in connecting with them?"

Those things go – to me, go a long way. To me that helps, because it helps you, it helps me. I could say, look, I don't have anything. I know they're in an announcement now. I can't cover their announcement, but can I use them as a resource later? In almost in each case always, always works out that way. We're like, "Hey, we're mounting a new initiative." Well, I can't cover that. But you what? I'll have a piece two weeks from now. Can I use them? Let's set up something next week.

[0:20:01] BB: There you go. Okay.

[0:20:03] RC: I may not cover your announcement, but I'm covering your organization. That initiative that was named in the announcement may get mentioned. Most of the time, it will, so it's a win-win for everybody.

[0:20:15] BB: Yeah. Do the virtual coffee. Unless, you happen to be flying through Albuquerque, New Mexico, right?

[0:20:21] RC: Exactly.

[0:20:23] BB: That's where you're based. Just for everybody, hey, that's a beautiful place. If you just happen to be in town, you can maybe swing by for real coffee. But otherwise, virtual coffee. Okay, Russell, we have a quick little quick fire. I'll give you the question and you just give us the quick answer. Does that sound good?

[0:20:39] RC: That sounds perfect.

[0:20:41] BB: Here we go. Video or phone interview?

[0:20:43] RC: Phone interviews are quick, fast.

[0:20:45] BB: Love it. Bullet points or paragraphs? I know we covered this, but just so.

[0:20:49] RC: Bullet points.

[0:20:50] BB: Yes. Bullet points. Images attached, or Dropbox zip file?

[0:20:55] RC: Images attached.

[0:20:56] BB: Pitches in the morning, or at night, or it doesn't matter?

[0:20:59] RC: Doesn't matter, but more than likely in the morning.

[0:21:01] BB: Okay. Keep in mind, New Mexico time. Great. Email, or Twitter DM?

[0:21:06] RC: Email.

[0:21:07] BB: One follow-up or multiple?

[0:21:09] RC: One.

[0:21:10] BB: Direct, or creative subject lines?

[0:21:13] RC: Direct.

[0:21:14] BB: Press release or media kit?

[0:21:16] RC: Press release. We can always ask for the media kit later.

[0:21:20] BB: There you go. Okay. Russell, is there anything we can tell, promote, celebrate, and so forth for you? You got a book coming, or anything like that? Tell us, tell us.

[0:21:30] RC: I do have a book coming, but I'm still working on it.

[0:21:34] BB: Wow. I just threw that out, but you know. I feel like a journalist, the new journalist thing is you write a book. Oh. Oh. Well, can you tell us anything?

[0:21:43] RC: Yeah, still working on it. It's about John F. Kennedy's last night in Houston, Texas. He spent it with Hispanic civil rights leaders. It was an event that they had been working for their whole life to get out. They were Mexican-American civil rights leaders. They invited him to Houston. He speaks to an audience. His wife speaks in Spanish. There's a beautiful Mariachi group there, that these are groups that have been trying to get the president to acknowledge them. It's the first time our president ever acknowledged the Hispanic population. This is 1963. Then the next day, he goes to Dallas.

[0:22:18] BB: Hmm. Okay, you said you're working on it, so there's no date or anything.

[0:22:21] RC: Not yet, but should be within the next year or so. I'll keep you guys posted.

[0:22:25] BB: Okay. Let's keep our eyes peeled. Nothing like buying the journalist's book that's out there, and I love this trend of journalists doing more and more books. Excellent. Well, Russell, thank you for being on Coffee with a Journalist, all the way from New Mexico. What a treat.

[0:22:41] RC: It was a pleasure, Beck. Thank you for having me.

[0:22:43] BB: Excellent. Everybody, keep your eyes peeled for that book and make sure you change your font on your pitches, especially for Russell. There you go. Thanks, Russell.

[0:22:54] RC: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:22:56] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Russell Contreras from Axios. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter at onepitch.co/podcast. We'll see you next week with even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]