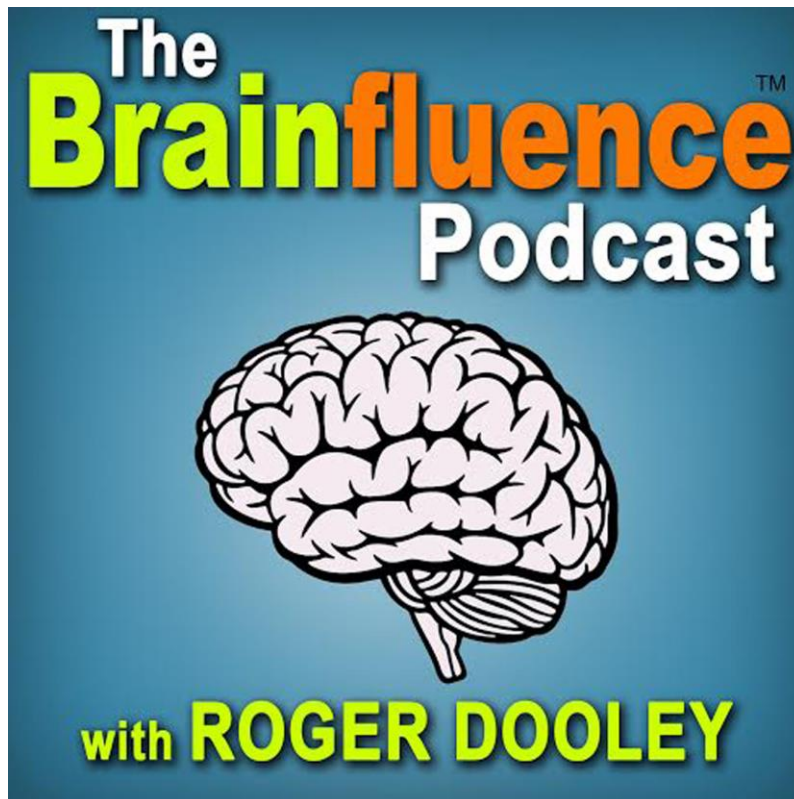


Ep #19 – Probing the Subconscious with Joel Weinberger



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Roger Dooley

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Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger: Welcome to the Brainfluence podcast. I am Roger Dooley, and today with us we have Joel Weinberger. He is a founding partner of Implicit Strategies. He is a practicing clinical personality and motivation psychologist and in his spare time, is also a professor at the Derner Institute for Advanced Psychological Studies at Adelphi University in New York. That's quite a lot of things you have going on, Joel. For starters, I'm going to set you up with what I think is a softball question, you can decide. What's wrong with traditional market research? Why can't we just use surveys and focus groups like we always have?

Joel: Okay, we say beware of the softball questions but the answer to that is that the human mind functions mostly outside of awareness. If you ask people, you will get something. You will get what they believe to be true assuming they're motivated to be honest with you, but you'll miss a lot of things that are going on inside their heads. People act automatically, they act impulsively, and then they tend to create a reason that makes sense, and it's not always correct.

Roger: Yeah, I guess, I consider it a softball question because I counsel and make the same point myself. I was just talking with our last week's guest about I wrote with Gallup, great polling organization, well regarded, known worldwide. Did own study that showed that 62% of the people they serve they said the social media had absolutely no effect on their purchases and of courses, I am sure that CEOs around the country were pulling this out to show their marketing manager and questioning their Facebook budget and all that. Great survey except but totally

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bogus because what consumer can answer accurately or what affected their purchase, what is in their decision?

Joel: It's the same thing with the negative attack ads and politics. We actually did a study on it and everybody that you had success, they're terrible and they certainly won't work on me, and then as we all know, they worked just wonderfully unfortunately, the politicians and their handlers know that perfectly well but self-report tells you don't use them.

Roger: Right, yeah and I totally agree. I used to be in the catalogue business, and people would always say, "Well, I'm not influenced by what's on the cover of the catalogue. I open it up and read in, if there's something, I want I buy it. Of course, all the AB testing show that we could vary the percentage of people who purchase by changing the imagery and content of the cover. Okay, well, Joel unconscious versus conscious is a question that everybody is involved with neuromarketing talks about. I like to use Gerald Halpin's number of 95% unconscious versus 5% conscious processes. A. K. Pradeep, in his book, *The Buying Brain*, what would something like 99.9998. I suppose it's impossible to come up with any kind of accurate number or even an estimate but do you have a number that you'd like to use when you're talking to people?

Joel: No, what I would say instead is it depends on the situation. I'd rather not say 90%, 10%, 60-40 whatever it is. They're both important. The function of the consciousness in terms of buying and marketing and so on is to focus an override. If you focused, if you're paying attention, and I don't just mean watching, I mean if this is important to you then consciousness tends to predict what you're going to do. That occurs almost never because most of us just flow through life. The unconscious would predict things over the long term because over the long term, you're not really focused all the time and also when you behave spontaneously.

Rather than give it a percentage what I would say is I could help you predict this knowing this what people are likely to do

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by knowing whether they're really thinking about the object that they are purchasing. Let's say, it might be a car, or they are just walking into a store and grabbing something but even a car, people buy it because it's a nice color and an attractive woman walked out of it in the ad and so on and so forth. All of those things matter but consciousness play a role when you're focused, when you're highly motivated, and when you're working on something. It's not useless, it's certainly not half of a percent, but it's not what people wish it. We're not in control of our actions mostly without conscious control, that is.

Roger: Does this relate to Daniel Cotterman system 1 and system 2 where he would say that we usually default to system 1 whenever we can and avoid a system 2 unless we are forced into it?

Joel: Yeah, that, there were a lot of dual systems in psychology and cognitive science that's the best known of them for good reason. That's a good way to think about it when we're normally behaving, system 1 requires no effort really. It happens automatically and it happens outside of our awareness, it's easy, so why wouldn't we use it? System 2 evolved to give us more flexibility and to override when we have to which is rarely and we rather not.

Roger: You did some work on studying conscious persons, unconscious values, and I'd like you to explain a little bit about that and what some of the surprising things you found.

Joel: That was fun. We did have with Y&R. It was surprising to them and was so to me. Here's what we found and here's why I'm saying it wasn't surprising to me. We found the usual. When you ask people what their values are, I'm going to simplify because we did it in three countries there were a bunch of values, so I'm not going to get into the technicalities. It rolls down to is if we ask people then everybody is nice. They're interested in helping others, they're interested in finding their own path, and being independent and thinking for themselves and that's what they will report when you ask them about it for conscious

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response. When you look at the unconscious response, what are they interested in? Floyd was right. They're interested in sex. They're also interested in security.

I'll stick to those two to just to make the argument simple. Then what I said to the people of Y&R when they looked at that and so that there was almost a reversal of conscious and unconscious. I said, "Well, how do you spend your time? You work in supplications on the weekend then do you read philosophy books in order to understand the meaning of life or do you work to earn more money and are you interested in attractive people and sexual fulfillment? Any marketer or any advertising person knows you, you put a good looking person in ad, it's going to help. It shows how people actually behave. We had those reversals but reversals make complete sense.

Roger: Maslow is kind out of favor these days, but it sounds like people who talk about the top end of the spectrum but actually function with the lower end of his hierarchy.

Joel: He was right about the. The problem with Maslow was that there was on empirical research done on it and so when Maslow died, it faded into the woodwork, but he's not wrong. The first thing you've got to take care of is staying alive. You're not going to be fulfilled and a deep thinker if there's no food and you've got no roof over your head. Maslow was right about that. I don't know if most people know this, but the top level is reached by less than 1% of the people and that's one of the reasons that Maslow fell into disfavor because who cares about this top level, when you've got to be Abraham Lincoln to get there.

Roger: Makes sense. You found too that brand preferences vary depending on conscious versus unconsciousness once again and what companies people say they like aren't necessarily the ones they seem to like or dislike subconsciously, tell us about that.

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Joel: Well if I'm going to ask you if you like we called it guilty pleasures and not remembering what we call the other one but it rolls down to like people like Google but they're afraid of Google, but they won't admit that they're afraid of Google or maybe they only realized they're afraid of Google. It's not as though Google was negative unconsciously. It was just far lower unconsciously than it was consciously. The flip side would be like the National Enquirer. If everyone hated it as much as they say they do, then no one would read it and it would be out of business, but it's not out of business.

I think an even better example was EXXON. EXXON was much higher unconsciously than consciously. People are angry at EXXON that polluted the water, you're not supposed to like the EXXON and so on and so forth, but I ask you and I ask you audience that when you need to buy gasoline, would you say, "Oh, that's an EXXON station, I'm not going there? Were you to invest, then EXXON is making billions of dollars of profit would you say, "Well, I'm just not going to put my money in EXXON, after all they're not nice people." The unconscious predicts what you are going to do most of the time and EXXON is doing quite well, except you'll say you don't like it and may actually believe that you don't like it.

Roger: Joel, tell us about Implicit Strategies, what the company does and what the main techniques it uses are?

Joel: Sure. I'm an academic by training so I'm going to try not to be too long-winded but the reason I'm mentioning that is I've done research on unconscious processes for, I hate to think about it, but over 25 years. If there're well a couple of people who do this work and I suddenly realized that it actually has practical implications, academic supreme that headed that way that cannot realize that there's a real world. We realized that we could use what we've learnt to predict behavior, consumer behavior, political behavior and so on.

What we could do that a lot of people could not do is measure unconscious processes, and beyond that, we could do it on a

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mass level of scale, the level using the web, using the Internet. What the methods are, there's two basic methods. We're not getting into the technicalities. One of them is what's called a reaction time method. It's about attention. If something is on your mind, you're going to notice it. If it's not on your mind, you're less likely to notice it. I think the simplest example and again, stop me if I'm getting long-winded is what's called the cocktail party phenomenon.

You're at a cocktail party with a group of people and you're talking, and next you're in other group of people talking, and you're not really aware of what the second group is saying because you're interested in your conversation. Maybe you hear a buzzing sound. Maybe you hear nothing. Then lo and behold someone mentions your name, your head turns, and you're now focused on that second group. Why did that happen? It happened because you were monitoring that second conversation all along but it was irrelevant to you. As soon as it became relevant to you namely by mentioning your name or something you're interested in, you suddenly became focused on it.

We can leverage that and control it by presenting stimulation to people and seeing what grabs their attention or whether we can give them, what we actually do is little more complicated. We ask them to do a task. The task is a simple one. Just tell me what color or this phrase or this word is printed in and pay no attention to the word. Now if the word is relevant to you, it's going to take you a little bit longer to click on the color or tap on the color depending on what device you are using because you can't help but process the word. We measure that and I'm not talking about half an hour, we're talking about 1000s of a second, maybe a 100th or 200th of the second, but you can measure it, and the longer it takes you to click or tap on the color, the more relevant that association is to you.

What does that mean? We put a bunch of associations relevant to an ad, a product, a brand, or tag line whatever it happens to be, and then we actually measure how long it takes people to

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click or tap on the different associations, and we end up with a hierarchy of strongest to weakest associates to the message. However, we wanted to find the message brand ...

Roger: Joel, how do you know that that particular phrase is relevant in that context as opposed to just relevant to the person in some other way?

Joel: That's a very good question. What we do is we have a control group and we present something, related to the brand or the product or the ad before we have them do the test. They're doing the test, having been exposed to some kind of effort to communicate something about the product to them versus people who are doing the test without having anything communicated to them and then we can see or we can compare to ads or we can compare two products or we can compare competitors or we can compare politicians. What we end up with is really the unconscious story of the communication because if you weave together those associations from strongest to weakest, you end up with a story. People are storytellers, they're not just word identifiers.

Then you end up understanding what that message is communicating unconsciously the people. The other way to do it is what you have to realize is that we are emotional beings and our first reaction to anything is an emotional one, a kind of a good-bad approach of avoidance. It needs to be that because way back when, when our ancestors lived on the Savanna, if they were looking in the tall grass and said, "Seems to be something with spots on it and it's got a tail, must be a leopard." It's over for you, you become lunch. What you need to do is have an automatic quick motion reaction to get out of there.

The opposite is true too. If you see something and you go, "It's kind of tan. Looks like it has sticks on his head, oh must be a deer." The deer was gone. You're not going to catch it, you're not going to eat it. If you know that and you know that people react emotionally before they react cognitively and consciously, you can present some central aspect of a brand, a

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spokesperson, a politician, or tagline whatever it is at a speed with emotional part that your brain grabs it and processes it, but the conscious cognitive part of your brain is not aware of it.

Then you present something, more neutral to people that's what they are aware of saying, and you ask them, "Read it, what do you think of this?" What you end up with is a bias positive or negative, sometimes both. I can explain that if you'd like, of the thing that you're actually interested in because the emotional part of the brain has now biased your assessment.

Roger: What would a real world example of that be, in other words, some actual test it run where you presented the first image and then the second one?

Joel: Well, you gave one it was the brands, so we'll present the brand at that speed, and then we present a neutral image at a speed where you can process it. Let's say for the sake of argument, we present a face of a man that we know from previous work is seen neutrally by most or generally, and we say what do you think of this guy? He is honest, I like him, he's trustworthy. I don't know there's something about him, questions like that and then the rate the guy, and we now have a measure of how positively and how negatively they see this man, and it's been influenced by the brand logo where the tag, in this case, the brand logo. Now we have an assessment of positive and negative towards the brand.

Roger: Right, and so, basically you'd flash a Google logo or National Enquirer or Facebook or EXXON or whatever too quickly to be consciously processed then show an usual image, perhaps a face, and you find that that face will be rated higher or lower based on the brand image that proceeded it, that people aren't really aware of it.

Joel: That's it exactly. Of course we have controlled group to make sure that we're not just getting some kind of random effect.

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Roger: It's truly interesting and let's talk a little bit about engagement. Mention that what is engagement and is it different than attention?

Joel: Yeah, that's a tough one. I wrote a blog about that. Engagement is different than attention because you have to like what you've seen and be interested in what you've seen. I can pay an attention to a sound. As I was talking to you, I hope the audience who viewed in here and a phone rang in the background. Well, I wasn't engaged by the phone, I was a little annoyed by it if anything, but engagement means that I paid attention, that I care about it, and that I'm processing what it's delivering to me. Of course, that can be both conscious and unconscious as well.

Roger: Engagement, that's interesting because usually when marketers talk about engagement, they talk about people paying rapt attention at whatever their message is whether it's content and advertising or something else but engagement can be unconscious or non-conscious too?

Joel: Sure, let me give an example that everybody is familiar with. There was the movie ET, and they had Reese's Pieces in the movie. No one said it was Reese's Pieces, it wasn't an ad for Reese's Pieces, but sales of Reese's Pieces shot up because they used that to tempt ET if you remember the movie. People were ...

Roger: I'm old enough to remember that.

Joel: I guess I did it myself too. Maybe people who'd seen it on TV, but the sales of Reese's Pieces shot up. Why? People were engaged, they were focused, they were paying attention, they were processing the movie which happened to have this product in it. The product got processed in a positive context if you would look at that emotion test I mentioned, they would have been positive, and if you'd look at the associations people would now have to it, they would be general positive than the

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conducive to using the product and lo and behold, you're selling the product.

It doesn't have to be, I remember the ad and I can tell you what the ad said, I can tell you a lot of things, and I might hate them and they might have a negative effect on me. I don't think that's what marketers want when they are trying for engagement. I'm sure that if I had Joseph Stalin having a product for me, everyone would remember it and I have perfect recall, I doubt that most marketers would call that engagement.

Roger: When you brought up movie ET, you occasionally work with entertainment companies, right?

Joel: Yes I do.

Roger: How do you evaluate say a movie or TV show, explain little bit about that process?

Joel: We take the trailer or a segment that they're interested in, and we show it to people. Then we do that association that I mentioned so that we see what the unconscious story that's being generated is, and we do the emotion tests where we take an aspect of the trailer, central aspect and present that at the speed I just describe, and then do the emotion test, and now what we have our associations in an emotional context. We can say, here the unconscious story of the trailer of your product, it's a product after all, and it's in a context of positivity or positivity and negativity or just high emotion in general.

If I may, I like to make the point that you can have high positive and high negative emotions of the same product. Most marketers and lay people don't seem to get that that easily and I understand it. It's counter intuitive how can I love and hate the same thing?

I ask you to think of your significant other and you'll understand exactly what I'm talking about or where I put on my clinical psychology hat, the ubiquitous mother, and you might want

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that. You might want high positive and high negative because what you want ...

Roger: Facebook strikes me as entity that could in general both of those ...

Joel: Absolutely.

Roger: Where people use, they love to use it, they love to connect with their friends, and family, and so on but at the same time, they have this fear of being tracked by feeling of helplessness when the Facebook says, Oh we are going to change your entire user experience today and that kind of thing.

Joel: That's a good example. That's exactly what I'm talking about it. You've got it.

Roger: What kind of associations are good for say a movie or a TV show? Is there something that's actually predictive that it will sell tickets or get a lot of viewers?

Joel: What we do is, we talk to the people this is why it's related to the creators. We talk to the creators and say what are you trying to communicate in this, and they tell us and then we make short phrases or words out of those. What we want to see is did the trailer, did the show communicate unconsciously what they wanted it to, and then you put it in a positive or negative context, okay it communicated with the people walked away feeling badly that's not what you wanted out of it. Did they walk away feeling positively and now you've got a success so to speak.

We also look at conscious processes because as I said, we're not irrelevant. We see whether they contrast or converge. Obviously if it's positive consciously and positive-negatively, unconsciously, you've got a winner. If it's negative in both cases, you've got a loser get rid of it. If it's positive in one and negative in another then you have an interpretation you need to make us to why that happened and you know what to do to put

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them more in sync because probably you've been focusing on the conscious part and what you need now to do is focus little more on the unconscious part to bring that into sync.

Roger: Very interesting. One of the other things that ran across in your stuff was a project that you worked on in trying to optimize a tag line for Global. We know tag lines and headlines are really important in the marketing business and explain how you went about that and what you found?

Joel: Okay, they had, we did two studies with them but I'll focus on one. They gave us four tag lines and they said, "We're choosing between these tag lines."

Roger: GlobalMeet is a web conferencing company.

Joel: Correct. It's web conferencing.

Roger: Okay.

Joel: Naturally, your tag line is your hello. Your introduction. if you turned people off, we know psychology, but other way, the first impressions are very hard to change. First impressions are important, and your tag line, your logo are your first impressions and they're critical. We compared the four tag lines. We got the associations, we got the emotional reactions, we got the conscious aspect of them as well, and then we gave them the feedback. We said here's the story of tag line number 1. Unconsciously, here's the story of tag line number 1. Unconsciously, here's where they are in sync. Here's where they diverge. Here's what we think of it and whether it's positive or negative and how much.

Then we rank ordered them, 1 through 4. We did more than that. We also said here's why the tag line we chose is your best tag line and by knowing that, we might be able to construct an even better tag line because now you know what's working. What's generating the associations you want? That actually was the basis of study too. They then generated some more tag

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lines and we went through those and told them which of those four were the best of the 4, and then they took the tag line and I'm assuming it works and they're still using us, so ...

Roger: Sort of values coming like that what we want to communicate as those will be things like reliabilities of the use, lack of technical glitches. There's a great video, I don't know if you'd seen it Joel, but it's if web conferences were held in real life, and it's an absolutely hilarious loop of all the things that you run into when these things were suddenly, everybody leaves the room because it crashes, or somebody inadvertently beats themselves so you can see their mouth moving but they're not talking and a dog wanders in and starts barking. Great video. In any case, they've got these specific values that they're trying to communicate what you were doing was trying to determine which tag line would come closest to matching up with those and I think we had like 15 total attributes or some ...

Joel: It's usually about ...

Roger: Some positive some negative, and what was the tag line that you finally came up with, do you remember?

Joel: I don't remember ...

Roger: I'm sorry I haven't informed you. I have to look that up. We will put it on show notes.

Joel: Okay.

Roger: Of what the final best choice was but that's something that so often is just a committee decision as are many things in advertising and marketing where a bunch of people get in the room and say, "Well, we like this tag line best" and that may or may not be optimal because you've got. Certainly smart people making that decision albeit they're not the consumer and of course are not really getting below the surface of what's going on in the consumer's mind.

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Joel: Now there is a note saying that a camel is a horse designed by a committee so I think that you've captured something that does happen. I do remember that for example the word value and the word better were good words as opposed to inexpensive. You don't want inexpensive because that associated to cheap. You want value because that associates positively. Likewise the word better was a good word and I suspect because of the problems you describe and reliability of course was important. I know this well. I had a disaster night with this company that used a different webinar last week where I was muted, I was supposed to be giving a talk, and there I was shouting into the microphone and no one heard me and they could not unmute me for about 10 minutes. I know what it's like.

Roger: Yeah. Yeah. That's sadly, that seems to be still too common of an occurrence. Yeah I do recall that and the key thing about value and better wasn't that people said those things were important to them but your measurements showed that subconsciously those are particularly powerful words.

Joel: That's right. That's right. What you can find out is think about one of the best tag lines ever is just do it. For example, the Nike tag line. I didn't do the study on that but what I see from looking at is if you think of the associations, do it. There's something really positive, active, assertive about it, and it needs the optimism and so on, I'm guessing that that's what would have happened. As opposed to, there was another tag line if I might say, "Impossible is nothing." It was a different sneaker, and it wasn't quite as successful and my suspicion is well the word impossible, the associations are not great. The word nothing, the associations are not great. What you have to do is something very complicated linguistically in your head.

You've got a double negative. Impossible is nothing means that it's really possible and I can do everything, and by the time the consumer has figured that out in the fraction of the second, you could lose him or her. That's where associations were to matter that you could look at those two and say well they're equivalent,

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they say the same thing, but associatively they are not even close to being equivalent. Those are the kinds of things that can be measured.

Roger: Yeah, there's a great lesson for copywriters there if you're trying to communicate a message and a tag line or something particularly and it's going to be read quickly that if the reader has to sort it out consciously then it's probably not going to be as effective as if it can be processed more or less on autopilot like just do it.

Joel: Right, and it needs to be evocative. Martin Luther King did not have to treat us. He had a dream and we remember that. I have a dream. People may not remember what the dream was but that metaphor is associatively powerful as opposed to when using the argument which politicians don't always get and I suspect marketers don't always get.

Roger: Right, there are quite a few things. Dreams are generally a positive thing, we talk about dreams as being good things. Nightmares are bad dreams ...

Joel: Right.

Roger: Usually if you think of dream, it's good. Also there's prior fluency affect there too because we can process dream very quickly where as you say would like to treat us. You probably have to think about that for a fraction of a second say, what is that or manifest or something of that nature.

Joel: Right and the fact that he repeated it that something called the near exposure effect. If you repeat something, you mentioned fluency that's why I come to this. People tend to like it more up to a point. Think of a song, the first time you hear it, "Nay." Then as it gets repeated it grabs you and you like it. Repetition leads to liking up to a point. In that speech for example, he repeated periodically I have a dream today. I have a dream today. There was a method to that repetition. It led to more

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liking. It led to greater associative power, it led to being evocative.

Roger: Well great Joel. See we're just about out of time, so let me remind our audience that we've been talking to Joel Weinberger, a practicing psychologist, a professor at Adelphi University, and cofounder of neuromarketing from Implicit Strategies. Joel, how can people find your stuff online and connect with you?

Joel: Well, we have a website, implicitstrategies.com so that's pretty easy to find. You could learn more there and contact me through there. You can Google my name. I have blogs all over the place. I would also recommend Drew Westen, who is my partner that we didn't mention who wrote a book called the political brain that talks about a lot of this as it relates to politics and he's another source for learning about this. In terms of contacting, I would say the website and get my E-mail address, and if you want to learn more, read the website, Google me and if you're really masochistic, read the scholarly empirical articles that I published in journals.

Roger: Great. Yeah Drew. Drew is really the major figure in this space too. We've to get him on the show some time ...

Joel: Sounds good.

Roger: We will link to these resources your website, and blogs on the show notes page at rogerdooley.com. Reminder, this has been the Brainfluence podcast and thanks Joel so much for being with us today.

Joel: Thanks for having me Roger.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at RogerDooley.com.