## **EPISODE 61**

## [INTRODUCTION]

**[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER:** Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by OnePitch. The guests on our show include some of the most notable journalists from the top US-based publications who cover topics including technology, lifestyle and culture, health, science, consumer products, and business news. We discuss their role, the types of stories they cover, what their inbox looks like, and how they connect with sources. If you're an avid listener to the show, we'd love to hear from you. Leave us a review to share your thoughts about past episodes and help spread the word to new listeners.

Today, we're joined by Lydia Dishman, a regular contributor to Fast Company. Lydia writes about the intersection of tech, leadership, and innovation. Lydia has been an independent journalist since 2009 and previously wrote for SC magazine, CBS Interactive, and USA Today. Lydia shares details about surveys and sample sizes, one of her recent pieces about the places to work at home, shares praise about her Fast Company co-workers, and much more. Let's listen in now.

## [INTERVIEW]

[00:01:12] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger, Co-founder of OnePitch and also BAM, which represents all these crazy venture-backed startups that we love and promote all the time. Today, I'm very excited. We had some technical difficulties a second ago, but I think we're good. Lydia Dishman from Fast Company, she's a contributing editor, also a contributing reporter. We are so happy you're here. Thank you, Lydia.

[00:01:39] LD: It is my pleasure to be here. Thank you very much for having me.

[00:01:42] BB: Yes. You were recently on one of our Ask Media Anything series too, so you are making the rounds on the promotion and educating people on pitches and all this good stuff. Appreciate it.

[00:01:55] LD: It's why I keep – help make everyone's jobs easier. I'm all about that.

[00:01:59] BB: Yes. That is the goal. I appreciate it. Well, let's start with your inbox. How crazy is it in there? Do you get bunches of pitches and what actually makes you open a pitch?

[00:02:12 LD: I get about an average of a hundred a day. Not kidding.

[00:02:17] BB: That's pretty bad. That's pretty bad.

[00:02:20] LD: I can tell you that in a half hour last week I had 44 land between both inboxes and –

[00:02:29] BB: That's bad.

[00:02:30] LD: I tend to look for the subject line which may catch my interest. That said, I'm not a fan of somebody writing time-sensitive in all caps, although I do understand that that is often a thing. I am often not a breaking news reporter, so that is really not much of a thing for me. I tend to do longer pieces. What I do pay attention to on the time-sensitive front though is in my role as contributing editor at Fast Company, I do a lot of work with outside contributors. So if someone has a hot take on a news item, then that may be time-sensitive, so there's the caveat there.

[00:03:22] BB: Got it.

[00:03:22] LD: But a good subject line is always catchy, and then I am always looking for the concise pitch. If you're writing four paragraphs and telling me what the story is, it's way too much.

[00:03:39] BB: Got you. Do you even like bullet points? Do you even like three sentences max?

How succinct is succinct where you love it?

[00:03:49] LD: Well, I have in my LinkedIn profile that it should be distilled to five sentences. I

feel like if you have to go longer than that, then you really haven't clearly thought out what the

angle is that you're pitching, and that makes me have to do a lot more work to wade through

your pitch. That said, I do read everything and I try to respond to everyone within 24 to 48

hours.

[00:04:15] BB: Oh, my gosh. Of the 100 pitches you get, you'll respond to all of those?

[00:04:19] LD: I do and -

[00:04:20] BB: Lydia, you are like a unicorn. I've never heard this before. Do you have like a bot

that responds? How do you do this?

[00:04:28 LD: Well, I've been at this for a very long time, so I can vet things pretty quickly and

with the help of Gmail's templated responses.

[00:04:38] BB: Yeah. That stuff helps.

[00:04:39] LD: I have anywhere between five to eight of those that are generally one size fits

most. So oftentimes if it's really something that I'm completely not interested in, then they will

get a templated response.

[00:04:55] BB: That is awesome though that you actually get those responses out, my god.

Out of the 60 of these that we've done so far I'd say, I don't think I've ever heard that.

[00:05:06 LD: Really?

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[00:05:07 BB: Yeah. That is remarkable, remarkable. Now, what if -

[00:05:11] LD: I do think that it helps, especially when people don't necessarily have a history of working with me, so they're not entirely sure about what I cover. I think that especially in my Fast Company bio, it's pretty vague where the lines are. Someone will send something that's not quite related to my beat and rather than have them, A, follow up 100 times or, B, keep sending me things that are irrelevant, it's just better to kind of get it out of the way. I'll take the hit of the pain part right at the outset.

[00:05:47] BB: That's actually quite the efficient strategy because now you don't get the follow-up emails. You don't get 17 other irrelevant pitches. This person knows you're a human, so there's some connection there. I see this. That's good. Good technique perhaps. Others could adopt. Do you then in thinking of creating a story because you're right. Your bio on Fast Company specifically talks about intersection of tech, leadership, and innovation. That is widely broad, and some of the last stories you've just done are about Harriet Tubman on the \$20 bill and a report. One-third of tech workers admit to working very low hours, which I really want to talk more about that. I'm like, "Who are these people?" A survey with employees the best places to work, all this stuff, job openings. I mean, there's just so many that you cover. As you think of a story, what spurs you to do one? Are you, for example, like taking a shower, doing a walk and you're like, "You know what? I want to talk about the \$20 bill."?

[00:06:49] LD: Well, I think a lot of what you see, especially in the recent lineup, is more a product of me taking a new shift once a week. Those little items that I do really short, not terribly deeply reported are a product of me on the news desk for the afternoon. That tends to come up. Now, that said, the report on how many hours some tech workers put in, that was pitched to me, and I was on news duty. If it's a slow news day, I tend to pull from the pitches that I get if I can do like a quick turn on an interesting report. I'm a journalist. I love data. I love reports. That said, there's certain parameters that we follow for surveys, not the least of which is it can't be conducted by a company that has a stake in the results.

[00:07:52] BB: Yeah. You mean you don't want to have the ones a hundred customers

surveyed out of a hundred love our products for technology. That doesn't work.

[00:08:01] LD: Yeah, no.

[00:08:04] BB: I love those. I love those though.

[00:08:06] LD: No, no, no. Also, thanks to Pew Research Center. We figured out that the

sample size needs to be a thousand or more but generally around a thousand to be completely

representative sample of whatever it is that you're doing. Those that come in 250 to 500, I

don't necessarily want to cover those because I don't feel like that's a standard representative

sample.

[00:08:30] BB: I agree. It's, yeah, weak potatoes. If anyone then, hopefully you're listening to

this, has a survey, you better have more than a thousand. You better have a third-party

research company that's conducting it.

[00:08:42] LD: Amen.

[00:08:43] BB: There you . That is very good guidance because I feel like that survey question

comes up incessantly with a bunch of people. Okay. So you mentioned right there, just when

you're on the news beat, you will take something from a pitch. How many stories would you

say come from a pitch you receive? What's the percentage if you had to guess?

[00:09:04] LD: I would say it's a majority but not in -

[00:09:08] BB: Majority?

[00:09:09] LD: Yes. But it's massaged.

[00:09:12] BB: Got you.

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[00:09:13] LD: Something will come through, and there'll be some sort of thread in there that

sparks a different idea. For example, the last reported piece that I did, one of the longer ones,

was the one about the best places to work from home in your house because we do tend to do

productivity coverage. That kind of grew out of a lot of pitches, a lot of different ones from a lot

of different people saying that what are the productivity hacks now that we're almost a year

into this pandemic experiment of remote work.

Then Fast Company did a partnership with Harris Poll, and so they actually did a poll to see

where people are working from home. Then I just did a handful of interviews about different

types of executives, different industries just to see how they were faring and where they found

the best places in their house to work.

[00:10:18] BB: I love that too. What a good way to change because, yeah, I guess you're not in

that shared communal kitchen eating your free snacks anymore.

[00:10:26] LD: Yeah. I'm sure that's hurting a lot of people.

[00:10:29] BB: Yes. We used to have debates about what is in the snack folder or the file over

here, so I'm kind of personally glad those conversations are over because we're done with that.

Okay. Lydia, what are you reading right now? But we'll also take watching, listening, podcasts.

We'll take anything.

[00:10:47] LD: What am I reading? Well, several things. I love literary fiction. Right now, I

dipped into the archives and I'm reading Circe, which is a reimagining of the Greek myth, and

it's the most lyrical prose and an incredible psychological study of these gods and goddesses.

That is a complete vacation for the brain.

[00:11:13] BB: I love that. How do you spell that, by the way, for people?

[00:11:17] LD: Circe is C-I-R-C-E.

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[00:11:20] BB: C-E, great. By Madeline Miller?

[00:11:24] LD: Yes, the very one.

[00:11:26] BB: Fantastic. Putting that on my Audible. This is where I get all my

recommendations. Okay, that's great. Anything else?

[00:11:33] LD: Yeah. I love to read memoir. So, again, another vacation to the brain was, and

I'm in the middle of this one because I tend to read two or three at the same time, depending

on the mood, Priestdaddy.

[00:11:46] BB: Priestdaddy?

[00:11:48] LD: Priestdaddy, yes. She is hilarious, some of the descriptions. I always joke that

writing memoir, especially about your family, that's the second oldest profession. She really,

really nails it, so highly recommended. I'm still in the middle of it. I'm trying to go slowly just

because -

[00:12:11] BB: You love it so much.

[00:12:12] LD: I'm enjoying it so much. The problem is that my spouse is not enjoying it along

with me. All he hears is me cackling next to him while reading. He's like, "Would you put that

away?"

[00:12:24] BB: I just added it also into my thing. This sounds so good. Father Greg Lockwood

is unlike any Catholic priest you have ever met, a man who lounges in boxer shorts, who loves

action movies, and whose constant jamming on the guitar reverberates "like a whole band

dying in a plane crash in 1972."

[00:12:44] LD: See.

[00:12:45] BB: Yes, yes. Oh, my god.

[00:12:47] LD: And having run the gauntlet of Catholic school, I was raised Roman Catholic,

I'm not practicing anymore, but there were certain parts of that that resonated for me.

[00:12:58] BB: Oh, my god.

[00:12:59] LD: Pretty strongly. It's nice to be able to laugh at it.

[00:13:03] BB: I cannot wait. I think both my parents were raised like with the nuns and the

school and all the stuff. Look. Here's one review that says, "Jesus would dig perfect." I love it.

Okay. I love a good memoir too. This is perfect. Thank you for those, Lydia. That's great.

[00:13:20] LD: You're welcome.

[00:13:21] BB: Okay. We do have an audience ask. This comes from Rosemary who works

over at Clearlink. She said, "What's the most memorable pitch you received in the last year?"

I'm sure you got some interesting ones pandemic-wise and all.

[00:13:37] LD: Yes, although you'll have to forgive me. I can't say that anything really stands

out because there were so many very similar ones. I'll confess that if we're going to go along

the Catholic route, forgive me, Father, for I have sinned, that there was I would say at least two

to three months where I was working 10 to 12 hours a day, and it just felt like I could barely

keep my head above water. It was just really focused but not focused, so just kind of

swimming as hard as I could.

[00:14:19] BB: Head above water, yeah.

[00:14:22] LD: This has been a year.

[00:14:23] BB: Was that April, May-ish time when everything came crashing down in the summer and then the unrest and all?

[00:14:30] LD: Absolutely.

[00:14:30] BB: I'm sure you guys have been -

[00:14:32] LD: Yeah. That second wave of – I'm calling the second wave the civil rights movement. Of course, there have been many, but that was so horrific and so nerve-wracking. Just being not a person of color but I just was so deeply, deeply affected by this and was trying so hard to do whatever I could to amplify the voices of the people who were living it. It was a lot. It was a lot.

[00:15:04] BB: Well, and I have to say kudos to Fast Company. That's an area they really focus on. What is the impact from a mental health perspective? Where is diversity? Who's making claims about it? What is the impact? All this stuff, that's one of your hallmarks, which is great. In fact, I'm just looking up right now. It's talking about fast food workers striking for \$15 an hour in 15 different cities, so there's always good coverage on Fast Company.

[BREAK]

[00:15:30] ANNOUNCER: Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious to see the unique ways OnePitch helps PR professionals and marketers pitch journalists? Head to onepitch.co to learn about our new OnePitch score and see how easy it is to find the right journalist to pitch your news to. Sign up for your free account today. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

[00:15:54] BB: Is there a story, especially in reflection of last year, that you wish you had written that you're like, "Damn, that other reporter got the scoop."? You know which ones I'm

talking about. You're like, "God damn, a scoop." Or maybe just also a piece you just really

admired from another journalist.

[00:16:15] LD: Yeah.

[00:16:15] BB: It's like your journalist love note, this part.

[00:16:18] LD: I have many, and they reside within my co-worker's umbrella. I work with such

incredibly smart people, and they continually surprise and delight me. That is a marketing term

that I loathe, but it is really wonderful to work with these people and to see them take coverage

to such great levels. My colleague, Julia Herbst, who she heads up our work life channel, did a

really terrific story on GitHub last year, and that was fantastic.

Another colleague, Ainsley O'Connell did terrific deep dive into women need more than just

flexibility at work. These issues are near and dear to my heart, so it's kind of amazing when

these reporters can just really jump in feet first and go super deep. Another colleague of mine,

Pavithra Mohan, she consistently turns out some incredibly deeply reported stories. She's also

a writer's writer, so always the clever turn of phrase which as you're reading, it's like, "Oh, I

wish I'd written that."

[00:17:37] BB: Pavithra, we've had her on here.

[00:17:39] LD: Have you? Yeah. She's terrific.

[00:17:42] BB: She is. Well, that's good. That's cool that you have so many within your own

outlet that you're like, "Oh, I love what they're doing." That's cool.

[00:17:50] LD: But I also – I mean, if I have to stretch outside the bounds, I'm an avid reader of

the New York Times. I've always been and I counted myself lucky to be among the contributors

once upon a time but Ginia Bellafante who writes the Big City column.

[00:18:05] BB: Yes. I just read her piece yesterday in the Sunday. Yes.

[00:18:08] LD: About the retail stores in Brooklyn?

[00:18:11] BB: Yeah.

[00:18:12] LD: She generally always does a very thorough and wonderful job of reporting on these little sort of what would seem kind of like niche but the microcosm of the macrocosm because I know that this kind of thing is happening across the country. It's just I guess more at scale in New York City.

[00:18:31] BB: I also love with the New York Times – This is why I miss New York so much. Are you in New York right now, by the way?

[00:18:37] LD: Yes, I am. I'm a New Yorker born and raised, even though I've lived elsewhere.

[00:18:43] BB: You're never not a New Yorker if you're born and raised. It's my opinion on that.

[00:18:47] LD: Very true.

[00:18:47] BB: And I love how you can read the New York Times and you feel it's still a very New York city paper, if that makes sense. I freaking love that, so here I am all the way in California and I'm reading parts like that piece you just mentioned, and you're like, "Yes." There was the piece on the MTA in the business section. I forgot who the influencer is but where he was wrangling up all the celebrities to do the MTA announcements. He had Jerry Seinfeld on there. I just loved that. I loved it and Modern Love.

[00:19:20] LD: Modern Love is wonderful. There was a recent story about a pretty famous Instagrammer in these parts, New York Nico.

[00:19:28] BB: That's the one I'm talking about. That's the piece. Yes.

[00:19:31] LD: Yeah. Where he was in the Army/Navy store, yeah, and the proprietor is the Asian guy who came as an immigrant and just through sheer force of will is continuing to operate this business. But he is a profile in stellar customer service, and that's why everyone loves him. But that was a wonderful story as well.

[00:19:53 BB: Gosh. There's nothing like New York as we know, as we know. All right, I have a few fill in the blanks here. Let's see what your first thought is. It could be like a sentence-long but just you want to keep it brief because we got a few. Okay. My favorite publicist always dot, dot, dot –

[00:20:13] LD: Knows my beat.

[00:20:15] BB: The most annoying publicist always -

[00:20:18] LD: Follows up even though I've sent them a reply.

[00:20:22] BB: You'll get a response from me if dot, dot, dot -

[00:20:25] LD: You know what's relevant to my beat.

[00:20:29] BB: Now, let's see about this one. You can follow up with me if -

[00:20:33] LD: You haven't heard from me in more than 48 hours. But the caveat there is I'm either sick or dead.

[00:20:43] BB: Good to know. Good to know. Is that the same with your colleagues too? Do they know this like Lydia rule?

**[00:20:48] LD:** I generally respond very, very quickly to colleagues, I mean, and I flex even after my own general hours. Everybody knows generally what my hours are. But if they call on me after those hours or before, I'll respond.

[00:21:03] BB: Nice. It would be a huge help if -

[00:21:06] LD: You knew my beat.

[00:21:08] BB: Back to the beat. My perfect Sunday is -

[00:21:12] LD: Taking a long walk, coming back, having a good stretch, and then snuggling up with whatever I'm reading at the moment.

[00:21:21 BB: Sounds good. The last best thing I ate was -

[00:21:26] LD: I made a wonderful chicken paprikash from the New York Times recipes.

[00:21:32] BB: Damn, that sounds good. I wonder this sometimes about their recipes though because you don't get like the rating, so you're like, "Did 2,000 other people make this yet?" I don't know. I don't know. It's a little risky I feel, but that was a good one.

[00:21:45] LD: Well, it can be risky. However, I've been cooking for approximately 105 years, so I know how to adapt.

[00:21:54] BB: So you're a good chef, Lydia. That's what you're telling us.

[00:21:57] LD: I'm a good home cook.

[00:21:59] BB: Quarantine taught me -

[00:22:01] LD: That I need fresh air, regardless of the weather. Otherwise, my head will explode.

[00:22:08] BB: My favorite stories to write are -

[00:22:11] LD: When there's a really interesting character, founder story, backstory, some sort of something that makes you feel like actually this could be a novel.

[00:22:25] BB: Yes. One thing I think people should know more about me is -

[00:22:30] LD: That I am extraordinarily conscientious and I work very hard and I don't like to be dismissed as sort of I guess a rookie because I've been doing it for a long time.

[00:22:48] BB: Who says you're a rookie? Do you get people saying that? I am shocked by this.

[00:22:53] LD: I think that if it's a new publicist perhaps, they don't necessarily know how long I've been doing this. More to the point I think is when they introduce me to a client of theirs that I wrote about, let's say, five years ago. It's a really simple fix. Before you write to somebody, Google their name and Google the name of your client and make sure that the coverage has not already happened. Pretty standard I think, but I don't think everybody really is mindful of that.

**[00:23:26] BB:** No, they're not. That's the problem. Wow. I have not heard that before, people thinking like, "Oh, I'm a rookie." You've been like in the business 20 plus years. Wow.

[00:23:37] LD: Well, not everybody looks at LinkedIn and -

[00:23:41] BB: I don't know. What do you think, speaking of as you have been around for a while, the future journalism looks like?

**[00:23:50] LD:** I think that it's definitely on the journalists to be as savvy with as many media as possible. Whatever 10 years ago, we had this rise of the multimedia journalists, and you had to be proficient in video, as well as audio. Then you had to be into the socials as well. I think that that's only going to increase. Definitely, you must be at least tangentially involved in whatever social platform is related to your beat so that you can see what people are talking about. It is fodder for new ideas, certainly fodder for new characters springing up who may potentially work out to be someone that you'd want to speak to as a source or even to profile.

I just think that's really going to increase and I also think that there's less of an opportunity to make mistakes. By that I mean, A, it's very easy to fact check things, but I think that our culture now is going to be less forgiving of lazy journalism in that your sources, your stories need to be as diverse as your audience. There is absolutely no excuse why you should be double-dipping into the well of the same five white guy experts that you've been talking to for the last however many years you've been doing this. There are plenty of people out there, and you just have to be a little more creative, and laziness is not forgiven anymore.

[00:25:40] BB: Yes. You spoke about this on our AMA that was all focused around diversity and how journalists are thinking about this, so I appreciate you emphasizing that again and agree, of course. By the way, do you hear from anyone else, maybe like your, let's say, peers, colleagues where you're like, "Okay, you guys."? Do you hear pushback from that from anybody? Obviously, not naming names or anything but do you ever get people who are like, "Oh. But you know, Lydia. I don't know." Or anything like that? Or is everyone on board would you say?

[00:26:11] LD: No. I think that certainly everyone I've worked with and for is definitely on board and definitely more mindful than ever, especially since this past summer. You can tell who's performative or not, but I really feel the authenticity coming through. I think the desire is there, and the proof is just day to day as you keep writing and putting stuff out there.

[00:26:35] BB: That's good. Good to hear. Well, Lydia, to wrap us up for today, we have a fun little mad lib. If you're down for it, I'm going to give you the word and then I'll fill it in and we go from here. The first thing is an emotion, any emotion.

[00:26:50] LD: Contentment.

[00:26:51] BB: Contentment. Good one. What about an adjective?

[00:26:55] LD: Perfidious.

[00:26:56] BB: Perfidious. This is going to be a fun one. Okay. And another adjective.

[00:27:06] LD: Insolent.

[00:27:07] BB: Insolent. Oh, man. Okay. What's a greeting, any type of greeting?

[00:27:14] LD: Hey with two Ys.

[00:27:20] BB: What? Okay.

[00:27:23] LD: You're like, "Heyy."

[00:27:25] BB: Yeah. "Heyy." Okay. What about a verb?

[00:27:28] LD: Running.

[00:27:28] BB: Running. Okay. Noun, any noun.

[00:27:33] LD: Gosh. Lampshade.

[00:27:34] BB: Lampshade. I like that. Okay. Another adjective.

[00:27:38] LD: Crimson.

[00:27:39] BB: Crimson. Okay. A cringe-worthy PR term.

[00:27:44] LD: Can it be a phrase?

[00:27:45] BB: Sure, sure.

[00:27:47] LD: It's no surprise that. I can't tell you how many pitches I get with that as an opener.

[00:27:56] BB: So surprised. Okay. Kind of my nasty retort to that is like, "Well, then if it's no surprise, why the hell are you talking to me about it?"

[00:28:02] LD: Yeah, exactly. Please tell me why I should give a shit.

[00:28:05] BB: Yeah. Okay. What's a part of a pitch?

[00:28:09] LD: A part of a pitch?

[00:28:10] BB: Yes.

[00:28:11] LD: Like?

[00:28:11] BB: Like the close or the or the subject line or this can have many interpretations.

[00:28:18] LD: Like if we were going to diagram the sentence?

[00:28:20] BB: Sure.

[00:28:21] LD: The salutation.

[00:28:22] BB: The salutation. Got you. All right, length of time.

[00:28:27] LD: Four minutes.

[00:28:28] BB: Okay. Four minutes. Then name of a real person ideally alive, but we'll take

anything.

[00:28:38] LD: Kamala Harris.

[00:28:39] BB: Okay. Yeah. Then lastly, an emotion.

[00:28:44] LD: Another emotion?

[00:28:45] BB: Yes, yes.

[00:28:47] LD: Joy.

[00:28:47] BB: Joy. Okay. Here we go, Lydia, from the top. When I think of the future of journalism, I feel contentment. The pitches I receive have gone from, what did you say, perfidious to insolent. If I receive a pitch that starts with, "Heyy," I run. When I write stories on lampshades, I get crimson. My favorite pitches include it's no surprise that and a very specific salutation like the heyy. I normally take around four minutes to respond to my emails. But if it's Kamala Harris, I will respond immediately. If you do get a response back from me you should know that I am very joyful for you. This was a good one. I'm going to say that was fun. Lydia, you were fun. Thank you for being here today.

[00:29:48] LD: My pleasure.

[00:29:48] BB: I fully enjoyed it. I love your book recommendations and I hope you get some good pitches.

[00:29:56] LD: I hope so too. Thank you so much.

[00:29:59] BB: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:30:01] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for tuning in to this week's episode of Coffee with A Journalist featuring Lydia Dishman from Fast Company. If you enjoy listening to our show, make sure to subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, and anywhere else you listen to podcasts. If you have a moment, please leave us a review to share your thoughts about the show and today's guest. To learn more about the latest tools on OnePitch and to subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter, head to our website at onepitch.co. We'll see you all next week with a brand new guest and even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]