

EPISODE 222

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:08] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with the 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 the Journalist is Rebecca Pifer, Senior Reporter at Healthcare Dive. Rebecca covers the business of healthcare with a focus on health insurers and public policy. During the episode, Rebecca discusses the nuances of healthcare journalism, the instances where it's okay to ping her multiple times with an idea, and the ideal elements of a standout subject line, hint. It's all about short, sweet, direct, and relevant.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:50] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. We do this little show to help publicists have better relationships, ideally, with our media friends and contacts, because we all need to work together. I'm Beck Bamberger, and I'm a publicist myself, so that's why I'm here. I also built, along with a lot of other people, OnePitch to help solve this problem of getting to better match journalists for all of our pitches, because we got to send a lot of pitches out, so there we go.

With us today, coming live from DC. I want to hear about the weather, because I like DC in the summer, is also a Rebecca Pifer, who is the Senior Reporter at Healthcare Dive. So, we're going to get into it. Welcome, Rebecca.

[0:01:33] RP: Thanks so much for having me, Beck.

[0:01:35] BB: Yes. By the way, I have a little note here on my sheet that says you're an award-winning journalist. Award-winning. Tell us a little bit more. I mean, I know the awards, but you can tell us.

[0:01:45] RP: Yeah. Healthcare Dive, which is the publication I wrote for, were a B2B publication, primarily aimed at healthcare executives. We've won a number of business awards, Neal awards, ASBI awards, and I've contributed to that work in those packages, so yeah. Happy to be here.

[0:02:03] BB: Yes. Excellent. For those who don't maybe know, I do ask this of every outlet, even like The New York Times. What would you say is the coverage encompassing Healthcare Dive, and then specifically yours? Because there's lots of nuances to healthcare. How would you describe it?

[0:02:19] RP: Definitely. Yeah. We're again, we're a business-to-business publications. We write about the business of healthcare for an audience of healthcare business executives. That runs the gamut from hospital executives, insurance executives. The wide variety of companies that operate in the healthcare space. We're targeted at getting them the news that they need to do their jobs more effectively.

[0:02:41] BB: Good to know. Then more specifically for you, what's the kind of content you like to do because, for instance, I see you're talking about Medicare, Medicaid, Scripps. You're talking to House Committee, so you're based in DC. You're talking politics and things like this, CBS, so it's quite wide, it sounds, but also probably government leaning.

[0:03:02] RP: Yeah. I cover a lot of stuff. Right now, my bead is more so focused on health insurance, but I'm also really interested in retail health and PBMs and public policy, but yeah, it's a mismatch of stuff and whatever strikes my fancy, at a particular moment.

[0:03:22] BB: Or maybe what strikes your inbox, so let's talk about that. How is your inbox?

[0:03:27] RP: It's good. It's pretty full.

[0:03:29] BB: Okay. Wow. But no one usually comes on here and it's like, it's good and full, though. It's usually like, there's two emails and I'm happy. This is odd. Okay. It's good and full, full with, what's in there? Pitches?

[0:03:43] RP: A lot of pitches. Yeah. I guess when I say it's good, I mean, more so it's very healthy. There's a lot of it. I think that this is actually a good reminder for me, honestly, that I need to go through. I haven't gone through my pitches today. I try to do that every morning, but yeah. Lots of different stuff in there.

[0:04:01] BB: Okay. Do you have an organization system for this inbox?

[0:04:07] RP: Honestly, not really. I definitely should. I've thought about a lot of different ways I could. Mostly, what I do is every morning I go through and I mass delete things that have absolutely no like relativity to anything that I cover, right? It's like a large variety of pitches that A, aren't even about healthcare or are about healthcare, but are more consumer focused and aren't anything that I would cover or they're about companies that are outside of my beat. So, I'll just go through and I'll just delete all those pretty much based on subject line.

Then everything remaining based off if I know the person or if the subject line is important, I'll click those, I'll open those and read through them in the morning. Then by the end of the day, I try to go through everything else and delete everything else. If it's not important or like flag it for potential follow up or something like that. But I don't use folders as much as I probably should.

[0:05:02] BB: Okay. Not a folder flag girl. Got it. But it sounds like you're a delete, so are you inbox zero camp?

[0:05:08] RP: I definitely try to be. I try to by the end of every week, get it down to zero. I tried for – yeah, for a long time. I was like by the end of every day. Then I just couldn't keep –

[0:05:19] BB: Couldn't keep up. Yeah.

[0:05:20] RP: Yeah.

[0:05:24] BB: Yes. Okay. You earlier mentioned like a great subject line. Can you get a little bit more into that? What is a subject line? You're like, "Oh, yes. I need to low. I need to do that."

[0:05:34] RP: Yeah. This I imagine it would be really hard for, you know my heart goes out for publicists and for PR people, because it is difficult having your work sort of judged by five to 10 words, but for me, a good –

[0:05:49] BB: No pressure.

[0:05:49] RP: No pressure. Yeah. For me, a good subject line is A, related to what I cover. I mean, that's like the biggest thing. I get so many emails that again have nothing to do with anything that I cover and those just get deleted immediately. Those you can pretty easily tell from the subject line. If it's too long or too complex some subject lines, they try to get like witty or do some a metaphor or something. I'm like, I'm a business reporter.

[0:06:19] BB: Yeah.

[0:06:19] RP: Direct into the point.

[0:06:20] BB: Yeah.

[0:06:22] RP: Sometimes that will cause me to be like, huh, and does exactly engender me to open those or to do like a heavy read of those. So, yeah. Good ones are short, I would say, and direct and relevant.

[0:06:35] BB: Short, direct, relevant. That's good. Source. Why? Source wise. What or who are you looking for?

[0:06:43] RP: Good question. I definitely do get sources from pitches, but they have to be a really good source. I got a lot of outreach from people putting up an executive at a company to comment on a trend when they might not be like the best third party, non-bias person to comment on that trend. I'm always looking for sources who are academics, who are researchers at think tanks analysts, financial analysts, lawyers are always incredibly helpful. Yeah, right now specifically, if you're knowledgeable about like PBM business models, or the intricacies of the Medicare Advantage space, or antitrust policy, very interested in those areas right now, so hit me up.

[0:07:40] BB: Okay. This is good.

[MESSAGE]

[0:07:44] 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 CONTINUED]

[0:08:07] BB: Then for those sources, you get someone you see an email, what's the ideal pitch for a source of those that you just listed? Is it hey, this person's available? Here's the points that they could say. Is it, these are their credentials and take what you want from that? Like how do you suss out that?

[0:08:27] RP: Yeah. That's a good question. I think tying in how your source might be relevant to an interesting story right now is always helpful, so you know, the subject could be like I don't know, let's say your source is a lawyer in the antitrust space. The subject line could be like legal expert on FTC non-compete ban in healthcare or something. Short to the point says who they are, says why they're relevant to me. Then, referentially, the email would be short to, source the name, why they're relevant. If you want to include a brief one, two punch on their background, that can't hurt, but also, I'm going to do research into these people myself before I reach out to –

[0:09:08] BB: Yeah.

[0:09:09] RP: Yeah. I would say, keep it short.

[0:09:11] BB: Keep it short. Okay. By the way, since you are based in DC, are you doing coffees meetings with people in the politic world? What does that look like?

[0:09:21] RP: Definitely. Yeah. Very open to in-person meetings.

[0:09:25] **BB:** Oh, she likes a coffee, maybe. Okay. Tell us more. Tell us more.

[0:09:28] **RP:** I can't drink coffee, actually, because it makes me –

[0:09:31] **BB:** Oh, no. Okay.

[0:09:33] **RP:** I know. I know. It gives me – energy and I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack, but definitely, tea.

[0:09:39] **BB:** Oh, God. Okay. So, you like tea.

[0:09:41] **RP:** Definitely, an in-person girl. Yeah, reached out to me, whether it's about something specific or not. I don't have a ton of free time, but there's no harm in reaching out, because if I do, always down to meeting people.

[0:09:56] **BB:** Okay. In DC, specifically. So, you want to do tea. Do you ever happy hour or anything like that?

[0:10:02] **RP:** Yes. Yeah.

[0:10:04] **BB:** All the drinks.

[0:10:04] **RP:** There's nice –

[0:10:06] **BB:** It's nice. It's not pitch-black outside at Five o'clock. Yes. Perfect.

[0:10:11] **RP:** Yeah. I think not.

[0:10:12] **BB:** Take advantage. Oh, I know.

[0:10:13] **RP:** It's not disgustingly humid yet.

[0:10:16] **BB:** Not yet. Exactly.

[0:10:17] **RP:** Not yet. We probably have another few days.

[0:10:20] **BB:** Yes. Yes. Take advantage. That is great. Okay. As a reporter, do you need to pitch your stories to your editor? You earlier said like, "Oh, I do what I want." That's like, but is there a process like that, because we want to demystify to publicists how it actually works in terms of getting a story greenlit?

[0:10:41] **RP:** Yeah. Good question. For Healthcare Dives, since I'm a senior reporter, I have more latitude in what I cover. If there's a particular story that I want to pursue beyond the new cycle, if there's breaking news or hard news, we cover that as it comes, but for longer pieces, yeah, I'll think of a story idea or something will come up in one of my conversations. I'll do a little bit of research into it to make sure it's something that is viable and is interesting. Then I'll bring it to my editor and be like, "Hey, I'd love to work on this." Then most of the time they're like, "Great. Enjoy."

[0:11:19] **BB:** Knock yourself out. Yeah.

[0:11:20] **RP:** Yeah.

[0:11:21] **BB:** Great. Okay. Good to know. You earlier were mentioning subject lines they're clear, they're business directed. They're what you want. You also talked about like the ones you don't like. Now, let's say you open that email. You're looking out the pitch. You want it brief. You mentioned, but what's like, "Oh, my gosh." This is the perfect pitch, because of X. If you could describe.

[0:11:48] **RP:** I mean, I hate to be a broken record.

[0:11:51] **BB:** It's okay.

[0:11:52] **RP:** Again.

[0:11:53] BB: That's okay. We want to hear it.

[0:11:56] RP: Yeah. Relevant topical. I mean, not all pitches need to be tied to something that's going on right now. If you have an incredibly novel company or you're calling out an incredibly novel trend, those are always really helpful, but it should be something that I'm going to be interested in.

[0:12:15] BB: Yep.

[0:12:15] RP: I think to like just structure wise, I'm a big fan of bullets over paragraphs.

[0:12:23] BB: Okay. That's on our rapid-fire question list, but yes, perfect. Okay. Oh, yeah.

[0:12:28] RP: Sorry to –

[0:12:29] BB: No. It's great.

[0:12:30] RP: But yeah, I'm a big fan of bullets. I think sometimes when you have like dense copy and a bunch of paragraphs and you're trying to argue your point, just things can get lost. You're busy. I'm busy, bullets. I think cut through that.

[0:12:44] BB: Bullet work. Bullet's work. Great. Is there something publicist can do just to make your life easier besides bullets in a pitch?

[0:12:53] RP: Yes. I think stop pitching me things that don't have to do when I – like with what I –

[0:12:59] BB: Just don't bug you.

[0:13:01] RP: Yeah. This has just been like a big problem recently more so than it's been in the past –

[0:13:05] BB: Why recently, you think?

[0:13:07] RP: I don't know. I couldn't tell you. I just, I feel like in the last two weeks, the majority, not majority, but you know, too many. I've gotten too many pitches that are about a sexual health, or marijuana, or consumer wellness, which you know, all very interesting topics and a lot going on in all those faces right now.

[0:13:27] BB: Just not what you do.

[0:13:28] RP: Just not what you do. I also got a number of pitches earlier in the year where I ended up blocking the publicist, which I've never gotten. I've never –

[0:13:39] BB: Oh, God. Okay. What led to that? That's our worst nightmare.

[0:13:43] RP: Yeah. What they were doing was the subject line was incredibly vague. So, I want to do my due diligence. I'm not going to delete something unless I know it's not relevant, so then I open it and then it would be like X other outlet is reporting on this story, but they're missing the bigger picture, talk to our expert to learn what it is. that would be it and that would be it. It wasn't interesting, almost like question mark situation, but then it's just like I shouldn't have to chase you to explain what you're trying to pitch to me to. You know what I mean?

[0:14:22] BB: Like two seconds of time. Yeah.

[0:14:24] RP: Yes. I got a lot of those emails and a lot of them were again about stories that were healthcare related. So, I reached out to them and I was like, "Can you please stop pitching me non-healthcare related stories?" They were like, "Sure." Then they continued pitching me.

[0:14:38] BB: No, no. Okay. That's how I get blocked. Yeah.

[0:14:43] RP: Yeah. Don't do that. That would be my suggestion.

[0:14:48] BB: Yeah. Even worse as they said, okay, yes, no, we understand. Then they then kept doing it.

[0:14:55] RP: Yeah. I was really surprised by that.

[0:14:56] BB: Yeah. Was it from different people, by the way, at the agency, perhaps or was it just, don't tell me it's the same person?

[0:15:02] RP: It was from different people – but the same person that I emailed did do it to me again.

[0:15:08] BB: Oh, no. Oh, well, then you know you're like on a spray and pray list of sorts.

[0:15:14] RP: Yeah.

[0:15:14] BB: Sorry. Oh, jeez.

[0:15:15] RP: The thing was that too is like that was a particularly egregious example, but it's like we can tell, like reporters can tell if you're just copy and pasting our name into the deer blank part of your email. That's not great. If we can tell that.

[0:15:31] BB: Yeah. Yeah. Oh, boy. Okay. Thank you for clarifying that, Rebecca. That is good to know. Don't get on the banish list publicists. We have a rapid-fire question part, Rebecca, that I think you might find interesting/intriguing. Some of the points you already covered off on, but here we go. If you're ready.

[0:15:51] RP: I'm ready.

[0:15:52] BB: Video or phone interview?

[0:15:54] RP: Oh, I personally prefer phone.

[0:15:57] BB: Okay. Yeah. Phone is coming back.

[0:15:59] RP: I would say, but –

[0:16:00] BB: Oh, in person. Yes – we also talked about already bullet points or paragraphs, so we covered that. Images attached or drop box zip file?

[0:16:09] RP: Attached.

[0:16:09] BB: Email or a DM of some sort? Somewhere, who knows where.

[0:16:14] RP: Email.

[0:16:14] BB: Email. One follow-up or multiple?

[0:16:18] RP: Oh, preferably just one, although I would say that there has been a few situations over my career where people have reached out to me, like three or four times, and I just missed it the first few times, and then I was really glad they did follow up with me.

[0:16:34] BB: Oh, there you go.

[0:16:35] RP: If you've done your research and you think it's something really relevant to me, I will not be angry if you follow up multiple times, but if it's something totally unrelated and you follow up multiple times, then that's slightly annoying.

[0:16:48] BB: Yes. Okay. Noted on that front. We already talked about director creative subject lines. How about press release or media kit?

[0:16:55] RP: I don't really have a strong opinion, honestly. I think whichever medium you feel will give us like the most and the clearest information. Just go with that. I think it's more so about how it's written than the medium in which it's delivered, because a lot of press releases nowadays are really either filled with a lot of jargon or they like seem they're written by AI and you can't even really get a sense of what –

[0:17:19] BB: Yeah. I know.

[0:17:20] RP: Trying to say.

[0:17:23] **BB:** I know. Yeah.

[0:17:24] **RP:** Yeah. Don't do that.

[0:17:25] **BB:** Don't do that. Okay. Is there a particular time you read pitches?

[0:17:29] **RP:** Mostly in the morning. Yeah. Pretty much first thing in the morning.

[0:17:34] **BB:** Okay.

[0:17:35] **RP:** Yeah.

[0:17:36] **BB:** First thing in the morning. Then again, the next day?

[0:17:40] **RP:** Yeah. So, usually I'll go through when I start working, just scan my inbox and yeah, if there are things that seem interesting, I'll open and read them then before I get started on the rest of my day. Then I try to finish everything else up by the end of the day, and then, yeah, process starts again next morning.

[0:17:56] **BB:** Okay. She's back at it with that. Okay. Then lastly, is there anything we can highlight, promote, tout about you?

[0:18:04] **RP:** Oh, sign out for Healthcare Dive. I would say. If you're in the healthcare space, we have a daily newsletter that goes out around like 11 AM noon-ish every day, and then we have two weekly newsletters. We have one on Wednesday that's focused on the health insurance sector and then one on Thursday that's focused on health IT. Yeah, great source for a variety of business news in the space.

[0:18:29] **BB:** Okay. We're going to sign up. Thank you so much, Rebecca, for being on today.

[0:18:35] **RP:** Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

[0:18:38] BB: You got it. Rebecca Pifer from Healthcare Dive. She's a Senior Reporter. Don't invite her to coffee, because she's not going to drink it, but everything else is good.

[0:18:47] RP: Excellent.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:18:48] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode featuring Rebecca Pifer, Senior Reporter at Healthcare Dive. 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]