

EPISODE 1684

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FT: So Money episode 1684, the power of instinct in business, work, and life, with Leslie Zane, author of *The Power of Instinct*.

‘LZ: Only five percent of the decisions that we make are made by the conscious mind, but everybody is sitting there trying to persuade that conscious mind. You will do this. You will buy my brand. I'm going to barrage you with messages. I'm going to give you coupons and discounts and all kinds of offers. And it turns out that it doesn't work, and it doesn't work for two reasons.’

[INTRO]

[00:01:01]

FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. Kicking off the week with a really eye-opening conversation about what it means to be a brand. Now, you're listening to this show. You may not consider yourself a brand. But if you're working on something to grow, to move forward, listen. We're all marketers, right? If you've got a social media account, if you are even posting on LinkedIn, we're all trying to push an agenda forward. So how can we be more successful? We may think we're following all the right rules.

But my guest today says that the key to persuasion in business, in work, in life is about understanding instinctive behavior, understanding the way that your audience's mind works. Here's the thing. We believe that we have to tap the conscious mind. But my guest today says we need to put that aside and recognize that the brands that are most successful are really good at one thing, and that is tapping the unconscious mind. But how do you do this? It's hard enough to understand your own instincts, leverage that. Now, you got to figure out your audience's instincts.

Leslie Zane is our guest today. She's the author of *The Power of Instinct*. She's an award-winning Fortune 500 brand consultant and behavioral expert. She is shattering conventional marketing wisdom and showing all of us how to tap into the hidden brain where instinct prevails and how to create a powerful network of connections, which she calls the Connectome that is the thing that drives people to buy your product or buy into your vision. We'll discuss why scaling as a brand, as a personal brand or a corporate brand is very important, although not in the traditional way that we have been taught. This idea of being more physically salient, having more positive than negative associations with your brand, and the key to distinctiveness.

I was taking a lot of notes. As you know, building a personal brand and growing a personal brand is a constant evolution, and this episode is a deep, deep study. I can't wait for you to listen. Here's Leslie Zane.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Leslie Zane, welcome back to So Money. I wasn't – seeing how – when was the last time Leslie was on So Money? It was 2021, and yet it feels like a decade ago because, I mean, 2021 was about five years. It took five years off our lives.

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LZ: It really did. Well, it is so great to be back here. I'm so happy to see you. You're one of my first interviews about my book, and I really wanted to be here with the Farnoosh.

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FT: Yes. Thank you. That means a lot. I respect your work so much. We'll get to your book very quickly. It's called *The Power of Instinct*. This book, although it may sit on leadership and marketing shelves at Barnes & Nobles, I think for anyone in the audience who just wants to move something forward, whether that is a business or you have a mission, a personal mission,

you need to speak to an audience. You need to convince an audience to get behind what you want to move forward. This episode is for you.

What I love about you, Leslie, and we'll get into it, is just how much not just heart but science you bring to this work. This is data-driven scientific evidence, proven strategies that does require us to kind of go outside the norms. You have sort of a new framework, a new blueprint for us. But I want to go back to when you came on the show in 2021, and what really the story that stuck with me that resonated with me that I think also captures your expertise is you are a Harvard Business graduate. You are the founder of Triggers Brand Consulting, the first female-founded brand consultancy in the country.

The story that I'll never forget is the one you told about being in a room full of male executives, being the first person to include a man in an advertisement for a baby care product. This was not something that you had a lot of support behind in the beginning. But you had, to use a word in the new book, the instinct to do this and also the data. But take us back to that moment. It was sort of the beginnings of the Leslie Zane we know today and the Triggers company. But tell us about that moment and how it has continued to be a source of inspiration for you in your work today.

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LZ: Sure I'd be happy to. I was working on the Johnson's Baby business. It was early in my career. Remember, I'm young, I'm female, I'm blonde, all things that work against you at the beginning of your career. But I also was very persistent and didn't take no for an answer. I had noticed that the business was down and that we still only had moms and babies in all of our advertising. But I also noticed that dads were getting more involved in caregiving. They were changing diapers. They were taking their kids to soccer games. When a dad walked down the street pushing a baby carriage, moms' heads would turn.

I put on my skirt suit and my highest pair of high heels, and I marched into my boss's office, and I said, "I know what we need to do to turn around the business. We need to put the first father in a Johnson's Baby Shampoo commercial." He said, "You're crazy. It's moms that buy these, not dads. And we have no data to show what you're talking about." But I kept persisting. I kept

advocating for this. That year, I got my performance review, and it said, “Leslie is too passionate about putting fathers in advertising. And this is an executional concern, not a strategic one.”

This was like a knife in my heart because I had been told in all my other jobs at P&G and Bain & Company that strategy was my superpower. I think I cried myself to sleep that night, but I still kept persisting because you don't know me very well. Your audience doesn't know me very well, but I am a crazy person. They finally did it. I think it was just out of sheer exhaustion, and it was the highest-scoring commercial in the company's history. Johnson's Baby product started flying off the shelves.

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FT: Wow.

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LZ: Why that was important was not just because it helped the Johnson's Baby business but because I had found my first trigger, sort of a beeline to the subconscious motivations of consumers that had a direct impact on sales. That's huge. It's the linkage between the instinct of mind which often does not come out in company's research or in your superficial results. You have to look really deep for it, but it's there. When you can find it, it becomes the unlock that can change your company's trajectory.

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FT: The word instinct is complex. I mean, I've done a whole episode on trying to just tap into your own instincts. Forget an audience, a stranger's instincts. It requires a deep study and just – will you explain it for us? Can you talk a little bit about – walk us through how instinct manifests and also in this context of us trying to connect with an audience to learn about what an audience really cares about so that we can meet them where they're at and meet them where their instincts are encouraging them.

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LZ: To me, the easiest thing to visualize this is a person going into the supermarket and just reaching for their go-to brands, right? You walk into the market, you pick a couple of your favorites, you stick them in the cart, and you walk out. If your mind didn't have the ability to make those snap decisions, you'd be in there for three weeks, right? There's hundreds of thousands of SKUs in there.

We make those go-to decisions, and I don't call that loyalty. I don't think there's any such thing as a conscious devotion to brands, a love of brands. You are reaching because there is something in your memory, which we'll talk about later what that looks like, that is making you reach. You reach over and over again. I call it sleep shopping. You're basically sleep shopping. That is what instinct looks like and it's why you would pick Pepsi over Coke or Aquafina bottled water over Poland Spring or Nike sneakers over Adidas, whatever. You have your go-to.

The question is where does all that come from? I think an easy way to think about this is like an iceberg. The iceberg, let's just have that represent the mind. Above the waterline, the tip of the iceberg that you see is the conscious mind. But it's really just a small tip because really the vast amount of the iceberg is under the water line. That we should think of as the instinctive or unconscious mind.

It turns out that only five percent of the decisions that we make are made by the conscious mind, but everybody is sitting there trying to persuade that conscious mind. You will do this. You will buy my brand. I'm going to barrage you with messages. I'm going to give you coupons and discounts and all kinds of offers. It turns out that it doesn't work, and it doesn't work for two reasons. One, the conscious mind is very resistant to change. It's rigid. It's skeptical. It's conscious. It sees you coming. It knows what you're trying to do.

Then secondly, it only makes up five percent of the decisions. You're spending 100% of your resources on this tiny, tiny little amount of the decisions we make. Instead what we need to do is focus on the unconscious mind, which by the way is making 95% of the decisions. That day that I found the father and baby, which was a creative twist on mom and baby and packed with positive associations like progressive and giving mom a break. By the way, he's pretty cute, and I wouldn't mind have him taking care of my baby. All of that comes with that unconscious cue.

That's kind of how you reach that instinct of mind. You're latching on to things that already exist in the mind versus going up against it. Think about it as collaborating with the unconscious mind versus confronting the conscious one.

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FT: Yes. Can you boil this down to us or bring this to life in an example? The Johnson & Johnson is a great example. But I think for most of us in the audience, we won't be in that decision-making room. But every day, we're making moves towards connection and whether it's like we're looking for a new job. I have a friend right now who's trying to persuade employers to think of her in a new role, a role that she's never done before, but she has all of the criteria. She wants to go in and be sort of a chief wellness officer. Her background's in fashion, but she's written a book about optimism. She's a student of optimism. She's written a New York Time's bestselling book, *Microjoys*. So she's got it.

But I would love for you to distill this and kind of show how it can work. More importantly, how we can tap the unconscious mind. Where do we show up?

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LZ: Great question. Okay. We're going to start with what is a brand because, Farnoosh, you're a brand. I'm a brand. Every member of your audience is a brand, and they all have things that they're working on to grow. Everything that everybody's working on is a brand. Let's just start there. Honestly, we're all marketers. Everybody here is trying to sell something or trying to push something forward, as you so aptly said.

I think of a brand as a seed that you plant in other people's minds. What you need to do to that seed is you need to make it grow. When you plant that seed, you want to add your soil, your water, and your sun. In this world, that's positive associations. The more positive associations you add to that seed, the more it sprouts into a seedling, then to a small plant. It puts down roots, and it grows branches. Little by little, if you are a good gardener, it will grow from a seed into a full-grown tree.

The moment that your tree is larger than your competitor's tree is the moment that the consumer goes to you instead of to the competition. Or people come and fund your idea or give you that job. You have to beat out the other job candidates' trees. That is literally what we're doing. So you have to physically scale this in people's minds before you can scale in the market. In other words, you need mind share before you get market share.

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FT: Now, this worries me a little bit when we start to use words like scaling because I think, "Oh, my gosh." I mean, anyone who's listening right now, there's always someone who's doing something in a bigger way, in a louder way, in a way that seems to have higher numbers than you. By the way, men are very good at talking up their numbers. Really, they are. We can learn from this actually. But I worry that then it becomes a race to the bottom because sometimes it's just like, "I need to just get bigger." But then you lose your way. You lose your sense of self.

I'd love some advice, and I'm going to take this advice. How to scale in people's minds without burnout, without losing your way, without also feeling as though you're just in a rat race, right? You're just trying to one-up your competition.

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LZ: It's really – I use the word scaling, but I'm using it in a completely different way. I am not talking about scaling in the traditional sense. I am talking about growing your Connectome, growing your tree. Women are very good gardeners, by the way. What you have to do is have more branches. Have more connections in other people's minds.

Let me give you an example. When I was young, I thought that the only relationship you needed to have in business was a business relationship. Then suddenly, I saw a lot of my male friends doing business and having personal relationships, going to their parties, going to their family weddings, getting to know their kids. I saw that actually they had multiple relationships with their

business context and their friends. That is a really good example of making more connections in other people's minds, rather than just a singular one.

There's three things that a brand needs to do to be healthy. It has to be physically salient in people's minds. That means more connections. Because if you have more, if you own more territory in people's minds, this is sort of like a game of Monopoly, the more real estate you own, the more you win. There's that. You need to have more positive associations than negative ones, so higher positive ratio to negative.

Then third, you need to have distinctiveness. But you don't really need to be that unique. It turns out that uniqueness doesn't even drive businesses but distinctiveness does. In other words, you can take something that someone else is doing in the category. You can put your own twist on it. Really, that's what dad and baby was, right? That was a twist on mom and baby, as opposed to something from Mars. Those are the three things; large, positive, and distinctive. That has to do with connections, the connections in other people's minds, multiple connections.

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FT: You're so right. I mentor a lot of entrepreneurs and thought leaders that want to build brand-centric businesses, brands that are centered around their personalities, their thought leaders, their experts, their educators. I think where we get, to your point in your book, what we think we're supposed to do, which is wrong, which is, first, we need to establish all the brand things; the website, the logo.

I even just had a conversation with a very successful fashion brand entrepreneur, and I said, "What was the biggest mistake you made in building?" It was M.M.LaFleur, Sarah LaFleur. I said, "What was the biggest mistake you made; financial, investment, or otherwise; in starting M.M.LaFleur?" She said, "I spent tens of thousands of dollars working on my logo in the beginning months, the first year. And I never – I ended up changing the name of the company, so all that money went for nothing."

It happens to the best of us. This is a hard shift, isn't it? Would you say? It's not like, "Okay, we're going to snap our fingers and start thinking out of the box this way." But how can we start

to do this in a measurable and possible way to start to retrain our brains essentially? This is a long history of thinking and the way that business has been conducted.

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LZ: Yes. I mean, I have been – it's a great question. When you figure that out, let me know.

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FT: Okay.

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LZ: I have been pushing this way of thinking for 30 years, and I have essentially been pushing a rock uphill. Thirty years ago, the world wasn't ready for it. But I think the corner that's kind of been turned is that there's been books like *Predictably Irrational* and *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman. So the importance and the dominance of the instinctive mind is now more readily understood than it was back then. I was really fighting the good fight back then.

Now, I'm seeing more receptivity, but it's really about understanding that this behavioral science thing isn't this niche thing over here in the corner that you don't – you need to learn a little bit about it, but it's not going to really change my life. It is going to change your life. It's literally how people make decisions every single day on everything. If you're not understanding how this works, you're really missing out mainly because you're going to be taking the much tougher road. It's going to take you much longer to do anything in the world; business, your brand, your influence, your get that job.

This is about latching on to what already exists in the mind. That's so much easier. I'm not saying create something completely foreign. You're totally right. Your logo, your website, those are all insular to your brand. I'm saying quite the opposite. I'm saying a brand is known by the associations it keeps.

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FT: I have two thoughts. Okay. Lately, I've recognized that with AI and so much noise on social media and, frankly, a lot of misinformation and lies that as a, let's say, personal brand, as a thought leader, as an educator expert in your space, whether that's money or nutrition or fashion, that leading with – you talk about distinction, like distinguishing yourself as someone that you can trust. With that, showcasing and highlighting your body of work. Again, things that maybe we take for granted.

But now more than ever, I think it's about going back to those basics of saying, “Hey, you know what? You can actually trust me because I'm not trying to sell you a meme stock or crypto. Or send you down a funnel or sell you into an MLM.” There's so much of that, and it's so disguised. I would love your thoughts on that in terms of distinctive markers and what you're seeing currently as what the consumer is resonating with.

Steve Jobs said, “You want to give people what they don't even know they need.” Like the iPhone, nobody was like, “I wish one day we had an iPhone.” He just knew that they would instinctively love this product. What are the distinguishable attributes that as individual brands we can bring forth, and it doesn't require a lot of effort? But it's just sort of mining what we already have, the skills that we already have, the talents we already have, and putting them more out in the forefront because they're suddenly really valuable again.

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LZ: Yes. No, great, great, great question. Trust is definitely a rare commodity. I would say that the thing about trust is you can't tell somebody to trust you, right? As soon as you tell somebody to trust you, you can be sure they won't, right? That's a big red flag. But if we think about trust as the outcome of what their perception needs to be, then what we need to understand is what are the drivers of trust in the mind. That's really what you're asking.

I've got a couple of thoughts. One is a process. I feel that it's really hard to convince somebody that you're better at something than somebody else. I think people are wary of that. But if you have a process, if you can codify what you do in a couple of steps, a repeatable process that you've done over and over again, and say, “This is our process. We've done it many, many

times. It works,” you're now selling you on top of the process. The process is something tangible.

People buy into assets, and that is what helps you create salience in the mind. You want to have assets. A process would be one thing, a proprietary process. I would just say look back at how you've actually done what you've done because there's probably a lot of expertise there that you may not have codified. That would be one example. In terms of distinctive markers, exactly right. You're using precisely the right word. Things like distinctive brand assets get lodged memory structure more than ideas and more than emotions.

A lot of times, an agency will come along that we're working with, and they'll say, “We just need an emotional campaign.” What we find is that making people laugh and making people cry, they kind of just go in one ear and out the other. But what sticks are distinctive brand assets. So I would say look for some of the cues and codes of your category, visual ones in particular, and maybe put a little twist on some of those. Link them to your brand and use them over and over and over again. That's another example. Whatever it is that's relevant in your category, some kind of visual cue. Those are some of the first thoughts that I have.

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FT: That's helpful.

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LZ: I also think your personal story and your philosophy and your heritage, how you got here, why this matters to you. As I was saying earlier, a lot of women, I think, tend to brush their personal story and their personal relationships aside. But it's really part of who you are. I mean, it's really how I got to have this book. I was trying to have a book for five years. My first attempt, I didn't have my voice in it at all. My passion and my excitement about the topic didn't come through.

Then when I did it the next time and I tried again and I did put more of myself into it, my personal story, my philosophy, my voice, and my passion, then I was able to get an agent and a

publisher within a week. It really does make a difference. Again, it's about more connections to people versus fewer.

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FT: This explains so much, especially when you look at what's happening in the political landscape, right? I mean –

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LZ: Yes. Politics is whole other use for this that we haven't talked about. Do you want to go there without knowing, without –

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FT: [inaudible 00:27:06]. Yes. I mean, I just – as you're speaking, I'm like, “My gosh.” The parties – I think one party does this much better than the other right now, and it's why the rational mind can't understand why a certain person is polling really well. It's like, well, actually, because maybe they're – the party is much better at tapping into instincts.

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LZ: Well, here's what I will say. We haven't used the word Brand Connectome yet, but what I was describing to you and what I explain a great deal in my book is the Brand Connectome, which is the cumulative memories connected to a brand over time, some going as far back as childhood. Everybody has a Brand Connectome. The political parties have a Brand Connectome. Coke and Pepsi have a brand – everything has a Brand Connectome, and it conforms to the three rules that I mentioned before. It needs to be large, it needs to be positive, and it needs to be distinctive.

If you look at President Trump and President Biden, the reason they became the de facto candidates is because they have the largest Brand Connectome. All of the other candidates that were less known didn't have a 30 or 40-year run-up to the campaign. They were just starting.

They started their efforts. They're campaigning within the last two, three years, but the two brands that are the biggest, the most salient. Both of them, each of them probably have some negative associations as well, but they were the largest, for sure. In some ways, they were like the de facto candidates, and the other candidates didn't have a chance because they didn't have large enough Brand Connectomes.

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FT: Right. Maybe we should caveat all of this by that sometimes it's not always the best brand that gets – that crosses the finish line. You can follow this form. Anyone can follow this formula, and that's good and maybe interesting news. I don't want to say bad, but it's like this is – you've democratized because this feels much more accessible, I think, to a lot of people who may have felt as though, “Oh, my gosh, the idea of building a brand, and it's bigger than me.” But it's actually – it's all in you.

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LZ: It's all in you to do. It's all in you to reach out and do. It's very accessible. You can do a much better job than the next guy. It's about early and often. You definitely want to have more connections more often. If you think about the two parties, really what's going on in the brain is you have a Republican Connectome, and you have a Democrat Connectome. If you identify as a Republican, that means you've got a larger Republican Connectome and a smaller Democrat Connectome and more positive associations for Republican and more negative for Democrat. The Democrat person who identifies as a Democrat has exactly the opposite, a larger and more positive Democrat Connectome and a smaller and more negative Republican Connectome.

When those two people get in a room on Thanksgiving and try to have a conversation about politics, they're going to be like the poles of a magnet. They're going to repel because, literally, their brains are the mirror image of one another. So if you understand that, you understand that actually the only way we're ever going to all get along is for everybody to balance out their Connectomes a little bit, and at least start to understand the other side. Otherwise, we're not going to be able to talk to each other.

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FT: Right. No, I agree. I agree. Leslie, this has been – I'm buying this book for so many people. I mean, I might buy it for everyone in my mentorship program. I think it's so important, especially the three pillars that you identified early. Size which is –

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LZ: Connections.

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FT: Connection.

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LZ: The more connections, the better. Positive, so more positive than negative associations. As soon as you get a negative association, you got to nip it in the bud because, otherwise, the dead leaves are going to consume your tree. Then third, distinctive.

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FT: As a opposed to –

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LZ: Uniqueness.

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FT: Uniqueness, right.

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LZ: You don't have to be that unique. You don't – there's no such thing as like –

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LZ: No such thing.

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FT: The first and the only. Yes, you got to just make it your own.

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LZ: A hundred percent.

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FT: Leslie Zane, thank you so much. Your book, again, is called *The Power of Instinct: The New Rules of Persuasion in Business and Life*. Appreciate you.

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LZ: Thank you so much for having me. This is a pleasure, as always. You're a joy.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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FT: Thanks so much to Leslie Zane for joining us. Her book, again, is called *The Power of Instinct*. I'm not joking. I'm giving this book to every single one of my mentees this summer. If you'd like to join me to work with me on your personal brand, go to farnooshbts.com. Applications are currently open, and we'll be kicking things off later this summer in August. I'll see you back here on Wednesday, and I hope your day is So Money.

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