

EPISODE 245

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:09] 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 guests on today's Coffee with a Journalist episode is Shwanika Narayan, Assistant Arts & Entertainment Editor at the San Francisco Chronicle. In this episode Shwanika shares her insights on crafting attention-grabbing subject lines and tailoring pitches to resonate with the San Francisco Chronicle's local audience. Offering real-world examples from her work.

[EPISODE]

[0:00:44] BB: Greetings, everyone. Welcome to Coffee with a Journalist, Oh my gosh, I actually have coffee. I have the coffee this time around. I'm Beck Bamberger, and we've been doing this show for a while now. I think as we're on like three, four, I don't know how many years, 200 plus episodes in, and we are still learning, still, still, still about what journalists need, what they need, editors as well, freelancers, and so forth. And this is the show for you if you want to understand how to better work with journalists, and reporters, and editors, all the people in media that make our world go round as publicists because we need each other. And that is what we're here to accomplish today.

With us today is the former business journalist, and now, the Assistant Arts and Entertainment Editor, who is over at San Francisco Chronicle, a great local publication that everyone in San Francisco frankly reads, including myself, and I'm not even here full time. Shwanika Narayan, and she is here to tell us basically everything about what's going on in her world now, especially because you've got a new beat. So, welcome.

[0:01:46] SN: Thank you, Beck. Thanks for having me.

[0:01:48] BB: Yes, yes, yes. How has it been shifting to the arts and entertainment, which is drastically different than the tech and business?

[0:01:56] SN: Very different. It's been a welcome change.

[0:01:58] BB: Okay. I'm sure you're like, "Great. Let me talk about performances."

[0:02:02] SN: Yes. No, no, no, no. It's been a welcome switch that I made about a little over a year ago, and it just kind of speaks to the flexibility we have here at the chronicle. They're very open about people wanting to sort of grow, and try out new things, and making it happen. So, that's how it kind of happened for me. But yes, my journalism experience, my background –

[0:02:22] BB: But wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, did you bring it up and say, "Hey, everybody, this is –" How did that get prompted? You know what I mean?

[0:02:30] SN: Well, I noticed that they had an opening, and it piqued my interest, and I wanted to try it out, and they were like, "Sure." I had a short stint on the coffee desk, because that's how a lot of legacy newspapers happen. If you have no editing experience and you've just been a reporter or a writer, they want you to sort of like really refine those copy-editing skills for a month or two, and then switch over. And it just kind of line up for me. But yes, I brought it up to them and it happened.

[0:02:55] BB: Oh, I like that. Way to shift over. Now, one thing we cover on here is that, editors are different than reporters, not in the function of they don't all write stories. Typically, most do. But how would you distinguish your role more as an editor versus a reporter now, especially since you've been on both sides?

[0:03:15] SN: Right. Now, as an editor, I am assigning coverage. I'm planning out our editorial calendar way in advance. So, we're just not looking at week by week. We're looking month out, we're looking at big projects, ambitious things we want to tackle this year. So, that's really a lot of sort of the strategy, the planning, that all goes into being part of like an editor and running a team. As a reporter, it was more of like, "Okay. I am – this is my beat, this is what I'm writing about. What's happening? What can I break? Am I noticing trends?" It's more really – it's a little

bit more solitary, and that you are mostly just reporting and writing. Whereas, editing is a little bit more collaborative and you're managing.

[0:03:56] BB: So, let's now take it to your inbox. How is it and how do you manage it. Everyone has a managing way, or some don't, and just let it ride forever. So, you tell us.

[0:04:06] SN: I mean, I start, it's the first thing I do every morning when I sign on. I go through my emails. There's hundreds of emails. Like as an editor, I average about 200 to 250 a day, and not all of them are pitches. I'm also, I would say, at least 75 of those. So, what is that? I don't even know the percentage, but –

[0:04:25] BB: A fourth, yes.

[0:04:26] SN: Yes, a quarter, a quarter of those. A quarter of those are pitches. So, I'm also subscribed to a lot of the arts newsletters to sort of make sure that I'm plugged in into what's happening with other publications and writing about what we may have missed and what we have going on. I do find myself finding a little bit more time responding to emails as an editor compared to when I was a reporter. So, that has been interesting. I feel like it's not necessarily because I have more time. I just think I'm beholden a little bit more to reply to people. So, that's the switch.

[0:05:00] BB: Okay, good distinction with that. Have you noticed by the way that people are still unfortunately sending you business pitches?

[0:05:07] SN: All the time, which is fine. I will just go ahead and forward it to the person who would be interested in it.

[0:05:11] BB: Oh, that's gracious.

[0:05:14] SN: But, yes. I really don't – if you do it more than once, then yes, I will just not respond or even forward it to you. But I will – the first time it comes to me, I'll say, "Hey, I have made the switch. This is what I do now. It's not my coverage area anymore, but I will forward

this." And most of the times, I do CC the reporter or the editor as well, and then, they can take it from there.

[0:05:31] BB: Oh, that's so generous. That's so generous. Okay. If we can go back to though your inbox and just how you were curating it and how are you surviving it. Some people we've had on here, you know, they have – they flag, they folder, they mass delete every 90 days because they can't handle. What are you doing and what also – second part of that question, what gets to the open of the email, if at all?

[0:05:53] SN: Right. So, I do all of that. I do my folders, I do a mass emails deletion every 90 days because it does get hectic. I forward it to the appropriate people who can sort of take it on. Yes, so I do all of that. What gets my attention, so at the news organization I work at, the chronicle, is it's a local regional outlet. So, the attention needs to be very, very relevant to the chronicle, and also to our readers. And so, it needs to be just a little bit more pointed to something that I hear at the chronicle would be interested in. Whether it's a new exhibition that opens here, or just some kind of trend that's more local in scope versus national.

[0:06:37] BB: I mean, this kind of sounds obvious, and for a lot of the reporters or editors, it is not. But I would imagine, it's like, is it happening in San Francisco? Is it in the Metro? Like it has to be, is that not a mandatory component of it?

[0:06:48] SN: Absolutely. So, I'll give you an example. Back when I started here in 2019, when I started here, Yelp, for example, they came up with a new economic measurement called the Yelp Economic Average. And it was just basically the state of small businesses in America.

[0:07:03] BB: That's very creative.

[0:07:04] SN: And that's great. Well, they have really great data on small businesses. So like, they did this thing for the media that piqued my interest. The subject line did not work for me, but it still piqued my interest. I asked them if they could cut data for the nine County Bay Area, and if we could glean trends from that. In 2019, you know, years before that, I wrote – I re-tell, it was one of my beats, and all I wrote about were bankruptcies and sky-high rents, and just how retail as an industry was struggling. But with this data, we found out that furniture stores, for

some strange reason were, were really thriving in San Francisco. So, that became a story. I'm not going to write about Yelp's economic average. I will use that data set in the story, but my story is about, why are furniture stores thriving in San Francisco?

[0:07:52] BB: Yes. I'm so glad you referenced that, because so often, and this is at least for folks we've worked with in the tech world, you've got some interesting data. Now, it's not about, "Oh, this is our data and write about our data." That's not it. It's more so, "What is the use case of it and where's the application?" So someone like you is like, "Of course, you can reference back and say this is provided by," but that's hardly the story. It's really in the data and what it's showing you. That's interesting too. Why were furniture stores thriving?

[0:08:19] SN: Yes. So, I had a couple of retail analysts weigh in on this as well, so they could provide me with the answers. And they said, well, furniture stores are really big purchases for people. So, they want to try out the couches, they want to try out the dining room set.

[0:08:33] BB: Yes, you want to sit on it.

[0:08:35] SN: So, they just kind of naturally lend themselves more to storefronts that last longer. I mean, and again, this was all pre pandemic things have changed. I haven't covered that beat for a while. But yes, this was sort of like the one thing that stood out.

[0:08:47] BB: Okay. So, you're saying, you flag, you folder, you do these things. How about subject lines? How important are those to you?

[0:08:56] SN: It's the most important thing. It needs to stand out. It cannot be – it just – think about how we write headlines. That's kind of how you need to address and go around when it comes to subject lines to get my interest. Because, again, I'm going through my emails really quickly. My goal is inbox zero every day, and I want to make sure I'm doing due diligence, and I can only do that if the subject line stands out. I will read your email then.

[0:09:22] BB: Yes, okay. So subject line it is. Now, speaking of subject lines, you want it like a headline, you want it direct, you want it like – how else does it stick out to you? Subject lines is a very big topic on this show.

[0:09:34] SN: Absolutely. So, I wanted it direct, it can be creative, it can be – in terms of the body of the email, I prefer bullet points, I prefer all the pertinent information there in that one email. So, when I was a business reporter, okay, you're going to randomly mention a company. Do I know where this company is located? How big is it? Who's the founder? Who are the backers? Also, what's the news? So, a lot of times, we get pitches of like, "This is a great company and maybe you should write a profile about it." It's like, "Well, there are literally thousands of startups in the Bay Area. Why am I writing about this one company and not the others?" So, what's the news here?

[0:10:11] BB: Okay. That was a great glimpse into the subject lines.

[BREAK]

[0:10:17] 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 CONTINUES]

[0:10:40] BB: Is there anything that you absolutely would love publicists to do more? "Please," like, "Please, this is my list here. Here we go." Yes, tell me.

[0:10:48] SN: Absolutely. So, with the local publicists, I love meeting up with them.

[0:10:53] BB: Oh, you do? Okay.

[0:10:54] SN: I actually do. I think it's very helpful. It was very helpful for me as a business reporter and even as an arts editor now, I am meeting with the book publicist. I am meeting with theater folks. I'm meeting with the classical music leadership folks. Part of that is to sort of establish a professional relationship, and also have people understand the kinds of stories that we are looking for, but also understand what they have coming up, so we can be a little bit more

better prepared if news breaks, and I like hopping on the phone. Sometimes, I'll like, news will break, news will break, or I will have a story go out, and literally, I'll get a pitch from a publicist saying, "Oh, you just heard about this. Here's a person who can comment." It's like, "I'm not going to update my story and include your person in this story that I spent weeks reporting and is already published. But I can give this person in mind for the next thing that might be relevant for this particular topic.

[0:11:50] BB: Can we pause on that for a second? This happens so often on here. And publicist, I just want to convey, when the story is out, you cannot be asking, "Oh, would you change that story and just insert my client into the piece? There's nothing new, just –" But I bet what happens is, the client saw it. They're like, "Why the hell was I not in that piece? Go email them." I'm thinking it's like, predatory client relations where that the client is dictating and saying, "You have to do that." But then, that to me is a bad client. Man, I, that's my only guess. I don't know. It's not good.

[0:12:24] SN: Yes. Going on that, even if it's a story, if you're the publicist that I've worked with on this specific story, also understand that your pitch is really it. How I take it from there is – the story is going to be – and this is the thing, the story will become where the reporting takes it. So, what you pitch can lead to a very different outcome. So, one example, when Yelp pitched me, they wanted a story about the Yelp economic average, whatever index that they had. Sure, they might have gotten that at maybe some more business-focused publications, some trade mags. But that's not what I got, right? Like, I sort of wanted more of the human interest, more of the localized take that would be relevant to our readers.

So, just understand that whatever you pitch, is that it? That's the only control you have. Is there email, your intro email to the reporter or the editor? And then, it's really up to the press as to how they take it from there.

[0:13:19] BB: Wow. Okay, sources. Now, you said you'd like to meet with publicists. You like local publicists, but are there any like sources that you particularly like? I'm like, I'm kind of struggling to think of what would necessarily be a source for you with arts and entertainment, but you tell us.

[0:13:34] SN: Sure. I mean, we have artists reaching out to us all the time. We have theater folks who want to chat, and these are not the leadership, but like the actual artist who want to talk about just sort of the state of the industry in San Francisco where there's such a high cost of living. So, there's all these other issues that are going on. Yeas. So, it's primary sources. Like, yes, we're dealing with the institutions, we're talking to the heads of departments, and we're getting those voices, but we also want to talk to the people that is their livelihood. So, getting everyone involved is like the best-case scenario.

[0:14:09] BB: Okay. So, artists, welcome, directly. Great. Is there a process that you are either religiously going after or you consistently use as editor in terms of the story approval? Because people want to know a little bit on like story approval process. It's not just not necessarily, "Hey, I sent a pitch of the reporter" and they're like, "Cool, let me write about it tomorrow," and it just is suddenly up. Sometimes that happens, but usually, there's of course a process. Did I tell the boss? Did I talk to the editor? Did we meet at the morning meeting? Da da da da da. So, how does it work over there for you all?

[0:14:40] SN: Absolutely. It needs to be timely, it needs to have that newsworthy element, and it also needs to be relevant to our readers. By that, I mean, it needs to be – include San Francisco or the barrier in some way. So, for example, there's tons and tons of books that get released every week. Which ones am I covering? Which ones am I freelancing out to our book critics or our book reviewers?

[0:15:02] BB: But every week? Every week, there's tons?

[0:15:05] SN: Oh, yes. There's hundreds of book releases every week across the country.

[0:15:09] BB: I mean, I knew across the country, but I'm like, "In San Francisco?" Okay. What would you say? What's the sector for San Francisco, would you say?

[0:15:16] SN: Right. For our books coverage, for example, for our books coverage, we would like the author ideally to be based in San Francisco, because we do like to have staff shot photos. We'd like our, whoever is interviewing them to sort of meet up in person. So, it's relevant because it's a Bay Area author. Maybe the story is set in San Francisco, so that's another way

to get into the book part if they're not based here locally. Or, if they have an author events coming up that's local. Though, that isn't like the most ideal criteria. The first two is what I would prefer more. Is the author local?

[0:15:50] BB: Yes, got it. Okay. I wanted to clarify that. Okay. That's very helpful. Is there anything you feel maybe folks don't know as much in just the process? I'm talking folks, as in publicists, that you wish more publicists would know in terms of how you run your process.

[0:16:05] SN: Sure. We mentioned this earlier. I'm constantly amazed over the years that I've been working as a journalist. The number of times I get an email saying, "Can you switch out this word and replace it with this?" For example. It's like, "No." If there isn't an inaccuracy –

[0:16:20] BB: Any word, by the way? It's like a specific, it'll be a word request?

[0:16:24] SN: A word request. Sometimes, you get even more like audacious emails like, "Can you switch the style or the tone of this graph?" It's like, "No, no." If it's not an inaccuracy, if there's nothing factually incorrect in the story, you cannot tell a journalist to like change stuff. You don't have control over voice, over style, over context. But I still get emails all the time, and sometimes, it's just amazing. We need to stop doing that.

[0:16:54] BB: Yes, we do need to stop doing that. Okay. I do have a short list of prep questions to go through. They're like super fire questions. Are you ready, rapid-fire questions?

[0:17:06] SN: Okay.

[0:17:06] BB: Let's hit it, let's hit it. Video or phone interview?

[0:17:10] SN: Phone if it's breaking news. If it's more sort of like in-depth analysis pieces, we like video, especially if we can't meet up, so that way we get some color as well.

[0:17:19] BB: Okay. Bullet points or paragraphs in pitches? Now, you said bullets earlier.

[0:17:22] SN: Yes, bullet points all the way.

[0:17:24] **BB:** Short or long pitches?

[0:17:26] **SN:** Short, succinct pitches that have all the Internet information, two or three paragraphs. Think about it that way.

[0:17:32] **BB:** Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[0:17:36] **SN:** Dropbox file that also has a document for captions and credits.

[0:17:40] **BB:** Oh, I haven't heard that before. Okay.

[0:17:43] **SN:** We get photos all the time, and I'm like, "Who are these people?"

[0:17:46] **BB:** And then, you're like, "Who do I credit to?" Yes, yes, yes.

[0:17:49] **SN:** Also, who's the photographer? We need that information.

[0:17:52] **BB:** Yes, okay. That's a good little tip. Okay. Email or a DM somewhere like on X or wherever we're doing things now?

[0:18:02] **SN:** I personally don't like pitches in social media, especially on LinkedIn. Try and email. Our emails are actually pretty easy to find.

[0:18:08] **BB:** Yes. By the way, have you been seeing more on LinkedIn? Cause that seems to be the hot place now for everybody.

[0:18:13] **SN:** Yes. Oh my gosh.

[0:18:15] **BB:** I don't know why. I don't know why. It's just – well, I do know why. We just talked to someone from LinkedIn today. They just have resources galore, and they're pumping in lots of money into LinkedIn. So, everyone's at LinkedIn. Anyway, we covered direct or creative

subject lines-ish, but you had mentioned a little bit like, as the headline. You want to read it as the headline. Do you want to clarify that?

[0:18:36] SN: Yes. I think direct subject lines are always great. It gives me an insight as to what your email is probably going to be about. But if there's some kind of distinction that you can be creative with, and tell me why it's important to me specifically, and to our readers, that is what would sort of do it.

[0:18:54] BB: Okay, good. Time that you usually read pitches, you said at the beginning of the day in the morning.

[0:18:59] SN: Yes.

[0:19:00] BB: All the time?

[0:19:00] SN: All the time. Yes, I start off my day reading emails, but it's an all-day long kind of thing.

[0:19:05] BB: It's an all-day long thing, yes. And we also covered sources. Okay. Then, to wrap us up here for today, is there anything that we could do to promote, highlight, celebrate, tout you and SF Chronicle, which is so dang good, people need to read it?

[0:19:22] SN: The chronicle as a newsroom has been doing really interesting work around how we're using AI as a tool to get some of our stories out there. So, we have a news assistant, for example, on Kamala Harris, who we've been covering been covering since '95.

[0:19:36] BB: Yes, she's a local.

[0:19:38] SN: She's a local. We have 20 years' worth of stories on her and anything around her, any questions. You go to this news assistant tool and you can get your answers. We also launched something called Chowbot, which is another AI tool and it's based on the food team's recommendations over the years about restaurants, about cuisine. So, just go to our website and check out all these really cool things we're doing.

[0:20:00] BB: Ooh. If there's ever a paper that would be about what is AI and all the applications, it would be in the mothership of San Francisco, of course. Ah, I love it so much. Thank you for being on today. This was so lovely. Publicist, she likes to meet locally if you are local and there's an art connection. If your author is located in San Francisco, but that's about it.

[0:20:21] SN: Yes. Again, as arts, I cover classical music, theater, movies, like all of it. It's all these gems under arts.

[0:20:29] BB: Yes, it's a wide array, everybody.

[0:20:31] SN: Thank you so much, Beck. This was so much fun.

[0:20:33] BB: Shwanika Narayan, thank you so much for being on with us today. Everybody, she is the Assistant Arts &– Entertainment Editor, former business journalist at SF Chronicle. Check out the arts section, I can't wait. Thanks, everybody.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:20:45] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode with Shwanika Narayan, Assistant Arts & Entertainment Editor at the San Francisco Chronicle. 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.

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