

**EPISODE 181**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[00:00:09] Announcer:** Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, brought to you by OnePitch. Welcome to this week's 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](https://onepitch.co) to learn more.

Our guest on today's episode of Coffee with a Journalist is Sarah Whitten from CNBC. As the entertainment reporter, Sarah covers movies, TV, theme parks and toys. During the episode, Sarah talks about using Sheets to save source information, email pitches that have strong headlines which catch her attention, building relationships with sources through calls and lunch dates and more. Let's hear from Sarah now.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:00:59] FT:** Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. Hopefully, you want to hear from a journalist because you are a savvy publicist wanting to know how to better do your pitches and make better relationships with our lovely journalists' friends. Yes.

Today with us, coming straight from Los Angeles with her two cats, is Sarah Whitten, who is the entertainment reporter from CNBC. She's been there almost 10 years, by the way, Sarah. Just saw that. Since 2014. I mean, holding it down. We could talk about movies, and Barbie and everything else. But we'd be here for 17 hours. So we're not going to do that. Sarah, welcome. And thank you for being here.

**[00:01:39] SW:** Thank you so much for having me.

**[00:01:41] BB:** Yes. Let's start with your inbox and how perhaps crazy it is there.

**[00:01:46] SW:** Absolutely. Yeah. Every morning I wake up to like 200 emails that I like to sift through while I'm drinking my morning coffee.

[00:01:53] **BB:** Are they all pitches?

[00:01:55] **SW:** Some of them are pitches. Some of them are news alerts we get at CNBC. Some of them are reminder emails to get back to people at the end of the weekend.

[00:02:04] **BB:** Yes. Got you. Okay. Reminders. Follow-ups. How do you then organize those 200-plus emails? Are you a mass deleter or an inbox zero or what?

[00:02:14] **SW:** We have this lovely thing that, after 60 days, the inbox, the emails delete themselves.

[00:02:19] **BB:** What?

[00:02:20] **SW:** Yeah. No. Sometimes it's a really good thing and sometimes –

[00:02:24] **BB:** Wait. What? What?

[00:02:26] **SW:** Yeah. We get so many emails that they, after 60 days, delete from your inbox.

[00:02:32] **BB:** I have never heard this. Is this throughout CNBC?

[00:02:37] **SW:** Yeah.

[00:02:37] **BB:** It's just because of the sheer volume.

[00:02:38] **SW:** Sheer volume.

[00:02:40] **BB:** Oh, my gosh.

[00:02:41] **SW:** So many people had got their inbox maxed out that they instituted this thing. So they just self-delete after 60 days. They're probably on a server somewhere.

[00:02:50] **BB:** Yeah. Who knows where? Wow. I've never heard that. Okay.

[00:02:55] **SW:** It's wonderful. But also, when you forget something from three months ago and you're like, "Oh, what was that email?" and you can't find it.

[00:03:01] **BB:** Oh, my. So then, how does this change your strategy of organizing anything?

[00:03:07] **SW:** I keep a lot of Google Sheets of sourcing and pitches.

[00:03:12] **BB:** How do you do this Google Sheets?

[00:03:15] **SW:** Yeah. I usually just put – we'll put the name of the source or pitch. Where they're from? Their email or telephone and then sort of a brief description for myself for later so I can kind of be like, "Okay, this person works PR for a gaming company or PR for an entertainment company or they're a professor or whatever their title is." And this way I can go back later and sort of be like, "Okay, I need someone who can talk about streaming. Here's my list of all the people who can talk about streaming."

[00:03:44] **BB:** Okay. I cannot recall the time I had someone on here with like a Google Sheet.

[00:03:50] **SW:** I'm a Virgo. We like lists. I'm a list maker.

[00:03:53] **BB:** Got it.

[00:03:55] **SW:** Let's also back up if we can, Sarah. Because I just jumped right into the inbox and I knew it was going to be juicy. I must have just felt the vibe because I've never heard of that. Wow. Oh, I would die. But for those who maybe do not know, how would you describe CNBC's niche in coverage?

[00:04:12] **SW:** Oh, absolutely. Yeah. We are a business news organization. So everything we touch has to do with either the business of something or something that has to do with money. For me, I cover entertainment, which can be a very wide-ranging topic. But I like to narrow it down to movies, TV, parks, theme parks and toys are sort of my four areas.

**[00:04:34] BB:** And toys.

**[00:04:35] SW:** Yes. I love talking about toys because it's so intermingled with the entertainment aspect of movies and TV. And I'm also a big kid at heart. Being able to kind of cross-section those different things to just be like, "Okay, this is why these toys are doing really well." We were talking about Barbie.

**[00:04:53] BB:** Yes. And weird Barbie is out.

**[00:04:55] SW:** Crazy because of the Barbie movie, which should be no surprise to anyone. But it's a fun little thing I get to do at my job because I'm able to like carve out this little area where I can talk about lightsabers, and Star Wars, and Funko Pops and all sorts of different items. Yeah.

**[00:05:13] BB:** Do people pitch you toys and mail you toys?

**[00:05:17] SW:** Occasionally. I usually ask people to send me an email before they start sending me things. That has become a problem in the past where I used to cover restaurants before I covered entertainment. And I wrote one story about Rosé and I was pitched by more than a dozen companies that do rose and was sent a number of bottles of Rosé. And then had to be like, "Listen, guys. You can't send this to me. There are rules in journalism for how much you can send somebody."

**[00:05:46] BB:** Which, by the way, just every department and every news org differs. But what is the policy for CNBC? I've long heard the \$50 rule.

**[00:05:55] SW:** Yeah. It depends because you go through a whole standards thing for ethics and all that. We like to follow that to the letter. It sort of is like there's a monetary cap on what you can be given. And it depends if it's food-based. Like, you're tasting something versus if they're like giving you a product to look at. It's a very complicated process. But we like to stick to it and make sure that we don't bend any rules or anything like that.

**[00:06:22] BB:** Okay. There's not necessarily a numerical number that you could say?

**[00:06:26] SW:** It depends on what it is. If I was covering food and they were like, "We want you to test out these new cheese puffs."

**[00:06:35] BB:** That's okay.

**[00:06:36] SW:** It can be as long as they send you like two packages and not 200.

**[00:06:40] BB:** I see. I see. Volume of the product matters too.

**[00:06:43] SW:** Volume is very important. And it's very good to check with a journalist before you send them a very large package.

**[00:06:48] BB:** Very good. Okay. Do you accept anything, by the way?

**[00:06:51] SW:** If you email me first and it's something that is more of like a review type thing. We don't really do reviews. But if it's something like I need to see or visually inspect to get it, that's usually okay.

**[00:07:03] BB:** Okay. Okay. Good to know. Sarah, what bugs you about pitches?

**[00:07:07] SW:** Well, I just mentioned I used to cover food in restaurants. Now I cover every entertainment. And if you go and look at my CNBC page, you will see that I've been covering entertainment for four or five years now. And I have not covered food since about 2018. But the number of pitches in my inbox that are food related, even this morning, I got up like three pumpkin spice emails. If you would just cursorily looked up my name, you would have noticed that most of my stories have to do with Hollywood or the strikes or box office or Barbie or Barbenheimer. And that maybe pitching me about pumpkin spice may not get you what you're looking for.

**[00:07:45] BB:** How does that even happen, though? Because that's five-plus years old. I could see like, "Oh, this person a year and a half ago covered all this COVID stuff." But now that boggles my mind. It must be on a database still.

**[00:08:00] SW:** It must be. I'm probably on a bunch of different databases where they're like, "Oh, she covered restaurants for a while or she did a food trend story." Because, I mean, I get whipped cream ads. I get alcohol ads. It's like all these things that show up in my inbox. And I'm like, "You've wasted my time and your time."

**[00:08:17] BB:** Yes. How frustrating. But this is why. This is why we made OnePitch, because it only looks at certain articles written by the journalist to tell you what is the appropriate person versus database is full of lists. Anyway, that's my plug for this one pitch thing that we built. Okay.

**[00:08:34] SW:** I mean, I love pumpkin spice as much as the next person. But I don't write about it anymore.

**[00:08:38] BB:** Exactly. Geez, though. Five-plus years ago. Okay. Obviously, no food pitches. Anything else that's one of your pet peeves of pitches?

**[00:08:46] SW:** For me it's really like – how do I say this in the most polite way possible? We both have a job to do, PR folks and journalist folks. And we work best when we understand what the other person needs and what the other person wants.

And so, pitches that are either off-topic or exceedingly long and convoluted don't do either of us any good because I'm not going to read them and you're not going to get a response back or –

**[00:09:12] BB:** Zero-zero. Yeah.

**[00:09:14] SW:** Yeah. It's sort of a waste of both of our times.

**[00:09:16] BB:** Oh, so it's just a waste of both of your times. I thought you were going on with more of just saying, "Yeah. Okay. It's a waste of both people's time."

**[00:09:23] SW:** I think I left it a little high-pitched there.

**[00:09:24] BB:** Yes. I was like, "Oh. And? Okay. Okay." Yeah, it's a waste of time. That's a waste of time for anybody. Okay. So then, perhaps on the opposite side, what's the pitches you love?

**[00:09:33] SW:** Oh, I mean – recently, obviously, we've been covering the two strikes happening in Hollywood. Those are a big deal for the industry. Have a lot of ramifications. And I recently the last couple of weeks have gotten several very good pitches where the headline of the email is SAG strike streaming source available on record.

**[00:09:52] BB:** Oh, there you go.

**[00:09:53] SW:** Like, "Oh, that's a gem. I'm going to click that."

**[00:09:56] BB:** Oh, I haven't heard of putting the on-record in the subject line. So you like seeing that.

**[00:10:02] SW:** Neither I.

**[00:10:02] BB:** Oh, hot tip. Hot tip.

**[00:10:05] SW:** I talked to so many people who want to talk on background, which is great. I love getting that kind of information. But when you have a source that is deep knowledge of the industry and willing to talk on the record, I'm going to click that email.

**[00:10:18] BB:** Oh, very good. That's a new one today. Okay.

**[00:10:21] SW:** Yeah. I mean, I got a similar one that was SAG strike entertainment professor from X university. And that was really great because I know professors are really knowledgeable and able to talk on the record when other people may not be.

[BREAK]

**[00:10:38] Announcer:** Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to learn about the unique ways OnePitch helps brands engage with the right journalists? Head to [onepitch.co](https://onepitch.co) and create your own custom media list in five minutes or less. Now back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

**[00:11:02] BB:** So, kind of related to that then, are you ever interested in exclusives, embargoes? And why or why not?

**[00:11:08] SW:** Yeah. I mean, I want to meet a journalist who isn't excited about those two possibilities. Obviously, exclusives are fantastic because it means we get to have it first and we get to put it out there first. And that's great for our brand and great for reporters.

Embargoes are equally as great to have because then we can kind of prep them ahead of time. Make sure there's enough context in there. And it really is great to have that relationship with sources to be able to get that information ahead of time.

**[00:11:35] BB:** Yes. Okay. For someone to tee up such, what's the preferred way? Do you want to see, for example, exclusive in the subject line?

**[00:11:44] SW:** Oh, absolutely. That's fantastic to have in there. Either exclusive or embargo is a great thing to have in there. And as for the pitch itself, I mean, it doesn't have to go into super detail if you're wanting me to agree to the embargo ahead of time. And a lot of times what I'll say is I agree to the embargo but I can't tell you I'm going to write about it until I know more about it. I like to be very transparent up front because I don't know what information you're going to give me. And since we're kind of a smaller staff, I have a lot of things I'm juggling at one time. I like to know information about the pitch before I can say, "Yes, we'll definitely write about this."

**[00:12:19] BB:** Okay. Very good. For following up to an exclusive, do you have kind of like, "Hey, if it is a true exclusive, you could send me one follow-up within 24 hours." Or do you never want to follow-up?



**[00:12:30] SW:** Oh, I don't mind follow-ups if they're one or within a small amount of time. I've had people follow-up with me five times within three days. And it's like, "Okay. I think we both know I'm not going to answer your email." Or I'm busy or something like that.

I never try to be mean to anybody who emails me. But there are just sometimes – like, if on the day we had SAG-AFTRA say that there was a strike happening, I was not going to be covering anything else that day.

**[00:12:58] BB:** Yeah. Exactly.

**[00:12:59] SW:** It's probably great to come to me the next day and say, "Hey, I pitched you yesterday. Just wanted to follow up." But doing it three days in a row is like, "Okay."

**[00:13:08] BB:** That's excessive. We don't want that. Sarah, as I think about this – oh, yes. Okay. Relationship building. You're in LA. You love LA. You're in the entertainment capital of the world, arguably. Is there a way for people to build a relationship with you either in person? Or is it really just digitally and over time sending good pitches?

**[00:13:28] SW:** I love doing desk sides, which are –

**[00:13:30] BB:** Oh, really?

**[00:13:31] SW:** Zoom calls. I love them because it gives me a chance to spend a couple of minutes face-to-face with some somebody. I don't have to leave my home office, which is nice. But then I get a really good sense of what the company is. What their background is. That sort of thing. Which is really helpful to me because then I can learn a lot in a short amount of time and then we can set up either calls later or lunch later to talk about it more.

**[00:13:56] BB:** So you like a lunch. You'll go out and about.

**[00:13:57] SW:** I do enjoy a lunch in LA. It's a little tricky because –

**[00:14:01] BB:** That could be a three-and-a-half-hour event, right?

**[00:14:04] SW:** Yeah, it can be a little bit of a trek to get out places. But it's nice, I find once you've kind of touched base with somebody, to get to know a little bit more about them, a little bit more about what they're working on, what their background is. And then you can kind of work together to figure out what's a cool story we could work on together. And I really like that collaboration.

**[00:14:22] BB:** Got you. Okay. She likes a lunch. Perfect. Where, Sarah, do you reside in the magnitude of LA? Is that important? Because I'm sure you're not driving 50 minutes to weho if you're – you know what I mean?

**[00:14:37] SW:** I mean, I don't mind driving. But I tend to pick and choose my battles when it comes to that and make sure that – in New York, you can do six meetings in a day. In LA, two is pushing it.

**[00:14:46] BB:** Two is pushing it. Exactly.

**[00:14:48] SW:** I try to – with all of the work that I have on my plate. And especially, as we're getting deeper into box office season and the strikes and all that, I have a lot of work on my plate. I'm kind of stuck in the office.

**[00:14:59] BB:** Yeah. She's a little busy.

**[00:15:01] SW:** Yeah. I will kind of pick and choose the days that I am able to kind of skirt my way out of the apartment and have a source lunch.

**[00:15:09] BB:** Mm-hmm. Okay. Good to know. I have a quick rapid-fire section here, Sarah. So you just give us your answer. Are you ready?

**[00:15:17] SW:** Yes.

**[00:15:17] BB:** Now some you may have already touched on. But you can elaborate. Okay. Video or phone interview?

[00:15:22] **SW:** Either.

[00:15:22] **BB:** Bullet points or paragraphs in a pitch?

[00:15:24] **SW:** Bullet points.

[00:15:26] **BB:** Oh, why?

[00:15:26] **SW:** I like you to get to the point of what the email is. And if you say, "Okay, I'm going to give you six paragraphs." I don't have time to read six paragraphs if I have 200 emails when I come in the morning. But if you give me five quick bullet points of, "Here's what I'm pitching you. Here's the person I want you to talk to. Here's why this is a good thing for you," I'm in.

[00:15:46] **BB:** Okay. Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[00:15:49] **SW:** Dropbox.

[00:15:51] **BB:** Okay.

[00:15:52] **SW:** They're usually better quality images.

[00:15:54] **BB:** Oh, good to know. Okay. Short or long pitches? You kind of answered it. But okay. Yeah.

[00:15:59] **SW:** Short.

[00:15:59] **BB:** Short. Great. Good. Okay. Email or Twitter DM?

[00:16:03] **SW:** These days, email.

[00:16:04] **BB:** Okay. Yeah. By the way, we got to update that to X, by the way. Note to Kindle. X. That's so weird. Okay.

**[00:16:11] SW:** When you now go on X, are you tweeting still or are you X-ing? What is the new terminology?

**[00:16:17] BB:** See, this is where coms professionals are helpful.

**[00:16:20] SW:** Yeah. I'll have to go talk to our tech group. A little outside of my purview.

**[00:16:24] BB:** Exactly. Okay. You also touched on this. But just so we can get like a number, one follow-up or how many?

**[00:16:31] SW:** One follow-up. And if we're people who have worked together before, you can do a couple more follow-ups and I won't be mad.

**[00:16:39] BB:** Direct or creative subject lines?

**[00:16:41] SW:** Direct.

**[00:16:42] BB:** Press release or media kit?

**[00:16:43] SW:** Press release.

**[00:16:44] BB:** What time, if there is one, do you normally read your pitches? You already mentioned the morning stuff. But do you all day scan?

**[00:16:51] SW:** I do.

**[00:16:52] BB:** Oh, okay.

**[00:16:53] SW:** It's a little bit of a problem. Like, the little email icon pops up and immediately I'm like, "What is this?" And I'm easily distracted when the email icon pops up.

**[00:17:02] BB:** Okay. What type of sources do you look for? I'll just end with that. There's further. But yeah, what kind of sources are you looking for? On the record, as you mentioned. But –

**[00:17:11] SW:** I love on the record. I mean, all journalists do. On background is also very helpful. There are a lot of folks that I talk to that I never quote but are steeped in the industry in a way that is essential to my reporting and essential to understanding bits of the industry that are like really niche and maybe we don't totally talk about all the time.

I mean, I love a good background source as well. Really, for sources, I look for people who are authoritative, people who are steeped in the industry, who have a good track record. That sort of thing. Looking for – I mean, that could be a professor. That could be a producer. That could be a box office analyst. I'm looking for somebody who really knows what they're talking about but it also has a passion for it as well.

**[00:18:00] BB:** Okay. Very good. Is there anything else you'd like to add, Sarah, in promoting yourself, your passions, your cats? Whatever else?

**[00:18:12] SW:** I mean, we could be here for a very long time if I started talking about my cats.

**[00:18:14] BB:** We could.

**[00:18:16] SW:** Yeah. I guess the biggest thing for me is I'm always looking to expand my coverage. I said I cover a lot of things, from theme parks and toys, to streaming, to box office. We don't cover music as much as I'd like to except for the odd Taylor Swift story, like earthquakes and sold out box offices there.

Yeah. I'm always looking for new sources. Folks that are really steeped in the industry. Have unique points of view. Have diverse points of view maybe. I'm always open to pitches. But also, just keep in mind that my inbox gets very full very quickly. And if I don't respond to you, it's not personal.

**[00:18:53] BB:** It's not personal. I think most publicists have long accepted this reality. And yeah, it's not. And I think, I hope, that through this show and the number of dozens and dozens of episodes we've done and in other ways, but particularly this show, the empathy for that is clear for us to have and go like, "God. What would you do if you had 700 pitches a day eventually?" That is not feasible for one human to understand.

**[00:19:18] SW:** It is not, especially if you go on vacation for a couple of days or you're off of work for a couple of days and you come back and you see like over a thousand and you're like, "Oh, no."

**[00:19:28] BB:** Oh, yeah. That's a no. But also, I have to say, Sarah, how beautiful is it that in 60 days it all goes away anyway.

**[00:19:37] SW:** As I said, it's really nice. But it's also, like, every once in a while, there's that one email that you forgot to answer or you forgot to write down who it was and you're like, "It's just gone forever now."

**[00:19:46] BB:** Gone. It's gone. Well, there you go. All right. Sarah, thank you for being here. This is so lovely.

**[00:19:51] SW:** Thank you so much for having me.

**[00:19:53] BB:** I wish you a good third viewing of the Barbie movie, by the way. And the many that are going to come for you, I'm sure.

**[00:20:00] SW:** Absolutely. Thank you so much.

[OUTRO]

**[00:20:03] Announcer:** Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode, featuring Sarah Whitten from CNBC. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter at [onepitch.co/podcast](https://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]