



ScratchThat Podcast Episode 29: Pitch Perfect

Emily: Hey, I'm Emily Chenevert, advocacy nerd, Peloton enthusiast, wife, and mama to two and CEO of the Austin Board of REALTORS®. Every day, real estate is changing. So we're taking it to the experts to unpack major topics that you need to know about to be successful in this business. Scratch what you think you know about this business, and listen up for a fresh take on an old industry. The post pandemic market is impacting how we think about our homes and all kinds of ways. It's definitely impacting how agents think about marketing listings by forcing language that creates a truer sense of the home while showing activity is riskier than it used to be. Mercedes Kraus is here to tell you that unique property is hot, and she would know. As the executive editor for the entire Curbed brand, she's seen it all. Curbed has a fresh take on how we live and the homes we choose. And she's got some advice for you as you're thinking of pitching your market to achieve nontraditional media presence and set yourself apart. We started our conversation talking about her work. When I asked her what Curbed really is.

Mercedes: So, Curbed right now is being transformed into its new iteration, which is a vertical under New York magazine. New York magazine, and the parent company Vox media merged last year. And as the world has changed so greatly in the past few months, the committee really identified basically a strong business case under New York magazine and a strong editorial case, so it felt like it was a great marriage. And so we're moving under there and we're excited to find a new iteration of ourselves that we're working on. And now a bit, we're going back to our roots. So, Curbed started as Curb New York and was really a real estate blog about what was happening in New York city, tracking the changes. You know, the whole idea behind Curbed is that people want to know what's happening in cities. People want to know what's happening in their neighborhoods. And the best way to do that is by looking at the actual transactional changes that are happening on the ground and that's real estate. And of course not everything is real estate and there's a bunch of stuff behind real estate, but that's kind of the core and the backbone of who Curbed has always been. It's like, what is changing? What are the new prices? Who's developing here? You know, all of that kind of stuff. So we were that, and we had been that especially locally, uh, in 16 American cities at our peak. And now we're with the move to New York. We're really focusing on being on the ground in New York and reinvesting sort of in that history in a deeper way.

Um, as we expand our, what we have grown over the last five years, which is this really beautiful, um, more nuanced journalism about how and where we live. So it's even less on the transactional side, in fact, and more on the deeper meanings behind all of the things we see and experience when we live a place. So actually I think having the merge of those two together going into New York magazine is an exciting move. Um, and I think, yeah, it really speaks to both our core DNA, and also where we have come recently.

Emily: You know, number one, congrats on a big change and a big evolution. I know that that can be hard to manage through, especially while the whole world is changing, but it sounds like it's just going to be a really good marriage to your point. And I think it sounds a little bit to me, like you're holding it on that voyeurism that's in all of us as it relates to real estate, right. Like I want to know what's behind the closed door when I walk Greenwich Village.

Mercedes: And who lives in that building.

Emily: Exposing it, yeah! Yeah. But that totally plays to, I think it plays to people being at home to some degree. Right. And like just getting to open, open the doors and open the windows a little bit, open the curtains as we're sort of stuck where we are to some degree.

Mercedes: Absolutely.

Emily: It sounds like you're spot on, especially for this time period. How do you feel like the stories are changing? What are you excited about coming up on the editorial horizon?

Mercedes: You know, New York magazine is a very storied publication that has been around for quite some time and really looks at, has a particular interest in power and power dynamics and real estate is all about power, right?

Emily: Yeah. Amen.

Mercedes: Yeah. So Curbed has a huge place there, and I'm excited that one thing that as we have sort of, you know, made these different moves, we kind of used to look at who are the power brokers and all of that. Curbed had this sort of bloggy maybe too rye, rye is what we were going for. It was probably like pretty disrespectful. It was, it was the blog years.

Emily: They were moments.

Mercedes: They were moments. Um, and so we kind of had that going on, but we didn't really look with the journalistic rigor that we have now developed at those same things in a more right, in a more sophisticated way. And so New York really brings the opportunity for us to do that. They do that on every level about New York city and about the country. And so we're excited to, I think everybody's really excited to get into that and start looking at power in a specific way. And also looking at characters, you know, they do amazing profiles. They really think about how stories affect people. And we're all stoked. We've

been putting a lot more people on a lot more characters in our stories already. And so that is exciting and fun. I can think of no greater characters than the REALTORS® that I know in this industry. It's true. Every one of them has an incredible story and they're all quite unique in their own way. So I can imagine that that is an endless basket of fruit for you, right.

Mercedes: Absolutely, absolutely.

Emily: One thing we're kind of excited about is a recent series on unique and beautiful homes that you've been running. I want to know how people are getting their listing in those stories and how our members might consider pitching?

Mercedes: We are going to be doubling down in some ways on listings and listings coverage. It's going to look different. We're piloting a bunch of new formats. And so just sort of very specific lenses through which to look at listings because there are so many, they mean so many different things. You can look at architecture, you can look at a neighborhood, you know, sometimes loyalism so as we develop those, we have more slots for them. Previously on our flagship site, curbed.com, we had house of the day, which is our editor curated, like our best house. And now we're starting to split that up into some new buckets to kind of bring in more things. So house of the day could be anywhere around the country, any price point, any, anything. Um, and we found those through a mix of PR pitches, our own listings research, our tip line, which continues to be fruitful, uh, from readers or REALTORS® or whoever, and sometimes social media. We'll spot some great homes on social media. You know, cheap old houses is a really fun account. We're sourcing from the same places. So people are of course, open to pitch. And then we're just sort of developing newer buckets to do all of that stuff in. So for instance, we actually just put up an Austin House this week, which is a new format we're trying out called Long Time, No Sale, where we look at time capsules because our readers love time capsules, you know. A Curbed, a typical Curbed reader loves homes. Doesn't, may have a favorite architectural style, but really loves all of them, especially historic ones. You know, it was maybe less inclined to the new stuff really wants to see at mid-century ranch, you know, wants to know all about that, but also wants to see Victorians. So readers are really architecturally curious. And so we're opening up some new buckets for that one specifically for time capsules, since people do love, love, we actually have a Facebook group devoted to mid-century modern homes.

Emily: Oh my I love that. I love it.

Mercedes: So we knew that we needed to create a space just for those homes. So yeah, they're really all over the place. And now geographically and price point wise, and now we are creating more opportunities there. And because we're going to be really establishing our base. Once again, in New York city, we're looking at New York city and the surrounds even more than before. So some of our mix you'll see more New York city stuff, more upstate, more long Island. So any listeners there by all means pitch, we're very much keeping our eyes open for that stuff. Otherwise really it's it's about, yeah. Looking at some of those formats, looking at all of our listings, what kinds of things appeal to us? You know, and I would say architectural pedigree, um, something unique, architectural pedigree is one that we can't help, but jump on.

Emily: Well you just can't replicate it, right? I mean, that's what makes it special.

Mercedes: Right, exactly.

Emily: And if you can really speak to that and speak to the character that even within this realm of character, it's not all unique, but some of it is really special and there are nuggets in there.

Mercedes: Absolutely.

Emily: Frankly, I think you should always feature an Austin House every week,

Mercedes: Listen, I do too.

Emily: Of which there are many beautiful, beautiful forms of architectures, as you know. As a Texas girl, but I'm excited to hear that you had one this week. I know that a lot of our members want to pitch, you know, all of them want PR they're marketers and salespeople, you know, by profession, by by trade. But I don't think that they all know how and not all definitely not. All of them are going to be in a position to seek external PR support. So what are your like quick tips on what makes a pitch special or how to do it?

Mercedes: This actually goes for writers. There's some pretty universal rules. The first rule is know your publication. If you are pitching to Curbed, spend some time reading Curbed. Look at the listings that we're covering. Try to get a sense for what we're looking for, right? Because the closer you can get to matching us or whatever publication you're looking at, the more likely your pitch is going to be absorbed. Okay. So that's the first thing is know the publication. Second thing is if you can establish contact with an editor that is ideal. If you can, you know, if you have a listing that an editor picks up and they're like, great, we're running with this, can we do this kind of thing, follow up and say, love to hear this. You know, maybe there's a phone call or maybe you ask, what else are you doing this? I would say generally, with any editors, you just want to establish even a, even a loose relationship so that you can email them. And when they see your name in their inbox, they go, Oh, this person always has good houses in Denver or Oklahoma city. Oh. And we haven't featured anything in a while. So it's like anything else. It's a lot about relationship building. And once you know the publication that you're pitching to, then you can say, Hey, this fits in really nicely with Long Time, No Sale. It's a time capsule. It's only had one owner it's in Wisconsin. So it's kind of out there, but like, look at this beautiful place. That's huge. It's really just, you know, no, no, your audience treat us like a human. The hard part, the reason that people hire external people is that it takes a lot of work to do that, right? Like you have to be a reader of the publication. We actually find sometimes that agents will pitch us and get a house picked up and then start reading the rest of Curbed. And suddenly we have new Curbed fans who are like reading our interior trends coverage because they found a listing and things like that. So it really is the best way to understand who we are and get placed on Curbed.

Emily: It makes sense to me. I mean, it's not unlike business development in any sense, right? You do have to manage the relationship. I know with the PR work that we do through we, and we work with an external firm, half the battle is just keeping up with who the writers are. There's burn and churn in many publications. It's, you know, to your point, making that relationship with the editor is always a smart move in my opinion too. So that makes sense. And I think that's, that's accessible for anyone if they're willing to put in the work. Right?

Mercedes: Right, absolutely. We have a masthead, everybody there, by-lines on all the stories that have contact information. So we try to make ourselves accessible. And you know, we do generally look at many PR emails as we can. We're always looking for good stories. Usually the subject line is a pretty dead giveaway. There are a lot of people who will pitch and you're like, why are you pitching me skincare?

Emily: No! For Curbed? No. Bless their hearts.

Mercedes: All kinds of stuff. That'll work for you. Yeah. So know that when you're pitching to a publication, like we just get put on PR lists like that. And so I have a special in my promotions tab, I like go through and just, I have to delete a bunch of junk. And so I have to either have a relationship with somebody or have a compelling subject line. That's like story idea, you know, where that's like time capsule MCM in Wisconsin, you know, like it has to be that subject line has to like really scream to me because I do get inundated with all kinds of stuff.

Emily: No, that makes perfect sense. It's not, I mean, again, not unlike the communications that they're sending to clients all day, they've gotta be catchy and direct. So we talked a little bit about people alluding to people, spending lots of time in their homes, which of course is what, we're, what we're all doing at the moment. What's Curbed seeing in terms of people making reinvestments in their own property. Are you like seeing fun DIY stuff? Are there interior trends that are changing?

Mercedes: You know, there has been as with, so many things, many different quarantine phases.

Emily: No doubt. Yes. Yeah. There was the, hey, it's sort of like the however many phases of grief there are, is what I think.

Mercedes: Truly and then we cycle through them yet. Again, you know.

Emily: Yeah here we are back again at grief.

Mercedes: For the first, the first way people were doing a lot of DIY projects. Um, they were like, Oh, I'm home. I can do stuff at home. And now everybody's like, I hate home. It's summer. I'm hot. So the recent trends that we've seen tracked by our eagle-eye, uh, trends reporter Diana Buzz recently, she wrote about papier-mâché. Um, there are a lot of designers and artists who are doing papier-mâché at home again.

Emily: Like wait, like straight up Mod Podge, like I did in junior high? What are we, what kind of papier-mâché are we talking about?

Mercedes: That cool.

Emily: Alright.

Mercedes: It's, it's cool. So one of the Stockman sisters, I believe was Hopie Stockman. They run block shop textiles. They're like really big out of Los Angeles. One of them put up some papier-mâché candlesticks that she had done and then like decorated in this cool way. And we were all obsessed with it. And then Diana started, you know, just going on the, on the hunt for it and found all of this cool papier-mâché stuff that just, it's such an easy, accessible thing that you don't need space or special materials for anything like that. Um, so we started seeing the paper machine trend very quickly. We started seeing other trends, roller skates, kiddie pools, above ground pools. So Diana has recently termed that this current aesthetic trend, The Great Regression, Oh, love it. We're doing all of these very childhood things. It's not just like kinder core or some of these other like, you know, primary color trends that we've seen. It's like actually kid stuff, you know.

Emily: No, like real deal, blow up kiddie pool that lives actually in my backyard. As we speak.

Mercedes: Yeah I have one too. Yeah. It's amazing. I've got a great line of them.

Emily: That's all I've got working for me in this heat.

Mercedes: Exactly, exactly. And because we're at home so much, we have to like keep reinventing things. And so we just discovered that like, people are really pull it out of the, the retro, you know, pool unintended, not really pun there, but keep pulling out of that. Well, to find new things to do, to keep their kids busy. And also just adult, I actually had some friends in Marfa who did a bachelorette party in many pools so that they could all be separated, but like they were all, there were just the serapes on the ground. And then they put these like little target kitty pulls down and had margaritas.

Emily: Genius.

Mercedes: They were all socially distant. Yeah. Yeah. That was great.

Emily: Don't you think too, people just need to laugh. Like it's kind of, you know, if Mod-Podging a candlestick is what makes you feel good and youthful and brings you like a tiny bit of joy to time that's relatively womp-womp, then that feels good. And that's, that's healthy.

Mercedes: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Emily: That's awesome.

Mercedes: We're all working a little bit harder to find joy is definitely true.

Emily: I think that's right. I think that's right. So I made mention to the fact that you're a Texas gal, you live in LA right now?

Mercedes: I do.

Emily: You do. Okay. So, but you've been on both coasts, both LA and New York, East coast, West coast. What's your fav? Or Texas where you truly belong.

Mercedes: Listen. Listen, this question runs through my mind nearly every day.

Emily: Oh yeah.

Mercedes: Los Angeles is perfect for this moment. We have a really great community here. We have a 14 month old. And so we have friends who also have young kids after spending a decade in New York city. And even though we had a dog and a car and we got out all the time, I had really missed just living outside. So I was ready to move to a place where I could live outside. And we've got all these friends here. And so yeah, we moved out here. I love it. Los Angeles is beautiful. There truly is nowhere like California. It's no wonder everybody's living here and everybody wants to move here and all of that, um, it's very beautiful. Texas is always tugging on my heartstrings. I do not know what to do about it. I have a fantasy once a week that I'm laying in a wide shallow rocky river. You know, that's like turquoise blue in the Hill country or whatever else. I mean,

Emily: We can make that happen Mercedes. We've got up. We've got a home for you. We do.

Mercedes: Oh man. I think about it all the time. But now that it's summer, you know, LA is right. The weather is not the same. So when it turned summer, then I really miss the East coast because new England summer is just the best there is. The seafood is amazing. The water is not too cold. Whereas like the Pacific here still is quite cold until like September. So in June and July, I really want to be on the East coast. And I really want to be at the beach and down the shore in New Jersey with my husband's family and you know, doing the whole thing. So I missed that and I miss Texas summer to, you know, go to Wimberley or whatever. So

Emily: Do you really miss Texas summer? It's heating up again, so I don't know.

Mercedes: The escapes in Texas summer. I don't miss the day to day reality, you know?

Emily: Yeah. There's not, there's something real special, about a hundred degrees and a, a hundred percent humidity, but we're working through it.

Mercedes: Thank you for reminding me.

Emily: Yeah, you're good. Stay right. Stay right where you are, but everybody else should move to Austin because it's the best. Okay. Well, we're gonna wrap up with a rapid round if you're cool with that.

Mercedes: Great.

Emily: Um, what, what's on your nightstand table right now?

Mercedes: Okay. On my nightstand table is a red glass full of water. I am a glass collector. I love vintage glass. I have a whole cabinet full. Um, so that's a beautiful set that I got in Palm Springs years ago. I have a little brown night clock. I'm trying to be not phone on my bedside table.

Emily: Digital free. Yeah, cool.

Mercedes: So it's a little analog, tiny little clock. Um, and this book called On Immunity, um, which is by Eula Biss. And it is about the history of inoculation and the history of public health. And I started reading it actually before Corona virus. You can tell.

Emily: That feels appropriate. Yeah.

Mercedes: You can tell how much I can read lately with baby and so many ways. Right. But I did start it and it's such a fascinating thing to be reading in this time. Cause it's like why we had vaccines, how vaccines happened, you know? I mean just everything. It's a really bad thing.

Emily: Awesome. What are your favorite Instagram accounts to follow?

Mercedes: Okay. Right now, um, I don't actually follow a lot of real estate accounts. I shouldn't tell you that.

Emily: That's okay. Tell, tell us the real ones. That's okay.

Mercedes: Favorite right now is this account called Press SF. So it's press books and they're out of San Francisco, which is why the SF and they just post a bunch of art and design and photography books. And they're very cool. They're usually retro. And so it's just cool to like look at, they are obsessed with interior. So there's always interiors books, cool. Retro interiors books from England or wherever, you know, and I have bought, that's like a little shop, so I buy stuff from there sometimes, but I just like to follow and see what they're doing. They had a post that was like art clothing, which is strange, but it's just like, you know, weird fashion books from like the eighties and nineties. I mean, it's just, it's really fun. So the other account that I really love that I like every time is something called Hood Midcentury Modern.

Mercedes: So actually that is an architecture account. Um, it's a couple of guys that were originally from Cincinnati, one lives here in LA. They're basically saying like there's mid-century modern in the hood and like people don't appreciate it. And you know, we have this

architectural heritage too, you know, specifically in LA, but in a lot of different cities where black people live, but have been red lined into, you know, discriminated places and you know, their buildings have not been taken care of and all kinds of stuff. And so the people behind the account are really trying to create an appreciation for the architecture in their places as a way to bring forward a new sort of investment. So it's really cool because, you know, I love all vernacular architecture. And so it's, it's great to look at both a lot in her here in LA, you know, and I'll see that on some accounts somewhere and then hood mid-century modern will have some really cool mid-century storefront that's in Akron, Ohio, and what they would consider the hood. And it's like, just look at it everywhere. You know, it's just cool. It's just cool design stuff. And that is specifically stuff that is overlooked because of, because it's been like in black communities. So I love that account. And then there's one called Doan_ly, DOAN_LY just a flower stylist that I'm obsessed with. It's just beautiful flowers with cool lighting. Um, and I feel like together, those three are very much me like flowers, architecture, old, old design books. Those are like my top three interests.

Emily: I love it. And we've rounded out Mercedes in an Instagram account run through. I love it. Okay. Let's wrap up here. What's one thing that every home should have?

Mercedes: Okay. So I have made a joke for a long time that the name of my Ted talk is when everything has a place.

Emily: Oh. Is there such a thing as everything having a place?

Mercedes: Well, I live and die by the truth that I love when, when everything has a place and I hate it when something doesn't have a place. So whenever I have been working in my own home or helping a friend rearrange a home, I always ask that question. Does everything have a place? You know, and there are some places that are transient places and that's fine. You got your keys and your mail and your whatever have your transient place. But otherwise everything needs a place. So organization to me is paramount to peace in the home. Everything has to have a place that you can put it away in. And of course then, you know, you put those things away and you forget about them and why do we have all the things in the first place? However, you have to live in your home. So you need to put all that stuff away. So between organization and lighting, I feel like if you've got the two of those you can pretty much have a great home.

Emily: You're good to go. What a beautiful question too, to ask at a higher level, like, does everything in your community have a place? Does everybody have a place? Like, there's something kind of special about that thought too. So I love that. Well Mercedes you've been awesome. Thank you so much for hanging out with us. I know that all our realtor listeners, especially if they're not already reading Curbed, they will, after this.

Mercedes: Come on up!

Emily: They need to be Curbed. Yeah. And I know that, um, it's just a fun place to kind of think differently about what they do every day. So thanks.

Mercedes: Of course.

Emily: Thanks for tuning in. Like what you hear, let's continue this conversation. Give us some love by leaving us a review on iTunes and let your friends know about this show by sharing this episode on social media. You can also follow along and tag me @EmChenevert. That's E M Chenevert. Until next time.