

EPISODE 201

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:09] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist, brought to you by the team at OnePitch. Are you looking for a more efficient way to find and pitch to the right journalists? Head to our website at onepitch.co to learn more.

Our guests on today's episode is Coffee with a Journalist is Melissa Daniels from Modern Retail. As a senior reporter, Melissa covers the retail industry, with a particular emphasis on e-commerce, ESG, FinTech, and home in design. During the episode, Melissa breaks down her process for assessing the hundreds of pitches she receives daily, she talks about the importance of making sure pitches are extremely related to her beat, her resolution about not taking cold pitches, and more. Let's dive in.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:01:02] BB: Welcome everyone, this is Coffee with a Journalist, where we talk with real journalist and hear about what they don't like frankly, about publicists and how to make their lives hopefully better with pitching. So, that is what we're here to solve.

My name is Beck Bamberger, and I'm here today with Melissa Daniels, senior reporter from Modern Retail, covering all types of retail things, stuff, trends, all the things. You have a wide breadth, Melissa. So, thank you for being here.

[0:01:34] MD: Hi. Thank you so much for inviting me on. It's really great to be able to talk about this. It's one of my favorite topics in media, really, this dynamic between our professions.

[0:01:44] BB: Yes. Tell us more, Melissa, first with your inbox. How is it?

[0:01:49] MD: It's sort of fun.

[0:01:51] BB: You're the first person who's like been saying that. Tell us more.

[0:01:54] MD: Yes. Okay. Well, just to lay the groundwork, as it were, I've been doing this for about 15 years, as part of the national reporting. When I started, I mean, I was in college working at my student newspaper when political launched, and everyone said you couldn't do an online-only news publication.

So, let's just remember how much media has changed in that time. Because I think that's really, part of why the dynamics between publicists and journalists is so crazed right now, because the whole way the industry works has been upended, right?

[0:02:26] BB: Completely.

[0:02:27] MD: So, my role right now, I'm super fortunate to have a really fascinating bee. I cover the evolution of retail and e-commerce for Modern Retail, which is a publication owned by Digiday. The publication that covers a lot of advertising news. All kind of in your wheelhouse as well. We get to have a lot of fun, because we kind of get to go wide, but we also get to go deep. It just really depends on the topic and where your nose leads you. So, some of the areas I focus on are a lot of ESG stuff, a lot of environmental, social, and governance roles at companies. I do a lot of FinTech, because that's an area I'm really interested in payment technology check out, that whole nine. I like to tell my friends that I can tell you everything about why you spent so much money on your phone.

[0:03:08] BB: That's so true.

[0:03:10] MD: That's lovely. It's fun. We all do it.

[0:03:13] BB: Yes. It's annoyingly easy. So, I think that's the big hook there.

[0:03:19] MD: Yes. So, we get into all of it. As far as sectors and products, I love it all. I love a good CPG brand. I love a good home cleaning product. Those are some areas that just as a consumer really interests me. It's fascinating to write about them. When you tap on my inbox, though, I mean, it's a nightmare. It's a total nightmare, because I get hundreds of emails.

[0:03:42] BB: A day? A week?

[0:03:44] MD: Hundreds a day.

[0:03:45] BB: Hundreds a day.

[0:03:45] MD: Yes. And I'm an inbox-zero gal.

[0:03:49] BB: Oh, you're in that club? Me too. Me too. There's nothing more satisfying.

[0:03:51] MD: Yes. Don't you love it? Don't you forget at the end of the day?

[0:03:54] BB: Yes. For me, like the best of the best is the Friday zero. When you're like, it is three o'clock. Well, we have a four-day workweek at BAM. But just to be like, "Okay", and I am hitting Saturday. Saturday, it's not like, "Oh, God", you look at it, you're like, "That's such" –so satisfying. So, I feel like the best. How do you manage that with the hundreds you get every day?

[0:04:18] MD: There's a lot of quick deletes.

[0:04:20] BB: Absolutely.

[0:04:20] MD: I tend to start my day on my phone, right? I'm with my dog, I'm with the kiddo, and I'm there with a cup of coffee starting the day out, and I'll look through my inbox and I'll do a quick scroll for anyone that I'm already actually in contact with. So, I kind of try to get like the business out of the way and then we go through that day's fresh pitches and all the new people, or all the lists that I'm on. **[inaudible 0:04:45]** then. All that stuff gets deleted really quick or it just gets filed away. If it doesn't get deleted, it gets pulled into one of many, many, many folders.

As much as I am an inbox-zero gal, my organization probably would leave some to be desired. But it works for me. So, I do it my – is this a furniture company? Is this a sustainability topic? Is this a report with data I want to come back to? Is this someone's contact information I want to save? I just kind of file it all the way. There's probably, on any given day, somewhere between

300 to 400 unread messages in my inbox. I still call out inbox zero because I'm zero on the read.

[0:05:22] BB: Exactly. That's my policy too.

[0:05:25] MD: Yes, I might need them. I'm going to search for them. I'm going to save them. I was thinking about this in preparation for this conversation, because you really have what four seconds to capture my attention as a blind email. I think you've got about four seconds. I like to think that I'm nicer than most reporters who get cold pitches.

[0:05:46] BB: But let's get into that. So, for the four seconds, what are you looking at?

[0:05:50] MD: I'm definitely looking at the subject line. I'm looking at the length of the pitch, and I'm looking at any bolded words or other links that you might have. I'm looking at where the sender is from. Do they have a signature? Is that signature from a PR company I know? Is it from someone who is a consultant doing their own thing? Maybe they have cool clients. I try to get to the who as much as the what, as far as the message that's being sent.

[0:06:20] BB: That's the first time I've heard Melissa, someone going in with kind of double checking where's the agency from? Do I know them already?

[0:06:29] MD: Is this an internal PR? I'm on a lot of internal PR lists. Is this an old-school news release? I'm on a lot of lists from government organizations. I do a lot of policy reporting for us about that intersection of business and policy. So, is this an FCC news email? Well, maybe that's what I'm going to leave on read, and I'll get back to it later in the day. Those are the kinds of things that I might save it and keep back is, is this sort of official news? Those ones don't get deleted as quickly.

[0:06:59] BB: Back to the subject line, because that's part of the four seconds priority. What is it in the subject line that stands out to you? And you're like, "Yes, must click."

[0:07:08] MD: Having the brand in there is huge for me. I want to know –

[0:07:14] BB: Say the brand.

[0:07:14] MD: Yes. If you're telling me like, okay, I pulled a couple examples of ones I really liked, and these are both ones that turned into stories. One is, Healthy Baby target launch under embargo? Well, this caught my eye because it's an embargo. So, this is still percolating. We love a target story. I love a target scoop. And healthy baby caught my eye because I really enjoy covering the home and baby and cleaning sectors. So, this had a lot for me. Just those five words, that had a lot for me.

[0:07:48] BB: And you actually liked the question mark with the embargo of like, "Oh, yes, do you want to? Do you not?" I don't know.

[0:07:53] MD: Yes, doesn't bother me. Doesn't matter to me. This PR person, actually, she just got back to me last week with something that she wanted to – a similar setup, with a very similar subject mine. I didn't end up writing about it. It wasn't a fit for where my head's at right now, and for my calendar. It just was something I had to pass on, which is going to happen. I mean, I'm juggling 5 to 15 topics on a given day.

[0:08:15] BB: God. Yes.

[0:08:18] MD: This is how I live.

[0:08:18] BB: Yes. That's how we live. Okay. So, how do you then know, a story is worth pursuing? The reason I asked that is because usually when we have editors on there saying, "Hey, well, we're deciding, and I'm going to match this assignment out to that reporter, or this reporter, I go to my meeting to hear pitch stories. For you as a reporter, what is that process like? Or is there any process?"

[0:08:41] MD: Yes. Well, there's a process in my head, and then there's a process editorially.

[0:08:46] BB: Of course. Tell us.

[0:08:49] MD: Yes, the process editorially is I bring ideas to my editors, and we can kind of yay or nay, or meet in the middle. That process may take anywhere from one hour to one week, depending on the urgency of the pitch, and the timeliness of the story. But in my head is a much more, I think, interesting processes. So, like I said, at the top of this conversation –

[0:09:12] BB: In my head, yes, continue.

[0:09:13] MD: Yes, because reporting is a heavy job.

[0:09:16] BB: Sure is, multifaceted. You have to be notably intelligent in order to keep up, in my opinion.

[0:09:24] MD: I got some folks, you need to talk to you.

[0:09:27] BB: Maybe. They haven't been on this podcast just for the record. So, there you go.

[0:09:32] MD: No, I love it. It's like, I think these things through. I can guarantee you that there are pitches that have been sent to me on one day that I would immediately say, “No, this is not a fit.” If they hit me back three weeks later, and other things had happened with that company, or there were other news pegs, I might reconsider it. A no is never a final no, because these things are all happening in an ecosystem of other news of topics that have my interest at the time of what my bandwidth is for reporting.

So, if you send me a pitch that's a new brand, that's going to be in Target set. Let's stick with our other example. Well, if that's a brand that's in my wheelhouse of what I already cover, it's a cleaning product brand. It's a furniture brand. My head's already in those spaces. I have sources that I can talk to. I have my finger on that pulse a little bit. But if it's something that it's like, “Oh, we're going to be launching a product in I don't know, maybe it's like an apparel line.” I don't do a ton of apparel. So, that's not necessarily going to resonate with me.

However, three weeks later, if you come back, and it's because that apparel brand has, I don't know, Stanley Cup branded T-shirt selling like hotcakes, and that's going to Target, well, maybe then I'll take that as a news hit. Do you know what I'm saying? It's so not in a vacuum.

[0:10:49] BB: Yes. Multifaceted here and the brain is boggling around to how to figure out where it goes.

[MESSAGE]

[0:10:57] ANNOUNCER: Today's interview will continue after this brief message brought to you by OnePitch.

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Now, back to today's episode.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:11:20] BB: Sources, Melissa. Are you looking for specific kinds of people to give you some dirt or some stories?

[0:11:27] MD: Yes, always. Always, always. I mean, some of my favorite stories in my entire career have come from people telling me things they're probably not supposed to, or that other people don't want them to talk about, right? I mean, that's journalism in a lot of ways.

[0:11:44] BB: Yes. Agreed.

[0:11:44] MD: And I can have a whole other conversation with you about the kind of journalism that's "positive". I will always have time for people who feel like they need to speak to a journalist because they have a concern about the way a company or an institution is operating or treating them or its customers or citizens. That's number one.

So, you come to me, and you say, "Hey, this company is not doing right by its employees. I'm all ear for you." That's just part of the gig. That's part of the job. That being said, I love sources who are also really knowledgeable and really good experts. I love someone who knows 10 to 15

times more than me about how furniture supply chains work, because they're going to be a great person to talk to when I want to talk about sustainable wood sourcing. I don't have all the answers. Helping me educate myself is a big reason I connect with folks. And I try to keep those relationships as collegial, and just kind of conversational as possible. Nobody wants to be just hit up for information all the time. I want to make sure they feel heard. I want to make sure they feel like their quotes and their work is being represented accurately in what I write.

So, I don't take that relationship lightly, even though some people might look at it as “Viola quote”. It actually is quite a meaningful relationship to me, as far as the expert sources.

[0:13:19] BB: Speaking of relationships, Melissa, so how do you look to build relationships with publicist, if at all?

[0:13:27] MD: Yes. I mean, I'm always down for like a good coffee or Zoom chat. Tell me a client roster. Who are you working with? Who's doing exciting things that you're excited about? Because I can tell you, if you as your publicist aren't excited about what your client is doing, no way my readers are going to care.

[0:13:45] BB: So true. Just to clarify, you're down for like, “Hey, Melissa, I wrote six clients in retail tech. One, I'm really excited about is X. You want to hop on a Zoom with me? You want to do a coffee?” You're good with that?

[0:14:00] MD: Absolutely. Yes. I mean, it's like, I can't spend my whole day doing that, because I'm doing deadlines. But I usually say yes. I mean, I can't think of a time that I've said no when someone's put that on the table. I know there's also situations where I've gone and had non-background conversation with PR people or comms people, because I proactively reached out to them. It's worked the other way around too, where I was like, “Hey, I really want to get to know you guys better because I'm really interested in your company. Can we chat? So, it works both ways.

[0:14:30] BB: This is good. Now, to clarify further, where are you based, where maybe people can meet you up in person? New York?

[0:14:38] MD: This is as a great question. I am based in the Mojave Desert.

[0:14:43] BB: Nope. Then we're not going there. I know. I saw Yucca Valley on your LinkedIn. I was like, "Maybe that's just" –

[0:14:49] MD: Yes. So, I live about 30 minutes from the Palm Springs Airport. So, if anyone's ever in town in Palm Springs, for whatever reason, that's a great place to find me. We'll actually be there for eTail at the end of February which I'm really excited about. I'm always happy to give tours of Joshua Tree National Park.

[0:15:08] BB: That's where I go for my birthday every year.

[0:15:09] MD: Get out. Okay, you're coming over.

[0:15:12] BB: There's just something about it, is so mystical. Now, a lot of it is blown up because damn influencers and all this crap. But hey, it's all good. Okay Melissa so probably not a median person. You're not going to go to Joshua Tree Coffee but that is a good spot in case you're going to be strolling through for J Tree. But by the way, have you been there lately?

[0:15:33] MD: Yes.

[0:15:33] BB: Oh, it's now all LA-ish. It used to be a little shack in the back, as you know. And now, I'm like, "What is this? What is this with the pink tie? What?"

[0:15:42] MD: There's like vintage markets there every Sunday and Saturday. It's wild.

[0:15:47] BB: Everything gets ruined, Melissa. It's okay. I'm old, older millennial complaining. Okay. Anyway, so we covered inbox zero, we covered relationship building, a little bit on the story approval process. Is there anything you wish to impart to publicists of like, please, I do not want this?

[0:16:07] MD: Yes. I have a list of them. I'm going to preface this by saying in December between the craziness of q4 pitching and holiday and trying to write ahead of the break, I had a

moment or two where I was like, “I’m going to stop taking cold pitches next year.” Because I had gotten myself into some situations where I took cold pitches, and then the expectations of what they thought I was writing, it seemed like they didn't trust me. They're like, “Oh, well, you're not going to print that, are you?” I'm like, “Well, that's not how this works. This is not that kind of relationship.” Even after the story ran, they were coming at me saying, “Oh, can you revise her quote to say X, Y, and Z?” That is not how this works. It wasn't even like – it's one thing, it's a fact error. It's one thing if I screw up, the year your company was founded. But simply because you don't like the verbiage, the colloquial interview is not enough for me to go back.

So, I don't like that. I don't like people telling me I'm doing my job. That really grinds my gears. We talked a little bit about the subject lines matters. I don't like my name in a subject line. It feels very patronizing.

[0:17:12] BB: Oh, like, “Melissa: Exclusive for blah, blah, blah.”

[0:17:17] MD: Yes. Because it's like, I have run email marketing too. I know how that works.

[0:17:22] BB: Yes. Exactly.

[0:17:23] MD: You're not really first of lessons to me. I know, to me, it's almost like a sign that your mass pitching this, but wanting to make – we're not getting fooled by that anymore. If your response to a question during the interview, listen, there's a lot of reporters that think it's insane how often I let, or have like PR folks sitting in on my interviews. I mean, my counterparts in government and policy journalism would be astounded. They'd be like, “Why do you do that?” I said, “Well, I know how to do it now.” I think, when you're working with really good publicists and comms people, they know their role, and they know that they're there to support, and assist, and be informational, and follow up, and support their client. But like, “Please don't interrupt.”

[0:18:13] BB: Oh, like what?

[0:18:15] MD: That's tough for me. Unless it's something where, like, your CEO said the wrong date, the CEO had the wrong figure, or you say, “Melissa, I'm going to get back to you, because I think Joe shared those q4 numbers, but I'm going to send you the link to the transcripts so you

can have the correct ones.” That’s okay. But don't come in with your talking points on top of the CEO that I'm interviewing.

[0:18:39] BB: Oh, I bet that client doesn't like it either.

[0:18:47] MD: Let’s lower –

[0:18:47] BB: My comms person had to hop in.

[0:18:49] MD: That’s not the best look.

[0:18:52] BB: I don’t really like – back to I think the sort of specifics of email. I like a really clear – your mileage may vary. Some people may not like this. But I'd like it to be clear and concise. If you say, “Hey, I have this expert and here's five different things they could talk about.” That's almost like too much for me to process. Do you know what I'm saying? I much prefer, especially, if it's a cold pitch coming in from someone, or a PR agency, or a company I have no relation to. I like a very specific ask of me. “Would you like to talk to my leader, Joe Schmo, about our company's launch in Y retailer?” Make it a clear ask. Be specific in what you're offering.

[0:19:37] BB: Mm-hmm. Specific. In other words, you don't want to pitch that’s like, “Hey, would you maybe be interested in product?” It's like, interested, why? Because it's a launch? Because it's new?

[0:19:48] MD: Yes, exactly. Exactly. I get a lot of those and it's not that the brands aren't interested. I just have nothing to do with it. Unless you hit that lucky strike where, “Oh, I'm already writing about upcycled clothing brands. I'm already writing about candle companies, new candle company.” Hey, maybe that's a great fit for that day. You hit the jackpot, that moment, maybe. Not that I’m a jackpot. Not that I’m a prize, Beck. That means you got to deal with me. That's the other thing. Know who you're pitching. If you don't want to deal with me, don't pitch me.

[0:20:23] BB: Yes. I think that's the quote of the episode. Melissa, as we come to the end here, we have a little rapid-fire session here. Let me see your answer. So, here we go. Video or phone interview?

[0:20:37] MD: Phone.

[0:20:38] BB: Yes. Bullet points or paragraphs?

[0:20:41] MD: Bullet points.

[0:20:43] BB: Short or long pitches?

[0:20:46] MD: Long.

[0:20:46] BB: Long? What? Like long how? What? I'm so surprised by this.

[0:20:53] MD: I mean, like, I think of long individualization. Give me your intro sentence. Give me your bullet points. Give me your closing sentence. Give me your link to your embargoed press release. Give me your link to your Dropbox. Give me your signature.

[0:21:06] BB: That doesn't sound that long, though.

[0:21:07] MD: I guess that's not that long. Maybe I'm saying like –

[0:21:12] BB: But it's specific and meaty.

[0:21:12] MD: Yes, and like compartmentalized, organized.

[0:21:16] BB: It's organized. Yes, I love it. Okay, you already kind of mentioned this but images attached or you like a Dropbox file?

[0:21:24] MD: Dropbox.

[0:21:25] BB: Email or Twitter DM or X, or whatever the hell we're calling it?

[0:21:28] MD: Email.

[0:21:30] BB: One follow-up or multiples?

[0:21:33] MD: One.

[0:21:35] BB: Direct or creative subject lines?

[0:21:37] MD: Direct.

[0:21:38] BB: Press release or media kit?

[0:21:40] MD: Media kit.

[0:21:43] BB: Oh, she likes media kit. And then is there anything, Melissa, that you want to promote, highlight, celebrate, et cetera? We are here for you.

[0:21:53] MD: Oh, my gosh, if anyone is going to be at eTail Palm Springs at the end of February, or on the off chance we'll be at Modernism Week in Palm Springs mid-February, I will be there looking for home and design brands to speak with. And then I'll be at eTail talking on some panels and some chats about all things e-commerce, so please find me.

[0:22:13] BB: And if you happen to be in Joshua Tree, hit him Melissa up, basically. Hit her up for a coffee or take a little hike if it's not blazing in the middle of summer. So, there's a caveat there. But I love it. Well, thank you, Melissa. Thanks for being on. I hope you have a wonderful rest of like January, February in the beautiful desert that I love so much, and we'll see you there, and don't put her name in the subject line.

[0:22:40] MD: You got it. Thanks, Beck.

[0:22:42] BB: Thanks, Melissa. Take care.

[0:22:44] MD: Bye now.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:22:45] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of Coffee with a Journalist episode featuring Melissa Daniels from Modern Retail. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter at onepitch.co/podcast. We'll see you all next week with even more insights about the journalists you want to learn more about. Until then, start great stories.

[END]