

EPISODE 1167

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[INTRODUCTION]

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FT: Talking about our accomplishments can be scary overwhelming, but it is vital to getting ahead in work and life. How do you do this? Welcome to So Money, everybody. I’m your host Farnoosh Torabi. Our guest is Meredith Fineman, she’s an entrepreneur, writer and podcast host, and author of the new book, critically-acclaimed, *Brag Better: Master the Art of Fearless Self-Promotion*. In her book, she talks about why bragging is so difficult, when not to brag and how to prepare for the inevitable ups and downs of being visible. You just heard her talk a little bit about the differences between when women brag and when men brag and how it’s perceived. How to navigate that at work when you’re trying to ask for a raise and really be your biggest advocate. We talked all about how to approach self-promotion, especially in an era when we’re not physically at work. It’s harder to be visible these days, but Meredith scot a strategy for that as well.

A little bit more about Meredith, she is the founder and CEO of FinePoint, a leadership and professional development company that elevates individuals from young professionals to CEOs. She is a freelance writer of 15 years and a book collaborator with bylines from Harvard Business Review to Forbes. She created and host the podcast, It Never Gets Old, a podcast about secondhand and sustainable fashion. Here’s Meredith Fineman.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Meredith Fineman, welcome to So Money.

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MF: Thank you so much for having me. It's fun to be here on the Internet with you.

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FT: Yes. You're all about helping individuals brag better. This is your latest crusade that's based on a book that you published in 2020. A weird time to be feeling the confidence to brag. I think a lot of us in 2020 and arguably continues this year. It was a humbling year, 2020, for a lot of reasons. Tell us, give us the case for why it's important to maybe even more so than ever, now more than ever to brag better, to be our biggest advocates at work.

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MF: Absolutely. I define bragging as stating true facts about your work strategically and cohesively to advance your career. That is regardless of age, gender, level of seniority. You have to tell people what you've done because they do not know. This became so readily apparent in 2020 with the pandemic, because you cannot drop by your boss' office, you cannot raise your hand in a meeting and knock it out of the park in a specific way. In the words of one of my interviewees in the book, I did about 20 interviews. Ruth Ann Harnisch talks about how bragging better is accurate reporting of your career, which needs to be reported on, it needs to be shared. Otherwise, people can't champion you, but also, people can't recognize your work if you don't share it with them to then propel your career.

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FT: When you're on the receiving end of someone "bragging" though, that doesn't sit well. I think that's the fear, right? We don't want to come across as unlikable. How do we toe the line there?

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MF: Yeah. That's a very difficult thing. I identify my audience as the qualified quiet, people that have done the work but don't know how to talk about it. This is a learnable, teachable skillset. The word brag is not a pretty one. I am a freelance writer of 16 years; we don't have another one to describe the activity of talking positively about our work and professional accomplishment. That elicits a lot of feelings in people, the same ones across the board; anxiety, fear, shame, doubt. When people come to me, which at this point is thousands of people, whether it's between my business and individual clients or my speaking and training practice with groups and companies. People inevitably are concerned about what others will think, and especially that they don't want to seem obnoxious.

Bragging exists, talking positively about your work strategically and cohesively to advance your career, stating the facts of your work exists on the spectrum and it is a means to an end. So yes, considering your audience and output, but more than anything, the pillars of bragging better are to be proud, loud, and strategic. That last one, strategic is what really matters here. It's you communicating, stating the facts of your work strategically and cohesively to advance your career, to the powers that be, that are in charge of getting you to the next level. It does tie into imposter syndrome in this fear of people figuring out, fear of negative reception or people will think I'm a fraud. What if people think I'm obnoxious? What if people think I'm too much? I do tell people that what separates you from someone who is that way is the self-awareness piece. People who brag too much are not worried that they might do so. That really helps you.

But the book and my work at this point now, for the better part of a decade, I am less concerned what others think and more that you communicate your work just so that other people can receive it. But also, so that you can do a better job, you can be a better employee, employer, manager. That's really at the end of the day what this is. It might elicit certain

feelings from people, in which case you have to determine whether it's a you problem or them problem. This makes people very uncomfortable, particularly if you're a woman who decides to be unapologetically forthcoming about her work. But I strongly believe that the judgment outweighs the potential upsides.

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FT: In your book, *Brag Better*, you start out by teaching readers the words that undermine us. We're not using the right language in many cases, and so what are the better words?

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MF: Yeah. I talk about the difference between verbal undercutting and self-deprecation. Self-deprecation is sort of poking fun at yourself in a playful way that still advances your goals and doesn't undercut your work. Verbal undercutting is basically insulting yourself before someone else can. I make it really clear, bragging is a complex, difficult, nuance, scary practice, which is why I wrote a book on it.

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FT: There's a book.

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MF: Yes, that's why I wrote the book on it. That it is a tactical skill set that you can learn and that you can refine, but it's hard and it's scary to do. When it comes to the word piece of it, there are ways to be vulnerable with the difficulties you have around bragging, and then their ways to shut yourself down so that no deals can advocate for you. If you can advocate for yourself or at least fake it till you make it in the way you're presenting things, it can be very hard for others to champion you.

Key phrases to not use. I hate to brag, but... humble brag, self-promotion alert, shameless plug. There are ways to share your reticence about bragging that allow people to be with you and feel close to you, but then there are those phrases, which actually just makes your reader receiver anxious. Instead of advancing your work, it stops it, dead in its tracks.

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FT: Are women predisposed to more negative feedback? There are studies that say like, when women ask for a raise versus men, they're both looked upon unfavorably by their managers, but women more so. I have to believe that it's because we're not doing it as much, and so it feels like an outlier in office when women ask, so it stands out and we're more vulnerable to criticism around it. When it comes to bragging, did you see in your research any differences between men and women?

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MF: Oh, yeah. There is a study in the book called the self-promotion gap and then a whole host of other data. That yes, women would rather underplay their own accomplishments most of the time that they would rather promote the work of someone else. But I will say, there are a lot of systemic factors here. I'm not going to pretend like if you brag better, things like the wage gap will disappear or certain feedback about women asking for more money. Which shouldn't be met with the level of judgment that it does. Women are scrutinized in the workplace in a way that men simply are not and that factors deeply into bragging. I cared a lot that brag better, be irrespective of gender that the qualified quiet be irrespective of gender. Because it was something I wanted to cast as wide as possible. But as a woman, it's so much harder to brag because you're judged on metrics that men are not; your appearance, your voice your hair color, your age, your height, all of those things.

Traditionally for women, positive attributes were associated with passive behaviors, particularly ones that denote silence. So coy, demure, shy, those are seen as deeply alluring and attractive when literally they meant that just a woman didn't speak. Then it's also very, very difficult to be

a woman in public. You see what happens whether it's in politics, or in leadership, how women are scrutinized and the lines they have to walk, and the real danger that exist with being woman who decides to put herself out there online, offline, particularly online. That's the real reason that stops a lot of women from wanting to do this in the first place.

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FT: So then, to combat that, is there any additional layer of advice for women or is the advice just keeping you? Don't worry about, like you mentioned earlier, like don't worry about how it's perceived.

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MT: Yeah. I think it's a lot of things. Women are more collaborative workers. I talked about how it's so essential that bragging better as a team sport. That means, bringing people into your bragging journey, whether it is bragging on your behalf or doing so in tandem with you in a meeting, or to pitch a project, or on a panel. Really understanding that more voices is better. It can really feel like particularly for women in the workplace, like it has to be a competition. I talked about Shine Theory.

I have an interview Ann Friedman and Aminatou Sow about their theory, which basically is, "If I don't shine, you don't shine" and this idea of having successful friends only elevates you and makes more room for others. But also, this idea of bragging better as a team sport, it's part of your job if you're some that we listen to and its tied to privilege here. If you're someone we listen to, that it's up to you also to share the work of others, pass the mic and help encourage other people's voices too. I think women are heartened by that, because you don't have to do it alone.

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FT: In the specific context of asking for a raise, Meredith. What's a good script or shorthand for anyone listening, they really want some pointers, maybe they're going in from a negotiation advice, for how to brag better in that context?

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MF: Absolutely. Asking for recognition and asking for money are incredibly similar, they're just different currencies. I have said that I want to write brag better with money, and you would be such a fantastic expert for that, but it hasn't happened yet. But never say never.

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FT: I'll co-author it with you. Consider that.

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MF: Great. Yes. You're showcasing your work and saying how what you're currently being compensated for that is not adequate for the amount of work you're putting in. Now, that is such a gross oversimplification of something that is incredibly difficult. The idea of bragging better, the idea of pitching yourself, packaging yourself, so much of this book is derived from public relations tactics and activities. The things that publicists do to get attention for their clients. That means telling a compelling story, and being unafraid of rejection, of that story. One thing that makes negotiation, and salary so incredibly difficult for people, as you're not accustomed for the most part to talking about money. Certainly, you're not accustomed to doing so in the context of your company unless you are in accounting or you're a partner in very, very high-level management.

In that case, that's one reason why it's so hard, is it's not something that you're used to doing. There are always a couple of things that I tell people, that this is a business decision, that from the bragging, and pitching piece, writing things down, creating a mini presentation, having things you can present, you can always bring papers with you. That's totally fine. You're

pitching yourself and your work for more compensation. One thing in a negotiation and specifically for salary is, people often rush this to get it over with, and I see this as well with bragging. It's like I'm going to spit out what I did, and then like not let any time pass, and you need to way to beat. This is the same thing with the vulnerability or afraid someone might insult you first, or with a salary negotiation, you're afraid someone will just immediately turn you down.

Letting something breathe for second, being okay with silence or taking a pause to let someone respond. You don't have to fill the air. I see that as a commonality between sort of the two situations, and those are the biggest things. To remember that this is a business decision and it is hard because you're likely not used to talking about money all the time, and getting in the habit and the practice of doing so is one of the most difficult things. So understanding that you can take your time, understanding that you want to set yourself up as well as possible. So whether that is the you pitch deck or I always tell — I've actually counseled a lot of people on this particular situation and it is about writing on everything you've done so you can see it and be proud as well, whether or not you get that more money.

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FT: Yeah. There's something to be said, Meredith about silence in negotiation. Obviously, say your piece, but to your point, don't you feel like you have to fill the gaps or fill the dead air that sometimes silence, it encourages the other party to weigh in and say something that would benefit you in the end.

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MF: Absolutely and it does. I mean, especially if people are uncomfortable in a situation, the inclination is to keep talking. That's true even if you're bragging or accepting praise. I mean, that's the other half of bragging better, is asking for that recognition. Whether that is simply the recognition from your boss, or from a friend, or from a teacher, or from an employer is being able to say thank you or being able to say, "No, I did deserve that." Again, that ties into sort of

the imposter syndrome and the, “What if I’m too obnoxious?” But accepting that praise too is very difficult.

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FT: You’re the expert on this, but at one point maybe you were the disciple. What’s a personal experience with bragging or with self-confidence, where maybe you were on the opposite side of this, and struggling, and you took your own advice? Your own advice, of course now in hindsight.

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MF: Yeah. Well, hindsight is for sure 2020. But confidence is hard. That’s something that takes time and development. I have been working for myself for 10 years. At the beginning of that, I definitely didn’t know that entrepreneurship was an option, didn’t necessarily have the confidence to think that I could do a job for myself that wasn’t at a larger company. I think for me, I feel very fortunate. A lot of our relationship with bragging, stating facts about our work strategically and cohesively to advance our career, but also the way we share our work and share out thoughts. I never felt like I had to be quiet. A lot of that comes from, I believe having a very vocal mother. But often, what you’ve seen about visibility in voice when you’re young, whether it’s you gave a presentation in fifth grade and everyone made fun of you and you decided you are never going to put yourself out there again like that. Or if you grew up in the south and gender roles were performed in a specific way. It totally runs the gamut.

For me, it’s been refining it and it has been, sometimes be more careful with my voice and being more strategic with my voice than it has been learning how to brag. I would say, for me, it has been about channeling it in the right avenues, understanding when and when not to do it. But also when I do have sort of a crisis of faith in myself and my work, looking back at the things I’ve done and being proud of those. That is still something I work on all the time.

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FT: You talked about pivoting to entrepreneurship. What was that first year like? Because I'm always hearing myself in your words, describing. "I never thought this would be possible." I've been also at this for 10 years myself, Meredith. It feels like I don't remember the world before being self-employed, but I am honest, that first year was very uncertain, especially if you and I are on the same timeline. We started our business in a recession.

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MF: Yeah. I mean, I didn't stop looking at job listings for like, I don't know, at least a year and a half.

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FT: Yesterday.

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MT: Yeah. At least a year and a half. Maybe I would say about a year and a half. I am not someone who had a business plan, and had a very carefully crafted. I look at some friends and their businesses, and the ways that they have saved up properly, and got out on their own, and been very systematic about it and I was totally flying by the seat of my pants. I came up with a sort of very specific goal, and very specific training set and skillset and offering set. But that took a lot of trial and error. I remain constantly unsure. I am happy and good at what I do, but it's working for yourself, you trade off certainly, a certain level of stability, and ease, and knowing and nothing through that more into view than 2020 and putting this book out in a pandemic. I feel very, very grateful that not only had I written it, because it would have been — I knew people that were writing books during and in the beginnings of the pandemic

My book was supposed to come out in May 2020, it got bumped until June, it was sort of in the thick of it all. I feel grateful though that I had already worked for myself for almost a decade

at that point, because I knew how to be adaptable and move quickly because I had no choice. I'd fought for this book concept for seven years and pandemic be damned. I'm going to figure out how to tell people about it.

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FT: Well, tell us about your work. Tell us about fine point. I was on your site and looking at all the different services that you provide clients from speechwriting, to media training, to brand research. And you say, this book has been many years in the making. I would imagine that you've learned a lot on the job in terms of how your clients have tackled this very hairy issue of self-promotion. You have been very much in the seat of helping your clients feel good or better about their work and to know how to sort of position themselves in a way that it is more successful in the long run.

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MF: Yeah. When I started FinePoint, it was much more of a PR shop and I ran campaigns and technology, consumer lifestyle business. I had always simultaneously built a personal brand. I start freelance writing when I was 18. I hosted events starting in college. I was doing lots of stuff on the side, but also things that allowed my voice to shine. When I was a more traditional publicist, people came to me as a go-to for individual representation and I started to represent people, which is when I discovered that nobody knew how to talk about themselves. This was such a systemic issue. I was watching their trajectory not change with level of seniority, particularly for women. But not only for women, but specifically in the timeline of a woman's full career, I would work with people when they wanted to in turn work for me, and then contemporaries or friends, and then represent very high-powered people and that was not changing. I sort of pivoted or got more specific in what I want to offer.

FinePoint is about representing people, about helping people be in public or tell a story. And be in public can mean, TV and panels and public-public or it can mean, more public facing for stakeholders, for leadership of a company. It can mean, being more visible within your group,

or among management. Its internal and external. That's what I spend a lot of my time doing, as well as the speaking and training piece on bragging better and workshops with companies. One thing I do love for a long time, I only did sort of routine representation, which is long-term, certain amount of commitment, certain amount of threshold of money. Then I started to offer power hours, and boot camp sessions, and things that were smaller and less costly, which allows me to really talk to people at a lot of different stages of career. Which is a really nice thing and something I really enjoy at just, even if someone can take an hour of my time. That's really a fun thing to do.

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FT: What's your money goal for this year, for 2021? Do you have one, a money goal or a business going? I know that *Brag Better* is definitely taking on a life of its own and that's going to morph into other offerings, podcast I believe is in your future. But tell us maybe something that you want to do personally with your money this year.

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MF: Yeah. I mean, the entrepreneur's wish is always to be have a certain amount of money stability, which can be a hard thing to hit. I am proud of the financial 2020 I had, despite it being such a garbage fire of a year, and sort of getting some things on track, whether that's from like a debt perspective, or just a consistency perspective. I always sort of had the narrative that I was quote "bad" with money, and so really finally, not hundred percent putting that to rest. But tools, like simple — I would get too intimidated and then, whether it was making a budget or really looking at the financials. So separating that myself, talking about sort of separating some of the emotion from bragging or from salary stuff. Personally, that was really difficult.

Understanding what I was spending was good for me, which I sort of understood, but not in a way that felt okay and didn't feel just like constantly shamy towards myself, which I'm sure —

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FT: Why do you think you have that self- shame or that feeling that I'm bad with money? Where do you think that came from? Do you think that it's a false narrative?

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MT: That was communicated to me growing up, which stems from — I mean, we don't enough time. That's a different conversation for someone else, but I will say that was communicated to me. But especially because I have extremely expensive taste, and I have a great eye, but it's an expensive eye. It's actually one of the reasons why I started so fervently getting particularly in fashion, particularly getting into secondhand and resell and consignment, which I had a podcast on, It Never Gets Old, which is on hold for the Brag Better Podcast. But I wanted really nice things and didn't have nor like shouldn't have had the business field to afford them. That's how I got so deep into consignment. I started doing it when I was 11, and I have consistently made money on my closet for more than 20 years. That's really an option. It really is a real option.

I would say, that's just been an interesting money lesson for me in an unusual place, the sort of buying and selling as I constantly have, I'm now veering off topic.

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FT: Not, but I like this. Let's end on this random tip for listeners, because I do think that consignment, and secondhand, and gently used, everything is all the rage right now. I mean, in the pandemic, you can't really get anything shipped to you in good time. So whether it was furniture, or designer clothes, or whatever. Like Facebook Marketplace had a moment in 2020, and it probably will continue that in 2021. But in your case with fashion, what are some ways where we can — what are your best secrets, best-kept secrets, best places to find high-end stuff for less and best ways to sell? Any nuggets you can offer, we will take it.

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MF: Yeah. I do this as blood sport now, buying and selling. I think I've probably — I mean, so I started doing this when I was 11. I'm 33. Over those 22 years, I have probably have made hundred thousand dollars on selling stuff. I think a lot of that went back into buying stuff. But over the course of 22 years, that sounds about right. But I've gotten more serious about selling because I have this insane categorical knowledge of brands, and what sells, and where to find things. But I always want people to know that you actually can — you can sell anything online, but one category that has been particularly interesting, that I don't participate in as much, just because it doesn't do it as much for me is skincare and beauty. Some people get weirded out or grossed out by that. There are a lot of influencers that get sent samples, there are a lot of makeup artist that have leftover unused things.

Basically, status symbols have shifted a little bit. Whereas, it was the Chanel bag, it was a certain coat. Those are still, that's still a thing. But now people show a lot of money and wealth through wellness. And anything that people want as a status symbol, they will buy secondhand or frankly, whenever you just can't find something, it's usually in the secondhand market. At the very beginning of the pandemic, I bought a liter of hand sanitizer, which is not technically legal because you're not supposed to ship that much alcohol through the mail. But masks, a thermometer, a sealed like boxed thermometer when they were all sold out. But yes, any clothing you're not wearing, using, you can split it into different categories. It's really important to donate things, but set up a posh mark, set up a — I know a little bit less about Facebook Marketplace. The Real Real has a pretty significant list of designers, which is very easy to do from home. Tradesy is do-it-yourself.

Anything in your closet with tags on that you don't wear, you should sell. I would say that, that's one of the top tips, is just understanding that you can set anything in your wardrobe for sure, unless it is very damaged, stained, something like that. But even if it is damaged or stained, if it's a designer object, people will still potentially buy it. People are crazy.

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FT: That's very cool. Yeah, we've done a couple of episodes on posh mark strategy. People, you can go back in the archives and look for that. I love this show because you never know where a guest will take you, and this is very interesting stuff. But most importantly, everybody should check out *Brag Better*. I always say, 2020 didn't really count. I turned 40 last year and I'm like I'm celebrating 40 again in 2021 because I didn't get a chance to really —

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MF: Yeah. I'm hoping to do my book tour when the paperback comes out, hopefully in the summer. Because I didn't get to do one of those. It counted and that my book came out, but I want to do all the — I want to wear my outfits and prance around. So we'll see if I get to do that safely and effectively. But yes, *Brag Better: Master the Art of Fearless Self-Promotion* is available wherever you get books. I recorded the audio book in a closet in the pandemic, so wherever you get your audiobooks. Books are expensive, you can request it from your local library. Then there is a free chapter on the *Brag Better* website, brag-better.com, which is about how to brag better from home and online, which is some useful tips because work is different.

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FT: Thank you so much, Meredith. We'll put all those links on our website and we hope to see you in person in one of your fabulous outfits in 2021.

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MF: Me too, man. Thank you so much for having me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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FT: The book again is called *Brag Better: Master the Art of Fearless Self-Promotion*. Meredith Fineman's work can be found at meredithfineman.com. Thanks for tuning in everybody. Come back here on Wednesday when our guest is, into it to the stars, Laura Day. She's going to talk about how to identify your intuition and leverage your gut, your gut instinct for making smart money moves. That's on Wednesday. In the meantime, I hope your day is so money.

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