



Why Zoila Darton Believes Community Is the Foundation of a Great Brand

This Panamanian-Jamaican-Jewish New Yorker spent the early part of her career in Latin music, before launching her own creative agency. Zoila reflects on how she secured her first clients, the three years she spent building Word Agency before she started making money, and the secrets to great brand campaigns.

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- Alicia Menendez: What does it take for brands to build community? It's a question I ask myself all the time, especially because I want to build community with you around this brand, Latina to Latina. And that query is what drives Zoila Darton's work at WORD, a full service creative agency that specializes in content, storytelling and experiences. Zoila and I talk about how she refined that offering, what marketing budgets actually look like right now, and her hard-earned wisdom about what really creates brand connection, loyalty, and legacy. Hi, Zoila.
- Zoila Darton: Hi, Alicia. How are you?
- Menendez: I am so great, so happy to see you. Congratulations, baby number two.
- Darton: Oh my gosh. Yeah, baby number two is making me sick again. I thought I was over this part of the deal, but I'm really excited. I'm very excited. First, second, and last. Second and last baby.
- Menendez: Zoila, you have said about your upbringing that you were raised hard and free. What did that look like?
- Darton: Oh my gosh. It looked like single mom who worked really hard. And even when my parents were together, I think there was a lot of chaos in the home. My parents divorced when I was seven, but my mom is an extremely hard worker. She had two kids. My brother went to private school. She just was working really hard to provide for us, but also make a career for herself and really enjoy the work that she does, and that, without a partner, is really challenging on children. And so I was left to my own devices quite often, constantly expected to make my own decisions. And so that became a pattern. And now people look at me and they're like, "Oh, you're such a hard worker," or, "You're so ambitious." And I'm like, "Is it, or is it a trauma response from being-"
- Menendez: A little bit of column A, a little bit of column B.
- Darton: Yeah, it's definitely a marriage of both. But yeah, I was raised hard and free. My mom really gave me a lot of trust, mostly because she came from a pretty strict Jewish mom. So my mom wanted to give me the space to thrive, and for the most part I was trustworthy.
- Menendez: Your mom is Jewish of European ancestry, your dad Panamanian Jamaican. Given that mom becomes the central parent when you're still pretty young, how then do you hold on to the cultural piece of being Jamaican, of being Panamanian? In what ways then are you accessing your Latinidad?

Darton: That's a tough question, to be honest. For a really long time I was confused about it. My dad being an immigrant and also being a jazz musician, he was very much, "I'm Black." He wanted to be Black, and I was not allowed to speak Spanish. My mom wanted me to learn. My dad did not. And that's really common for a lot of immigrants, especially during that time. He didn't want me to be seen as an immigrant. And so for a long time, my Latinidad, it's there, but it wasn't something that felt urgent to me that I needed to scream from the mountain tops. And I would go back to Panama and visit with my family, and my grandfather actually came from Negril to Panama to help build the canal. So I never got to visit Jamaica.

But everybody also spoke English because Panama has a very interesting history there. And so my Latinidad really wasn't something that I held strongly onto until I was older. My mom, working in the Latin music business and being a Jewish woman, also played a big part in that because everybody always thought I was Dominican because she works with a lot of Caribbean songwriters.

And then it wasn't until I met other Latinas that were really proud, I guess, of their Latinidad, that I was really like, "Okay, this is who I am." And I think it really has translated into who I am today because I see identity as its own separate silo of my life almost. It's like I am, of course, Panamanian Jamaican Jewish, and I love that about me because I think that is part of what makes me as wild and interesting as I am. But I'm also so much more than just my identity. There's no one way to be a Latina. There's no one way to be Black. There's no one way to be a white person or a Jew. And so for me, it's always been almost separate because people have always been like, "What are you?" And I'm like, "Zoila. Hey, nice to meet you." Yeah, identity is really challenging.

Menendez: If I'm getting my math right, it's almost six years since you founded WORD Creative, and you currently describe it as a creative marketing boutique focused on culture-driven events, intentional creative strategy, and content creation. My question for you is you could have gone in a lot of directions. How did you get there?

Darton: Oh, because I did what I knew.

Menendez: But even within the realm of what you knew, you could have just done marketing.

Darton: Right.

Menendez: It's like the idea to sort of really narrow in on this is going to be events and this is going to be content, that seems like a very deliberate choice.

Darton: I made that choice because I do understand marketing, and I understand marketing because I understand people, and community is at the foundation of any great brand, product. And especially when you're speaking to our community, communities who have never been prioritized, there has to be community built in, and there needs to be a cultural competency that a lot of brands don't have. There's massive legacy brands that are still missing the mark. And it's shocking because there's so many great agencies that are out there that can support this work, but they're just not really ready to admit that they even need to do the work. Because to them that would say, "Oh, we've been neglecting a whole group of people for X amount of years."

Menendez: Let's talk about brands because you've worked with major ones, HBO, Nike, Converse, Meta, The Wing, AT&T, Foot Locker, Lululemon, Red Bull, Planned Parenthood. Who was your first big client?

Darton: Shea Moisture, technically, because Shea Moisture paid for WORD's first event. We hosted an art exhibit in the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles. I wanted to do a dinner where we

honor women in LA, the new icons, or future icons rather, is what we called it, and then have a huge event as well, like an opening. So I put together a deck for it. And I sent it to Nora, and she was, at the time, the marketing director, one of the marketing directors at Shea Moisture, and we had known each other through the music business. And she was like, "This is great," and gave me a little bit of money, and I made that money stretch. And then when I worked with Foot Action, the same thing. Lorena Serrano, we had worked together on a separate deal where she was on the agency side of things, and now she was on the brand side of things. And she came to me and she was like, "We're doing something for Women's History Month. Can you do something here? It has to be sneaker-related." So I was like, "Yeah." I was like, "I want to talk to women sneakerheads. I want to hear from women. What do sneakers mean to them?" And they gave me \$7,000 for the entire thing. But I'm an ambitious woman, and I wanted my work to show. So I took that \$7,000, and I created a film and an event from it. I didn't make any money. I didn't make any money. I made no money.

Menendez: When do you finally start making money?

Darton: I started making money at the end of 2020. So three years in.

Menendez: The last time I saw you in person... Maybe the first time I've ever seen you in person?

Darton: First time. We've only met online for years.

Menendez: Yeah. We've been orbiting each other for years. It was at WeAllGrow, and you were part of a dinner that was for HBO Pa'lante!?

Darton: Yeah, for Pa'lante! and Rare Beauty. Yeah, both of my clients.

Menendez: Okay. So what I want to know about something like that, and what I think would be helpful to listeners, is both how do you go about curating a guest list for something like that for a brand? What is the promise you're making to the brand? How do you figure out how to fulfill that promise to the brand? And then for someone who wants to be invited to those things, right? Because I noticed even recently I broke through 20,000 followers on Instagram, and the amount of incoming I have from brands who want to do partnership has jumped exponentially. I'm clearly on some master list that I was not on before. So help us understand the mechanics of it, both from the vantage point of the brand, from the vantage point of the connector like yourself who's trying to match the brand's mission with the people who you know and are following, and then also how someone makes that leap to being a person who is seen as being valuable to have at those events.

Darton: That's a really great question. And it's going to vary from brand to brand, and it's going to vary from really brand manager or whoever is kind of the leader on that project or on that initiative. First of all, bringing Pa'lante! and Rare Beauty together was really exciting for me. Rare Beauty is a new client. We got to work with them this year and fill the campaign-

Menendez: It's the Selena Gomez skincare.

Darton: Yeah, Selena Gomez has a skincare brand. And I spoke to Katie Welch, who is the director of marketing at Rare Beauty. And she also exists in the same kind of understanding and space that I do, that the consumer is the community, and the community is the consumer. And so that is who we need to have in our ads. That's who we need to have at our dinners, and that is who we need to be talking to. And I do a lot of research. I hate it, but I'm on social media all the time, and I really curate guest lists to make sure that everybody is going to learn and meet somebody new.

Menendez: So you are thinking of it actually for the value of the event itself, not the way that the event then gets transposed on social?

Darton: Yes. Yeah, for this, that was what was really the purpose because it was for WeAllGrow Latina, which is a place where people come together, together and to grow and make connections. So our goal was to make sure that we created an environment where people were able to really be in community with each other. And of course, we love the social media, we love the posts. Sometimes the purpose is really rooted in the people, and-

Menendez: But help me understand because I'm really like... just don't know anything about this and I'm so intrigued by everything that you do, which is, what is the value proposition for a brand?

Darton: The value proposition for a brand... To do a dinner is to create more brand awareness. That's really what it is. But at the end of the day, we're not paying people to be there. We can't force anybody to post, and that's not the business that we're in. So marketing is a crapshoot at the end of the day. It's really earned PR. You have to just hope that the way that you've created something is strong enough for people to want to tell their friends about it. And also the price, the amount of money that you're willing to invest in something is going to also provide a different level of impact.

Menendez: Can you give us a sense of budgets on these things, like big picture?

Darton: Events are sacred. You're requesting people to spend time with you. You're pulling them out of their homes, especially post-pandemic, or we're still in it, but it's a big commitment, and they can vary in price. Like a dinner, let's say a 20 to 30 person dinner, something really nice, it's probably going to run you between 15 to \$20,000. And that's with labor, but maybe there's not a proper agency fee where all the people are getting paid for the time spent working up until the actual date of the event. You could have a \$40,000 dinner. You could have a hundred thousand dollars dinner. And what I've learned is, unfortunately, our communities get the lowest budgets. And so what I'm working towards as an agency is to really ensure that brands are giving our community the budgets that we deserve. When I worked with Rare Beauty, they showed up, put their money where their mouth was, but other brands don't necessarily do that. It needs to be a symbiotic relationship between the creators, between the agencies, between your directors and all of these different people that are involved in events. And so there have been times where I have not made a single dollar off of a campaign because I didn't want to compromise the integrity of the campaign, and I wanted to make sure that my team was paid.

Menendez: Help me understand math here though, Zoila, because you also though are running an agency that last year made a million dollars in revenue.

Darton: Yep.

Menendez: So once you hit a mark like that, how do you make sure that you are a good steward of that money?

Darton: That is total revenue, that's not profit. And that's something that needs to be talked about more because people also assume that a large budget means that you are coming away with this huge amount of money. And even if you are, there's operational costs that go into running a company like mine. The way that I've managed to support a strong profit margin is, honestly, I have worked myself to the bone. So when I first started the agency, I had very few clients, and the money was not great. And thankfully, I have worn many hats in my life, so I was able to do so many different things. I can write a contract, and I can write storyboards. I can do all of those things. So I got in the habit of doing all of those things because I did not want to hire somebody and not pay them their worth.

Menendez: But it also means then you are not building a business, you're building a one-person enterprise.

Darton: Correct. Correct.

Menendez: That rises or falls on the success of one person.

Darton: But that was what I had to do. I was also not your traditional entrepreneur. I was a mom. I had a family to support. It's not like I was in my twenties living in a one-bedroom apartment or with roommates. I have bills to pay. What ended up happening is one, I understood my business top to bottom. I know everything that needs to go down in this business. I know how to do it all. But the other side of that is that I'm exhausted. But because of that, I was able to, in the very beginning, kind of stack money because I was the only one working those grunt hours. But I never spent that money. I left it in the business.

Menendez: You're a believer in this Bevan quote that I've seen before, which is, "The purpose of getting power is to be able to give it away."

Darton: Yes.

Menendez: What does that mean to you?

Darton: I want to put people in a position to make decisions for themselves and to have the ability and the agency to feel and know that they are responsible for something. Being responsible for something and being able to take that, and whatever it may be, even if it's just cleaning your room, that's really powerful work that gives human beings a real sense of honor. And I have to tell you, Alicia, it's really hard with our community because we're so used to a lack mentality and a sense of not being trusted that when I give power to my team or to people that I work with, they think that that means that they have to show up and know everything. And I'm constantly saying like, "Ask me questions. Sometimes I may not even have that answer. We'll figure it out together." That's one of the reasons why I am self-taught in a lot of things, because I love the process of figuring things out. And I call people all the time and I'm like, "What do you think about this?" And it took me a long time to get there, actually. I wasn't always an advice person because I was afraid that people were going to think I wasn't good enough if I asked for help. So that's what I mean by giving power away. I want to see folks stand in their power because when you've been given the space to stand in your power in a really authentic and nurturing way, you then go on to do that for other people. But for you to take power over your life, you have to be willing to step in and have the audacity to say, "I can do this."

Menendez: Zoila, thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Darton: Of course. It was my pleasure.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us @LatinaToLatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us grow as a community.

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