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Beck Bamberger: I like to do them in person because they're fun. Okay. Oh, also, and you like Ann-Marie complete, right?

Ann-Marie A.: Yes, yeah.

Beck Bamberger: Okay. So not just Ann. Okay, Ann-Marie. And Alcantara? Alcantara?

Ann-Marie A.: Alcantara.

Beck Bamberger: Alcantara. Okay, great. So I don't usually do the ... I usually record now the little overview and, "Today, we're going to have blah blah blah." So I just jump into it and I'm like, "Ann-Marie Alcantara is here." Cantara? Did I get it?

Ann-Marie A.: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Beck Bamberger: Finally.

Ann-Marie A.: And do you have any preferred names?

Beck Bamberger: Oh, just Beck is fine. But some people don't even reference me or anything. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. So I want to make sure I nail this, and I'm horrible with names. Alcantara.

Ann-Marie A.: Yeah.

Beck Bamberger: With more of an E.

Ann-Marie A.: Alcantara.

Beck Bamberger: Okay. Alcantara.

Ann-Marie A.: Alcantara.

Beck Bamberger: Great.

Ann-Marie A.: I'm questioning my own way of-

Beck Bamberger: I know, right? Alright? And retail reporter, okay. I just like to clarify that because sometimes people are like, "Oh, in six months I'm going to be changing beats," so then I'll just say, "Reporter at Digiday," or whatever, but-

Ann-Marie A.: I see. No, I'll be retail reporter.

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Beck Bamberger: Okay. Okay, great. Alright. Today everybody on Coffee with a Journalist ... Although what do we have today? What do we have?

Ann-Marie A.: Water.

Beck Bamberger: Water, me too. But yours is a Star Wars one.

Ann-Marie A.: Yes, yes it is.

Beck Bamberger: I like it, is Ann-Marie Alcantara. Did I get that right?

Ann-Marie A.: You did, yes.

Beck Bamberger: Excellent, who is the retail reporter at Adweek. I was just reading up on all your D-to-C type stuff about candles and what people are doing for retail therapy and the holidays and whatnot, and we're going to talk about you today and what's going on in your role.

Ann-Marie A.: Awesome. Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to do this.

Beck Bamberger: First off, huge Star Wars fan, so recap on what you're thinking for what's going to happen with this latest series coming out.

Ann-Marie A.: I don't like to make predictions. I think it'll be good and bad for all fans out there and at the very least it'll end. It'll be the last one, we're done. They can move on to other shows like Baby Yoda.

Beck Bamberger: Exactly, which, by the way, is on your Twitter profile in case anyone wants to reference. Excellent. Well, let's dive into how you come about and create a great story, the actual crafting of it, because we like to ask this as a lot of people don't understand what it takes to actually put a whole story together. We're going to edit that out because the Slack came in from you, Jared. Oh my gosh. Okay, Jared. Alright, we're good. So we like to ask, what does it take to make a great story, the actual components? Are you sitting at your desk going like, oh, what's that next story going to be? Are you waiting for someone to give you a tip? Are you hunting all the time? How does it work in your world?

Ann-Marie A.: It's a mix of everything you just said. A lot of it can be from tips or coffee meetings I'm always having with people in the industry. I'm also, because of my beat, direct-to-consumer brands, I am in this Slack group with a bunch of people who are in the space, like founders, CMOs, et cetera. And so they're always chatting about the industry and that's a really good insight for me to see how they're thinking about it, what positions they want to hire for next. And I think

that really helps shape my thinking of, okay, this thing happened, but what does the industry kind of think about it, what do they want to learn about it, that sort of thing.

Beck Bamberger: So let's talk about the Slack group. Do people know you're in there?

Ann-Marie A.: Yeah, yeah, they do, they do. And I make it clear when I'm first talking to someone there, this is off the record. Please just, I want to have a candid conversation, and then if I want to take it on the record, I obviously ask them to do that. But yeah, I'm in there. They know.

Beck Bamberger: Other reporters in there too?

Ann-Marie A.: I think so. I just don't know how active they are. But he does let other reporters in there.

Beck Bamberger: Fascinating. You're the first I've heard that's in an active Slack group where your direct people you report on are actively chatting. Fascinating. That's probably the best tip I've heard all day or throughout all of these. Okay, so then let's say you get that idea or you hear that tip, what then is happening? How long does it take for you to actually produce then that piece that needs to be a thousand words, let's say? And maybe sometimes you don't have the luxury of time, but what does that normally entail?

Ann-Marie A.: I think first reaching out to the usual analysts that, this is their bread and butter every day, this is what they're studying, this is what they're writing case studies on, those people. And then depending what the topic is, getting a little more granular and reading ... reaching out to agencies or people at brands that I know who I can just be like, "Hey, what is this thing? What does this mean?" The Slack group is a great resources for that, because I could just ping them, like, "Is this something that's actually happening or is this ... Am I being crazy and just overthinking the situation?" So yeah, it's a lot of reaching out to people and your own sources that you've developed and just seeing kind of their own thoughts on it and proving out your thesis for the story.

Beck Bamberger: So for example, if we can go down the path a little bit on one recent piece, the e.l.f. Cosmetics, which I read from top to bottom. Just as FYI, it's about how they've used TikTok extremely well to boost their brand. Did that one come in to you as a pitch where you had your eye on it? How did that come about?

Ann-Marie A.: So it was a mixture of both. I've had my eye on TikTok because they've been testing commerce and, I mean, they're just a very hot app right now. But this did come in originally as a pitch, and it was a mass pitch that they gave to everyone. And by the time I got to it, I was actually out of the office. I was like, this isn't

really news. But I worked with the PR contact on this to develop this into a bigger brand marketing story, which is perfect for Adweek and kind of how and why they created an original song for TikTok that has climbed the charts on Spotify and Apple music.

Beck Bamberger: Yeah. Interesting application on that. I was pretty impressed by it. Oh, so speaking of that and pitches, we're going to talk about your inbox here, because you said that that one came in as a pitch. And did you know it was sent to, let's say, a bunch of other people here at Adweek, or do you just know because it was so blasted that like, okay, a bunch of other people probably got this.

Ann-Marie A.: I tend to start asking these days when it's a really interesting angle and I kind of just want it for my own instead of ... and to develop the story and have time to do that, I just ask. And the PR person was like, "Yeah, I already sent this out to a bunch of people," and that's how I knew.

Beck Bamberger: Ooh, and then what was your move there? Were you like, "Okay, but I want it, so just give it to me,"? How'd you negotiate from there?

Ann-Marie A.: Honestly, it was a busy time. It was when Adweek ... At the time we had eight issues back-to-back, so I had my own print deadlines. So I was kind of like, okay, if anything new happens with this ... Because at first it was just a 15 second clip. It wasn't a full song. I was like, "Just keep me in the loop and we can see if we can work out some sort of exclusive angle on this down the line when there's more data and you've proved out the campaign." And that ended up working out for me, because I told a bigger story about what they did than the initial TikTok campaign.

Beck Bamberger: Got it. So you grew it?

Ann-Marie A.: Yeah.

Beck Bamberger: You took it and grew it. I like it. Speaking of your inbox, what is it like in there? Are there hundreds of pitches? Is it clean? Oh, we were talking about this earlier. It's clean, it's labeled, it's organized.

Ann-Marie A.: Yeah, I'm probably on the other side of journalists where I have folders for everything, and the only thing that stays in my inbox are stories that are happening this week or they're magazine stories and I want to make sure I send the clip to whoever I was working with on that story. And yeah, I don't like to have the crazy 27,000 unread emails because I will get too stressed.

Beck Bamberger: So you said you even will send the the company or the publicists, "Oh, here's the clip. This is the piece I wrote,"?

- Ann-Marie A.: Yeah, yeah, because sometimes, they're very ... They work with me on my own crazy schedule. I can only talk for this hour and this day, and it's a good relationship.
- Beck Bamberger: Yeah. So it is a nice piece of like, "Hey, thanks for doing this piece, and here it is." That's really nice.
- Ann-Marie A.: Thank you.
- Beck Bamberger: Yeah.
- Ann-Marie A.: I hope so. I hope they see it that way.
- Beck Bamberger: I would think they would if you had the own reporter say, "Oh yeah, here it is. Thanks so much." Oh, that's great. Gold star. Oh my gosh. Okay. So you have things categorized, you put it in folders, you file it away. Do you ever delete anything in these folders or do you dig up pitches that were three months ago sent to you?
- Ann-Marie A.: I dig stuff up. In my head I don't I mean, yeah. I don't know how my brain works because I will sometimes remember, oh yeah, this person once reached out to me about some random B2B business thing and now they're relevant to something I want to work on, and, or this person knew someone and I don't know how the inside works.
- Beck Bamberger: Wait, wait. So you're just going from your brain, as like, oh there was that one person, that one company, or do you do a search in the inbox? How does that work?
- Ann-Marie A.: I'll remember either their name or the company they were pitching or something in that e-mail and look it up in Outlook and find it. But yeah, it's not a scientific process, but it works.
- Beck Bamberger: Wow. You have a steel trap mind. I can't even remember the name of people, employees. Oh my God. Wow. Okay. Well, that's good news for people who are listening. So if you send a pitch, it is very well likely added to one of your folders. It could be resurrected and she will remember your name.
- Ann-Marie A.: Yes. Yeah, for sure.
- Beck Bamberger: Fantastic. So furthermore, in the inbox, is there ... How many pitches are you getting a day, and then how do you categorize from there? Do you batch them? You get to the end of the day and you're like, alright, here's 200. Let me file

them appropriately. Here's two I respond to. How does kind of that process work?

Ann-Marie A.: I'm really bad with e-mail in the sense that I just have to look at it immediately. I know people say you should look at it in blocks of time. I just can't do that, at least not yet. So, yeah, I mean, I probably get over 100 pitches to my inbox every day, and whenever they're coming in I can in my head prioritize like, oh, this is actually interesting, but I can respond in an hour, or can respond end of the day, or oh, this is ASAP and I need to do this right now.

Beck Bamberger: So you look at all hundred pitches every day? Is that what you're telling me?

Ann-Marie A.: Yeah. I mean, not all of them getting read very thoroughly all the time, but yeah. Yeah.

Beck Bamberger: That's fantastic. At least a glance you get and you actually open it, the whole thing?

Ann-Marie A.: Yeah, I mean, fantastic. Some people would say it's a waste of time. Really, it depends on how you look at it.

Beck Bamberger: Oh, I'm just saying fantastic from probably the publicist view. At least you got the open, so hey, maybe she is, maybe she's not. Ooh, speaking of, what about follow ups? Are you someone who appreciates the follow up, or are you someone who despises? Or is there a number that you're like, okay, when you send me six, I'm done. You're dead to me.

Ann-Marie A.: I did once count someone following up with me 32 times. I literally counted because yeah, it was just ... I was like, this has been too much for me. I generally don't like the follow ups, because as I explained in my process, if I already know I want to respond to you, I'll just keep it in my inbox or file it in a certain way and I will get to you eventually. And I just, doing all the tricks people do on your inbox, like forward or hey, putting something personal on this. I just, please don't. It's not a good time. And we all have limited time. Don't mess with my time that way. And yeah.

Beck Bamberger: so you don't like the personal note like someone saying, "Oh Baby Yoda, you're totally into that." You don't even care. You'd just rather not.

Ann-Marie A.: If I have a relationship with you already, I appreciate it. It's like, oh, okay, we're being ... We've met, we've had drinks, we've had coffee. But if it's just ... It's usually always a pitch that's unrelated to my beat, and they're just trying to catch my attention and I don't appreciate it because it's like, you didn't even

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pitch me something relevant to what I'm reporting on, and now you made me hate whatever I supposedly liked in the subject.

Beck Bamberger: Yeah. So back to, you're dead to me. There you go.

Ann-Marie A.: Yeah.

Beck Bamberger: Right?

Ann-Marie A.: Yeah.

Beck Bamberger: Okay. Be noted for publicists. We're going to now do a little word association. So I'm going to give you a word and you're just going to tell me the first thing that you think of. These are usually a lot of fun. First one, food.

Ann-Marie A.: French fries, McDonald's.

Beck Bamberger: Oh, specific. French by McDonald's. When was the last time you had some?

Ann-Marie A.: This is terrible. I probably had it last week.

Beck Bamberger: Oh that's great. Way to own that though. You're just like, yeah, yeah. Okay. Star Wars.

Ann-Marie A.: Love.

Beck Bamberger: Hobby.

Ann-Marie A.: Reading.

Beck Bamberger: Direct-to-consumer.

Ann-Marie A.: Oh man. I don't know. Every line I think came first to mind.

Beck Bamberger: Ooh. Retail tech.

Ann-Marie A.: Shopify.

Beck Bamberger: Product round up.

Ann-Marie A.: Product round ... Like a wire cutter thing?

Beck Bamberger: It does not specify on my sheet. So however you want to interpret that.

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Ann-Marie A.: I'll say wire cutter.

Beck Bamberger: Okay. Cyber week.

Ann-Marie A.: Hell.

Beck Bamberger: CBD.

Ann-Marie A.: Trendy.

Beck Bamberger: Martech.

Ann-Marie A.: Oh God.

Beck Bamberger: Adtech.

Ann-Marie A.: Nope, nope, nope.

Beck Bamberger: Journalism.

Ann-Marie A.: Good.

Beck Bamberger: Pitch.

Ann-Marie A.: Eh, meh.

Beck Bamberger: Inbox.

Ann-Marie A.: Zero.

Beck Bamberger: You're the zero person. I like it. Same here. Same here. Okay. What are you reading right now? Articles, book-wise, since you said hobby reading. Anything good that you're really loving right now? Anybody's work in particular you want to shout out?

Ann-Marie A.: I'm currently reading a bunch of fiction novels. I borrow a bunch of books in batch from the library. But I did recently finish Trick Mirror by Jia Tolentino from, The New Yorker writer who's just our generation's ... I don't even know how to describe her. She just nails everything she writes about in our culture and how we like it and why we like it, and it was a really good book.

Beck Bamberger: Ooh, tell us again, because I need to write it down.

Ann-Marie A.: Trick Mirror by Jia Tolentino, if I'm saying her last name right.

Beck Bamberger: Okay. I have that down. Anything else? What do you read on the daily to get your news updates?

Ann-Marie A.: I'm subscribed to a few newsletters like Retail Dive, Industry Dive, 2PM, Inc., Lean Luxe. Oh, Retail Brew by the Morning Brew folks. What else? I think that's kind of it. Oh, the New York Times, the New York Time Today, and Smarter Living newsletters as well.

Beck Bamberger: And how long does all that reading take you on the daily when you're coming in here, sitting down?

Ann-Marie A.: I try to keep it pretty short, unless it's really grabby or newsy, especially for the ones specific to my beat, I don't really ... I just like read the headline. But everything else I try to read at home while I'm getting ready for work or on my commute

Beck Bamberger: All the time then basically, it's sitting with you. Got it. That's good. I'm going to get that book. And I love how you go to the library. Who goes to the library?

Ann-Marie A.: It's free. You can borrow ebooks for free.

Beck Bamberger: Amazing. I mean, I have a library card. I just, I don't know what my deal is. I'm going to take your inspiration. I like that. Okay. What about the future of journalism? A lot of people have commentary on this, where it's going to go. Is it positive, is it negative? What are your thoughts?

Ann-Marie A.: Yeah, it's really hard for me to answer this question because I've been a victim of a media layoff and even a media company shutdown. And then I've been on the flip side of it, being at media companies that are growing and doing really well and are profitable, and it's just a mess really. I think the future of journalism is severely undefined for better or for worse. I think it's also the generation we're in and the people who've entered the industry are also at an age where older millennials and Gen Xers are having kids and are really wondering, is it worth it to be in this industry with another layoff, or getting paid this low, or dealing with sales or anything else like that. And it's really hard to kind of have that. But the news, and the truth, and all of that when bills are piling up and millennials have the worst college loan debt and all of that.

They have all the statistics. So I don't know, it's hard for me to answer and I think I've been very lucky to still be in this industry considering I've been through a layoff and a media shutdown.

Beck Bamberger: Yeah, you have war stories.

Ann-Marie A.: Yeah, yeah. I've got the scars. I can still smile through it and yeah, it's just a complicated mess. And I mean, we're already seeing some winners and losers in the media industry and yeah, I don't know. I hope it continues chugging along and doing well. And some companies are seeing surges in subscriptions and that sort of thing, but there's not enough jobs for all the people who want them. And I don't know what that means for the future of journalism.

Beck Bamberger: You're another person who has not had the most positive outlook. I'm yet to sit with someone who's like, oh my gosh, this is such a pillar of democracy. We must keep going. We have to keep ... No, everyone's just a realist to tell you the truth.

Ann-Marie A.: I mean, it's hard not to be when ... I mean, I used to live in San Francisco. That was the most expensive city in the world. I think it still might be. And yeah, when you're looking at rent and even going out to get food and it's just a certain amount of money every month, you got to make it meet somehow. And yeah, it was just the reality of it.

Beck Bamberger: This usually isn't a question I go into, but since you are covering a, let's say, maybe frothy space, retail and direct-to-consumer. Maybe, maybe not, you can share your opinion. What do you think about the future of retail and how that's going, especially for D-to-C brands?

Ann-Marie A.: I actually think it's going pretty well. It's very ... I mean, it's a good time, honestly. For so long, I think consumers, we had very few choices in what we could wear and who could we were from and where we had to shop and how we got those items to our doorstep. And now because of the direct-to-consumer brands and how they've disrupted everything and are like, screw going to the mall all the time, or no inclusive sizing, things like that. They've really changed how even larger retailers are functioning and they're opening up their own brick and mortar shops that are more fun. They offer you water while you're getting in the fitting room that's always really hot for whatever reason. And I think it's going in a positive space where consumers are going to get more personal and a more personalized experience and have more fun shopping again, because it's never going to go away.

People always say, "Oh, e-commerce." I mean, it's growing, but if you need to try something on, you're going to go to the store still. And yeah, I think it'll be a good time. There's a lot of tech influence in shopping and obviously data privacy will also for better or for worse change the shopping experience. But I think at the end of the day, it's all to benefit us, the consumer. We all shop, we all live it,

we all have to buy something to wear on our feet, our bodies, our face. So it's going in a better direction than I think a few years ago where it was not a good time.

Beck Bamberger: Maybe too frothy or people were speculating a bit too much on it or if it could be viable? I don't know. It seems like the industry is maturing and having its moment and now there's been exits and now there's been things to point to that have, ah, made it successful. There's been returns, et cetera. This is viable basically. I don't know.

Ann-Marie A.: No, yeah, I think that's happened and the legacy companies woke up and were like, we can't just keep doing what we've always done. It's not going to work for us. Our earnings are suffering, our stores are closing, and they've also had to change. And I think in a positive way they've had to make returns easier or have more sizing or just be better about the types of discounts that they offer. It's all good.

Beck Bamberger: And now, let's play a little Mad Lib. This is one of my favorite parts, so I will give you a outline of some word or a part of a word or something, and then I will plug it in and I will read it back. Are you ready?

Ann-Marie A.: I think so. Let's do this.

Beck Bamberger: Okay. Okay. Let's see. Okay, first off, just a catch phrase. What's a catch phrase off the top of your head?

Ann-Marie A.: Gradatim Ferociter.

Beck Bamberger: Oh Lord. Will you look at the ... What is this? I-

Ann-Marie A.: That's Jeff Bezos's ... Sorry, I'm so sorry.

Beck Bamberger: That's a perfect thing for the retail reporter. I love it. Alright, let's hear that again. What is it?

Ann-Marie A.: If I know my Latin, which I don't, I think it's Gradatim Ferociter.

Beck Bamberger: Gradatim Ferociter, okay. You're going to have to repeat that one back when we read this back, okay? Okay. What does it mean?

Ann-Marie A.: Oh shoot, now I can't remember. It's something Jeff Bezos-y, so probably keep going team.

Beck Bamberger: Day zero or whatever he ... day one, something like that. Okay. Alright. Journalism scare phrase. Is there anything that's a scare phrase?

Ann-Marie A.: Layoffs.

Beck Bamberger: Oh, there you go. That's perfect. Okay. Let me write that in. What about a empowering journalism buzzword would you say?

Ann-Marie A.: Profitability.

Beck Bamberger: Hmm. It's the first time I've heard that. You've got some good answers here. Okay. Okay, good. Let's go back to another scare phrase.

Ann-Marie A.: Sales.

Beck Bamberger: Oh, okay. Sales. That's a scare phrase, huh?

Ann-Marie A.: The sales team interfering, yeah.

Beck Bamberger: Oh, okay. Okay. Well, I'm going to specify sales team. That's good, that's good. Make sure that's clear. Okay. Then, part of a pitch.

Ann-Marie A.: E-meet. Phone meet?

Beck Bamberger: Oh, e-meet. Okay.

Ann-Marie A.: Does that work?

Beck Bamberger: Who says that to you? So they want to e-meet. Oh, oh, good to e-meet you or whatever?

Ann-Marie A.: Yeah, and listen, I do it ... I don't know what to say sometimes and I say it back to them.

Beck Bamberger: Wow, yeah. I haven't had an e-meet in a while. It just sounds kind of funny, like emu. It reminds me of emu. Okay. Amount of time.

Ann-Marie A.: Like hours? Days?

Beck Bamberger: Whatever you want.

Ann-Marie A.: Let's say days.

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Beck Bamberger: Days. Okay. Singular, noun.

Ann-Marie A.: It can't be a pronoun. This is actually difficult. I don't know why. A singular, I don't know. You got one?

Beck Bamberger: Like dog could be one.

Ann-Marie A.: I have a dog. Let's go with dog.

Beck Bamberger: Okay, dog. Okay, okay. Excellent. I'll put that in. What's your dog's name?

Ann-Marie A.: Donna.

Beck Bamberger: Donna.

Ann-Marie A.: Donna.

Beck Bamberger: Donna. Oh, Donna the dog. What kind of dog is Donna?

Ann-Marie A.: She's a Maltese.

Beck Bamberger: Oh, even better. Okay. Put Donna the dog. Okay. Okay. Adjective.

Ann-Marie A.: Cute. I'm thinking of my dog.

Beck Bamberger: Yes. Perfect. Okay, yes, okay. Keep keeping on here. Okay. Topic.

Ann-Marie A.: Retail.

Beck Bamberger: Retail. Good. Almost done. Two more. A verb with ing on the end.

Ann-Marie A.: Talking. Is that boring?

Beck Bamberger: I mean, you can go with talking. Do you have another one instead?

Ann-Marie A.: Smiling.

Beck Bamberger: Okay, smiling. Let's update to that. That'll be more fun. Okay. Smiling. And then lastly, just a verb.

Ann-Marie A.: Running? Does that count? Is that okay with the ing?

Beck Bamberger: Well, you can just put run.

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Ann-Marie A.: Run, true. Good point. Let's do run.

Beck Bamberger: Okay. We're doing run. Okay. Are you ready? Here we go. Okay. Here, I'm going to read it back. To me, tech journalism is insert Jeff Bezos' Latin phrase. We need to look that up. It consists of layoffs and sale teams on the daily. If a pitch has profitability, I will absolutely respond to it. If a pitch though has an e-meet, you can expect no reply from me. If days go by and you don't see an e-mail back from me, you can assume I am not cute about it. The best stories always have my dog, Donna, the Maltese, and are usually about retail. That's true. This is true so far.

Ann-Marie A.: This is fun. This is a really good Mad Lib.

Beck Bamberger: I love it. Okay, and now look at this. The best way to reach me is by smiling to me, but you can also run with me.

Ann-Marie A.: I like that. I think that's perfectly captures who I am.

Beck Bamberger: It's perfect. I love it. The only thing we didn't get in there was Star Wars. See?

Ann-Marie A.: Oh yeah. Next time, another time.

Beck Bamberger: Next time. Okay. Thank you Ann-Marie. This has been so fun. I can't wait for you to see your, the last episode. What is it called technically? Is it the last ... What do you call it?

Ann-Marie A.: Round?

Beck Bamberger: No, no, no, the actual ... is it ... Where are we in the sequel of this whole Star Wars thing? It's the last episode. It's the last ...

Ann-Marie A.: It's the last episode, but it's also the last of the Skywalker saga.

Beck Bamberger: Is there going to be more to this whole thing? There has to be more. They didn't buy that for billions of dollars and not have enough more coming out of that.

Ann-Marie A.: I think there will be more to the Star Wars universe, but not I think with the Skywalkers anymore. I think they're done.

Beck Bamberger: Okay. We will stay tuned.