

EPISODE 209

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by the team at OnePitch. Are you looking for a more efficient way to find and pitch the right journalists? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn more.

Our guest on today's episode of Coffee with a Journalist is Monica Pitrelli, editor of CNBC Travel, part of CNBC. Monica covers news, trends, and financial matters for high-yield travelers around the world. During the episode, Monica discusses how she organizes her email inbox across time zones. She's based in Singapore. How she puts her stories together and what makes a great source for her coverage.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:50] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. We have journalists, real journalists, reporters, editors, freelancers come on our little show here to talk about what they frankly cannot stand about publicists. But also what they love about publicists so that we can all work better and have a funner time, if that's even a word, together in the relationships that we need to foster with our great journalist friends.

With us today, all the way from Singapore, hanging out in the early morning time over there, I'm so thankful and excited, is Monica Pitrelli. She's the travel editor at CNBC. She's here with us, coming to us live. Hi, Miss Monica.

[00:01:32] MP: I'd like to say good morning, Beck, but good evening.

[00:01:35] BB: Yes, exactly. You're here, and I'm so happy. What, first, can we talk about do you cover on the travel beat for CNBC? There's quite a lot if you look at your articles, quite a bit on Singapore as well. But what would you detail?

[00:01:51] MP: Yes. I cover basically anything that has to do with travel. It's aviation, the hotel industry, some market news, costs. I find cost is always a topic people want to maybe know more about and trends. Particularly as they relate to broader topics like geopolitics and really the post-pandemic psychology of what's making travelers tick right now. I'm very interested in that.

Another area I always look into is the intersection between work and travel. It works really well for CNBC and how the pandemic has sort of changed from work from home. We have more opportunities to travel and how that's changing how all of us take vacations nowadays.

[00:02:34] BB: The boom of the bleisure sector is what you're referring to, I think, of like, "Oh, let me just tag on a little trip to my business thing and whatnot." Yes. It's quite changed since the pandemic, so it must be a busy time in all the things you're looking at.

Monica, how is your inbox, especially with pitches?

[00:02:52] MP: My inbox – anybody who sits around me at work knows that I am perpetually fighting and losing the fight with my inbox.

[00:03:00] BB: Oh, no.

[00:03:02] MP: Yes. I spend quite a bit of time, but I'm getting even more efficient I'd like to call it. Really, it's like a brutal cowing process. But, yes, my inbox, because of my time difference in Singapore, I still get a lot of emails from the US. So I typically wake up to at least 100 emails. If I don't, I know that it's a holiday that I've missed in the US like Veterans Day or something. That's really exciting.

[00:03:26] BB: Oh, okay.

[00:03:28] MP: Yes. But it is a really hard process. I'll say when I first started when CNBC launched about four years ago, I was really looking at every email. Then I decided about two years ago I'm going to spend an hour a day on email. Since then, I've realized if I'm going to be efficient and get work produced because I actually report, too. If I'm going to do my own work, I

have to be absolutely brutal in this effort to cut. I've really started a different process recently, Beck. What I do is I take my phone.

[00:03:59] BB: Oh, tell us. Tell us. Yes. You take the phone.

[00:04:01] MP: I turn it on its side, and I just start deleting, deleting. I look at the subject line, not even the whole subject line, and maybe the first 10 words of the sentence. If it doesn't resonate, boom, it's out. Boom, boom, boom. If it does, I'll keep it there. Then once I get to work, then I will take a deeper look at those. But that's probably about 15% of my email at that point.

[00:04:25] BB: Oh, wow. You chop it down all the way from there. So you're saying you take out 85% just by doing this brutal cut-down, looking just at subject lines.

[00:04:34] MP: Yes.

[00:04:35] BB: Yes. Then –

[00:04:36] MP: Absolutely.

[00:04:37] BB: Then from that 15% remaining, then you'll actually open up the email and then call it from there, I imagine.

[00:04:43] MP: Correct.

[00:04:44] BB: Okay. Ooh, it's a tough chop with you, but I like this. Okay. Tell us a little bit more about then the subject line. What is it that stands out to you that's so essential to get to that 15%?

[00:04:55] MP: A subject line that hits on things that people are talking about right now will work for me. An interview opportunity with a C-suite-level executive will work.

[00:05:08] BB: Yes. Maybe, for example, ex-Boeing employee perhaps because Boeing's having issues right now. Would that be something?

[00:05:16] MP: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. If a subject line can hit on a couple of things that are happening right now. Here's one that I kept in my inbox. It said like, "Nine-month voyage Gen z steer cruising future." I went, okay, these world cruises are very popular right now. Gen Zs are traveling different. Then it also – because of the way people can work now, we know that you can do these sort of world cruises and long cruises. There's an intersection of a lot of things that interest me in one story, so I kept that one.

[00:05:48] BB: Yes. Ooh, good example. Okay. Do you have another example but just by chance?

[00:05:53] MP: Yes, okay. Here's an example. I had new travel data. Israel-Hamas war impacts bookings. I'm always looking at geopolitics, what's happening, the news of the day, and how that is affecting travelers. That is the type of stuff that will get me every time. I'm not so interested in most Instagramable places or a new chef, a new menu. It's too small.

One thing that I think a lot of people don't know about my coverage is I actually work for CNBC International. A lot of my coverage focuses on Asia and Europe and basically everything outside of the United States. So pitches that have to do with any of the cities in the US, I typically – I won't pick up. I will pick up data coming out of the US but not specific travel-based stories that are in the United States.

[00:06:45] BB: How does it differ for you story-wise with the live reporting that you do? You're on camera. You're doing the actual videos. If anyone looks at your author link and they could see and watch your stuff, is there a difference in how those pitches get through to be an actual piece that you'd package on TV or not so much?

[00:07:03] MP: Yes. Completely, actually. The television reporting has to be recent and timely of –

[00:07:08] BB: Now.

[00:07:09] MP: Yes, exactly. Right what's happening today.

[BREAK]

[00:07:15] 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 and create your own custom media list in five minutes or less. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:07:38] MP: Digitally, I can look at this nine-month voyage thing that we just talked about and have some time to look into that. TV reporting is something that happens right away. Actually, the different reporting styles, I like to be contacted in different ways. I guess here's an example.

[00:07:52] BB: Ooh, tell us. Okay, okay, okay.

[00:07:55] MP: Email I've got time. I can sit. I can return to it even a month later, which I often do. If you don't hear from me right away, that doesn't mean I won't. I usually wait to see maybe three emails on a topic, and I say something's going on in this space. Then I'll return to everyone and say, hey, I'm going to go on this topic. It could be a month or two later. Sometimes, PRs are like, "I'm not even dealing with that client anymore." I know. They're gracious enough to help me.

For TV, now what's happened is I was getting people contacting me through LinkedIn, and that was the side door because email is so insane these days. But even LinkedIn has become overwhelming now.

[00:08:33] BB: Oh, no. It's a wasteland. I hate to say it. LinkedIn, if you're listening, we need to fix this. We need spam control because, my God, it's bad out there. It's bad out there.

[00:08:42] MP: Yes, yes. That's not working either. Now, I find WhatsApp. As much as I don't like –

[00:08:49] **BB:** WhatsApp, really?

[00:08:50] **MP:** Yes, yes.

[00:08:51] **BB:** Oh. Oh, gosh. Okay. Are people pitching you on that, or is that just Monica's preference of world communication?

[00:08:59] **MP:** Oh, my gosh. They are pitching me. It's rare.

[00:09:01] **BB:** Oh, my God. Oh, no.

[00:09:04] **MP:** I don't know how my telephone number has gotten out because this is my private number, too.

[00:09:07] **BB:** Monica, what's happening?

[00:09:11] **MP:** I don't know.

[00:09:11] **BB:** You're the first on this whole show that's ever said, "Oh, my God. I'm getting the WhatsApps pitches." What?

[00:09:17] **MP:** As much as I sometimes think, "Oh, I don't want to be contacted this way," somebody will contact like, "Hey, do you want to interview the Minister of Tourism from Saudi Arabia tomorrow?" Yes, I do.

[00:09:27] **BB:** Well, yes. Yes, I do.

[00:09:29] **MP:** Yes.

[00:09:30] **BB:** Wow. Okay. Well, this is a new moment. Also, I learned from you, Monica, before we got on this that LinkedIn has 13 different ways you can say that you're on a leave; mental health leave, parental leave. Anyway, the treasure trove of Monica but also LinkedIn, there you go.

Okay. For those pitches that you get back to maybe in a month's time, two months' time, whatever, it sounds like you're using your inbox then and your calling system pretty well, such that you will Google. You'll do your own internal Google and find a pitch that resonated but maybe didn't have a fit. Would you say that's right?

[00:10:09] MP: Another misconception is people think, "Oh, the CNBC Travel team." Well, the team is really me, and I'm but one.

[00:10:16] BB: This is the whole team. Oh, I love this. Okay.

[00:10:18] MP: Here's the team.

[00:10:20] BB: This is the team.

[00:10:20] MP: Yes. I love when people say, "Maybe your photo editor." I say, "Yes, that's me."

[00:10:23] BB: No, no, no. That's me. I shoot it. I cut it. I just write it.

[00:10:28] MP: Absolutely. I have at any given time 50 ideas that I want to go on. I can only do one story at a time or a couple I should say. So I do have a rather elaborate folder system on my email. I have all of the things –

[00:10:42] BB: Oh, tell us.

[00:10:44] MP: That would be interesting me for the day. There's probably 50. I'll flat those in. When I see something that is really good like this is an interesting piece of data on Gen Z travel habits, then I can go back to my folder and go, "And here I've got this, this, this. I've got all these elements that I can combine into my story."

[00:11:02] BB: Oh, I see. I've never heard this before from somebody here where you're – I call it plating the story. In a pitch that you plate, it's like, "Hey, here's my expert. Hey, here's three customers. Here's two other founders doing the same type of company like the industry. Oh,

and here's my PhD professor person who can also comment.” That's a whole story now that you're plating up. You're doing that with your own files, your own folders it sounds like. Oh, so smart. Then you go in there. You're like, “Oh, great. I got six pieces. Boom, story.”

[00:11:32] MP: Exactly.

[00:11:33] BB: Oh. This is how a one-woman team gets it done, everybody. This is it. I love it. Okay, Monica. What about sources, especially for those we wanted to get into the Google folder? Are you looking for specific sources like professor of tourism, I don't know, or Gen Z expert on something? I don't know. This is kind of a reach for your beat, but you tell us.

[00:11:57] MP: Yes, I am. Especially with data and reports, if there is a line item at the bottom I can put you in contact with so-and-so from this report, that will get me every time rather than just a report because I go –

[00:12:10] BB: I see. I see. Yes.

[00:12:12] MP: Here's a name I can contact. So I'm looking for people that are deeply involved in data analytics, travel companies, economists, C-suite executives. But, Beck, I have to say I also really like everyday travelers. I want people that have good information. Everyday travelers often have –

[00:12:29] BB: Yes, real information.

[00:12:31] MP: Exactly. They're not – they don't have a conflict of interest, typically. They'll speak to me. I want somebody to speak to me in regular language. I really don't want – I'm just working yesterday on a story with an intern in our office, and she turned in her story. I said, “Did you speak with this woman?” She said yes. I said, “Was it by email?” She said yes. I go, “She didn't write any of this.” This was a PR because no one talks like this, and we can't use it.

[00:12:59] BB: Well, intern lesson 101. There you go.

[00:13:01] MP: Yes.

[00:13:02] BB: Yes. You want to get on the phone with people. You want to be on record, off record, whatever it is. Well, you tell us. But, yes, you want to talk to people, real people.

[00:13:11] MP: I want to talk in plain language, and I want someone who's willing to say something. I know in the day and age of newspapers where you might crumple it up, throw it away, or recycle it, hopefully. Now, things live online in perpetuity.

[00:13:24] BB: It's forever.

[00:13:25] MP: I think it's made a lot of people kind of clam up. But I always want somebody to just give me your opinion if you're a traveler or give me your experience or say something to really cut through this for people. Otherwise, it's a lot of words, and we didn't learn a thing.

[00:13:41] BB: Yes. It's a waste, and it's not a good story. Monica, are there any publicists who are making your life easier, and how are they making your life easier?

[00:13:49] MP: Yes. I would say I've got two to three, not very many.

[00:13:54] BB: Two to three. Not very many at all. Oh, no.

[00:13:56] MP: Yes. No.

[00:13:59] BB: Oh, no. Okay. what are those two or three magical beings doing?

[00:14:03] MP: Two to three that I would say when I see their name in my inbox, I'm reading it. I haven't even read the subject line yet because I know that they always send me quality, interesting, different pitches.

[00:14:18] BB: Yes. That is essential. Okay. For those two to three people, how did they get to be the two to three that you always open it from? Was it just over time and experience with them?

[00:14:28] MP: Exactly. It's just the experience of working with somebody. I would say it's just like working with a colleague. You go, "This person really gets what they do." I have to say I've never been on the side of PR. But I go, "Wow, this person really has mastered their game." That's a pretty high bar and I get that. But other than that, somebody that's just really responsive and can turn around things quickly.

I have to say I really feel bad because often I never return emails. Then suddenly, I'm in your inbox like, "Hi, yes. I would like this. Can I get it in three hours?" I feel like this is such a terrible etiquette. But it is the nature of the business, and I just hope we all sort of understand the time prints we're all under.

[00:15:11] BB: Yes. That is one thing that's very consistently noted on here is just, hey, when I come back to you, and I can't find your cell phone number easily, or you take 48 hours to get back to me, done. I'm already moved on. I can't work with it. So that's not going to work. Thank you for telling us that. Okay, are there any pet peeves you wish to spell out, Monica, of publicists?

[00:15:34] MP: I guess I would say anything that's too small. I mentioned before the new chef, the new menu. I don't cover a city or even a country. I'm covering the whole world. Getting anything that has to do with a new GM at one hotel in the Caribbean, it'll never work.

[00:15:51] BB: Yes. No. Who cares?

[00:15:55] MP: Then, also, I would say, Beck, what I call the fake out. I get some fake outs.

[00:15:59] BB: Oh. What?

[00:16:01] MP: Like an email. Somebody will offer up an interview with someone, and I will say, "Yes, let's do it. Can they be a guest on the TV show?" Then I get an email back like, "Oh, no. Actually, they're not available." But here's what I don't know. I never know who's really at fault there. Maybe the interviewee said that they were available and then pulled back. So I never really know.

I can say with the bookers at CNBC, they will not even really deal with PR because they've had so many experiences like this. They'll go straight to the companies where I'm still a bit hopeful. I have had good experiences, so I don't completely count it out. But I have had quite a few experiences like that.

[00:16:38] BB: Dang. Okay. So they're saying, "Yes, yes, yes, Monica. This person can be on and whatever." Then, "Oh, no, no. Sorry. No, they're not available for tomorrow."

[00:16:46] MP: Exactly, Beck. Even if it's not available at that time, I say, "Okay. Well, when can they be available?"

[00:16:51] BB: Then it's still no?

[00:16:53] MP: Yes. Oh, no, no, no. That's bad. Why would you even do that? That's just – oh, well. Okay, I have to ask. Do you then have a folder that's for your I never want to talk to these people again? Or do you just block them or what or no?

[00:17:08] MP: I don't have that. I don't have that because, again, I always think –

[00:17:13] BB: I had to ask. I had to ask.

[00:17:16] MP: Who really is to blame? I don't know the full story. I do have that with freelance writers.

[00:17:21] BB: Oh, interesting, interesting. Okay. Okay. That's fair. That's fair. Oh, Monica. We're getting so much here. Okay, Monica. We have a rapid-fire question part here that we just need your first blush on. So are you ready?

[00:17:35] MP: Mm-hmm.

[00:17:36] BB: Great. Video or phone interview?

[00:17:39] MP: Either.

[00:17:40] **BB:** Either. Okay. Bullet points or paragraphs in pitches?

[00:17:44] **MP:** Either, as long as it's concise. But take out the adjectives.

[00:17:48] **BB:** Okay. Short or long pitches?

[00:17:51] **MP:** Short

[00:17:52] **BB:** Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[00:17:55] **MP:** Attached just to illustrate one subject. But if it is we are now working together, batch it into one zip file.

[00:18:02] **BB:** Yes. There you go. One follow-up or multiple?

[00:18:05] **MP:** One.

[00:18:06] **BB:** Direct or creative subject lines? I think we know that.

[00:18:09] **MP:** Direct. Please.

[00:18:10] **BB:** Yes, yes. Press release or mediate kit?

[00:18:12] **MP:** Press release.

[00:18:14] **BB:** Now, this is a little bit more complicated question because we got to put it in global time. What time do you usually read pitches, morning in Singapore?

[00:18:22] **MP:** Morning in Singapore.

[00:18:23] **BB:** Morning in Singapore.

[00:18:23] MP: It's my morning coffee ritual, 8am Singapore time. I'm going to give 30 minutes to go through 150 emails.

[00:18:31] BB: Wow. Okay. Then we already talked about sources but anything further you'd like to add to those that you're looking for? What's on your wish list right now?

[00:18:41] MP: I don't really have much. I'm quite happy with the – the email situation is a bit of a needle in a haystack, but I'm coming to terms with it. I'm accepting it. Then my new system is working for me. No complaints on my side.

[00:18:54] BB: Okay. Monica, is there anything we could highlight, tout, celebrate for you? We just like to give you a little spotlight as our last final words here.

[00:19:03] MP: I'm such a terrible hype person and sales person.

[00:19:06] BB: Maybe PR person.

[00:19:08] MP: Exactly, exactly. My brain really doesn't work that way. I guess just the focus of I really cover international stories. I would love to hear from more people from Asia, Europe, Latin America, South America.

[00:19:24] BB: Make sure it's global, everybody. No GM from one hotel in the Caribbean. No, Jesus. Monica, thank you so much for being on today. So enjoyed it. So glad you made this work at Singapore time here. It's late over there. Monica Pitrelli, she is the travel editor at CNBC. Thanks so much, Miss Monica.

[00:19:44] MP: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:19:46] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode, featuring Monica Pitrelli, editor at CNBC Travel. 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. But until then, start great stories.

[END]