

EPISODE 257**[INTRODUCTION]**

[0:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Hello, and 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 over to our website at onepitch.co to learn more. Grab your favorite cup of coffee and get comfy, because today, we're sitting down with Rachel Curry, a sharp, insightful freelance journalist and longtime CNBC contributor. Rachel's got her finger on the pulse for finance, tech, and local issues, breaking down complex topics in a way that actually makes sense.

In this episode, we're getting real about the freelance hustle, the shifting media landscape, and Rachel's latest passion project, Acronym, her newsletter dedicated to slicing through corporate jargon to get to real stories. If you love smart storytelling with a side of wit, this one's for you. Stay tuned. You're going to love it.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:59] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. On our little show, we like to talk with journalists, freelancers, producers, editors, people who make the media world go round, because we all need help as publicists, understanding how better to work with our journalist friends. Hopefully, they're more friends than the opposite, because we all need each other both ways.

Today with me, a professional dog walker, apparently, is Rachel Curry, who is a freelancer and contributor to CNBC. Where are you coming from today, Rachel? Jersey?

[0:01:33] RC: I am in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. More popularly known as Amish Country. It is Fasnacht Day today. I'm not sure if you're familiar. I did have a doughnut for lunch.

[0:01:42] BB: Wait, what is this? What is this?

[0:01:44] RC: In the Christian world, it's Fat Tuesday. In the Pennsylvania Dutch world, it's a special type of doughnut called Fasnacht Day, and everyone piles up on sugar. I was raised Catholic. I'm not anymore. So, I'm familiar with the whole Ash Wednesday thing. But more importantly, I appreciate getting the doughnut for lunch.

[0:02:06] BB: Oh, fun. Okay, new info. I did not even know this. Okay, great. Also, you've been recently volunteering as a dog walker?

[0:02:14] RC: Correct, for the past four months or so. I'm bringing the experience of having two sometimes reactive mutts of my own, who come from Thailand and have experience living on the streets. I definitely have found a lot of joy, emotional moments on both ends of the spectrum by working with my local shelter.

[0:02:37] BB: Okay. Good for you. Have you had any dog walks yet where you're like, "Uh-oh. Never walking that dog again"?

[0:02:43] RC: Well, usually when there's something that goes down, I immediately think, what did I do wrong? Because I should have known better, or now I know better. For example, maybe this isn't a dog that should be playing tug-of-war in this enclosed space, for example.

[0:03:01] BB: Love it. Okay, yes. I love the self-reflection.

[0:03:05] RC: If only we could meet people where they're at in the same way like we meet animals where they're at, what a great world.

[0:03:12] BB: It would be. I try to think of people as like, well, that's a four-year-old. That's just a four-year-old in their head. That can be helpful. Okay, Rachel, let's talk about your inbox. It's a bit different with a field answer, because you are also pitching sometimes, and you are also getting, I'm sure, pitches. What's the ratio of pitches to you from publicist, versus you pitching and talking to journalists, or talking to your journalists, basically, editors, I imagine?

[0:03:40] RC: Yeah. I mean, I really can only push forth a vast minority of stories up to the editor. Sometimes, I'm developing a story from a pitch that I receive. Sometimes I have an idea

for a larger story, and the time is just right, and I'm receiving certain things in my inbox that would align with that. But I'm just one person. I tend to do more long-form, slightly more evergreen stories, because that's just how I do well. I like to get into the trenches of research and not so much be on the 24-hour news cycle. It's hard nowadays, because everything's moving so fast. But yeah, I'm getting a lot of stuff that I am not necessarily able to use, but I do appreciate the perspectives of what I can look at and read.

[0:04:38] BB: I feel like you're being a little vague. Are you getting hundreds of emails? Tell us more.

[0:04:43] RC: Yeah. I'm probably getting, well, right now it's a little bit off-kilter, because I'm attending South by Southwest next week, so I'm getting a ton of that stuff. In general, I would say, 50 to 100 pitches a week. My in-house staffers might be getting more. But yeah, I feel I'm getting a lot that I just have to file into my big folder to look at later, if it's not relevant for a story I'm working on at the moment. In general, I'm pitching every week or two. I try to bundle the pitches. For example, with CNBC, I have a monthly pitch call with my editor, and then we move on with everything from there. She's like, yes, no, yes, no, yes, whatever.

[0:05:34] BB: Oh, that's so great. Efficient.

[0:05:36] RC: Oh, it takes five, 10 minutes. It's wonderful.

[0:05:37] BB: Oh, amazing. Ooh, that's a good relationship then. You have a better year.

[0:05:40] RC: I know.

[0:05:41] BB: That's awesome. Yeah, she's the best. For other publications, it might be more ad hoc that I'm sending things out. But really, I would say, outside of the local and regional journalism that I do, in the tech world, I'm probably writing seven to 10 stories a month, and that's just off the top of my head. I cannot promise accuracy on that.

[0:06:07] BB: We're not going to fact check it. Yeah

[0:06:10] RC: You could imagine that.

[0:06:12] BB: Okay. This is the interesting and amazing part with, I think, freelancers you're pitching your work, and of course, you have to do the work, you're feeling all the stuff from the publicists. How do you, if at all, manage the slew of pitches you get? Do you just mass delete? Are you a filer? What do you do? I'm talking from the publicist. Yeah.

[0:06:32] RC: I'm a filer.

[0:06:33] BB: You're a filer. Okay.

[0:06:34] RC: Yeah. Sometimes I do delete, and I was looking through my trash holder today to see if there's any rhyme or reason for that, and preparation for this conversation, and I was coming to the conclusion that it's, yeah, some of it is about what they're pitching and how they're pitching it, but a lot of it comes down to just being in the right time. Being in the right time, right place situation, which must be a very hard job. I can only imagine having to be on all the time, like a realtor or something, and I do feel for that. But yeah, I generally have a one folder that I file it all into that allows me to reference later. I'm starting to think I need to work on that system, because it worked for me in the past. Now, as my career is expanding a little bit, it might not be the best moving forward. Yeah, as I looked through that folder as well today, I'm thinking I might need to reassess.

[0:07:34] BB: Mm-hmm. Okay. Okay. Are we always reassessing, dealing with the slug? Yes, tell us.

[0:07:41] RC: I will say, today, I realized that I had filed an email that I did take note of and wanted to use for a story that I have coming up later this month. I never responded. I'm responding to her about four weeks after she sent it, and I said, I hope that this source is still available, because I put it in my folder for the story, and they came back to me right away.

[0:08:05] BB: Oh, okay. That was going to be my next question. Did they respond right away? Because one of the pet peeves I hear is people go like, "Yeah. So then, I did respond and then

what? You're emailing me back four days later? No. The story's already filed." Okay. Shout out to this publicist, you got an immediate response and they got it connected, or what?

[0:08:21] RC: Yeah. They're working on getting it connected. I have not responded back to them since then, but it's moving. Things are moving.

[0:08:26] BB: Okay. You're doing it, of course. I love it. Okay. Tell us a little bit, Rachel, you mentioned you put pitching to your editors, and so forth. Walk us through, or tell us a little bit about how you pitch. How does that look?

[0:08:42] RC: Yeah. I might get an idea from just what's going on in the world, or an interesting fact that I encounter, or statistic, or technological advancement and build a story around that. I might build a story based on an expert that I have available in my inbox, who has a particularly interesting take and build on that. Ultimately, I'm thinking about building stories that resonate with something that's going on in the cultural, political zeitgeist of some kind, has some sort of problem and then solution, hopefully. That way, we're not just harping on one side or the other. It's hopefully providing a more balanced, nuanced take there. Whether I have the sources, or I need to go get some additional sources, I do try to build a story around different viewpoints.

For example, I just wrote a story on how, and this still has yet to go live. I'm not sure if it will be live by the time this is out, but on how the artificial intelligence, advancements around education could potentially fill gaps, despite defunding at the federal level for the Department of Education, and you can only imagine the varying perspectives on that. Obviously, we all have the same goal, which is bringing children up and hopefully, healthy environments that can propel them toward success, but what that may look like is different for different people. As someone with my own perspectives, I have to put that aside to talk to certain people, but also, make sure I'm asking them everyone questions that could poke holes in their story.

[0:10:39] BB: Yeah. How have things shifted for you, would you say, Rachel, since new administration, just toggling between, okay, this is maybe how I really feel, this is a disaster that's going on, but I need to stay curious with the source? Has that confronted you in these last couple of months?

[0:10:57] RC: Yes. It's confronted me. The first thing I would say in my work is that things are moving so much faster. I'm sure people in the PR world have seen that. I might have a semi-bite on a pitch from an editor next day, they're like, "This is no longer relevant."

[0:11:16] BB: An instance. Have at you. Irrelevant.

[0:11:19] RC: Yeah. I'm starting to have to, I need a little bit more often, which is a balance, because you have to balance like, I would say, being on with news 24/7 is not good for anyone's mental health. You really have to balance it, because you want to be informed, you want to try to talk about these things, but you have to protect yourself. That's interesting. Yeah, I don't have Instagram right now, because that is just a casualty of what's going on. Regarding the perspectives of things, I am grateful for my job, because it gives me a safe place to talk to people about high-tension topics, which is interesting.

[0:12:03] BB: What a great perspective. Yeah.

[0:12:07] RC: Whereas, in other environments, you might not be able to be so civil, such as Facebook comment section, God forbid. It also allows me the chance to be, like you said, curious, ask these questions, but also, try to figure out, have you thought about this? If so, what's your perspective on that? I think as a journalist, you have to balance. Sometimes it's very important to put yourself into the conversation a little bit in order to make the source more comfortable. Finding commonalities that way is an interesting activity.

[MESSAGE]

[0:12:52] 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]

[0:13:15] BB: Thank you for sharing that. Okay. How may publicists help you?

[0:13:19] RC: That's a big question. Publicists can help me by number one, stop asking for coffee chats. We don't need to be doing that.

[0:13:29] BB: Okay. She does not want to go coffee. Okay. Okay.

[0:13:33] RC: Unless, we're both at an in-person event.

[0:13:37] BB: Okay. You're at Southwest or South Vine. You're like, "Okay, I'm going to be here." Even that, you feel like, "Okay, I'm too damn busy. I'm not doing one coffee with you."

[0:13:46] RC: Yeah. I think that I've tried it in the past. People are very nice. It's a nice experience. There have been times where it have been fruitful. For example, I'm starting a newsletter and I've worked with a particular publicist multiple times and she's been able to help me guide some of my sources for the stories, in the early editions, which has been very helpful. In general, it really just doesn't pan out with much. I think that it's like what they say, it could have been an email.

[0:14:18] BB: Yeah. Oh, I hate those. It's like, could have been an email. Okay. Tapping on that a little bit, relationship building. What's your preferred method? It's definitely not asking you for a coffee, it sounds like.

[0:14:31] RC: Yeah. I would say for me, my preferred method is having successful interactions over time. It's really, there's no shortcut to that, I fear. But yeah, if we're successfully partnering, or providing a source for a story that goes live, everyone's happy. We do it again. Your name is going to pop in my head and I'm going to email you next time to see if you have any one, if I need to fill a hole. You may or may not have someone. As you can imagine with a bajillion names in my email, it's actually really hard to remember who people are.

[0:15:14] BB: Oh, God. Yeah. That's just email, so you don't have any visual. No. Yeah. Yeah.

[0:15:19] RC: I hope people don't take that personally, but –

[0:15:22] BB: Oh, I don't think you can.

[0:15:23] RC: Yeah. Really, just building that relationship over time. It's like a Pavlovian response. I see your name and I'm like, I trust you a little bit more.

[0:15:31] BB: Exactly. There you go. Okay. Let's keep it. Consistency, building trust. That's all.

[0:15:38] RC: Yeah. If things aren't landing, just keep trying. I appreciate it, nonetheless.

[0:15:47] BB: Okay. Rachel, I'm thinking a little bit more – Oh, I'm going to ask you this. What's a typical day for you as a freelance?

[0:15:55] RC: There is no such thing. There is no such thing.

[0:15:58] BB: Okay. Tell us more.

[0:16:00] RC: Which is how I like it. I'm someone who, when I was in college, that was the peak of my existence, because I was taking all these credits, working a part-time job, also on the newspaper.

[0:16:14] BB: Yeah. Doing all the things. Doing all the things.

[0:16:16] RC: Doing all the things. All over the place, never in the same spot for more than a couple of hours. When I went into the workforce after school, I was so bored sitting somewhere all day, doing the same thing. Nowadays, I mean, it really depends. I might have a day where I've got five interviews for three different stories. That can be a little bit confusing. But as long as I organize my calendar appropriately, I can make sure I'm not saying the wrong thing to the wrong person. You have to be a bit organized and playing well. Don't accidentally say, this is a story for CNBC when it's actually not.

[0:16:52] BB: Yeah. Yeah.

[0:16:53] RC: I've never done that, but it's a fear of mine. My favorite type of day is when I'm writing one long-ass story for six to eight hours and have nothing else to do, because that's where I shine. It's just like, I can put on my dark academia, classical YouTube series on my noise canceling headphones and shout out the world. More commonly, I'm –

[0:17:21] BB: Sounds fun.

[0:17:22] RC: - spending half a day writing, half a day doing other tasks, like contacting sources, preparing interview questions, transcribing interviews is big.

[0:17:33] BB: By the way, by the way, you don't use AI for that? You like to transcribe it? Or tell us more.

[0:17:38] RC: I use Otter, but it's not perfect. Just like, you still need to go through everything. It turns down the time, but you still need to go through it manually for sure.

[0:17:49] BB: Got you. Okay. Excellent. It's good to know. I know, manually, it also helps it sink in if you ask me, because then you're like, “Oh, hmm. This point, that point, connect the dots,” and so forth.

[0:17:58] RC: Yeah, for the most part, it's just revising whatever they think was said to what was actually said. Maybe it's the accent of the person. Maybe it's just the audio quality. Maybe it's the fact that they're talking about the Susquehanna River, which is where I live near and transcription services don't really know what the hell that means.

[0:18:16] BB: Yeah, exactly, exactly.

[0:18:17] RC: You're right. I like to do it, and then shortly thereafter write the story, because it just reminds me of everything we talked about.

[0:18:28] BB: I like it. Okay, Rachel, we have a rapid-fire question set if you're ready for it. Shall we do it?

[0:18:33] RC: All right.

[0:18:34] BB: Let's do it. Phone, or video interview?

[0:18:38] RC: Video. Unless, I'm really tired.

[0:18:41] BB: Okay. Why video? Why video?

[0:18:45] RC: I prefer video, because it just allows you to understand the source a little bit more and that helps you build a better connection with them, gain their trust, and then you can ultimately have a more candid and more candid interview with better quotes. When people are comfortable with you, that tends to be the case. Sometimes I like phone. Usually, it's when I'm fed up with the videos. I've done that week and I just don't really feel like doing it. I guess, it's a little bit selfish.

[0:19:17] BB: Yup. I hear you on that. Okay, bullet points or paragraphs in a pitch?

[0:19:22] RC: Bullet points, for sure. If there are paragraphs, definitely take advantage of the bold formatting, because it's very helpful. Maybe both.

[0:19:31] BB: Maybe both. Short, or long pitches? I would say, short then.

[0:19:36] RC: Short pitches with additional information as needed after the signature is super helpful.

[0:19:43] BB: Okay.

[0:19:43] RC: Because I can choose to look further if I need to.

[0:19:49] BB: Images attached, or Dropbox zip file?

[0:19:52] RC: Oh, Dropbox. Because I think it's just easier for me to add it to a different tab and look at it after.

[0:20:00] BB: Okay. Okay. That's an unusual answer. Okay. Email, or DM somewhere, somehow, to whatever it is? Well, you're not going through around as we just discussed.

[0:20:11] RC: Emails most likely. I am on LinkedIn, so I'll accept it in there. For the love of God, do not text or call me, and that has happened.

[0:20:23] BB: We haven't heard of, for the love of God, for a while on this show. Let's make sure – Katrina, make sure we call that one out. That's fun. For the love of God, for Rachel Curry, no calls or text, you can imagine. Love it. Okay. One follow-up, or multiple?

[0:20:37] RC: One follow up is plenty. Unless, we've already communicated a little and I said, I'll get back to you, which I do a lot. I'm putting a pin in it and saying, I'll be in touch once I get this moving.

[0:20:50] BB: Yes. Direct, or creative subject line?

[0:20:53] RC: Direct, because I think you could do creative. But to do that, you really have to put yourself in the journalist mindset and really, the editor's mindset, because most journalists are not writing headlines. If you want to make a really headline ask subject line, that would be cool, because that makes it easier for me to pitch to my editor. However, that's really hard, even for me. I would just go with direct.

[0:21:23] BB: Press release or media kit?

[0:21:25] RC: Media kit. I would say, press releases can be fine. They're just so long. Usually, I just file them for reference later if I need it for a story.

[0:21:36] BB: A time that you usually read pitches?

[0:21:39] RC: Oh, I'm not a good person to ask this question, because like I said earlier –

[0:21:41] BB: All the time. Yeah. All the time. You're not feeling that, what are you going to do?

[0:21:45] RC: All the time, or none of the time.

[0:21:46] BB: Or none of the time.

[0:21:47] RC: There's no in between.

[0:21:49] BB: Mm-hmm. There you go. Okay. Then any sources you're looking for, particularly right now?

[0:21:55] RC: Yeah. I am working on gathering one to two extra sources right now for a story later this month. It's got a couple of weeks until I need to figure that out, particularly around green energy, green technology that enables energy, specifically thinking of, again, the current political climate, the current cultural climate, how the industry might change in the future, but also, how advancements in technology are creating high demands for the grid. I would love to speak to someone in the renewable energy space on how they're preparing for that future.

[0:22:32] BB: Oh, oh. Okay, publicists. You heard it here. Excellent. Rachel, is there anything that we could do to celebrate, promote, tout your stuff?

[0:22:41] RC: Oh, yeah. I have a newsletter of – I launched it a few months ago. It's called Acronym. It's an ironic title that plays on the TLA's, or three-letter acronyms that corporate is known for. Really, what I'm hoping to do is shed light on what's really going down in business. The tagline is getting past corporate jargon to get to the good shit. There will be the occasional cuss word, because that's how I talk. I am trying to maintain my journalistic integrity in these stories, but also, just give myself a space to write a little bit more in my own voice than the voice of the publications that I tend to write for. Also, give people a space to be a little more candid in our interviews.

For example, I recently published an article, actually came out this morning, the newsletter, someone who had experience with their tech company being acquired and what they learned through that process. So, what they would do if they had to do it again and things like that.

[0:23:50] BB: Okay. Okay. Rachel Curry, thank you so much for being here today. All the way from Pennsylvania, enjoying her donut for the day. For what is it again?

[0:23:59] RC: Fasnacht Day.

[0:24:00] BB: Fasnacht Day. Okay. There you go. Put it on the dance card for me. Maybe not. Maybe not. This is maybe not a travel to type. This is a Michelin star travel to type of thing, if I hear you right. I love that you had a donut today. Thank you for being here. Rachel Curry, contributor for CNBC, everybody, freelance journalist. Do not invite her to coffee. No, no.

[0:24:22] RC: Do not text me.

[0:24:23] BB: Do not. For the love of God, do not text her. Thank you so much, Rachel. Appreciate you.

[0:24:32] RC: Thank you.

[0:24:32] BB: See you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:24:33] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode with Rachel Curry, a freelance tech journalist and CNBC contributor. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly newsletter at onepitch.co/podcast. We'll see you next week. But until then, start great stories.

[END]