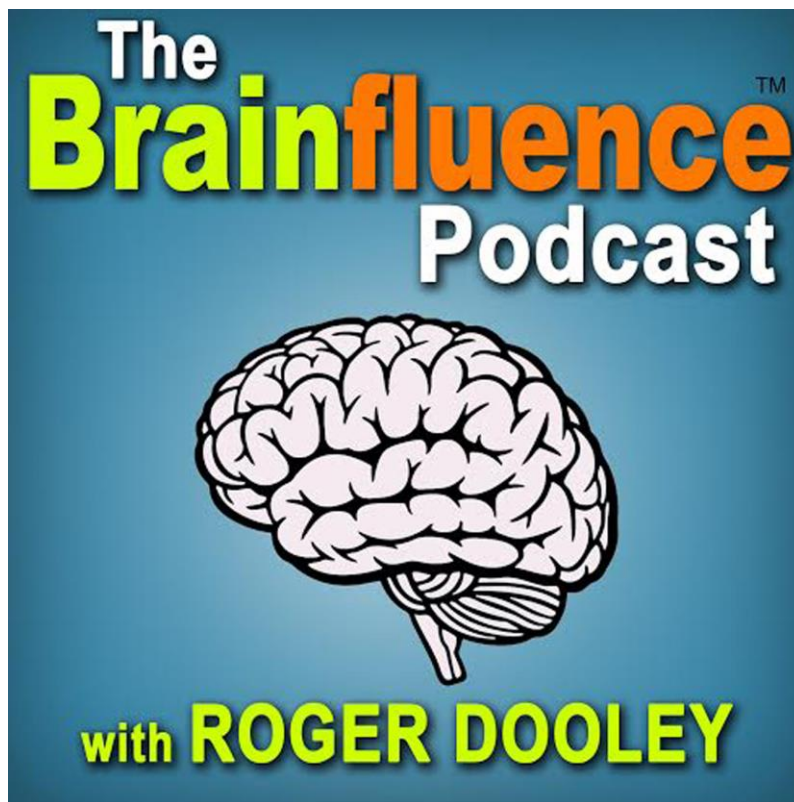


Ep 21: Smart Thinking, Smart Change with Art
Markman



Full Episode Transcript

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Roger Dooley

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Ep 21: Smart Thinking, Smart Change with Art Markman

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. This is our first ever podcast recorded in person. I'm in the office of Dr. Art Markman at the University of Texas, Austin. Art is a cognitive scientist there and a professor of psychology in marketing. He is the author of *Smart Thinking and Habits of Leadership*. Now, his latest book is *Smart Change, Five Tools to Create New and Sustainable Habits in Yourself and Others*. Welcome to the podcast Art.

Art: It's great to be here, thanks for coming to the office.

Roger: My pleasure, this is fun. Hopefully all this cool technology work. To start off, I'm sure our listeners are familiar with what habit is or what they think a habit is, how would you define a habit? Is your definition any different than other common one?

Art: It's not much different in the sense that habits are the things that we do mindlessly because they are routines that we've established over a long period of time which I think is the sort of thing that people think of these habits. The one thing I like to add to the definition of habit that I think is important for people to understand when they begin to think about how they're going to change those habits is that habits are really part of your memory. The habit system is basically of memory system. The reason that you're able to carry these habits without thinking is that it's sort of like any memory. If I said to you, listen you can think of anything you want but don't think about white bears. Now you're going to think about nothing but white bears for several minutes.

Roger: Right, for Polygram I might right now.

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Art: Exactly. Habit is the same way. You get into the circumstance in which you normally perform a habit and suddenly the desire to do that action floods to mind because it's a memory and you perform this and so the habit enables you to do that without actually having to think through what the steps are.

Roger: Why is so easy to develop bad habits, it's tough to reverse those. It seems like it's really easy to fall into a habit that is either bad for your health or bad for your productivity but trying to change it is difficult way. Is it particularly easy to fall in to bad ones?

Art: Well, I think we have to separate that into two pieces. The first of which is it's very easy to fall into habits, good and bad. In fact most of the habits you have are probably really good ones. You have habits for turning light switches on in your house. You have habits for your entire morning routine from waking up through taking a shower and getting dressed and all of that. You have habits that are associated with driving and all of those habits are actually wonderful. It's important to recognize that only a small fraction of the habits we have are actually bad ones. Then most of those bad ones emerged from a few characteristics. The most important of which is that we are so strongly wired to do things that feel good for us in the short term. What we could think of is being the allure or the power of now.

We really want to do things that feel good right now and not all of those things are necessarily good for us in the long term particularly because some of the desires we have for things that we want to do now are things that are wired into us from our evolutionary heritage where the environment has now changed. For example, if you think about eating behavior, we crave salty, high fat foods in part because presumably in our evolutionary ancestral environment high fat foods were pretty rare. The fact that we can now manufacture these delicious salty, sweet, fatty foods at will doesn't necessarily have changed those basic preferences. That's I think the biggest source of what gets us

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into trouble and then it can be very difficult to change that habit for several reasons.

One, because if the habit you're trying to change to is something that is largely desirable in the long term rather than in the short term, you really fundamentally have to work against this desire to give in to the temptations to do what feels good in the short term. Then I think the second thing that's difficult is that we generally speaking go about trying to change our behavior in entirely the wrong way in large part because we're unaware of things like the fact that our habits are actually a memory system. For example, start off our process of trying to change our habits by doing things like saying I'm going to stop doing this which is a monumentally bad way of framing the habit change.

Roger: You talk about five tools to change habits and are you referring get in to the go and stop systems there or when a longest start with the go and stop systems and if you could explain the difference and how people can harness those for good or for bad?

Art: Sure, yeah. If we think about the way the brain is structured, you don't need to know a lot about the brain to help you really understand the nature of your habits. A lot of what you need to know is that if you take the brain and if you have never seen a brain before which means you haven't read Roger's books, so that because there's a beautiful picture of it right on the front there but you've got, the brains looks like a pair of boxing gloves at the wrong way around with the fingers on the outside. The surface of the brain unlike a boxing glove is really headed and there are lots of little ridges in it. The outside of the brain is gray in color and if you were to cut into the brain after that, you would discover that a couple of millimeters down the brain turns white.

One of the reasons that it turns white is because a couple of millimeters down from the brain. You begin to get to all the wiring harnesses that carries signals from one area of the brain

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to another. If you continue cutting down into the brain, as you get deeper, you find another set of gray matter brain structures and those gray matter structures which form part of what are called the basal ganglia in the brain are crucial in the circuitry that creates and maintains your habits. Now the important thing for you to know about this is that the basal ganglia are really deep inside the brain which signals that they are phylogenetically really old. These are the parts of the brain that we share with rats and mice and our closer cousins like chimpanzees. They are so deep inside the brain that they function extraordinarily effectively, they are really been optimized over a long period of time.

That circuit, that circuitry that the basal ganglia are involved in is something I called the go system because what it does is it takes the goals that we have, the things that we're trying to achieve moment by moment basis and relates those goals and the environment that you're in to a set of actions that you can perform in that moment and presumably now actions you're going to perform without really have to think about it. That go system is incredibly effective at doing what it does. In fact when you engage that system, not only do you try to perform behaviors mindlessly but you like and desire things that are related to the goal that you're trying to achieve and you actually decrease how much you like and decrease how easy it is for you to think about things that are unrelated to that goal. That's your go system. Then every once in a while and you know this happens, right? Every once in a while you have a behavior you're trying to perform that you should no longer be doing for some reason. We have circuits that make use of some of the cortical areas, right with that model pitch reached part on the outside of the brain.

In the frontal lobes there are some mechanisms that inhibit or stop actions that you're trying to perform and I call that mechanism the stop system. For example not long ago I bought a new car and it's the first car I've ever had in which you keep the key in your pocket while you're trying to start the car. Periodically I will reach in to my pocket as I'm getting in to the

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car and in order to carry the key and then just stick it somewhere in the car and I have to stop myself from doing that. I used that stop system to disengage a behavior that the go system is trying to say.

Roger: In our family we have one of each so I can't form a habit either way.

Art: Yeah, that's right. Those are your go system and your stop system and the go system works incredibly well. The stop system, because it's evolutionarily much newer is much less efficient and it can be impaired by stress, it can be impaired by drugs and alcohol, it can be impaired by overuse. If you find yourself stopping yourself repeatedly throughout the day, so imagine you are sitting at work and a supervisor is standing over your shoulder, making annoying comments the whole day and all you want to do is to turn telling words stick it and you know you can. You spend the whole day controlling yourself. By the end of the day, if you bumped in to a temptation, maybe that big bag of chips that you've been trying to avoid eating, it's going to be very hard for you to resist that now because having spent the whole day resisting these kinds of temptations. You are now much more likely to give in.

Roger: Yeah. I've seen a lot of research that shows that self-discipline takes energy in and your brain gets more and more tired so it's tougher and tougher to hold out.

Art: Yeah, exactly right.

Roger: Although sometimes like a little of glucose and recharge it...

Art: Potentially, although rest works much better.

Roger: Right.

Art: You can recharge it ever so slightly and you can also recharge it by just telling yourself, I've got a power through this but taking a nap is actually probably a better thing for replenishing some of the energy stored.

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Roger: Right. If I'm in a restaurant and I've been tempted by the cheeseburger and fries that looks really tremendous, would that be my go system saying, oh yeah, that's really something that my brain wants because there's lots of fat and energy and it's going to taste great and everything else where the stop system is saying, yeah take a look at the salad because you're on the scale this morning and you're up two pounds and they have to sort of fight it out.

Art: I was saying that's 90% of the perfect description in a sense that yeah the go system is the one saying, woo, cheeseburger and the stop system is going, whoa, there, don't do that. The one thing that stop system isn't so good at doing is suggesting an alternative.

Roger: Wow, okay.

Art: That's actually one of the, when we get to some of the tools for trying to change your behavior, part of what you need to do is actually to develop plans that will allow you to suggest an alternative to yourself in the hope of reengaging the go system in a more productive way.

Roger: Okay. The next tool is in fact the goal, right goals.

Art: That's right.

Roger: I mean we have all goals. How do we incorporate them into effective habit change?

Art: Sure. If we think about habit change, actually almost everything starts with the goal. A lot of times that there are two big things I want to say about goals. The first of which is often we fail the task of trying to change our habits at the moment we even frame how we want to do it the first place because we frame it negatively. We say, look, I'm going to stop doing something, I'm going to stop smoking, I'm going to eat less and the problem is that for each of those things, not only are you probably going to have to rely on that that inefficient stop system but you are not

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creating an action. Remember, your habit system, that habit learning system, the go system is a memory system. Well, you can't form a memory when you don't do something.

You can only form a memory when you actually do something. It's really important if you're going to create a new habit and that's really what you have to do is to replace one behavior with another. If you're going to create that new habit, you actually have to create a positive action you're going to perform rather than a negative action. Rather than stopping smoking, you have to ask yourself what am I going to do in these situations in which I used to smoke. If you find yourself eating chips while you're watching television, then rather than saying I'm going to stop eating chips, just take up knitting or something, right? Do something with your hands that is incompatible with picking up chips and shoving them in your mouth. That's the first thing, is you have to frame the goals positively rather than in negative way.

Roger: Also it's very specific goal as supposed to my goal is to lose weight which really doesn't say anything about behaviors involved.

Art: That's right, that's exactly right. I'll talk more about that in a second because that's really important point. The second thing we want to do with our goals is we want to take our goals and focus on the process of living your life rather than just the outcome. With weight loss for example, people say, yeah my goal is to lose 30 pounds. That can be a very motivating goal in certain ways. The problem is what happens when you succeed? You engage in all sorts of behaviors, dieting, eating, really getting rid of all of the foods that you used to love, all of these things that probably aren't sustainable in the long term. Now you reached your desired weight, now what? You're out of the context of that goal and so most people then revert back to doing whatever it was they were doing before which is the thing that got them into the situation where they needed to lose 30 pounds.

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An alternative way to approach your goals is to say look, I'm going to change the process by which I live my life and in doing so I'm going to make the desired outcome a side effect of the goal itself. Chances are, you've got a friend or someone in your life who desperately wants to get in a relationship and they set the goal. I'm going to meet my ideal romantic partner. The frustrating thing about hanging out with those people is that they are evaluating every social interaction they have through the lens of this, is this person my potential mate? Not only is it frustrating to be with them but they engage in all sorts of weird behaviors in which they devote all of their energy to this goal and of course part of the problem is once they meet this person and get in to a relationship, now they turn their energy somewhere else and often and they wonder where did the magic go?

An alternative is to say look, I'm going to live my life in a way where I'm going to put myself and to contact with people who might ultimately be interesting as potential romantic partners. I'm going to volunteer somewhere, I'm going to go to groups that have common interests that I do or I'm going to go to places where there is music that's related to what I like to do. That's the way I'm going to live my life and it turns out there's a side effect of that. I'm going to come into contact with all of these interesting people, some of them might be eligible and some of them might be people I actually want to get in a relationship with and the nice thing about doing it that way, first of all you don't look desperate and second of all you've got a process by which you live your life and even after you meet the romantic partner of your dreams, you're still engaging your life the way you want to. It doesn't have to fundamentally change just because you achieved this outcome you are hoping for.

We want positive goals and we want goals largely have focus on the process by which we live our lives. Then to get back to something you were saying, we now we want to make sure we engage that go system by taking the goals that we have an really creating a specific plan, a specific set of actions that makes reference to actual days of the week that are going to

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occur and actual times of day that are going to happen. They don't have to be calendar times, you could say I'm going to do this after dinner or something like that but it needs to be actual time that's going to happen in your life to make sure that these very abstract things that we want to do which could be things like losing weight but they could be big goals we have it work, there is really some major contribution I want to make in the workplace.

You have to make sure that you turn that into actionable steps that you're going to be able to carry out on a daily, weekly and monthly basis that will accumulate into the desired outcome. A lot of times we fail as you are pointing out earlier because we don't create a plan that is specific enough for us to actually carry out a set of action.

Roger: It sounds a lot like the business planning process where you have to start with an overall goal of we're going to increase our sales by 50% over the next three years. But then you have to take it down from there to strategy or we're going to enter a new market or come out with a new product. Then down, you have to go to the tactics level, okay here is how we're going to actually accomplish these thing. Your example with the meeting people for relationship as supposed to simply try to keep doing what you're doing and filtering everybody that you meet for suitability, it takes us into the next tool which should be environment. In that case you're putting yourself in an environment where you can start changing that habit. Talk about environment a little bit.

Art: Yeah. I think people don't appreciate the degree to which the environment they're in has this profound influence on their behavior. We really are creature who exists in the world. We're not just a brain in a box that has a body that happens to carry us around our environment and our interactions with our environment are these really essential parts of what we do. One of the things that that means is then if you got a habit that you are trying to change then one of the things you want to do is to

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figure out how can I manipulate my environment to make this undesirable behavior hard to do.

What can I do to make desirable behaviors easier to do? For example several years ago now I lost a significant amount of weight and part of the band of my existence was this little single serving carton of Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream. They are like a pine and what you do, the habit I engage in is I take that pine out of the freezer and with the spoon and I would start sit down at the couch and I'd start eating and you eat for a while and it's really good and then you get that about halfway down in the container.

Roger: It's really worth putting away.

Art: Well, it's in fact it's impolite, right? At that point why don't you take one more spoon for be on halfway, it's just wrong to put it back. Then you continue eating to the end of it and now you've eaten just way too many calories. In the process of trying to lose weight, I made this somewhat remarkable discovery which that it's actually impossible to eat an ice cream that wasn't in your freezer. If you just stop by eating the ice creams, you can eat them. You're just engaging in a very simple thing which is making an undesirable behavior, hard to perform. You could imagine for example that in office building that was trying to encourage some of their employees to walk a little bit more.

What if they were to slow the elevator down a little bit? For example make the door take a little bit longer like pause for a little while before it opened. It would sufficiently annoying to enough people that they might if they only had to go one or two flights of stairs might actually choose to walk instead of taking the elevator while not disrupting those people who might have to 15 or 20 floors. Just changing the environment in these little ways can have a really huge impact on our behavior.

Roger: Yeah. The example of the ice cream is a good one I think because when you're at the store then since you are not getting immediate gratification you are much more likely to buy healthy

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foods. In fact I think there is research that shows that people will buy the broccoli in the store just that when they get home they'll consume the chips because they bought the chips too.

Art: Yes.

Roger: The broccoli will sit in the fridge for a week.

Art: Yeah. That's exactly right. In fact this is a variant of what I used to call the Netflix.

Roger: Right where you left the documentaries but then watch the action first.

Art: Right, exactly, because from a distance you think oh yeah I'll do the thing that I really ought to do and then up close you're thinking, oh, it might be boring it might...

Roger: Yeah. I think I've had the King's Speech disc from Netflix for about three years now. I recommend watching it. I did see it on an airplane. It was pretty good.

Art: That was pretty good.

Roger: I've been forced to watch it there.

Art: Well I always tell people in those situations if you have a documentary or something that you've been thinking you want to watch that what you should do is tell yourself you're going to watch it for 10 minutes with a backup in mind because most of us are willing to have 10 minutes to something and invariably a lot of these movies and documentaries are really excellent o you watch if for 10 minutes and you get sucked in. The next thing you know you watched the whole thing. If you happen to pick that, you have an escape plan.

Roger: Right. That's a good point. It reminds of AJ Floss concept of getting people to start flossing where, set a goal of flossing one tooth and just one, they don't just do one tooth. It won't take you

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a second to do and but that initiates a behavior and overtime you work up to the point where you're doing them all.

Art: Exactly.

Roger: The fact that environment is interesting, my friend here, yeah, wrote a book called *Hooked* about building habit forming products and landed his sort of holy grails of product development is to get to the point where either internal or environmental triggers make people want to use the product. As soon as you get in the line of the grocery store and the bank and play cells, you plug your phone and check Facebook or whatever your application of choices and...

Art: It's interesting. I mean if we think about that, about the product contexts for a second and I know that a lot of your listeners are really interested in that product context, it's funny, the chance to do, you have this as this book habits that is largely a very interesting book. I quibble with some of some of the example that he uses and one of them that I quibble with is actually a discussion of Febreze. He argues that people that that one of the big reasons that people were unable to develop habits to use Febreze which a Procter and Gamble product that takes odors out of the air is that it wasn't really sufficiently rewarding for them to use it and that when they added a scent that it got people to use it more as it turns out I do quite a bit of work Procter and Gamble and was actually at a meeting about nine or 10 years ago now in which they were discussing this issue explicitly.

One of the biggest changes that they made to the product was that which I think is actually substantially the reason why people use it more frequently now is that when Febreze was first developed and marketed, it came in a plastic bottle that looks a lot like a Windex bottle. If you think about where you put cleaning supplies like that, they tend to go in the dreaded cabinet under the sink, never to be seen again except once a week or once every two weeks when you do a full cleaning. That's a real problem for a product that you're hoping people

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are going to use on a daily basis because it means they're not going to be using enough of that repurchase it significantly.

One of the big changes that they made if you were to go to the store now and find Febreze on the shelf, it comes in this very attractive bottles. They don't look at all like Windex bottles. Now they're cylindrical bottles and they have designs on them. They are very pretty and they're really designed in a way that they could be put out, they could be left out on a shelf or on a countertop so that they're actually in people's environment so that when somebody walks by that they can think I'll just make a quick spray of this in the air. I think that changed, has had a much more profound influence on the ultimate sales and usage of the product.

Roger: Right. I heard somebody from, and do you talk about the process too and one of the things that you did was explain the consumers that they could create a heather of using or is the final stage of the cleaning process like the room is not really fully clean until you give it a shot of Febreze so that now if they could get the consumer and do it a few times it would become part of the habit of cleaning the room or making the better whatever we just told use the product.

Art: Right. Of course if you put it out, that makes it even easier so that you don't have to go to another location.

Roger: Absolutely yeah. Right yeah, go under the sink in the kitchen to get it and just carry it back to bathroom where people are, they won't bother doing.

Art: Never, yeah. Not going to happen. Yeah.

Roger: The last of your tools is neighbors. What does that mean?

Art: Well, more broadly, one of the things that we want to think about is that another huge influence on our behavior that we don't get enough credit for often is the people in our world. We

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are hugely influenced by the people around us. It turns out that in an almost literal sense our goals are contagious and so if you see somebody performing an action, it actually increases your desire to perform the same action. Just being in an environment in which people are doing things in a particular in a particular way will make people want to do that. Here in lovely Austin, Texas, you can go down to Lady Bird Lake and there's all sorts of people walking and running and biking and jogging and you just can't stand still when you see all those people moving like that, so putting yourself in an environment in which people are exercising really makes you want to move. I think that that's one big issue, is engaging with people in our world who are performing the behaviors we want.

But another thing is that we need to engage specifically with the people I think of as our neighbors ,that is there are lots of strangers in the world, most people in the world are strangers to us and then a small number of people are part of our family. The problem with strangers is it's hard to really engage with them enough to have them change our behavior. Family could change our behavior but family are the sort of people who many of them they will often accept you for whoever you are which means they don't necessarily push you strongly enough to change and then there are some members of our family are just very hard to engage with because family, because we have to accept them for who they are as well. They will say things to us that no one else would ever say in ways that may not be the kindest.

It can be very hard when you're dealing with difficult behavior change to really do that with your family. But what I tell people is to remember that particularly here in the United States where we live in a very individualist culture, we pride great people doing great things I difficult situations that there is a tendency for us to want to engage in behavior change alone, to really feel like this is an individual sport. It turns out that when you complete your process of changing your behavior, no one is going to take points off if you got help along the way. Engaging with these people who are friends, acquaintances, the

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equivalent of your neighbors that the people they won't say just anything to you but you do feel some debt to. Those people are so powerful in our lives. Taking them on as exercise buddies if you're trying to exercise, getting advice from them, either in our personal lives or in our work lives, having real mentors who are looking out for us and who you feel some responsibility to, to do what they say, those people are so helpful to us in learning the process of change and also they can be really motivating at those times when we're likely to give up on ourselves, right?

Roger: The principles behind either AA or white watchers where you've got the group meetings or often very frequent group meetings and maybe individual mentorship when that's appropriate, so in a sense...

Art: Yeah I know. I think that principle has been embodied in those kinds of groups and in very effective ways.

Roger: I think probably a lot of our listeners work on it either within companies or at teams where there are people around them that are exhibiting behaviors or haven't thought they'd like to change even, whether it's sort of a bad boss syndrome and an employee, there is a really annoying habit of some kind, is it possible to change habits of other people?

Art: Yeah, it is. One of the things you have to do of course is there are certain things that you could change to make their undesirable behaviors harder to do, right? Partly you can engage in the desirable behaviors, a way of modeling that, you can really try to mentor some of the people around you particularly if you have somewhat more senior role for an employee, you also can work with the organization that you work with to see if you can change the environment in ways that might make the most undesirable behaviors harder to perform, right? Those are some things you can do. Then really at some point thought, of course if you want to change someone else's behavior, you are going to need some amount of their buy into this, right?

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I always tell people that unfortunately the old joke is true. How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb, only one but the light has to want to change? In some sense, you can make it more difficult for people to engage in a behavior but if they don't really want to change that behavior, they will just keep going out of their way to do it. For example if we think about the most successful public health campaign of the last 40 years, it's probably that war on smoking. Smoking rights in the United States in the 1960s harbored around 50% to 60% of adults, unless you are watching Mad Man in which case it seems like it's 98% of adults. That's going down to where the smoking rate in the United States harbors now around 18% or 19%. We've cut it down substantially.

Two of the ways that we've done it which engaged these tools, one of which is the environment, so it's virtually impossible to smoke indoors anymore, in fact we're sitting here in the middle of the University of Texas Campus, the entire Texas Campus is smoke free which means that in the building that we're in right now, if you are a smoker, you would have to walk several blocks before you can have your cigarette. That's really making an undesirable behavior, hard to perform. That's influencing people's smoking behavior whether they want to change or not. In addition, we engaged people, right? There is a tremendous amount of social disapproval for smoking. A story I tell the book is that when I was a kid I was part of one these father and son youth groups where we would get together at different kids' houses every month and the kids would engage in some craft project and the dads would stand around then about half of the dads were smokers.

They would just light up a cigarette while we were working. Honestly I can imagine an environment now in which kids would get together to play and parents would be standing around and someone would light up a cigarette and smoke in front of the kids. It's like now, if you're going to smoke, you're going to excuse yourself and go somewhere else. There is so much social disapproval for smoking in those kinds of situations. We really had engaged in those kinds of methods that used the

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environment and use people that end up influencing other people even when they don't necessarily say that they want to be influenced. Then on top of that, once people admit that they'd like to make a change, we can begin to do other things like help them to create positive goals, to create specific plans and even help them to plan for the temptations in their lives so that they minimize the degree to which they have to rely on that stop system.

Roger: Great. We're just about out of time here Art. Let me remind our listeners that we've been talking with Art Markman and his latest book is *Smart Change, Five Tools to Create New and Sustainable Habits in Yourself and Others*. Art, how can people find you online and connect with you?

Art: Yeah. I love to meet people online. I'm on pretty much every form of social media there is. I'm on LinkedIn, I'm on Facebook, I have one of those authors like pages. You don't have to reach out to me personally if you don't want to. I'm on Twitter @ABMarkman, I'm even on Pinterest I think. If you're on social media, you can find me. I have my own website where I posted some of the blog entries I write. That's SmartThinkingBook.com. I also blog for Psychology Today, a fast company, YouBeauty.com, in case you're as interested in beauty as I am and so those are all different places that you can find me.

Roger: Great. For our listeners, we will link to Art's websites and social profiles on the show notes page at RogerDooley.com and thank you very much for joining us today Art.

Art: Thanks so much for coming up to UT.

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.