

EPISODE 212**[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 Ilona Limonta-Volkova, host of Money Memories, an NPR podcast, and contributing writer on fintech at Forbes. During the episode, Ilona discusses her podcast and the types of guests she features, plus her dream guest, the art of staying pithy in pitching, and the best way to connect with her.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:44] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. We do this show to help publicists know how to better work with reporters, writers, editors, freelancers, basically all the people in media that make our lives basically function because we wouldn't have a job if we didn't have media here. So that's what we try to uncover on our little show here. I'm happy you're all listening.

With us today, we have, I want to say, like a multi-hyphenate journalist because we got multiple outlets she is contributing to. We have Ilona Limonta-Volkova. Did I get it right, Ilona?

[00:01:19] ILV: Nailed it.

[00:01:20] BB: Ah, I love it. She is the podcast host of NPR Money Memories and also a contributing writer for Forbes in the fintech arena. Thanks for being here, Ilona. Welcome.

[00:01:31] ILV: Beck, I'm so excited to be on your show and just really honored that you have me.

[00:01:35] BB: Oh, we're happy that you are here. First, let's talk about, Ilona, because you have a couple things going on, what does the coverage for NPR Money Memories entail?

[00:01:45] ILV: Yes, great question. Money Memories is a podcast that I created several years ago during the pandemic. Initially, I was distributing independently. The whole premise behind the show is that it's 20 to 25-minute conversations with a wide variety of guests about their earliest or most impactful money memories. I started the show because I've spent my entire career work investment management and financial services, and realized that even I had anxiety about money matters when it came to personal finances. I thought that by giving a platform to individuals to share some of these early experiences that people would, hopefully, kind of not feel so taboo around the topic and open up the discourse for further conversation. Yes, that's the premise of Money Memories.

[00:02:31] BB: Yes. Memories form so much of your worldview and your day-to-day function, too. We like it, Ilona. Then over on Forbes, you're contributing fintech writer, and you have various coverage pieces here. You're talking about, for example, Africa's retail revolution. You're talking about AI redefining creativity. What would you let us know on the Forbes front that you cover?

[00:02:55] ILV: Yes, absolutely. I love to focus on things on the kind of intersection of inclusion and empowerment where fintech can really try change. I love focusing on innovation in emerging markets. You mentioned that great article I wrote on things going on in the African continent and Latin America. I'm Cuban, so I feel like I have kind of an insider's perspective to things going on in that region. But I really pride myself on trying to find any kind of fintech inroad because I really believe that innovation in financial services affects every facet of our lives because at the end of the day, all of us interact with money in some way. That's the kind of perspective that I try to bring to my storytelling.

[00:03:33] BB: Oh, we do. We do. You can't escape it, unfortunately. I do love that background because you also grew up in Russia, correct?

[00:03:40] ILV: Yes, yes. I have a crazy background.

[00:03:44] BB: You have communist type of things with Cuba and Russia. You have capitalism things being in America. That's a lot of money memories right there. I'm sure.

[00:03:53] ILV: Absolutely, absolutely. There's not something that I can't really relate to, I think, as a result of that interesting **[inaudible 00:03:59]**.

[00:04:00] BB: Yes. Wow, wow, wow. Okay. So let's go to your inbox. How busy is it with pitches for you, if at all? Maybe it's not.

[00:04:08] ILV: That's a great question. I was listening to some of your other episodes and most of your guests are full-time journalists. I have the privilege, I guess, you can say of getting to do this on the side because I'm a full-time venture capital investor. Lately, my inbox has been getting more traction. I get a couple of pitches a week, particularly on the Forbes angle. Mostly around different press releases for different funding rounds and things like that that I typically take a look at and see if there's any way to incorporate into an article or around some kind of announcement that a company wants to make. It's quite diverse. I'm always fascinated by the – I think I know a lot about fintech. Whenever I see a pitch, I'm always impressed with how many layers there actually are.

[00:04:48] BB: You're like, "Oh, there's something else new going on there." Okay. For you, with pitch management, let's say, and it is different for you because, okay, you're not full-time, let's say, and one of the journalists who's on here who gets 400 pitches a day, insane. What do you do to manage pitches, let's say, you like but then also ones you're like, "Yes. No, that's not a fit."?

[00:05:10] ILV: Yes. That's a great question. In general, when it comes to things around funding rounds and announcements, I will take a look at those pitches to kind of see what the company is. But I tend to avoid those because at the end of the day, there's plenty of great publications that cover that in-depth like TechCrunch, Crunchbase, et cetera. The things that kind of I gravitate towards, when there's an opportunity to talk to someone on the management team or if there's someone with an interesting background they're trying to feature and promote. I find that's always a better inroad to a story. That can get my creative juices flowing rather than just restating an announcement on a funding round. I will skim through those funding

announcements, but I tend to gravitate towards the kind of individuals to connect with. I'll typically say yes to those opportunities.

[00:05:55] BB: Okay. Then in terms of, yes, not a fit or anything, are you one of those mass deleters of like, "Okay, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, delete."? Or you just let it float around? What do you do?

[00:06:05] ILV: That's a good question. I think when there is an outright specific conflict of interest. For example, I've gotten a couple of pitches for interviewing other investors that I will specifically say, "Hey, I'm on the investment side, so I don't think this would be appropriate." I like to flag that because, well, I want to maintain the relationship, and I just want to make sure on the other side, that person isn't wasting their time. They could just be more mindful of directing, just going forward. I find that's always well-received if I can be very direct when there's a very clear conflict. For everything else, it's either in scope or out of scope. If it's completely out of scope, I'll typically just kind of delete that.

[00:06:41] BB: Got you. Okay. What about the cadence of your typical week? We want to know. Or even sometimes people like to do their day-to-day like, "Well, first, I always make the coffee first. Then I look at pitches. Then I go back." Yes, just give us a little inside.

[00:06:56] ILV: Yes. That's a great question. I try to be organized in some kind of capacity, and I've been trying to be better about planning content for the long term around different thematic ideas, while also leaving room for spontaneity or whatever is going on in the industry. Kind of things that I like to bookmark on my calendar are Women's History Month which just happened, Black History Month and topics around that. I'll try to kind of slowly do research throughout the quarter, I would say, around those topics.

Every single day, I'm checking the Wall Street Journal, and I'm checking the headlines. There's always something great in there to kind of hang my hat on or to use a repository for data going forward. A mainstay of my work week is always going through the headlines of various publications. I like to switch it up to just get different perspectives, either that sparks an idea for publishing something more immediate. For example, I'm writing a piece right now on the women's market opportunity for advertisers. So much around that is being driven by a lot of the

athletic coverage with Marsh Madness. So I want to make sure I time kind of that publication with the final which will be Friday which is tomorrow when we're recording.

I would say it's kind of a combination of just kind of regularly scanning, as well as thinking more long-term, leaving room in my schedule to kind of write more free flowingly when there's something that's very pertinent going on in the market or the industry.

[BREAK]

[00:08:19] 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]

[00:08:42] BB: Now, this is quite different from most guests we have because they're usually doing the interviews. Or they're doing maybe a phone or something. But you're having people for a podcast. What makes for you a pitch stand out as like, "Oh, this is a good guest for my podcast," versus, "Yes, I can get on the phone with them and interview them."? I think that's quite different. So what would you illuminate?

[00:09:05] ILV: I love that you bring that up because I do think that the tone of both of those platforms are very different. I view Money Memories as a more personal conversation that's meant to be very open. So I want the barriers to entry to be low. I want the average person who might not be as financially savvy. I don't want them to feel overwhelmed. The tone of that conversation is going to be really different than the tone as a writer that I take for Forbes on a fintech topic, although I do try to still write at a level where even if you're not familiar with fintech, you'll be interested in it.

To get to your question about what makes the Money Memories pitch appropriate, the simplest thing, and it's getting a lot – I don't know if more PR people are listening to the show. But when they automatically give me in the pitch like, "This person's earliest money memory is this, and

they're willing to talk about it," that just automatically – it's great for me because I know that there's been some kind of engagement, some research. That person is actually interested in talking about their money memory and not just pitching a product or something like that. It's a really great screen for me to say better way to build a relationship than just saying, "Hey, do you want to feature this person on your podcast?"

Initially, I got a lot of pitches from people in financial wellness I would say. The only pitch needs to be, "Hey, this person's in personal finance." After a while, I started to really reject a lot of those pitches because, A, I felt like I had enough guests who brought that experience already in my archives. B, I would tell them once again the purpose of the show is to showcase diverse perspectives. If I keep having financial therapists and coaches, it's not going to be a very diverse show. That's not the point of it. I think that that's helped because now I get pitches from people in tech and all kinds of industries, but they're able to always give the through line to the money memory.

[00:10:50] BB: If you were to say person I'd love to have on the podcast looks like, reads like X, whom would you define?

[00:10:59] ILV: That's a great question. A person I'd love to have on the podcast is if I had a celebrity, I'd say Bad Bunny. I'm sorry. You're like, "This is not the question."

[00:11:09] BB: No, fascinating.

[00:11:11] ILV: To get to that point, I think it's someone who you wouldn't necessarily associate right off the bat with personal finances or with finance in that way. So it could be – that's why I love having entrepreneurs, for example, on my show. I love featuring a range of perspectives, so ages as well. I think that my show tends – I'm a millennial, and maybe my own and personal bias has been kind of towards more millennial guests. But I'm starting to realize there's a gap that I'm missing in terms of younger folks as well because they're coming into their first relationships with money, so wide range of ages.

I think the key takeaway is just someone who understands that personal connection very well and who has a great story or a great memory around maybe – it doesn't have to be around

financial hardship but just something that they witness. Maybe like parents budgeting together or maybe a time that a parent shared some insight. Kind of someone who maybe doesn't look like a financial person but who has a great story around a money memory.

[00:12:11] BB: Okay. Someone just – so juicy memory that has probably a through line, a storyline. Not just like, “Oh, yes. I used to help my mom count the piggy bank.” That's not really a story.

[00:12:22] ILV: Yes. The piggy bank and the tooth fairy, that's why I made Money Memories because I got so many piggy bank stories. I was like it's got to be early or impactful, so yes.

[00:12:32] BB: Early or impactful. Okay, good to know. Okay. How can people make better relationships with you, just as it relates to publicists? Or are you like, “You know what? I don't need to know any publicists.”? What would you say?

[00:12:48] ILV: No. I love work. I think a great publicist can be almost like a secret weapon in terms of gaining access or expediting flows of information. I think especially someone like myself who's working more independently. I love leveraging the resources of PR teams in terms of doing things like setting up scheduling, communicating information with the guests, and things like that. There's a couple of publicists I've worked for over the years now, and they know my show so well. They'll just be like, “Hey, here's two or three people that we think would be a great fit.” I say yes to them just about every single time. Or if I say no, I know there's no hard feelings.

I think a great relationship for me is just with any team that takes the time to listen to the show and understand the premise and realizes it's a tool for their guests to connect with their following or audience on a more personal level, rather than maybe product-oriented. I think that's the best way to connect with me is just on that more personal level because I have to say my bar is pretty low. Maybe I didn't say that but like –

[00:13:51] BB: No.

[00:13:53] ILV: When I get a pitch, so yes.

[00:13:55] BB: Yes. By the way, any pitches that you're just like, "Oh, God. That again." Just your pet peeve with pitches at all, besides the obvious ones like, "Clearly, they didn't listen to my stop." You know, anything.

[00:14:07] ILV: Yes. I try to be respectful of – for the financial wellness pitches that I was getting earlier on when I had my podcast, I try to be very direct and respectful of their time and just say, "Hey, thank you for the pitch. Here's why it's not a fit." When people just –

[00:14:21] BB: That's so generous, by the way.

[00:14:23] ILV: Thank you. When they continue to kind of follow up, continue to reach out after it's a clear no, it's always a little bit – not frustrating but it's – I just kind of wonder what. Then kind of almost in my eyes the quality of the guests must not be so high then if they continue to do that. I think like pushing – once you get a clear no and continuing to push. Or even worse, once I give them a clear no for a certain reason, and then they give you alternative that's in the same vein, and you're like, "Okay, you really didn't pay attention."

[00:14:52] BB: No, you didn't. You didn't get the memo

[00:14:55] ILV: Exactly.

[00:14:56] BB: No. Okay. That's good. Ilona, I have a little fast quick-fire questions for you, and we'll see what you say. Video or phone interview for a potential guest?

[00:15:05] ILV: Video for the first introduction. After that, we can do phone or email.

[00:15:10] BB: Nice. Bullet points or paragraphs in the pitch?

[00:15:13] ILV: Bullet points. But if it's going to be a paragraph, make it pithy.

[00:15:16] BB: Pithy. Excellent. Short or long pitches? I imagine then short. Images attached or Dropbox zip file? I don't know if you need those, but what would you say?

[00:15:24] ILV: I do, especially for Forbes when I want a – showcase the technology. I like the images attached, so I can scroll through it on my phone. How about both? So then I can have access to the files, too.

[00:15:35] BB: That's the thing. It's like, "Oh, I don't want to – now, I got to click a link to sign into the thing. I do not like –" That's one of my biggest tech pet peeves. Don't send me to a link that needs more clicks to get through and needs the email to authenticate. Then pass me the – I'm like, "Freaking no. We have enough solutions already." Okay. Email or XDM or even Instagram DM?

[00:15:58] ILV: Email please. If they DM me, I will probably direct them to an email because I like to – to me, an email is serious, so we can start scheduling things.

[00:16:05] BB: Yes. An email is serious. Okay. Yes, serious time when we're in email. Okay. Follow-ups, one or multiple?

[00:16:12] ILV: One.

[00:16:13] BB: One and done. Okay. Direct or creative subject lines?

[00:16:16] ILV: Direct. When it's super creative, I get confused.

[00:16:20] BB: I know. You're like, "Hey, I don't want to spend time thinking about what –" No. I am with you on that. Okay. Any time that you read pitches particularly? We talked a little bit about that.

[00:16:30] ILV: Usually in the afternoon around lunchtime when I have some break.

[00:16:34] BB: Okay, okay. Then to emphasize again, even though we know Bad Bunny is on your list, is there any sources, though, you would particularly love to hear from?

[00:16:44] ILV: Gosh. Sorry, I'm not doing good with this quick-fire. To be honest, I'm pretty happy with the sources I get. Maybe from some more of the agencies that have data, so like the World Bank and things like that. Those are – I've gotten a couple of pitches from folks there on new statistics and results. I always – I geek out on data, so I always love getting those reports and getting those sources.

[00:17:06] BB: Okay. Ilona, is there anything that we can help you promote, highlight, champion, whatnot? This is our moment to give you some little PR.

[00:17:14] ILV: I've been told that Money Memories is a great podcast to listen to while washing dishes and/or walking the dog because of the length. Please, if these things apply to you, feel free to download and subscribe to Money Memories. It's available everywhere people listen to podcasts, as well as on npr.org. To follow me on my Twitter is @ilonaonthemoney. My Instagram is also @ilonaonthemoney. I keep all my content centralized there for articles and podcasts or moneymemoriespodcast.com.

[00:17:45] BB: Excellent. Make those pitches pithy. I like it. Ilona Limonta-Volkova, did I get it right again?

[00:17:55] ILV: You nailed it. You nailed it, Beck. Thank you.

[00:17:58] BB: Podcast host NPR Money Memories, contributing writer to Forbes for fintech, thank you so much for being here today.

[00:18:04] ILV: This was delightful. Thank you so much for having me.

[00:18:06] BB: Thanks, Ilona. Take care.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:18:09] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode with Ilona Limonta-Volkova, host of Money Memories, an NPR podcast, and contributing writer on fintech at Forbes. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast,

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But until then, start great stories.

[END]