

EPISODE 258

[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 the right journalists? Head over to our website at onepitch.co to learn more. Today, we're joined by Cassie McGrath, a healthcare reporter at Morning Brew. We're pulling back the curtain on health journalism, what it's like to cover the industry, how Morning Brew's professional division operates, and the process of turning a pitch into a compelling story. Cassie shares her approach to managing a packed inbox, building strong relationships with publicists, and finding the right experts to bring her reporting to life. Whether you're a publicist looking for insider tips, or just curious about the fast-paced world of healthcare news, this conversation is packed with valuable insights. Let's dive in.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:59] BB: Welcome, everyone. This is Coffee with a Journalist. Oh my gosh, I actually got coffee today. This is a rare instance. I'm Beck Bamberger. I made OnePitch along with Jared Martin, who you all know because you've been listening to this dang podcast for a very long time. We thank all our publicists out there. And we're here to talk with reporters, journalists, editors, the freelancers that make the world go round in our world as publicists because we need to know each other. We need to have good relationships. So, yay.

And with us today is Cassie McGrath, who is the healthcare reporter at Morning Brew Inc. We're going to hear a lot about healthcare and the things going on at Morning Brew. Cassie, thank you for being here.

[0:01:40] CM: Thanks so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

[0:01:42] BB: Yes. I know you've been listening to a couple episodes, you said. So you're up to speed a bit.

[0:01:47] CM: Yeah, my editor came on a few weeks ago. She was great. Yeah, I'm excited to chat more depth.

[0:01:52] BB: Yes. You've been now at Morning Brew since about a year, right? Since last May or so, right?

[0:01:58] CM: Yes, that's right.

[0:01:59] BB: How is it now been? Because, specifically, we want to talk about your inbox. But actually, before we get even to that, Morning Brew. Can you give us an overview of the coverage type, so we're very up to speed with that?

[0:02:10] CM: Yeah, definitely. I'm on our professional division side. We work under Healthcare Brew. We also have IT Brew, CFO Brew, HR Brew, etc. We're focused on the healthcare industry and that ranges everything from hospitals, health plans, tech, medical devices, things like that.

[0:02:31] BB: Pharma.

[0:02:31] CM: Pharma, exactly. Doing more government reporting now as more policies are intersecting with industry and things like that. Yeah, we do it by range. We put out three newsletters a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. We're a team of three reporters, an editor, a great coffee editor. Yeah, we are small but mighty, I would say.

[0:02:51] BB: Okay, small but mighty. Now wait, you said the number of people on your team. Go back to that. You have a copywriter?

[0:02:57] CM: Yeah, we have a copy editor. Editor Nicole, who was on a few weeks ago. [inaudible 0:03:01].

[0:03:02] BB: Yes. Okay. It's a tight team. Tight team. Okay. Now let's get into your inbox. Now that you've been there about for a year or two, I'm sure people now know about you. And I'm trying to hit you up. How is your inbox and how do you organize it?

[0:03:19] CM: Yeah, it's always busy. I came from another role covering health journalism, covering healthcare. I got to bring some sources to this role. I had those connections made.

[0:03:33] BB: That was the Boston Business Journal, right?

[0:03:35] CM: Yes, it was. Yes. And I'm from the Boston area. I don't live there anymore, but it's really like a healthcare hub. As I moved into more national coverage, I definitely often touch base with those same people. Always having familiar names in the inbox is great. I try to set up even background chats or just conversations with folks, too. I have a face to the name when they come into my email. But, yeah, it's always busy, I think.

I get a wide range of things. I tend to cover at Healthcare Brew hospitals, tech and government, but we all cover everything too at the same time. My kind of role is if it's not too stressful for someone else, I'll always take a pitch and I'll always read it over because I want to know what people are talking about, what they care about, because that can turn into a story now or maybe in the future if I see a lot of people are talking about this thing and I think an inbox is a good way to indicate that. It's always busy though because of that and because a journalist inbox isn't a little crazy.

[0:04:42] BB: It is. It is. Okay. You mentioned there's something. Oh, for later time, it becomes relevant for you. I'm guessing you don't delete pitches.

[0:04:52] CM: No.

[0:04:53] BB: You let them ride.

[0:04:54] CM: I do, yeah, because I like to go back and search sometimes too. I find my inbox is a really good research for that. And sometimes I saw something a couple months ago and I think now's the time to act on it and maybe there's a source available, an expert available there, so I think it's just valuable to keep them. But I know other people maybe would be driven a little crazy by that.

[0:05:17] BB: No, it's very common for reporters, I have to say. They use their inboxes as their own personal Google of sorts and go back in there. I want to ask more about that though because it is so common. And so publicists have all had this day, hopefully, where you're like, "Oh my God. That pitch I sent three and a half months ago, they responded right now." You're like, "Why?" And that's because that journalist is going back in and searching. How do you search? What keywords are you doing? Because I think this helps illuminate for publicists what they should always have in their pitch.

[0:05:47] CM: Yeah, I think it's often the topic for me. I'm not sure how helpful that is. But, yeah, it is often. If they're monitoring trends in the industry that I find that I want to go back to, often, I'll search that way. But sometimes it could be a name. Sometimes it could be a title even. I'm looking for someone right now, I'm working on a story about chief AI officers at hospitals. Sometimes I search that way.

And I think often in getting pitches, as much of the jargon that can be worked through as possible, especially in healthcare, really get to the point and explain what you're pitching, if it's a device or something. Or I think this happens a lot in healthcare, because in trying to describe something that is kind of confusing or complex, you can kind of just say it's like solution-oriented, or future-proof, or something like that. I don't know what that is. So I'm not going to often go back to those pitches that don't make it clear really what the product is or what you want me to write about.

And if I have to ask several questions to understand what the pitch is, yeah, I might have time to do that. I would say that would be my point of advice. I guess that's not as much on the searching thing. But if you're pitching a product and you say, I think this is really interesting, I think this is going to change the healthcare industry, I need to really understand what it is from that first email.

[0:07:11] BB: Yes, and I would say the first sentence.

[0:07:14] CM: Yes.

[0:07:14] BB: The first sentence, because no reporter worth their salt. This is my take, is spending the time to like, "Oh, let me try to figure this out. Let me spend 20 minutes trying to think about." No. No, I'm already – what? No.

[0:07:26] CM: Exactly.

[0:07:28] BB: Cassie, what does something, perhaps, publicists do that you're like, "Yes, thank you. I love it." If anything?

[0:07:35] CM: Yeah, I think a good description, as I said, of what they're pitching and how it ties into an issue or a trend in the industry. I cover AI a lot for us. And I do this newsletter every month called AI 411 that announces things that happened in AI health tech each month. I always really appreciate when I get something that's for AI 411. I know people are following what I'm doing and make my life a little bit easier by being like, "We have this announcement."

And basically, one of the reasons we started that was because I was getting so many pitches about new products, new AI-driven products in healthcare. And we just wouldn't have the time to write a story on every single one of them. And then through that newsletter, we're also able to monitor trends in health tech and then do stories based on that, like longer stories. I think if they're watching what we're doing and they're responding to it, that's always really helpful.

I always appreciate one generous follow-up because, as I said, I'm inundated. And so I think if I do miss something, especially someone, if I have a relationship with them, I always welcome a follow-up. And I actually try to thank them for following up when I end up –

[0:08:57] BB: Oh, okay. You like a follow-up. Okay, one, one and done.

[0:09:00] CM: Yeah.

[0:09:00] BB: Okay.

[0:09:01] CM: I think that can be really helpful because, yeah, if I miss something, it's that I genuinely missed it because we have so much happening all the time. I do appreciate that. But I

think a lot of it comes down to just being as descriptive and to the point as possible. And making sure, before pitching it to me, that you understand the product because maybe I do have a follow-up question. And making sure also it relates to healthcare. Sometimes I get pitches that are more industry general and there aren't numbers that I can tie back to the healthcare industry. And I just don't want anyone to waste their time, and I don't want my time to be wasted, and I just can't use those usually.

[0:09:42] BB: Yes, exactly.

[BREAK]

[0:09:46] ANNOUNCER: 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.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:10:09] BB: The one follow-up is my takeaway on this that you do like. What about relationship building? You're talking about you had some relationships when you came from the last media outlet in Boston. It sounds like you like media relationships. But for you, how are those built?

[0:10:25] CM: Yeah, all types of ways. I think in-person as much as I can. I love to meet people in person, either going into a hospital, like touring manufacturing facility, or even just going to events and things like that. Conferences are really helpful for meeting people. I went to CES in January and I'm still generating story ideas and connecting with people from there. That's really helpful.

I work remotely, so I meet with people online all the time. I'm always interested in a background call. I think those are really helpful. And sometimes I work with the same PR folks several times and then we can kind of build a relationship that way. And then, of course, with sources, same thing, chatting with people. And if you have a really good conversation with someone that feels

like, "Okay, we have 20 minutes for today, but you brought something up that I would love to talk about again." I usually try to follow up on that. Because once I'm done with this story, sometimes I got another story idea from them and I would love to explore that in more detail. Yeah, all types of ways. But I guess I don't do it as much over email. I usually like to get on a call with someone.

[0:11:38] BB: Okay. You're open for the call. You're open for a little Zoom chat. Okay. We touched on it before and we're seeing this a lot. And this is relevant through this era of this podcast. I mean, everyone, everyone is in up on their nose on anything with policy, because you cannot deny all the things going on. Who is helpful for you source-wise right now?

[0:12:01] CM: Good question. Yeah, analysts, I would say.

[0:12:03] BB: Analysts? Okay.

[0:12:03] CM: Because you have to pry a lot back to the business perspective. Yeah, how is this policy affecting the healthcare industry, the pharmaceutical industry, things like that? For tariffs, for example, we saw today pharmaceutical companies were at least currently exempt from tariffs. And so what does that mean right now? And how is the industry preparing? Or with layoffs and stuff like of, having less people working at the FDA, how will that affect the pharmaceutical industry? Those are two, yeah, just top of my head sort of ways that we try to break that down. Often, analysts can help bridge that connection.

But also, I've interviewed people who were fired or quit amongst layoffs. We are interested in speaking with people who are on the ground affected by these issues. Of course, the agencies themselves, if they become more willing to speak, I think we'd be interested in hearing how those, the HHS, CMS, FDA, have changed. And I think it's just so confusing right now.

[0:13:10] BB: Oh, to say the least.

[0:13:12] CM: Yeah. But then, yeah, hospital executives or nurses. Wide range. Health plans. People who are on the ground, from executives to people who feel like their jobs are really affected by a change. I don't think there's like a limit, I guess, to people who we would speak with. But I think it's just kind of finding the right people for each of these issues. I mean, even in

something like the mass layoffs we're seeing right now, there's 10 stories I could probably think of right now to do that would touch – because healthcare is so broad that you could touch on so many different pieces. Yeah.

[0:13:50] BB: I want to touch on that. Okay. Especially with the small team that you have. You're not Wall Street Journal where, "Oh my God, there's 20 reporters on 1B." How do you all – because you're saying, "Oh my gosh, there's so many stories I could do." How do you all decide on the stories you do?

[0:14:04] CM: Yeah. I cannot speak highly enough of my team. I love, love, love working with Maya and Caroline who are the other reporters. And we have a weekly pitch meeting and we bring pitches to that that we kind of just catch week to week. We also, of course, respond to daily stories based on what's happening in the industry as we hear news and things like that. But it's very collaborative. And I would say, I mean, we're always messaging, "Did you see this? Did you see that?" We share sources and things like that.

And as I said, we have a loose outline of who covers what. I am covering a retail pharmacy story right now and that often falls under Maya's purview. But I think part of it is that we just do a really good job sharing and brainstorming. While we bring pitches to our pitch meeting, it's also a brainstorming session. Sometimes I can just say, "I'm noticing this. Is anyone else noticing?"

And so, yes, well, I think it's kind of our approach is carving out the best angle. We have a smaller team. When we can't maybe do as many stories as another pub could, it's finding the right story right now and then being really open to follow-ups and trying to find that unique perspective that's really not out there. And I think we do a good job at that. And I think a lot of that comes from the teamwork that we put into it.

[0:15:30] BB: Yeah, just sharing, talking. Yeah.

[0:15:32] CM: Exactly. Yeah. We're all seeing things happening all the time and speaking with different people so that we can bring that to really carve out that ideal angle, I think.

[0:15:43] BB: Such a joy working with people you love working with. And it's small, and it's tight, and you're like, "Yes, it's a vibe."

[0:15:48] CM: Yes, it's great. It's awesome. Yeah.

[0:15:51] BB: Well, Cassie, I have a list of some fast, rapid-fire questions. If you're down for that. Are you ready?

[0:15:57] CM: Yes, ready.

[0:15:58] BB: Okay. Video or phone interview?

[0:16:01] CM: Ooh, can I say both? I like both.

[0:16:03] BB: Yes.

[0:16:04] CM: Yes.

[0:16:05] BB: Okay. Bullet points or paragraphs in a pitch?

[0:16:08] CM: I think I'll say paragraphs.

[0:16:11] BB: Okay. Short or long pitches?

[0:16:12] CM: I prefer longer if it takes more words to explain it.

[0:16:18] BB: What a rare answer here. But go ahead, yeah.

[0:16:20] CM: I think that kind of ties into what I was saying earlier. If you try to cut the chase a little too much, it can just – I don't really know what you're pitching. Short, if you can, but I will read a longer pitch if I think it's worth, if it needed those extra words. But not too long.

[0:16:36] BB: Images attached or Dropbox zip file?

[0:16:40] **CM:** Images attached.

[0:16:42] **BB:** Email or a DM of some sort?

[0:16:45] **CM:** Oh, I like both of those, too.

[0:16:47] **BB:** Cassie, you are a rare one, where you're like, "Oh, both. This is very rare. Okay, we talked about follow-up. So it sounds like you're one and done. Like one follow-up, you're good.

[0:16:57] **CM:** Yeah.

[0:16:57] **BB:** Okay, one and done. Direct or creative subject lines?

[0:17:00] **CM:** Direct.

[0:17:02] **BB:** Direct. Press releases or media kit?

[0:17:05] **CM:** I think press releases tend to be more timely, so I'll say that.

[0:17:08] **BB:** Okay. And then what about time that you read your pitches? Or is it all the time?

[0:17:13] **CM:** All the time, yeah.

[0:17:14] **BB:** All the time. All the time. And then we talked about sources. I think we're good there. But you know what we didn't talk about this? Do you read all the pitches?

[0:17:24] **CM:** No, I don't.

[0:17:25] **BB:** Okay. But you don't delete, it sounds like. You let them ride.

[0:17:28] **CM:** I do. I've read as many as I can.

[0:17:32] BB: Physical.

[0:17:32] CM: Yeah. But I get pitches things that have literally nothing to do with healthcare, so I do not read those.

[0:17:39] BB: Yeah. No, that makes sense.

[0:17:40] CM: Yeah, I would say don't be misleading in your subject lines too. I got a pitch once that it said something about Colin Farrell, and it was just that it was a condition that touched someone in Colin Farrell's life, but it had nothing to do with him or whatever. And I was like, "Now I'm annoyed. This is on the same topic." And I don't like feeling someone's trying to catch me. I just like honesty, be straight up, tell me what you got. And yeah, I'm not going to feel more inclined to work with someone who I feel like misled me.

[0:18:16] BB: Yeah. Yeah. Good. Cassie, anything else you want to promote, highlight, talk about? How do we sign up for your stuff, for example?

[0:18:24] CM: Yeah. We're at Healthcare Brew. Pretty easy. I recommend subscribing to our newsletter which you can't miss on our landing page. And then, yeah, we have a few projects going on. One is a quarter-century project that's looking at like it's newsroom-wide. You can see it in a lot of different industries. Ours, of course, goes on healthcare, but it's how healthcare has changed over the last 25 years. My first story for it was a day in a life in a hospital in the year 2000 and talking to people who have worked at Mass General Hospital for a few decades and, yeah, how their work has changed. But we're also looking at like the Affordable Care Act, looking back at COVID, things like that.

And, yeah, I put out newsletters every month. I mentioned AI 411. I also write Signed and Scrubbed, which is a list of M&A bankruptcies. Yeah, we love puns at Morning Brew, and I'd say we're really good at them. And then otherwise, yeah, just don't hesitate to reach out if you're listening to this and you have a pitch, or you just want to chat, or you want to know what am I looking for? And I always post on LinkedIn when I'm looking up for sources if I'm having a bit of

a hard time. Keep an eye out there. If you think you might be able to connect me with someone, that would be awesome.

[0:19:35] BB: Okay. And she likes to make relationships. Ta-da. Let's make it happen.

[0:19:40] CM: Yes.

[0:19:41] BB: Cassie, thank you so much for being here today. Everybody, she likes attachments, she likes short pitches, long pitches, all the things. This is Cassie McGrath, a reporter from Healthcare Brew. Sign up for her stuff. Yes, Cassie.

[0:19:58] CM: Thank you, Beck. This is great.

[0:19:59] BB: And keeping it up to speed with everything on the policy front. What a time. What a time.

[0:20:05] CM: Indeed. Thank you. Thanks for all your work.

[0:20:08] BB: Thank you, Cassie. See ya.

[OUTRO]

[0:20:11] ANNOUNCER: Thanks for listening to this week's Coffee with a Journalist episode featuring Cassie McGrath, a healthcare reporter at Morning Brew Inc. For more exclusive insights about the journalists on this podcast, subscribe to our weekly podcast newsletter at onepitch.co/podcast. We'll see you next week. But until then, start great stories.

[END]