

**EPISODE 148****[INTRODUCTION]**

**[00:00:09] ANNOUNCER:** Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist brought to you by OnePitch. Are you curious how OnePitch can help you find relevant journalists to pitch, including guests on this podcast? Head to our website at [onepitch.co](https://onepitch.co) to learn more.

On today's episode, we're joined by Zach Wichter. Zach is a consumer travel reporter at USA Today, covering travel, primarily writing about and focusing on airlines and aviation. During the episode, Zach talks about his process for responding to pitches, the best way to approach him with embargoes, how he's built close relationships with sources, and more. Let's hear from Zach now.

**[INTERVIEW]**

**[00:00:54] BB:** Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger. Of course, we have a wonderful journalist with us here today, Zach Wichter, who is the consumer travel reporter at USA Today. Not tech reporter Zach because I just was mentioning the travel reporter for consumers USA Today, which I'm sure we're going to have probably interesting conversation on airlines and points and maybe things you get pitches for because you're the first one we've had on that's travel-specific but for consumers as well. So this is going to be good.

**[00:01:26] ZW:** Oh, great.

**[00:01:26] BB:** Yes. Thanks for being here.

**[00:01:28] ZW:** This is going to be fun, and there is some overlap with tech. But mostly, it's its own thing. So I'm excited, happy to be here.

**[00:01:33] BB:** I am sure. Okay. I do like to ask people, just even when it's a big huge outlet, just so people are totally on the same page. How would you describe USA Today as an outlet?

**[00:01:45] ZW:** Yeah. So USA Today is, obviously, a big national newspaper. We're owned by Gannett, which means that we have partners in a bunch of local papers across the country. All of Gannett's different properties operate as sort of one big network. So my focus as the consumer travel reporter for USA Today is really covering nationally relevant stories. But I also can partner with folks in local newsrooms to work on more local stories as well.

**[00:02:14] BB:** By local, you mean like all the way down to like towns or cities? Or how would you describe that?

**[00:02:19] ZW:** Yeah, yeah, exactly. It's like individual papers for each city or in some towns, varying sizes across the company. So we have outlets of all different sizes.

**[00:02:29] BB:** Oh, that's fun. That's good to know, especially for pitching purposes, which is what this is all about. Okay, Zach, how is your inbox?

**[00:02:39] ZW:** So my inbox is always a little bit of a mess, but I also compulsively open all of my emails. So I am on zero unread emails right now because I just hate having unread emails. I like try to open them as soon as they come in and figure out if it's something I need to do something about.

**[00:02:57] BB:** Oh, you mean you're an impulsive like inbox person? You're in there all the time?

**[00:03:01] ZW:** Yes, constantly, which is great, I'm sure, for PR folks. My open rate is 100%. Every email I get, I see.

**[00:03:08] BB:** What? So this is so interesting. There is like two radical camps here of the open every email group, rare, and the like, "Yeah, I do a scan, I mass delete, and you know." Then there's some other inbetweeners, but my goodness, every email.

**[00:03:26] ZW:** Yeah. I mean, I don't like – I still scan it when I open it. I don't always read through every email. I kind of look at the subject line in the first paragraph or two. But, yeah, I

open every single one. If it comes to my inbox, it will be seen and marked as read at like the first opportunity I have because I put like a little icon.

**[00:03:45] BB:** Oh, wow. Okay. So then what do you do once you have opened all those emails? Do you file? Do you flag? Do you just let it roll? What happens?

**[00:03:54] ZW:** Yeah. So most of the time, I can tell pretty quickly if it's something that is going to be actionable for me or not. So if it's something that I think is a story, I usually forward it to my editor and say, "Hey, are we interested in doing this?" If I have some follow-up questions, I'll respond to the person. Otherwise, I just kind of leave it as read, and sometimes it's something that like I'll remember a couple of weeks later like, "Oh, I got a pitch about this," and like maybe there's some interesting data in there.

But usually, I act on it pretty quickly. If I don't respond to it like within a day or two, I'm probably not going to do anything about it. That said, especially on Monday mornings because, like I said, I try to read all of my emails as soon as possible, stuff does fall through the cracks sometimes. So every so often, I appreciate that follow up like, "Hey, just making sure that you didn't miss this," because sometimes I have missed things, and those have saved my butt a couple times.

**[00:04:54] BB:** Okay. So you said, "Oh, every so often." So how often is often?

**[00:04:58] ZW:** Oh, you mean for the reminders being helpful?

**[00:05:00] BB:** For a follow-up, like some people are really particular. They don't want to have three follow-ups. They want only a follow-up after maybe a couple of days. But then I know, of course, a pet peeve is people saying like, "Okay, if you just emailed me, three hours is not appropriate time for follow up. It's not."

**[00:05:17] ZW:** Yeah, that's right. I would say, for me, I have found, in general, the times that the follow-up has been helpful is usually like in the one to three-day range after the initial email came, and it's almost always a story that's really targeted to my beat. I think that that's one of the things that drives me and a lot of my industry colleagues crazy is when we're on the clear,

just like spray and pray list. Because I get a lot of emails that are not relevant and like, obviously, that clogs up my inbox, which, again, just like makes my sorting that much longer.

But also, it does make it – Those emails that are not relevant do make it more likely that I missed the ones that I actually want to be seeing.

**[00:06:03] BB:** Because it's getting clogged up. Yeah.

**[00:06:05] ZW:** Right, exactly.

**[00:06:06] BB:** What's a non-relevant one for you? Like just give us an outlandish example, if you have one.

**[00:06:11] ZW:** Sure. I mean, I don't have a specific one pulled up in front of me, but I think a sort of broad category of ones are like crypto pitches. I don't cover crypto at all, but I get a lot of pitches about like this crypto thing or like this blockchain thing that maybe in some way, 25 years from now, is going to be relevant to the airline industry. So those always just drive me nuts because I'm like, "I can't write about this now. That's not a story for me right now."

**[00:06:38] BB:** In a quarter of a century.

**[00:06:41] ZW:** Right, exactly.

**[00:06:41] BB:** Let me tell you about how this is going to – Oh, God. Oh, okay. Yeah. That's a far reach there. Okay. Then do you, Zach – Since you do open every single email, do you go back to emails like even months later? In other words, use your inbox as your own personal like Google storage.

**[00:07:01] ZW:** Very rarely. I mean, I do keep my emails. I don't really like delete anything. But for me, it's like if I remember a pitch that has stood out, I'll go back and try to find that one specifically. I don't go like dumpster diving in my old emails to try to find stories that aren't already kind of in my mind. It's like in those cases, it's more using pitches that I remember having had relevant data to something that I'm working on.

**[00:07:28] BB:** Okay. You mentioned data. So what is important to you and a pitch that has data or likes to say it has data, which –

**[00:07:35] ZW:** Yeah. So for USA Today, in my beat in particular, we're super consumer-focused. So a lot of what I look for data-wise is how it affects real people, whether that's flight delays or prices or something. For me, it needs to be data that is understandable to a traveler and like they can see the number and kind of think about how – Like what that means for them on their own trips.

**[00:08:04] BB:** So it's got to really go back to the end consumer who's like, “All right. Do I need to know this? Is the flight going up in price 47% if I book three weeks before the trip? Like what is exactly that half? Yeah.”

**[00:08:18] ZW:** Exactly, yeah. So like the sort of more specific and actionable the data is, the better. Like I'm a journalist, which I feel like by default means I'm not that much of a numbers guy. I came into this industry to avoid math. So for me, it's really helpful if the data is clear and concise like, “Oh, I understand what this means for me and for my readers.”

**[00:08:42] BB:** Yep, very clear. Okay. Then, again, since you read every email, do subject lines ever mattered to you?

**[00:08:49] ZW:** A little bit. They can grab my attention. But for me, like you said, because I scroll through and read every single email, the subject line, for me, isn't that important because whether it's the best subject line that's ever been written or just like a blank subject line with “re:”, it still gets opened.

**[00:09:06] BB:** Yeah, I know. So see, that's so interesting. Then the topic of like, “Oh, how compelling the subject line,” just doesn't even matter for you.

**[00:09:13] ZW:** Yeah. Which I realized makes me probably like the weirdest, most outlier-y guest you've ever had on this podcast. I acknowledge that most people do not do this method.

**[00:09:23] BB:** But there's a cohort of you all. Yes, there is, and I think it's a personality thing, where like you just got to open every single – What if you miss something? What if you miss something good?

**[00:09:32] ZW:** Exactly.

**[00:09:33] BB:** You got to open it, so I totally get it. Okay. Well, then what would you say are your preferred three elements for a good pitch?

**[00:09:43] ZW:** Right. So concise is definitely a big one for me, again, because I'm going through and trying to read or at least skim all of those things. I really want to see like even – I feel like bullet points are really helpful. Like here are the things that are important for you to know about this pitch and honestly like the ask to follow up for more. Like I don't need necessarily the entire press release even. I just need like a couple of highlights and then say, “If you want to know more, like reach out and we can talk about it. Set up time for an interview, that kind of thing.”

Then also, just a pet peeve of mine is when someone sends me embargoed information without confirming the embargo first. Because as a journalist, we operate under the assumption that any information we receive is fair to publish. So if you really want to send me something that is under embargo and is not for publication, like definitely reach out to me and say, “Hey, I have some information that's under embargo. It's on topic X. Would you be interested in learning more? Can you agree to the embargo, this date?” Then make it a conversation because I've never done this. Like I'm not interested in burning a bridge. But I think PR folks should know that like even if you say this information is embargoed, if I haven't actively agreed to it, it is fair game for me to publish.

**[00:11:08] BB:** Yeah. I never understood this, to tell you the truth. Like what are you doing saying, “Oh, it's under embargo. Here you go.” It's a journalist.

**[00:11:15] ZW:** Right, exactly. It's public now.

**[00:11:16] BB:** I just like – Now, I would just – It's exactly public, especially when you send it like that via email, and now we got a traceable. So, yeah, that always boggles my mind. Yeah, okay. All right, so you mentioned that was a pet peeve. Okay. We went down a little dovetail.

[BREAK]

**[00:11:34] 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](https://onepitch.co) to learn about our new OnePitch score, and see how easy it is to find the right journalists to pitch your news to. Sign up for your free account today. Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW RESUMED]

**[00:11:58] BB:** What else is essential for your pitch, if anything?

**[00:12:01] ZW:** Yeah. I mean, I think it really is just like concise and then also understanding what I do. Like I said, I get a lot of irrelevant pitches, and that's just kind of frustrating because it clogs the inbox. Like my beat is pretty specific. I write about air travel for consumers. So after sending me a pitch that isn't about that, like I'm almost certainly not going to write it.

I did actually receive a pitch recently that was pretty tangential to that beat, but I wrote about it anyway. It had to do with this open letter that was written to the Transportation Secretary about changing some rules about the organ donation transportation system.

**[00:12:45] BB:** I saw that.

**[00:12:47] ZW:** Yes. So I have a story about that coming out in the next couple of days, I think, after this recording. So that was one that was like definitely marginal for me, but it was just such an interesting topic that I approached my editor about it. But, again, that kind of thing is pretty rare. Like, for me, when I'm receiving a blind pitch, it really needs to be pretty on topic 99% of the time for it to catch my eye.

**[00:13:13] BB:** Yep, makes sense. You mentioned embargoes. Do you ever do exclusives, and do you like those?

**[00:13:20] ZW:** Yeah, we love exclusives.

**[00:13:21] BB:** I know USA Today does but your preference, and tell us a little bit of your rules and definition of exclusive versus embargo.

**[00:13:30] ZW:** Sure. So embargo, in my experience, is just getting information ahead of the public release so that we can write it and kind of put that out there in time with when the company's press release goes public. Those are all really handy. I mean, getting information under embargo is great. We like to be on top of the news. Being able to pre write some of that industry news for consumers is really helpful because, honestly, the press releases are geared towards journalists. I think for consumers, unless they're like the most educated frequent flyer, for example, who may see a press release directly from the airline and understand what changes to the loyalty program mean for them. Most consumers probably need some kind of translation from a journalist to really be able to understand what's in there.

Again, embargoed stuff, really great. Love it. I love being able to stay on top of the news and get my article out there as soon as possible, in terms of when the news breaks. On the exclusive side, again, USA Today also loves those. For me, that basically means that we're the only outlet or one of a very select number of outlets getting it in advance. One story, for example, that I had exclusively was when the FAA was introducing a notice into the public register to solicit comments about airplane seat sizes. I got a heads up from the FAA's comms department about that a couple of days before it went in and was cleared to publish that that was going to be happening like well ahead of time, and USA Today was the only one that got that in advance. So stuff like that, I mean –

**[00:15:18] BB:** You're alluding to like relationship building. How do you like a relationship to be built with you, Zach?

**[00:15:25] ZW:** Yeah. So I'm in New York and always down to grab coffee with folks, if we have relevant things to talk about.



**[00:15:32] BB:** He likes coffee. Okay.

**[00:15:34] ZW:** I do. Well, actually tea. I don't drink coffee, but yeah.

**[00:15:36] BB:** Okay. Great, tea. Make sure you got the tea.

**[00:15:39] ZW:** Yeah. Coffee is a metaphor for warm beverages.

**[00:15:42] BB:** Exactly. I agree. I agree.

**[00:15:44] ZW:** I'm happy to meet in person. I'm like definitely down to do that, as schedules permit and as topics like kind of mesh. Then also, just on this beat, the players don't change all that much, and I've been covering airlines on and off now for, I don't know, probably since like 2017 or '18. So for me, like I have the fortune of kind of knowing a lot of the big comms people in the industry, like folks who have been around and are representing some of the bigger players for a long time.

I feel like the best relationships that I have have really happened organically over time, just from being in this space for so long. I feel like that's probably the case for a lot of journalists. Just like the longer you do it, the better you get to know the players and the more natural their relationships are.

**[00:16:36] BB:** Okay. So I gather from that, you like tea. You want a hot beverage. This is good. Invite him if you're in town and make a friend, basically.

**[00:16:46] ZW:** Yeah, exactly. Also, like I try to go to industry events. So come over to me, say hello, give me your business card. Even if you don't have a story for me right now, it's always a good idea to keep in touch. I read every email, so there's nothing –

**[00:17:01] BB:** I mean – Yeah, it's amazing. He does.

**[00:17:05] ZW:** The worst that can happen is I don't respond, which, in fairness, I don't respond to a lot of emails, but I see them. If they interest me, I will be in touch, for sure.

**[00:17:14] BB:** Yes. Okay. We have a little rapid fire question section, Zach, which I'd like to now tee up for you. So real quick, this is like yes or no. Then if we want to elaborate, we will. So let's see how it goes. This is a new little section, by the way, that we're piloting. So you're my first one to do this. This is very exciting. Are you ready?

**[00:17:36] ZW:** Yes. I'm ready.

**[00:17:37] BB:** Okay. Video or phone interview?

**[00:17:41] ZW:** Phone.

**[00:17:41] BB:** Bullet points or paragraphs?

**[00:17:44] ZW:** Bullet points.

**[00:17:45] BB:** Short or long pitches and how short or long?

**[00:17:49] ZW:** Short and bullet points is ideal.

**[00:17:52] BB:** Okay. Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

**[00:17:56] ZW:** I've never thought about that one. I have no preference.

**[00:18:00] BB:** No primary. Okay. Pitches in the morning or at night?

**[00:18:04] ZW:** Ooh, that's a good question. Not first thing in the morning but like late morning, early afternoon.

**[00:18:11] BB:** ET time?

**[00:18:12] ZW:** Yeah, exactly.

**[00:18:13] BB:** Okay. Okay. Email or Twitter DM?

**[00:18:16] ZW:** Email, definitely.

**[00:18:17] BB:** One follow-up or multiple?

**[00:18:20] ZW:** Ooh, that's a tough one.

**[00:18:22] BB:** I know. We talked about that a little bit. I'm just going to just – Yeah.

**[00:18:25] ZW:** One to two, definitely not more than two.

**[00:18:29] BB:** Okay. Direct or creative subject lines? Kind of –

**[00:18:37] ZW:** Yeah. It depends a lot on what the story is, if it – Sorry. We're not supposed to elaborate. We can go back later.

**[00:18:42] BB:** Yeah, yeah. No, that's totally fine. We did cover that you do open every single email cell, so – Yes. Okay.

**[00:18:49] ZW:** Well, I guess, yeah, we'll come back to this in a minute.

**[00:18:52] BB:** Okay. Okay. Press release or media kit?

**[00:18:56] ZW:** Honestly, what's the difference? I don't know.

**[00:19:00] BB:** Well, usually, a press release is like, “Oh, on this day, this company announced that so-and-so got hired as blah, blah, blah title.” Versus a press kit is usually, “Oh, here's our images. Here's our team piles. Here's all the press releases. Here's the one-pager on the product,” and da, da, da, da. I mean, they can vary, but there's a lot more, so yeah. It sounds like you have no preference.

**[00:19:23] ZW:** Yeah, exactly. No preference there. It kind of depends what I need for the story, I guess. So it's hard to say as a blanket statement.

**[00:19:30] BB:** Okay. Lastly, here, not on our rapid fire questions but for you, Zach. Is there anything to just wrap this up here that you want to share with the audience? Or do you have something to promote about you because we want to shout out you?

**[00:19:48] ZW:** Well, thank you. I feel like, like I said, my big pet peeve is that embargo thing that we talked about. So like even if I'm never going to burn that bridge, it just always drives me crazy when I get a press release that says under embargo and then has all the info. Then just going back to what we were talking about before with fun versus direct subject lines, because I read every email, like I do still read the subject lines, and it just so depends on the pitch. Like the subject line, to me, is part of the pitch. So if it's a fun story, go for it with a fun subject line. If it's a serious story or like some breaking business news or whatever, then just be direct. Send stuff to promote for me.

**[00:20:29] BB:** Yeah.

**[00:20:30] ZW:** I don't know. I'm happy here. Like I love the work that I'm doing, and I want to do more travel writing. So excited to see what 2023 brings.

**[00:20:40] BB:** Yes. Now, real quick, though, just as a final thing, like do you prefer like for us to follow you on Twitter or on LinkedIn or on Instagram? We have all your things, so you know?

**[00:20:51] ZW:** Yeah, sure. Probably, Twitter is best for as long as they're still around and like –

**[00:20:56] BB:** I've been wondering about that. I know we're wrapping up here, but you got any thoughts on that?

**[00:21:01] ZW:** No. I'm not a tech reporter, so I'm just kind of watching from the sidelines to see what happens. But I'm like horrible at LinkedIn. I have a LinkedIn, and I like almost never remember to check it. Then Instagram, like I do use a little bit, but it's more mixed kind of

personal business. So Twitter is definitely the best social to reach me for work stuff, but I still prefer an email, if it's going to be a pitch.

**[00:21:25] BB:** Yes. Let that be known loud and clear to everyone here. **[inaudible 00:21:29]** we want email.

**[00:21:30] ZW:** I think actually my work email address is in my Twitter bio. Yeah, it is.

**[00:21:35] BB:** In fact. It is definitely – It is right there, everybody. Okay. Zach, thank you for being here today. This was a lot of fun.

**[00:21:44] ZW:** Yeah, absolutely. Thank you so much for having me on. This was great.

**[00:21:47] BB:** You got it. Zach Wichter, consumer travel reporter, USA Today. Invite him to tea.

**[00:21:54] ZW:** Please do.

**[00:21:56] BB:** Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[00:21:58] ANNOUNCER:** Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, featuring Zach Wichter from USA Today. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter at [onepitch.co/podcast](https://onepitch.co/podcast). We'll see you next week with even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]