

EPISODE 249

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:10] 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 Coffee with a Journalist episode is Jennifer Kester, the vice president and executive editor at Forbes Travel Guide. In this episode, she chats with Beck about her insights on luxury travel, ratings, effective pitching, and the Forbes new Verified Air Travel Awards.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:43.7] BB: Welcome everyone, this is Coffee with a Journalist, I'm Beck Bamberger. I'm a co-founder of OnePitch because we are building stuff to help publicists do their job better, specifically, with media, and that includes reporters, freelancers, editors, executive editors like we have today, and with that, I'm very excited because travel is my thing, Jennifer. We're going to talk all about it. Today, we have Jennifer Kester who is the vice president/executive editor at Forbes Travel Guide. We're going to get all into it, welcome, Jennifer.

[0:01:18.3] JK: Thank you, Beck, I'm excited to be here.

[0:01:19.9] BB: Yes, thank you for being here. You just came back from Santa Monica, you said, doing a little hotel review. How was it?

[0:01:26.6] JK: It was lovely. I was in town over the weekend to cover the grand opening of the new Regent Santa Monica Beach.

[0:01:34.9] BB: Nice.

[0:01:35.5] JK: Which is a big luxurious hotel that's really making a splash. So, that was a lot of fun.

[0:01:44.6] BB: Oh, and I see, your article is actually up here as of four hours ago. Boom, you're quick. Bomb, she's on it, she's on it everybody, okay. Well, again, thank you for being here, we're going to chat some travel. For those not as familiar though, I do like to start out with this, which is, how would you define the Forbes Travel Guide's coverage? It is all about things of travel but let's get into more specifics so people know what the heck we're pitching here.

[0:02:10.8] JK: Sure. Forbes Travel Guide really covers everything luxury travel. However, we do have a strong emphasis on hotels, restaurants, spas, and cruises. We started out as a guidebook. Is it okay if I delve a little bit into the history just to give some background?

[0:02:31.8] BB: Yes.

[0:02:32.3] JK: We started out as a guidebook for Mobil gas company –

[0:02:38.6] BB: Yeah.

[0:02:38.9] JK: And the time back in 1958, the Mobil gas company was looking to find a way to encourage travelers to consume more gas and hit the road. So, they came up with the idea of putting out these guidebooks, which it put in every gas station and the guidebooks did really well for Mobil. It really became the travel bible for road trippers in North America but fast forward several years, the Exxon company came and acquired Mobil and was looking to get out of the guidebook business, and at the same time, we were rating hotels.

Everything from a five-star to a one-star hotel but we wanted to focus more on the luxury component, and so we had our owner, his name, Jeff Arnold. He came and acquired the rights for the five-star rating system, and what he did was envision bringing it back online only but in a more luxurious fashion. So, he took the guidebook and he was looking for a brand partner that would really convey to hotels and everyone else in the world that we were a luxury publication.

And as I mentioned, we started rating hotels in China and the Chinese were not as familiar with Mobil gas company but we chose Forbes as our brand partner, and that is instantly a recognizable name. Everybody knows who that consumer is.

[0:04:18.0] BB: Exactly.

[0:04:19.9] JK: And so, we are sort of like sister publications with Forbes Media. We have our own website, we have our own editorial team but we do have a channel on Forbes.com. We are also promoted in their travel channels, in their newsletters, and social media. So, it's a close relationship but we are independent and what we really focus on is our star awards. So, these are –

[0:04:46.1] BB: Yes.

[0:04:46.6] JK: Ratings that we give to hotels, restaurants, spas, and ocean cruises, and so when I talk about coverage, a lot of our coverage revolves around our collection of rated properties, and so that might mean a hotel review but it could really touch upon anything in that experience. It could be the destination, it could be food and beverage, it could be adventure travel, really anything that lures in a luxury traveler.

[0:05:18.3] BB: I like how you said that, anything that lures in the luxury travel – traveler. Thank you for that overview too because I always thought, “Wow, what a brilliant move from a tire company to go, “Hold up, how do we get people more on the road?” I know, we’ll tell them where to go to, so they could drive there.” This is just brilliant in terms of what this initially started as, so that’s good. Now, as executive editor, how is your inbox as it relates to pitches?

[0:05:45.7] JK: Well, the inbox is always very full.

[0:05:48.2] BB: Yes.

[0:05:49.4] JK: I do my best to stay on top of it but I get hundreds of emails a day, hundreds of pitches a day.

[0:05:53.9] BB: Ugh, gosh.

[0:05:54.6] JK: So, I try to do my best but you can safely say there’s always a full inbox.

[0:06:04.2] BB: What do you do to manage it then? Are you a let-it-ride person or are you somehow cleanse it out every so often?

[0:06:09.6] JK: I try to stay on top of it, anything that I can get done under five minutes, I try to do that.

[0:06:16.0] BB: Ooh, that's smart, yeah.

[0:06:17.0] JK: And the rest of it, I go back to, and then you know, there, I have to put aside some time where I just more carefully go through the longer emails that require more attention of mine.

[0:06:29.7] BB: Is there a time you do that, by the way, or is it just when you have a window and you're like, "Ugh, okay?"

[0:06:36.1] JK: Just when I have a window.

[0:06:36.9] BB: Yeah.

[0:06:38.2] JK: Yeah. I mean, but I have to say, I think in the mornings, I have a little more time to be more thorough with my emails.

[0:06:47.5] BB: Okay, in the mornings, she likes the mornings.

[0:06:49.3] JK: Yes.

[0:06:50.3] BB: Speaking of mornings and maybe all those pitches you do get, what stands out for you, subject line-wise? If that's an important element that makes you go, "Ooh, yeah, I'm going to open that email, right now."

[0:07:03.8] JK: It's a very important element. I will delete a ton of emails just based on the subject line, I don't want to read them. For me, something that stands out is it doesn't have to be

really creative, it just have to convey information in a concise manner. So, one example is just getting an email like I received today, and it said, "Hotel opening: X hotel opens November 1st." So, just very quick to the point. I know exactly what's –

[0:07:36.8] BB: Which hotel, yes.

[0:07:37.5] JK: Yes, which hotel it is. You know, if there's a timeliness element, and so I appreciate that but of course, I do really enjoy getting emails too that are a little less informative and more enticing. So, one, I received that I thought was really good said, "These luxury hotels are elevating the guest experience with exclusive in-room hotlines."

[0:08:04.2] BB: Oh, hotlines.

[0:08:05.6] JK: Yes. So, that really made me, you know, don't stop and want to check out and see what these hotlines were. and so something like that. Like, there's a couple of things in there that peaked my attention, the word, "exclusive" was really good, the fact that these are luxury hotels, so this is what I cover, and the in-room hotline's component just adds a different twist, something unexpected.

[0:08:30.4] BB: And I'm like, tell me about the hotline, where do I call the hotline for? Right, yeah. Oh, man, okay.

[0:08:38.2] JK: Like, there's one, there's a champagne hotline.

[0:08:40.0] BB: Oh, like caviar hotline, okay, okay. The hot – oh, I like this. Fun. See, that's just, that's fun, and that is the beauty of travel is, it is fun. It's about experience, it's about things you're going to remember forever. So, not as heavy as some of the other breaking news and other areas of coverage people are dealing with. So, good, thank you for those examples. Those were great.

[0:09:01.9] JK: Sure.

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[0:09:05.5] 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]

[0:09:28.3] BB: Now, relationship-wise with publicists, do you wish you have any relationships with publicists, and how would those be done or built?

[0:09:38.1] JK: Definitely want to have relationships with publicists. I think the best way to build a relationship is to do it in person. So, anytime I've been on a trip, that's been really great to bond with publicists and build a rapport that way but it could be meeting for coffee. It could be – even if we can't do that face-to-face interaction, there's so many publicists that I correspond with that I have corresponded with for years and I've never met.

[0:10:07.8] BB: Wow.

[0:10:09.3] JK: And yes, so I think just making sure that you know, a publicist is responsive and really helpful, I never forget those people, and I'll go to them when I need some help or I think I can feature their product or property. So, I think it's really good to cultivate those relationships for both parties.

[0:10:31.1] BB: Yes. I want to double down on something you alluded to right there, which I think is not as overstated as it needs to be with but it's speed, responsiveness. You have to, you have to. I've had a number of folks on here who said, "Oh, my gosh, you know, I didn't hear back from the publicist for like three days. Well, the story is already done, what am I going to do with that?" Yeah.

[0:10:51.8] JK: It's frustrating because you know, you could be working on a deadline or you're just –

[0:10:56.2] BB: Yes.

[0:10:57.2] JK: If they don't want to be featured for whatever reason, it just would be helpful for them to say that.

[0:11:03.4] BB: Yeah, just to say, "You know what, we're good. We're good."

[0:11:05.7] JK: Right, rather than ghosting. I just don't think that's –

[0:11:09.0] BB: Oh, wait, Jennifer, do you get ghosted?

[0:11:12.2] JK: Well, you know, it's not that –

[0:11:14.5] BB: Play out of ghosting.

[0:11:16.3] JK: Yeah. I mean, periodically or just sometimes like I could tell like they don't want to be interviewed or something and I just think like instead of beating around the bush, people should just be forthcoming. I would just appreciate it and save my time and I just think it helps everybody.

[0:11:33.4] BB: Agreed. Are there any pet peeves you specifically have, Jennifer with publicists that you wish to eliminate here?

[0:11:41.2] JK: Sure, I think the biggest –

[0:11:42.7] BB: Yeah, I guess I do.

[0:11:44.9] JK: Do you enjoy working with them for the, you know, most part? Of course, there's always room for improvement.

[0:11:51.9] BB: Yes.

[0:11:52.5] JK: I think my biggest pet peeve is photos.

[0:11:55.8] BB: Oh.

[0:11:56.9] JK: I will get a press release or I'll get some you know, some information and it requires like a back and forth with getting photos and then I have to escort you know, where the photo credit comes from and it just – I really appreciate it when the, whatever, the email, the press release has photos there and ready because there are times where I might need something last minute, and if I have all the information there and I have the photos, then I'm going to pick that property.

[0:12:28.3] BB: Got it.

[0:12:29.0] JK: That property and sometimes, they'll give you, you know, a URL for a Dropbox for something or WeTransfer and it expires.

[0:12:37.9] BB: It expires, oh, yes.

[0:12:39.6] JK: So, it – that just makes it –

[0:12:43.4] BB: Yeah.

[0:12:44.4] JK: That gives me just like five more steps that I need to do.

[0:12:47.5] BB: Yeah, yeah. What is the deal with that? I guess that's maybe just the auto setting because I've dealt with that too and nothing is more frustrating when you're like, "Okay, great, I just need this photo. Okay, great, here they are." And then you're like, "Okay."

[0:12:57.7] JK: Yes.

[0:12:58.4] BB: Now, you got to – yeah, yeah.

[0:13:00.0] JK: Yes.

[0:13:00.4] **BB:** Okay, so it sounds like just with photos, you would just want a link that never expires, number one.

[0:13:07.1] **JK:** Yes.

[0:13:07.7] **BB:** Yeah, okay, don't expire with that.

[0:13:09.2] **JK:** And just included, included in your –

[0:13:10.9] **BB:** Include it.

[0:13:11.6] **JK:** Your hedge because the more information I have right at my fingertips, the more likely I will be to cover it.

[0:13:18.8] **BB:** There you go. Okay, what is the story approval process like there, Jennifer? You're the editor.

[0:13:25.0] **JK:** Yes.

[0:13:25.7] **BB:** Executive editor, so you're probably the top brass to say, "Yes, we are doing this or not." So, what does it look like?

[0:13:32.4] **JK:** So, we have a network of correspondents that span the globe and they feed their pitches to our managing editor, who vets them, and then sends them to me, and I'll go through and approve pitches from there.

[0:13:50.5] **BB:** Got it. Okay, so it actually just goes managing editor, and then to you, and you all meet how often?

[0:13:56.7] **JK:** Me and the managing editor?

[0:13:57.8] **BB:** Yeah.

[0:13:58.2] JK: We meet several times a week. We talk all of the time, we're remote so we don't live in the same place but we talk about a hundred times a day, so.

[0:14:08.6] BB: Yeah, yep, sounds about right. Sound about right in the remote world that we live in, yes. I have a quick flash list of questions to go through if you're down for it Jennifer, we could see what we get.

[0:14:20.4] JK: Let's do it.

[0:14:21.1] BB: They are our rapid-fire questions, here we go, yes?

[0:14:22.9] JK: Let's do it.

[0:14:23.7] BB: Let's do it. Phone or video interview?

[0:14:26.5] JK: Video.

[0:14:27.4] BB: Video, why video by the way?

[0:14:29.6] JK: I sometimes like picking up on visual cues when I'm interviewing someone. Like if they, maybe they want to say a little something more or if I touch upon something that I think like I can probe a little bit deeper.

[0:14:45.3] BB: Yeah.

[0:14:45.8] JK: And sometimes, you can't detect that through audio.

[0:14:50.3] BB: Yeah, there's more clues of a communication coming out. Bullet points or paragraphs in a pitch.

[0:14:57.0] JK: Either would suffice but I guess I get more paragraphs.

[0:15:01.3] **BB:** Okay, more paragraphs, and you like that? We're talking about preferences, like Jennifer's hitlist of the best thing ever.

[0:15:08.1] **JK:** As long as it's concise, it doesn't matter to me so much whether it's in paragraphs or bullet points.

[0:15:15.2] **BB:** Got you, okay, no preference. How about short or long pitches though? Like how short, how long?

[0:15:21.7] **JK:** I would say shorter.

[0:15:23.2] **BB:** Okay.

[0:15:23.7] **JK:** Even if it's like, you give me two paragraphs to introduce a press release or something like that. I'd rather just kind of get all the information in a quick manner.

[0:15:36.9] **BB:** Great, what about, we already covered images, so email or a DM like on Instagram or X or LinkedIn, what? Like, there's so many places to DM.

[0:15:47.5] **JK:** Only email.

[0:15:48.1] **BB:** Only email.

[0:15:49.4] **JK:** A lot of phone calls, unless they're planned I don't want DMs. I just find that obtrusive.

[0:15:56.8] **BB:** Yeah.

[0:15:57.4] **JK:** To do that.

[0:15:58.7] **BB:** Well, there's so many DMs though.

[0:16:00.0] **JK:** There are.

[0:16:00.6] BB: All over the place, so it's like, "How do I?" I can't get to seven other boxes of things.

[0:16:05.1] JK: Yes.

[0:16:05.7] BB: Yeah, what about, we touched on this a bit, direct or creative subject lines. You said direct you liked.

[0:16:12.7] JK: I do like both. I think each has a place, like if it's more of a newsy item, I think direct is great but if you have something that's a little more creative, I think it's fine to be a little creative with your subject line as well.

[0:16:29.5] BB: Yeah, like champagne hotline.

[0:16:31.0] JK: Yes.

[0:16:31.9] BB: Yeah.

[0:16:32.2] JK: And who wouldn't click on champagne hotline?

[0:16:34.1] BB: I mean, I do. Let's do it, let's do it. What about, we talked about photos but like press release versus media kit?

[0:16:40.8] JK: I guess it depends on the context but I guess I would pick press release first and then media kit if I need something more involved.

[0:16:53.3] BB: Okay, good to hear. We didn't touch on this yet, so what about sources? Are you ever looking for, "Wow, you know the travel planner for West Africa," you know, because that's a hotspot coming up or is it like a Delta representative because you want to hear like what's going on with travel demand or something? Sources for you, what do those look like if at all?

[0:17:15.8] JK: We do use sources. It depends, we have a lot of contacts on properties so we use those a lot but we do turn to airline representatives. We might interview travel agents, a travel adviser. So, it really depends on the story but really, anyone in the travel space could be a source for us.

[0:17:41.3] BB: Should publicist then consider that as a pitch source or a pitch idea for you?

[0:17:46.4] JK: Oh, certainly, especially if they're someone who has like a really interesting story or career, something like you know, we did interview like Raffles, the historian, at Raffles Singapore, and he had been at the property for decades and –

[0:18:04.4] BB: Oh, I love those people.

[0:18:05.8] JK: He had just so much information and great anecdotes. So, we –

[0:18:10.6] BB: Oh, the stories.

[0:18:12.5] JK: Yes. So, hospitality is all about people.

[0:18:14.6] BB: It really is. Okay, and I'm glad you mentioned that because that's a little bit of a – like avantgarde source. That's not someone's, you know, "Oh, it's not a travel agent." Like, that's the category. It's, "No, someone who has been at a property for 30 plus years."

[0:18:28.0] JK: Yes.

[0:18:28.7] BB: You know, what category do you put that in, other than okay, a veteran of a hotel or something but that's significant.

[0:18:35.1] JK: It is, and those people have great stories.

[0:18:37.6] BB: Oh my gosh, for days, and what is travel about? It's about stories, making stories.

[0:18:42.4] JK: Exactly.

[0:18:44.4] BB: Oh, Jennifer, is there anything else that we can tell, promote, highlight for you, as just our own, you know, publicist side of things here?

[0:18:53.2] JK: Well, we just unveiled our very first verified air travel awards.

[0:18:59.2] BB: Ooh, nice.

[0:18:59.7] JK: So –

[0:19:01.3] BB: I bet that was competitive, yes?

[0:19:02.3] JK: It was, and this is –

[0:19:03.9] BB: Ah, yeah.

[0:19:04.8] JK: While we too were known for our inspections of hotels, restaurants, spas and cruises that use incognito inspectors. This was something different for us. We actually tapped our big community of travel advisors and those who really specialize in a luxury space, and we have them vote, so we set [crosstalk 0:19:26.4], 5,000 travel advisors and they came back and we had some really great results from there and some surprising winners that really guard the press.

[0:19:39.5] BB: I'm looking at the list right now.

[0:19:41.5] JK: Yes.

[0:19:41.6] BB: Emirates sweeping the house here, it looks like, and Delta, not surprised, not surprised. Yeah.

[0:19:47.7] JK: I think a lot of people were surprised that LaGuardia won for the best domestic airplane.

[0:19:52.0] BB: Listen, that is the best turnaround I've ever heard. That is the turnaround of – they need to be talking about that for the next two decades, I'm sure because that used to be, for anybody who doesn't know, the pits. The pit's pits, pits of New York. I was just – man.

[0:20:07.7] JK: The worst airports.

[0:20:08.9] BB: Oh, ever.

[0:20:09.9] JK: In the world.

[0:20:10.0] BB: Ever, notoriously. So, wow, that's – what a great PR turnaround story. Congrats LaGuardia, if you're listening and you're on that PR team over there, we see you. We see you. Oh, man, Jennifer, thank you so much for being on today. We love travel, we want the hotline with champagne, everybody. My gosh, everyone, this is Jennifer Kester who is the vice president and executive editor for Forbes Travel Guide, check out her stuff on Forbes but also, of course, Forbes Travel Guide. Thank you, Jennifer.

[0:20:42.2] JK: Thank you so much. Beck.

[0:20:43.5] BB: Oh, what a joy. Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:20:45.8] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode, with Jennifer Kester, the vice president and executive editor at Forbes Travel Guide. 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]