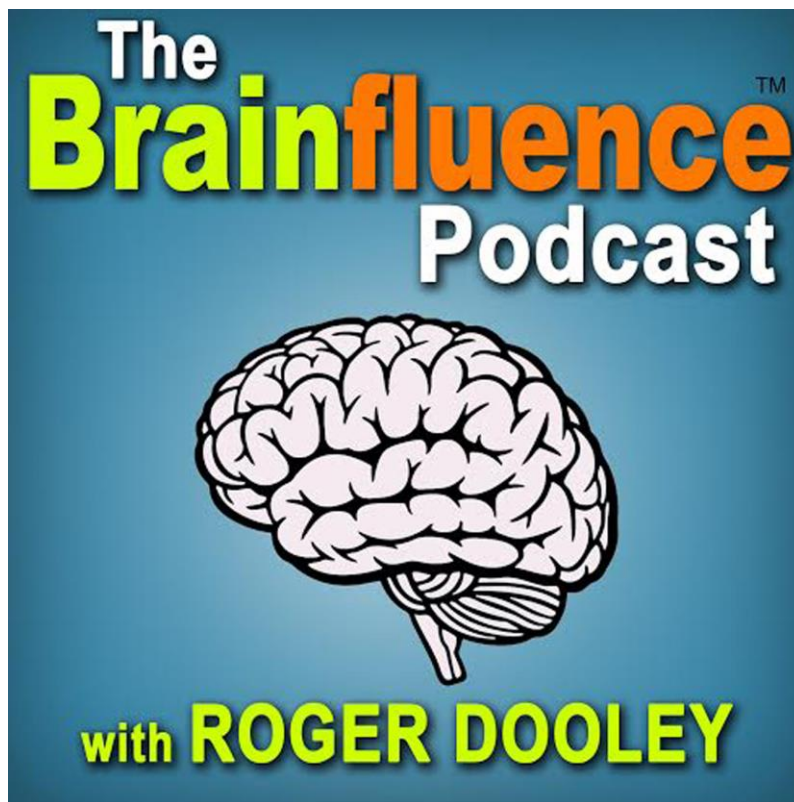


Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley



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Roger Dooley

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Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

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 Roger Dooley, and our guest today is Ann Handley. Ann claims the distinction of being the world's first chief content officer, a title she still holds, clinging to it at, MarketingProfs. She is a Fellow Wiley author as well. She is the coauthor with C.C. Chapman of the best-selling *Content Rules* and Ann's brand new book is *Everybody Writes, Your Go-To Guide to Creating Ridiculously Good Content*. Welcome Ann, did I miss anything important?

Ann: No, I think, that's, you got the highlights, Roger, so thank you. I'm really happy to be here.

Roger: Great. Well thanks for coming on. The first thing and test my mind reading abilities since this is a Brainfluence podcast, I'm going to make a guess that you are a morning person and you get your best writing done in the morning. Is that true?

Ann: That's funny. I'm actually not a morning person at all, not by a stretch, but I do actually do most of my best writing in the mornings. I think part of that was true.

Roger: Right. Well actually the part that I was, I guess, most interesting was the writing piece because I just saw this string sort of infographic circulating that showed obvious famous writers ...

Ann: Oh yeah, yeah.

Roger: And how it skewed heavily toward morning writing, even people like Hemingway, they sort of associate with late-night carousing and so on, was, got the most of his writing done in the mornings. That was kind of fascinating. There wasn't really

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

mind reading. There was more a probability thing at this, but of course that's the way mind reading actually works.

Ann: I was just going to say that, yeah. I actually, I have seen that, that infographic. I think I saw it in *Bloom Pickings* or something like that. That's a fantastic graphic and it's, I think it's based on a book that's actually looking at some of the habits of famous writers which is actually a really fascinating read and I will try to remember that before we end this podcast today. It's a great book and really gives somebody lot of perspective when it comes to when do you write and how do you get stuff done.

Roger: Yeah, I know and it's so tough to buckle down to writing when you've got these important things. You've got E-mails that are there just waiting to be answered and so on. It's tough to do. Here's a tendency to want to clear that stuff out of the way so you can concentrate and unfortunately, by the time you've spent three hours clearing that stuff out of the way, you are perhaps not as fresh as you were at the start.

Ann: Oh! Yeah, listen. I am the world's best procrastinator. I don't claim to be best at anything but I'm pretty much the best procrastinator that I know. I can just, I waste all kinds of time before it comes to actually writing, which is ironic because it's a lot of what I do for a living and frankly, it's a thing that gives me from a work perspective, pretty much the most satisfaction in my life. Nonetheless, I spend as much time as I can avoiding writing before I actually get to it. Like for example, when I wrote this book, I spend an awful lot of time just maybe three months on a couch, just trying to watch as much TV as I could because I just didn't want to think about what this momentous task that I had before me. I think that's true with a lot of writers, I think ...

Roger: That explains why the book has such a high entertainment value. Those months on the couch, studying how the prose create entertainment.

Ann: Yeah, exactly.

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

Roger: Once you explained a little bit, since you're maybe queen of content marketing in addition to being the first chief content officer, what was your path to becoming a writing and content expert?

Ann: My background is really as a journalist and as an editor. I started my career working for a business newspaper here in Boston where I live, and from there went on to work for lots of B2B publications as well as consumer magazines. I wrote for a while for those magazines that are in the back pocket of airline seats. I did some freelance writing for many, many magazines from financial planning to B2B trade publications that are geared toward people who run rehab facilities or health clubs, all kinds of stuff, all these industries that I didn't know a lot about at the time, but ended up doing lot of research and doing lot of writing for them.

My start as a writer went from there to becoming a regular contributor to the Boston Globe, and then in 1997, I founded a company called ClickZ.com which was essentially one of the first websites that taught businesses how to use this nascent thing called the Internet to market their businesses and services. Then from there, sold it in 2000, and then joined MarketingProfs in 2002 where I've been ever since.

Roger: That's great. Yeah, so you pronounce it ClickZ. I have somehow always visualized that as ClickZ.

Ann: Yeah. Yeah.

Roger: I learn something new every day.

Ann: Yeah, that's a common pronunciation. I suppose it doesn't quite matter, but it was originally the idea behind it was ClickZ and there's no real story about why we chose that. We just thought it sounded cool and hip at that time. Remember, this was 1997 when the E-mail marketing didn't even exist, so everything was sort of cool and new, and so we thought ClickZ sounded fittingly edgy. That's what we went for.

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

Roger: One of the things that you probably faced while you were working on your book, I would guess that you had other content creation responsibilities. You probably had some blog content or sort of short-term content like that and social media participation perhaps. It seems like that sort of part of being an author or a content creator these days is also engaging and social media sort of content curation and content promotion. How do you balance all of these activities because it just seems like in perhaps classic Stephen Colby fashion, you've got all these sort of urgent but unimportant things that end up getting in the way of the non-urgent but important which would be say working on the big book project or some other major content project.

You know, that you've got sort of timelines to hit on Twitter, and you've got a blog post that has to appear on schedule and so on. How should other people try and balance out these conflicting content creation goals?

Ann: Yeah, yeah. That's a great question. I do struggle with that just like many of us do all the time, but for me, they're all part of the same continuum. One of the things that I talk about and everybody writes that and I do believe strongly is that it's all writing. Whether you're working on something like a book which anyone would identify as their writing, or even writing a blog post or even posting to Twitter or Facebook, or LinkedIn update. I think it's all writing, it's all part of the same continuum in the sense that it's all communicating through text. It's all furthering your story. If you were to think about story in a bit more broad way then I think it's all worthy of consideration.

The way I balance it is first of all I sort of choose where I'm going to build community and where I find the most amount of enjoyment, more than anything else, where I get the most business value for me or for MarketingProfs. For example, MarketingProfs has a huge Twitter community so that's definitely a community that I spend a lot of time nurturing. More generally, I think it's really a matter of figuring out what you have time to invest in and then picking the right venues for you

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

based on your own interests and your own business and community if that's part of your objectives.

For the book, I interviewed David Meerman Scott who I'm sure you know as a Fellow Wiley author, and he told me a great story about the way he led, he thinks about social networks and writing books in particular but also things like blog posts. He said he almost thinks of it like a writing ladder like he will sort of throw some things out there on Twitter. He'll almost float them as trial balloons and see what resonates with his community with the people who follow him there. If it's something that he feels like gets a lot of traction then he may take those comments into consideration and maybe write a blog post about it.

If that gets a lot of traction then he might turn that into, put that on a list of something that he wanted, he will use it in a book some day or maybe even become the basis of a book. I think it's a really great way to sort of encode all of this "posting" that you're doing all around the web and really treat it as something that's potentially a little bit more valuable.

Roger: That's great advice. I didn't, haven't heard that story from David, so that makes a lot of sense. I find myself doing that in just looking at the stuff that I show on social media that gets traction, looking at that saying, "Okay, well, how can I expand on this a little bit or share it again or do something else with it" because clearly it hits some kind of a resonant chord there.

Ann: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, it's a great way I think to reframe all the things that we were doing and I make the comparison in the book that it's a little bit like how taking the stairs over time becomes part of a fitness regimen. All these little things that you do and if you pay attention to both how they resonate with the people you're talking to as well as how you're saying things and are you furthering your story? Are you telling things from your unique point of view? Are you just sharing and broadcasting? I think really taking that a little bit more seriously is just a great way to do some warm up exercises.

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

Roger: Well, Ann your first book was a cooperative effort with C.C. Chapman and then now your new book, *Everybody Writes*, you did on your own, how would you contrast that experience of working with another author versus doing it yourself? Was it easier or harder?

Ann: Oh man! It was harder. I missed C.C. a lot on this one. First of all, he was a great collaborator for me. Now sometimes you hear stories of folks you collaborate on books, end up not friends, but C.C. and I were great collaborators. He remains a very dear friend. The beauty of working with somebody is obviously, it splits the work in half, but at the same time, it also motivates you. I would wake up in the morning and open up Dropbox which is what we're using to file share, and he'd have a bunch of stuff in there and I'd go, "God! I got to get moving."

It was definitely the sort of mutual encouragement going on even very subtly that I just didn't have with, *Everybody Writes*. Like I said, I am indeed the world's best procrastinator, so it was, it was a little tough but ultimately, you I also have a really good work ethic so that's what saves me in the end because I know that I have to do it, and I do but that isn't to say it's not painful getting there.

Roger: Yeah, and that makes sense really with the coauthor, you create a sense of accountability to ...

Ann: Yes.

Roger: Other than that you are liking because your editor, Wiley is waiting for your manuscript, but there's no daily accountability there. It's once a while, "Hey how's that going." We're going to see that ...

Ann: Yeah, yeah.

Roger: If you know that somebody else is writing away, and he's going to be reading your stuff on a daily basis, it pushes you a little bit harder.

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

Ann: Oh yeah for sure. That's why I spend so much of time. I even check some accounts because I didn't have to worry about anybody. The other thing that really makes the difference is just in the marketing, and you know this Roger, because you're an author as well. As soon as you're done writing, you go straight into sales. Actually if not before you finish writing, you're straight into sales, so there's a very brief period where you can kind of relax and think, Oh God! That's done. Now I'm heavily into the sales and marketing aspect of any new book, and I really miss C.C. there too because that again splits that work in half. We were able to cover twice as much ground and now it's all on me.

Roger: Right.

Ann: It's great. I have zero to complain about, but it is, it's definitely a little tougher and it's definitely harder on one person I would say.

Roger: That's a good advice then because I'm sort of shy to waive from the coauthor concept just from the standpoint of having no potential discord or one of us and not necessarily the other person isn't working as fast as the other one, it could be me, ...

Ann: Yeah.

Roger: Or that sort of thing so but definitely on the promotion side, that's huge because C.C. has got a big following and not necessarily the same following as yours, so you can really reach multiple audiences that way.

Ann: Right. Actually that's a really good point because I think it would have been a different story if C.C. and I were, if you drew this event diagram of me and C.C. and they were exactly a circle that wouldn't have worked but it wasn't that way. There's definitely an event diagram of Ann Handley and C.C. Chapman, there's definitely some overlap, but for the most part, he has his community. He's got his Dad and photography and blogging community and very active social community and then on my

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

side, I have a big community and more of a marketing community. C.C. had the agency stuff, so we each had something to bring to the table in the marketing and the community aspect.

Also in the writing, so if I were going to give advice to anybody to who's considering having a coauthor then I think the most important thing is find somebody who shares your general point of view and sensibilities, but at the same time, definitely contributes something new, something that you don't have. I am definitely a writer, and I'm far more controlling about words and the text that we put together than C.C. is and he will tell you that. That I pretty much went over everything that we wrote before I submitted to Wiley, so but, he was cool of that. C.C. is really great with other things, like with podcasting and photography and video, that was all him.

He has been blogging for longer than I had so he had a lot to contribute and really, I couldn't have done Content Rules without him because I think, our personalities and our skill sets just really married well with that particular project.

Roger: Yeah might be worth co-authoring a book with you and just have you do the final edit out of that, that's awesome, really. Let me ask an off-the-wall question. Did you everything electronically or do you use a paper, and pen and pencil for some things?

Ann: Yeah, it depends. The rough draft of Everybody Writes, I did, I sketched it out on in my Moleskin notebook with a pen and paper, almost like grafting it out if you will, just trying to figure out what the concept was. For me that's the hardest part of writing is really conceptualizing it, and especially with something like writing, like for me, that I know so well. I've been writing for a really long time since I was 8 years old. I wrote in my diary I wanted to be a writer and I spelled it with two Ts. That's just tells you...

Roger: Things have been brief since then.

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

Ann: A little bit, yeah, definitely I know how to spell writer now, but I have been writing for so long that it's really hard for me to step back and say, "Okay, how do you teach this?" How do you actually lay out the stuffs for somebody of how to do this well or how to communicate well in a way that's going to do make sense to them and isn't very Ann-centric. For me, it was the hardest part of just laying out what would be most helpful to anybody who wanted to learn how to write better, or learn to hate writing less, as I talk about in the book. There's, that part of it, I laid that a lot of on pen and paper. Then after that I went straight to Scrivener. I used Scrivener to put this book together. Have you ever used Scrivener?

Roger: I, I installed it and tried to get going in it and did not really devote the effort to it, so after struggling little bit, I just said, "Well, I don't have time for this and went back to my own fashion way of either scribbling on paper or using Word.

Ann: Yeah, yeah. I did actually the final edit in Word because I couldn't quite figure out how to make Scrivener work for me in that way. The point where I needed everything to be compiled into one long document. I did export it out to Scrivener and put it into Word, but what Scrivener really helped me do is was move things around in a very modular way, so spatially it was really easy to look at a big book. This book is 300 pages. It was easy to look at the book and then figure out, "Okay, this goes here, the lungs in part I, not in part III where I have it." Just things like that. It was a whole lot easier to sort of move it around and so I dumped all my notes in there essentially and then was able to move things around into the final polish.

Like I said, I exported all into Word and then did a final polish in there. Also my significant other is an editor as well, so he did the final, final. I owe big thanks to him as well.

Roger: Yeah, one of your description of the first section of the book, How to Write better was How to Hate Writing Less or the Discovering of Adult-Onset Writer, it's a, that has a great

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

negative ring to it, do you find that many business people really do hate to write?

Ann: Yeah, for sure. The funny thing is, actually this was a funny thing. I just think it's a reality of life, but I think a lot of us have baggage from childhood or from adolescence about writing. A lot of us like self-identify as somebody who can't write which to me is just, I don't think we can say that anymore. To me it's a little bit like I think everybody who is learning some basic skills of life, I compare it to how the carpenter who comes to your house and who's had nailed the skills so I think every marketer, every business owner needs to know how to write. A lot of us have learned how to write. The last time we took a course in writing or really thought about how to write was high school or may be college for some of us.

There's a lot of things that we were taught then that we don't apply anymore. I have a high school daughter, and so the other day, she was working on her summer work for like an AP class that she is taking this fall and she said, I was asking her about her writing, and she's used to my odd comments about now how is that you're write? I'm always asking her about things like that and she said, "Well, I just have to write a five paragraph essay. Now the typical, you start out with your broad statements and then supporting point 1, 2, and 3, and then the conclusion."

She had so little energy about what it is that she was writing and this was her AP and environmental work, was a course which she loves, and she loved science. She loves environmental science. She should have a lot of passion about putting together a bit of writing about that and she didn't. I'm using that point just to illustrate the fact but I think that's typical for lot of us who maybe knowing that there's one way to write in school. Like I say, in a book, now there's no one way to write just like there's no one way to raise a child or to roast a turkey. We all have our different take on it. Partly, what I'm doing is sort of addressing that adult-onset writer, that person who does feel like they are an inept or inadequate writer then giving them a

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

little bit of the tools that they need to cope in a world where we, all of us, are in fact writers.

Roger: Let's now change spheres and talk little bit about stories, and you speak about stories a lot in the book, and what you mean by stories and how can businesses use those in their writing?

Ann: Yeah, so what I'm talking about stories in the book, what I'm really doing is talking about really how to frame what you do or what you sell in the context of what you do for others? Really, talking about how you helped your customers. How it is that your products or services shoulder their burdens? How they, how it eases their pain? A lot of what I'm talking about in there is how do you really tell a compelling story and what are some of the elements of that? A lot of it has to do with telling true stories. Well, really using those experiences of your customers and bringing them to life a little bit.

Roger: Yeah, I love stories and most of my speeches and often in my writing, I advise businesses to use stories because they're based on brain scan data about the closest that you can come to controlling someone else's mind. They actually have done experiments putting a storyteller and listener in two different brain scan machines. They can see the second person's brain begin to synchronize after just a few seconds with the first one. Stories are, we're programmed genetically to like to listen to stories because they were in evolutionary advantage for us. Other animals had to learn to by experience, but our only communities as humans could learn from one person telling a story to everyone else.

Ann: Well, that's fantastic. Yeah. Yeah. That's exactly the thing that is really valuable. I don't think that this is not a book necessarily that probably goes as deep into a story as certainly your knowledge would hold, but I felt like it ...

Roger: Like you're probably a better storyteller.

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

Ann: I was real remised to leave it out though, I felt like that stories really should serve as very real foundation of the way they were communicating with our customer cell. I felt like, give it a little bit of short shift, it's probably the shortest section in the book, but at the same time, leaving it at hub I think it would've been terribly depressing for me.

Roger: Do you have a great MarketingProfs story?

Ann: A great MarketingProfs story, just generally you mean?

Roger: No, no, I just your advising businesses to tell lot of stories. I was just curious if you had one on the tip of your tongue, if not, don't worry, that's okay.

Ann: Oh yeah. Well actually there have been lots of stories about MarketingProfs but one of my favorite stories is actually about a way that I came to be with MarketingProfs and to join up with the organization. In 2002, like I mentioned, I had sold ClickZ to what was then internet.com and I was casting around for my next business. I'd had a two-year non-compete, right. I wasn't allowed to work in Internet Publishing at the time. It seems crazy, I would have never signed a non-compete like that now, but at that time, it was actually a two-year welcome break so I didn't really mind it. Anyway then in 2002, I was casting around for my next opportunity and I'd heard about this company called MarketingProfs.

I reached out to Allen Weiss who was the founder and CEO, and I said, "Just curious, if we could get together and talk about your business at some point," and he said, "Sure, I'd be happy to that." He said, "Well, you don't remember me, do you?" I said, "I don't think I do, should I?" He said, "Yes, as a matter of fact when you were at ClickZ at the very end of your tenure there two years ago, I had written you and reached out to see if maybe you'd accept some of my pieces for publication." You wrote me back a very curt note and said, "I don't think so because your pieces are a little too academic for us." What he ended up doing is founding MarketingProfs based on his

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

expertise as an actual professor, he was where he still he is, a professor at the University in Southern California Marshall School. Two years later in a moment of sporadic and sweet justice, I ended up working with him. So ... it's a funny story about ...

Roger: Does he have his rejection letter on his wall in the office?

Ann: I wish he did. I have asked him about that and neither one of us can burned it or have access to it anymore, but it's very funny. I remember actually that he sent me an envelope full of information and I think that's actually what turned me off because I again this was in 2002 or the year 2000 when I thought, whose still sending mails anymore, that's kind of crazy but yeah, I was such a content snob back then.

Roger: 20th Century.

Ann: I know, but ...

Roger: Ann, you close the book with a section called things Marketers write and it emphasizes tactical moves, what would few of these tactics be?

Ann: Yeah, I included a section part five in the book because there are various specific things that marketers have to write. Frankly, there is not much in there. I could read parts one through four and probably take everything you needed to begin any of those writing tasks, but at the same time, I think it's worthwhile mentioning the specifics of a few of them. Things like writing a homepage, writing a landing page, writing a compelling about us page. I talk about writing for social media, so writing on Twitter and writing with hash tags, and writing for Facebook and LinkedIn and as well as putting together a LinkedIn profile and that kind of thing.

Also when do you use humor. There's a lot of very tactical aspects I think so all of these things and I tried to pull out in a general sense. It's hard to give specifics without knowing what

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

business you're in, but I wanted to give some general guidelines, like bumpers on a bowling lane to help marketers begin to think through, some of those things.

Roger: Do you think we're headed for a, maybe a through already, content cloud and actually good content cloud? There's probably always been a content cloud but most of it's been garbage. It seems like at least in the spaces where I pay attention, there's just a lot of really good stuff being turned out, now very detailed blog post that practically E-book size blog post with illustrations and examples and well written, and so on. Everybody now is doing content marketing and the bar seems to be getting higher and higher where just what would've been a good shareable blog post a few years ago, now it's nothing compared to the stuff that's being turned out. Are you seeing that in other areas or overall?

Ann: Yeah. Not so much actually. I want to go to there, I want to go to that world that you're talking about. I see little bit certainly there are places on the Internet. That there are websites and blogs that've been doing some credible stuff, Buffer for example is an app that helps you manage your social side.

Roger: Yeah, I've used it. It's great.

Ann: If you follow their blog and their blog is fantastic. It's really, really great. A couple of other ones, the HubSpot does a very good job.

Roger: Yeah, Keven Lee does a good job there at Buffer.

Ann: Yes. Yeah and HubSpot does a great job ... A lot of folks have been at this for a while. I think that they do a decent job. Some of them do a really great job. I also think that there's lots of companies who don't do it. There is a bit of a chiasm there between the content have's and content have not's but I hope so, actually that would be, it would be a great thing if we see the quality of all our content increase.

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

- Roger: Yeah, it's fine that you had mentioned that what like I said, definitely so. That would be on my shortlist of people that really get the whole content space both in their creation process and they do the curation process as well and suggesting stuff to share and most of that stuff is pretty good.
- Ann: Yeah, yeah. Buffer is definitely a standout. I talked to VO for the book and I think they are definitely a company that is doing some great things. There's a couple of people that I think are really doing wonderful things, more than a couple, there's a number, but at the same time, there's also people who are not doing so great. I have editing Marketers for almost 20 years I guess between ClickZ and MarketingProfs and the quality of things that come across my desk that will come into my inbox every day. I can't say it's a stellar some of the other things that are being popped here. Definitely, this book is written for the rest of us.
- Roger: Right, well. If it's title read with content it's carrying both good and bad with it. I think we're just about out of time, Ann. As a reminder to our listeners, today's guest is Ann Handley. She is the coauthor of Content Rules and the new Wiley title, Everybody Writes, your go to guide to creating ridiculously good content. How can people find you and your stuff online?
- Ann: They can connect with me to annhandley.com. I am on Twitter as at MarketingProfs or at Ann Handley either one or both. You can check out information about the book at everybodywrites.com.
- Roger: Great. Of course for our listeners, we will have links to all of those sites as well as Ann's books on the show notes page at rogerdooley.com. Ann, thanks very much for joining us today.
- Ann: Roger thanks so much. This was really great. Thank you.
- Roger: Well it's been maze ball to actually understand that's one of your favorite words.

Ep #23: Creating Compelling Content with Ann Handley

Ann: That's really funny. Do you know that that was actually accepted into, it wasn't Merriam Webster, but it was another big dictionary published here recently and just much to my chagrin, but nonetheless, it's, in some circles it's an acceptable term so ...

Roger: Yes.

Ann: Let's go with it.

Roger: I said that just for you Ann.

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.