

EPISODE 178

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:09] Speaker 1: 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 at pitch, including some of the guests on this podcast? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn more.

Our guest on today's episode is Christopher Zara from Fast Company. As senior editor, Chris runs the news desk. His memoir, *Uneducated*, which is out now, examines the value of higher education and confronts the stigma of being degreeless in a 21st-century knowledge economy. During the episode, Chris talks about why he wants to be easily reachable for sources, the reason he says no to pitches, how you need to pitch the news desk at Fast Company, and more. Let's hear from Chris now.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:01] BB: Welcome everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. I'm Beck Bamberger and we have today coming live from New York. My heart. I love New York at Christopher as we just talked about. Christopher Zara is here. He's a senior editor of Fast Company. He's been the editor for a while. It looks like Christopher. So we're going to talk about it. But thank you for being here.

[00:01:24] CZ: Yes, Beck. Thank you for having me.

[00:01:25] BB: Yes. In addition, you are also now in the special class of journalists called published authors with an actual dang book.

[00:01:34] CZ: Yes, that's correct. A memoir, if you want to really put a technical spin on it. Yes.

[00:01:01] BB: Yes. To be even more specific. Okay. We're going to get into that because yes, everyone should be buying the books by our journalists that are always on here and all the things. But first, Christopher, just bronze strokes because even for the biggest, biggest outlets,

I like people to just be clear. What would you say encompasses Fast Company's coverage?

[00:01:58] CZ: So Fast Company is a business publication with, broadly speaking, and eye toward innovation, design, technology, things that move the business world forward, work life, culture, generational conflict at work, anything having to do with whatever the heck Elon Musk is doing today, that is usually something we might cover. So it's all of the broad business categories, but with the sort of eye toward how to make business a force for good in the world, if that makes sense.

[00:02:27] BB: It does. And for you being an editor, is there much of an inbox commotion that you have? How is your inbox?

[00:02:35] CZ: Yes. It's not great right now. And I'll tell you, I think I probably have maybe a unique issue with inboxes at my job. I'm the senior editor on the news desk. So if you Google, "Who is the news editor at Fast Company?" and you have any kind of piece of news that you want to share, I'm usually the first name that comes up. I do look at everything that comes into my inbox.

[00:02:57] BB: Wow.

[00:02:58] CZ: I don't say I read everything word for word, but I don't let anything just pass by, but I get a good amount. I've been there seven years, people know where to find me. I make my emails real easy to find. I'm the kind of journalist that I want to be; a person you can contact. I don't want to be one of these ones where you have to go through like 50,000 different hoops just to get them to respond to an email. So I'm pretty available. And the price I pay, if you want to use the word price, is a really full inbox that I don't always have the time to manage.

[00:03:28] BB: So then what do you do in an attempt, let's just say?

[00:03:32] CZ: Well, there's a few things I do, and it really depends on the week. This week, for example, it's been a really busy week. I mentioned Elon Musk. Twitter is changing their branding. Everyone knows that story. It's a huge story for fast company. Branding is already big, branding and design, and things like that. So there's many different things we have to think about with all that happening.

We also have tech earnings happening this week, all week long. So these sort of news-driven items are going to basically command most of my time. So I'm not going to have a lot of time this week to answer and look at pitches for news coming in, but I will try. And because of the fast-paced nature of what I do on news, there's a lot of times when I just have to say no to things just because we don't have the resources at that moment. I say no to a lot of good pitches. I mean, any given week, we get great stuff and we just don't have the time to cover it all, especially in a week like this when the news is beckoning.

[00:04:29] BB: Yeah, timing is a lot of it. So do you do, Christopher, the let it roll method? Like you just keep the emails in the inbox and just?

[00:04:39] CZ: No, I don't. And partially, I mean, partially it's because, again, there's a real time-sensitive element to much of what I cover. And if it's something that ends up more than a few days old or a week old, I usually just delete them. I can look at my inbox right now and tell you I have 12,000. I don't know where they go. There's like a hole somewhere.

[00:05:02] BB: God. Okay, but you're the editor, so you're doing a lot of traffic control, I'm sure, which means, "Okay, this piece is really good and I've gotta toss it to reporter person over here," right?

[00:05:14] CZ: Yes, that's a big part of my day.

[00:05:15] BB: Yes, how often is that happening?

[00:05:16] CZ: That happens a lot. That's going to, again, depend on the week, you know, what's happening. I get a great pitch, for example, about, I think I mentioned generational conflict at work, you know, we get something about how Gen Z is demanding XYZ thing at work.

[00:05:32] BB: Yeah, every single day.

[00:05:34] CZ: Right. The bar is high because there's a lot of Gen Z stories out there, but if it's a good one, I have a couple of good reporters who like to cover that space. If it's mental health at work, I have a couple of good reporters who really like to cover that space. I have one that

likes finance.

[00:05:47] BB: God bless them.

[00:05:48] CZ: To your point, yes, I do a lot of like, “Here, you want to take a look at this?” Very often, I let the writers decide, I’m a soft sell as an editor, so if they don’t want to do it.

[00:05:57] BB: Well, okay, so wait a second. If they don’t want to do it, does that mean you do it? Because you still write. You do a lot of writing.

[00:06:03] CZ: I do. I do. And that happens. I get first refusal, I guess, is the word.

[00:06:08] BB: Yeah. You’re like, “Oh, I want that one!” Okay.

[00:06:10] CZ: I would say I still love to write and I never want to be one of those editors that stops writing. And to keep myself happy, I find the pitches that really delight me the most. And we can talk about some of them.

[00:06:23] BB: We will, you’re already ahead of it. By the way, I must disclose on here for all the publicists listening, Christopher came with ample notes and preparation. Very solid.

[00:06:34] CZ: Very unlike me.

[00:06:35] BB: Oh, okay. Well, I gotta just give you a round of applause because some people get on here, they’re like, “Oh yeah, what am I, what are we doing again?” And I’m like, “No problem. I got you.” But kudos to you, even though your inbox is thousands and thousands deep, you are ready for this show. So I do love that. Well, since you teed it up, Christopher, let’s talk about some of those pitches. What do you like in a pitch from a PR person, not a, let’s say, freelancer who wants to write for Vasco?

[00:06:59] CZ: Yes, it’s got to be direct. And the news value, because we’re a news team, the news value has to be really upfront and really prominent. I need to know right away, what is this about? I don’t need three paragraphs of throat clearing about some trend that I already knew about, or that Twitter is turning into X today and people are mad at Elon Musk and blah, blah, blah. It goes on and on.

It's like, yeah, "I know all this, we're covering this stuff." So it's like, "Tell me what it is you're offering and try to make that clear." Start with the subject line. There are no tricks with subject lines. There's tricks to get me to open something for sure. I'll open it. And then if it's not something for us, the subject line is not going to get us to say yes to a story. I really love subject lines. It just tells what it is.

Study. Millennials are the biggest liars per generation. Research reveals that was actually when I said yes to and then I ended up not doing it because I didn't feel the survey delivered on the promise, but the subject was right there. It's like, "Here's a new study about millennial behavior in a workplace." I want to read this and I want to see what it's about. So that one worked.

[00:08:07] BB: Okay. Great. Anything else on the opposite that you never want to see in a pitch or is it a complete like, "Bye?"

[00:08:15] CZ: The thing that really gets me probably the most upset is when I feel that the pitch promises a piece of information that is not delivered in the story. Usually this happens with surveys or data that a company wants to share with us. A lot of companies have proprietary data. They want to share it with us to get their name out there. It's a great arrangement because we'll write about it if the data is, if there's a real news value and the companies get mentioned. And I think everyone likes that arrangement, but sometimes the PR people will say, "We have data that can say this or this or this," and I get excited because I'm a data person and I'm like, "Yeah, let me see that," and then they don't produce it or they produce a study that doesn't really say what they said in the opening. So that would probably be my biggest pet peeve.

[00:08:57] BB: Yeah. So don't be tricky in your subject lines and then fail to deliver. Yes. Okay.

[00:09:07] SPONSOR ANNOUNCEMENT: 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.

[00:09:30] BB: What about, and I'm sure they come to you, exclusives versus embargoes? Do you ever want to see either?

[00:09:37] CZ: Yeah, we will. We'll take a look at anything that if there's a reason to do it, I won't turn it away just because it's an embargo. I think like most journalists, I probably get a little annoyed with certain embargoes, the weird midnight embargo times, which I know the companies decide and not the PR people, but that's always weird because we always mess it up.

[00:09:55] BB: You mean like midnight for my one little tech company that's announcing its brand change? And you're like, what? This is not even, no, there's no embargo. That kills me. What's like, no one is sitting on the edge of their seat for your dorky little news. Go sit down.

[00:10:11] CZ: Yeah, but we will consider them.

[00:10:12] BB: That's very generous.

[00:10:15] CZ: Another pet peeve would be like you agree to an embargo and then clearly like they have already tossed the story, an early version to like the Wall Street Journal or the New York Times that comes out like a day before the embargo that you've been sitting there waiting on. I won't name names, but that happens sometimes.

[00:10:31] BB: Yeah. No. Okay. So Christopher, you mentioned, and I love this, you always want to be an editor who's writing. You always want to be a journalist who's accessible and never is on the mountain of the holier-than-thoughtness and never touchable. For relationship building then, for you, is there anything publicists can do?

[00:10:50] CZ: I'm an after work drinks person in the sense that like I do, if it's going to be coffee versus drinks, I'll take the drink anytime because I can't really drink a lot of coffee and it ends up being, I don't know, like it just feels more comfortable in an after work cocktail environment to have conversations. I don't do a lot of no agenda meetings with PR people these days just because of time. I have in the past and I do occasionally, if it's somebody who really wants to work with us, I do make the time.

The better scenario for us probably, we do have a great office at Fast Company at Seven World Trade.

[00:11:26] BB: You do. I've been there. The views are spectacular. Let us emphasize. Yes.

[00:11:30] CZ: Yeah. And we like to show that off. We want to bring people up and so if you represent a client, say a CEO is in town, they want to meet with us. We often do that. We have to arrange it with the building people and stuff.

[00:11:43] BB: It's worth it.

[00:11:44] CZ: That's a really good way to develop relationships, I think, because you get to know the PR person and also there's a reason for the meeting.

[00:11:51] BB: Exactly. Okay. Come visit you in your fabulous office. Old school.

[00:11:56] CZ: Yes, exactly.

[00:11:57] BB: Old school. I like it.

[00:12:00] CZ: We always give the guests the view that faces outward so they can see the harbor and everything.

[00:12:05] BB: So yeah. Smart. Okay. Christopher, I have a rapid fire little question series here. Are you ready?

[00:12:11] CZ: Yes, I am.

[00:12:12] BB: Okay. First, video or phone interview?

[00:12:15] CZ: I prefer the phone. I usually sound better than I look.

[00:12:18] BB: Okay. Bullet points or paragraphs?

[00:12:21] CZ: Bullet points can be effective.

[00:12:22] BB: Good. Short or long pitches?

[00:12:25] CZ: Short.

[00:12:26] BB: I always hear short. But on a rare occasion, we'll hear someone say, "No, I want it spelled out." Anyway. Okay. Well, actually, how short?

[00:12:33] CZ: So short enough to where I can get context and make an informed decision, but not too long that I'm going to not read the whole thing.

[00:12:41] BB: Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[00:12:44] CZ: I usually don't want images unless I ask for them. And our software often filters them out anyway. So if you send the images, we usually don't even see them if we don't know you.

[00:12:52] BB: Oh, email or Twitter DM.

[00:12:55] CZ: Email, please. I try to use Twitter very little these days with all that's going on.

[00:12:59] BB: Me too, or X or whatever we're now calling it. Okay.

[00:13:01] CZ: I use it to find news. I have to be on there and use it, but I don't necessarily communicate on there.

[00:13:08] CZ: Okay. One follow up or multiple?

[00:13:10] CZ: Usually, you know, one or two follow ups is fine. We do get busy and there's times when a good idea slips by and it's, it is something you've meant to respond to, but didn't. So they can be effective to follow up. I'd say if you're following up more than like twice on the same idea, yeah, it's probably no.

[00:13:27] BB: Okay. Good to know. Direct or creative subject lines?

[00:13:31] CZ: Direct.

[00:13:32] BB: We covered that a bit. Yes. Direct. Tell them what you got. All right. Press release or media kit?

[00:13:37] CZ: Press release, paste it into the email can be very effective. It gives me the context I need. If the press release is already drafted and you can just paste it in and it's text. Yeah. That really helps.

[00:13:47] BB: Then you don't have to click to another thing. It's right there. Yes. All right. Time you usually read pitches or is it all the time?

[00:13:54] CZ: I try to keep it to daytime hours and weekdays. I have to do things for work all the time after hours, deal with emergencies. You're a journalist so stuff comes up. But pitches is a workflow thing and I like to keep it during business hours. I rarely look at a pitch on a weekend.

[00:14:14] BB: There you go. Who sends one on a weekend?

[00:14:17] CZ: People do. People do. And the thing is, I am looking at my inbox because I have to.

[00:14:23] BB: But also, there's tools to not have this happen these days. So I wonder, publicists.

[00:14:28] CZ: Yeah, you can schedule them. Yeah.

[00:14:30] BB: Yes. Okay. What type of sources do you look for? This is a very broad question, but some people are like, "Academics and chemistry."

[00:14:40] CZ: Yeah, that is a broad question. I mean, if we're still talking about the PR world, there's nothing wrong with a PR person who wants to spill, I can't believe I'm going to say this, spill a little tea.

[00:14:51] BB: Spill it, everybody. You heard it here.

[00:14:54] CZ: I can't believe I just said that. I really want to jump out of the window now, but I said it because I couldn't think of any other way.

[00:15:01] BB: Yes. Give me a scoop, right? Give me something.

[00:15:04] CZ: The scoops are great. Even if you just want to say something off the record that you know you wouldn't, that you don't want printed, it shows trust when you do that. When you're that kind of, I mean, so there's nothing wrong with that. I think that I like people who know what's happening. You know, we're news people.

[00:15:19] CZ: I met with someone yesterday and he's this global guru who goes all over the world and talks to presidents. And I was like, "What is your strategy in knowing what's going on?" And his whole strategy is he just goes to breakfasts and lunch with interesting people. I'm like, "Wow, that's awesome." Anyway, he's not in journalism clearly. So there's that. Okay. Lastly, Christopher, let's talk about your book and anything else you want to promote, but yeah, talk about your book, *Uneducated*.

[00:15:46] CZ: Yeah. The book is called *Uneducated*. It just came out in May. It was published by Little Brown. It's a very personal story about the education divide. It follows my own attempts to navigate the professional white-collar world without a college degree. I came to journalism relatively late as a person who had problems in high school. Like it was ejected in 11th grade. I was classified as emotionally disturbed. It was a whole thing, but like the school system didn't quite -

[00:16:16] BB: Didn't work for you.

[00:16:17] CZ: It didn't work for me. And when I left, I wandered around at menial retail jobs for about a decade and then found an opportunity to do an unpaid internship. That's how I got into journalism. Working in the business after a number of years, I really started to notice what an anomaly I was.

[00:16:32] BB: Yeah, you are.

[00:16:34] CZ: Yeah. And it felt like a relevant story to tell from the perspective. There's a lot of books about college and I wanted to write about college from the perspective of someone who

missed out on it. Cause I really do feel like I missed out on something vital. And if I had to do over again, I might do it differently, but there's a message there about how education has a power to shape our identities, even when we don't have the education. So that was the story I wanted to tell.

[00:17:00] BB: Yes. Well, I just spotted it's coming on Saturday, Christopher. So there we go. You got one sale. Yes. Thanks for doing this podcast. Oh, and I love memoirs. So I'm excited and I will definitely be writing you back on that.

And for everybody listening, we're increasingly doing more community events. And so we're doing coffee with a journalist or journalists out and about in various cities. So stay tuned. But also we might be including readings by our journalists, authors of books as well. So Christopher, you're going to be on tap to sell more books as well. So there you go.

[00:17:33] CZ: I'm happy to be there.

[00:17:34] BB: Yes. Christopher, is there anything else you just want to plug, mention, tout, et cetera?

[00:17:40] CZ: To dovetail away from the book for one second, read Fastcompany.com. You know, Fast Company has been my home as a journalist for the past seven years. And it's a great publication if you care about tech, if you care about business, if you care about how business and the world around you intersect. That's where the place for it. I hope people go check it out.

[00:18:01] BB: Oh, yes. We will be. Christopher, thank you for doing this today. Congrats on your book.

[00:18:06] CZ: Thank you so much. This was fun.

[00:18:08] BB: This was fun. And also, as we now all know, take Christopher to a drink and make sure you spill some tea.

[00:18:17] CZ: That's what we learned.

[00:18:19] BB: We did, we did. Oh, thank you so much, Christopher. Lots of fun. Thank you, Beck. Yeah, thanks. We'll talk to you soon. All right. Bye -bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:18:28] Speaker 1: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with the Journalist episode, featuring Christopher Zara from Fast Company.

For more exclusive insights about the Journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter at onepitch.co forward slash 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]