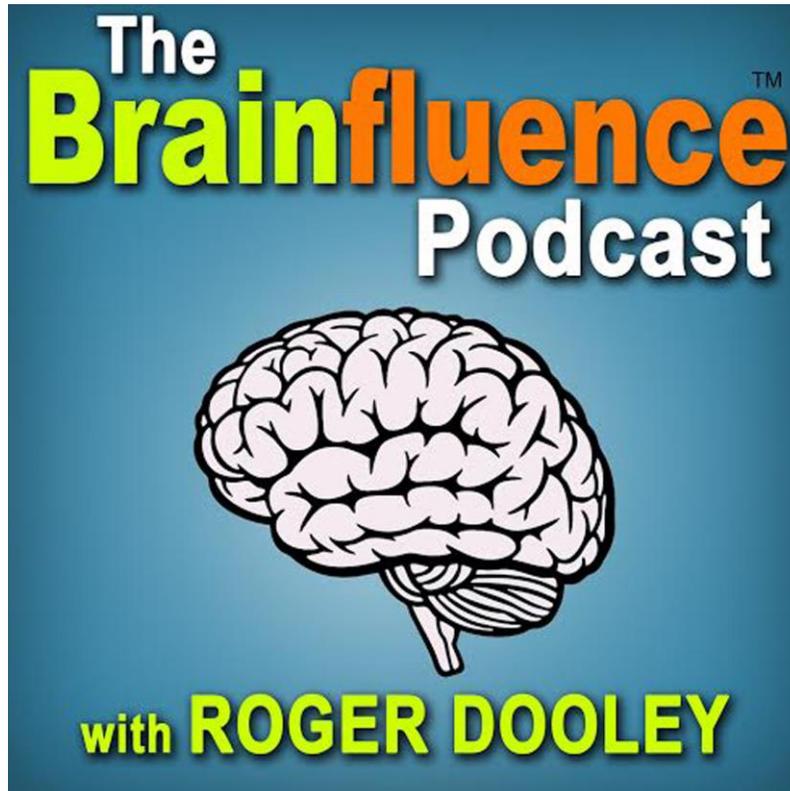


Ep #30: Small Change, Big Influence with Dr. Robert Cialdini



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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 Dooley: Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast. This is Roger Dooley, and today with me I am really, really excited to have Dr. Robert Cialdini, who the name probably familiar to most of you. He's Professor Emeritus at Arizona State University. He's the author of Influence, one of the bestselling and also most respected business books of all time, and also the coauthor of a new book, The Small Big, Small Changes That Spark Big Influence.

Bob, welcome, first of all. We're really happy that you were able to make the time to be here.

Dr. Cialdini: Well, I'm very pleased to be with you, Roger.

Roger Dooley: Thanks.

Let me ask you first sort of a general question. You've been dealing with persuasion psychology for quite a while now. Do you find that it's becoming more mainstream?

Dr. Cialdini: Yes, I do. I think there's an evolving sense that persuasion isn't just an art any longer, something that we have to leave to those individuals with some kind of inborn gift to say exactly the right thing at exactly the right time. There's a set of principles now that allows us to apply a scientific analysis to persuasion, which makes it teachable and learnable, so people are adopting this

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scientific approach to influence much more than in the past.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, I'm seeing a lot more general interest in blog content and so on that is tracing its roots back to persuasion psychology. In other words, people who write about how to convert better on your website, how to get more orders or more leads are now really mining the area of persuasion psychology for their ideas. It's really common to see ten great examples of social proof and this sort of thing that really was, at least my impression was, it was not all that common, say, five years ago or ten years ago.

Dr. Cialdini: That's right. I think part of the reason has to do with the contribution that books like yours actually have made to the general understanding of how these principals operate and how they can provide an advantage to those individuals who understand how they operate and how to implement them.

Roger Dooley: One thing that I know I get asked a lot about is the ethics of persuasion. As soon as you start talking about these things that sound kind of like tricks almost or ways of exploiting how people's brains work, it immediately sounds kind of mind 'controlish' and unethical. I know I've got my canned response to that, but how would you respond to critics that claim this is all manipulative and so on?

Dr. Cialdini: You know, I would validate them in the sense of saying that it can be manipulative but is by no means all manipulative, that if we arrange the information that we present to people in a way that informs them into assent

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rather than trick them or coerces them, then I think we are operating in an entirely ethical way.

A good example comes from this new book that we've done with my coauthors, Steve Martin and Noah Goldstein, called The Small Big. Steve is located in UK, and he's worked with the British government tax office to do something remarkable.

He changed one sentence in a letter that they would send to delinquent taxpayers, people who hadn't paid their taxes on time, and the previous letter was all about sanctions and penalties and so on. It produced about a 57% compliance rate, but if he added one sentence that said, "The great majority of UK citizens do pay their taxes on time," it elevated compliance to 73%.

Now, that was simply a piece of information. It had to do with the idea of social proof that one of the things that we are, I think, trained from childhood to recognize, is that what the people around us, like us, are doing is good information about what's appropriate in the situation.

Simply informing people honestly about what the majority of individuals in the UK do produced a big change in compliance in a way that I think was informational. It wasn't in any way deceptive and I think entirely ethical as a consequence.

Roger Dooley: That's great, and it's serving an important societal goal in that case too, which presumably is tax compliance, and that would generally be considered a good thing since not complying is illegal. It also hurts society.

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I think any kind of advertising can be manipulative and unethical, and it really relates to the content, not so much the technique, but if you're going to sell somebody a product that doesn't work or doesn't do what you say it does, then, sure, that's unethical. But simply creating an effective advertisement to market a good product isn't somehow worse than an ad that doesn't really work very well.

Dr. Cialdini: Yeah. It seems to me that that's right on target, Roger. One of the things that I always use to determine whether something is ethical is to ask, "All right, suppose you now revealed to the person who moved in your direction because of some change you made in your persuasive approach, would that person become less likely to be influenced by you in the future? Informing people, telling them honestly what most others are doing in a situation doesn't seem to me to have that character and so isn't something that we should outlaw.

Roger Dooley: Right. My interests bleed into the neuro-marketing space, where we've got people doing fMRI and EG studies of what's going on in people's brains, and of course, that also sparks similar criticism, but the same response I feel applies, that if you're going to use these techniques simply to communicate more effectively and honestly, then that's great. If you're going to be deceptive, well then, deception is just deception.

Dr. Cialdini: Yeah, and you deserve to be less influential in the future if people find out about it.

Roger Dooley: Your new book, I really like the format. It's a little bit like your previous book that you also coauthored, yes, and it's

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broken into 50-or-more small chapters, bite-sized chapters. It's really nice, I think, for the business reader who may find it difficult to plow through a long psychology text but this way can really look for items of interest. While there is sort of a flow to the concepts, you don't necessarily have to read every one in order.

Dr. Cialdini: That's right. There's 52 individual findings from the literature on persuasion science that we thought fit the theme of the book. That is, very small changes that one could make to a persuasive appeal that would produce very large persuasive success.

By the way, we chose 52 not just at random, but we thought maybe organizations or people could try one of these a week for a year, and at the end of that time, they would have a set of principles or techniques that really worked for them that they could carry on into subsequent years and know that they would be effective.

Roger Dooley: That's interesting. Good strategy, I think. I think that probably any organization would find that, okay, some things are going to work really well and others, maybe in their situation, not so much, but like anything else, if you, first of all, are thinking about the problem and then try stuff, you will find some things that work and, as you point out throughout your book, even these very small changes can sometimes have a really big impact.

Dr. Cialdini: Right. I love that aspect of it. We were queued, each of the three authors of this book were queued into the attractiveness of this idea of a small change that produces big effects by something that happened on the stage where we were presenting information about the

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psychology of influence. I know you're on the stage often as well.

We all, as speakers, want to be sensitive to what's going on in the audience. The three of us all noticed the same thing. When we were talking about the big principles of influence that move people toward assent, if we ever said in front of the audience, "Now, I'm going to give you something really small that you could do to engage the power of this big principle," Roger, the room would fall silent.

Roger Dooley: Interesting.

Dr. Cialdini: People would lean forward. Pens would poise over notepads. It told us, "Oh, this is something people find valuable, the idea of being able to implement something that costs almost nothing in terms of time or energy, maybe just changing a word or two that produces a big effect.

That was the impetus for deciding to collect as many of these as fit well in a book this size, 52, and make that available to the business community.

Roger Dooley: That's interesting, Bob, because I've noticed the same kind of feedback loop in my online writing where now we've got this great feedback mechanism on the web where some content gets shared through social media, some content gets a lot of page views. Other people pick it up and write about it and so on, and other content just sort of sits out there and not much happens.

Dr. Cialdini: Right.

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Roger Dooley: I found myself pulled in the same way, where the articles that I wrote that tended to focus on relatively simple things that you could do that weren't expensive but could have an impact on results were the ones that got the most social media shares, the most attention, the most reader comments and so on.

Dr. Cialdini: It makes great sense, doesn't it, because, first of all, these techniques have to do with persuasion, and everybody wants to be more persuasive, so we've got their attention that way. Everybody wants to be more persuasive.

The other thing is that it applies a return on investment model to persuasion science, not just what are the tactics and procedures and practices that make a big difference, but which are those that require very little effort or time or resources on our part to produce that effect.

That's very valuable in a world that's as busy and information-dense as the environment we live in right now, to be able to do something relatively effortlessly and still have a big impact.

Roger Dooley: Right. I know I've got a slide that I use in some of my presentations about the two ways that you can increase results from your website, and in essence, there's two knobs you can turn. You can turn the dial on sending more traffic to your website, which is usually really expensive to do because you're paying for clicks or you're paying for content writing and SEO services and this sort of thing. There's also kind of a diminishing return there where the harder you try to drive traffic, the more costly it gets and the less effective it is.

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Then the other knob you can turn is the conversion knob. In other words, by being more persuasive with the traffic you already have and, by and large, that's relatively inexpensive. I mean, it isn't cost-free but ...

Dr. Cialdini: That's right; the traffic is already there.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. Often it's just changing a few words, the imagery, a headline, making the call to action clearer or something like that.

Dr. Cialdini: Right. That really fits well with one of the small bigs that I love. It's one that has to do with a small change that restaurant managers can make to significantly increase the likelihood of people purchasing particular items on their menu. All the manager has to do is put a little star next to those items that are the most popular dishes on the menu, and each one immediately becomes 13 to 20% more popular.

It's with the traffic that's already in the restaurant. The manager doesn't have to increase advertising budget or give discount coupons or hire a new chef or increase the quality of the ingredients in the food. No, none of that. You just take what's already there in the situation and it's absolutely true. Point to it and you get a 13 to 20% increase in each item as a consequence.

Roger Dooley: Well, also a form of social proof, I guess.

Last week I was in Stockholm. We did both a speech and an all-day workshop. At the workshop we were ordering sushi for lunch and they passed around a menu that was totally in Swedish. I had absolutely no idea what most of the terms were other than I recognized "avocado," I think.

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That seemed to translate pretty well. But one of the items, six of the other people had already checked it off, so I took the social proof approach rather than trying to get somebody to translate the menu. I said, "Okay, that looks like the popular choice," and I did the same thing, and it was fine.

Dr. Cialdini: Yeah, sure. You typically do get steered correctly by the thing that's most popular.

If I go into a restaurant and I might not order dessert. Maybe at lunch I'm not that hungry, but if I see something that says, "This is our most popular dessert," all of a sudden I have a reason to buy dessert I didn't have before. It's perfect.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. That's a dangerous thing to do.

Dr. Cialdini: It usually steers me well.

Roger Dooley: I try and avoid that kind of encouragement from menus because I'm all too susceptible to persuasion when it comes to the dessert and so on.

Let me ask you a quick question about your six principles of persuasion, which are part of the every text now. Do you feel those are all inclusive? Have you wanted to say, "Boy, I really should have added number seven and number eight," or do you feel that most other principles can be put into one of the six basic ones?

Dr. Cialdini: Yes, I do feel that is the case, that most of the other approaches ... not all of them, because there are hundreds and thousands of different practices, but the majority of the most effective ones seem to fall into one or

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another of those categories. That's not to say that each of those categories is equally likely to be effective in all situations. Depending on the situation, the principle at work will change in its potency.

In a situation in which you have something that's brand new and just out on the market, well, you wouldn't want to use the principle of social proof, because if it's brand new, there aren't a lot of people who have already tried it. You can't point to that. But you might want to use the principle of scarcity there to say, "There is very limited supply of this because it's so new," and you get the chance to get in before competitors have had that chance.

Roger Dooley: Apple seems to be pretty good at using multiple principles with their product launches. They seem to get social proof and then when they get in the lines outside the stores but combined with scarcity and so on, they do a great job.

Dr. Cialdini: Yep.

Roger Dooley: Let's look at a few of the specific topics in The Small Big. One thing that I found kind of interesting was, in the negotiation process, some research suggests that the old advice about never go first in a negotiation; always let your opponent go first, because the worst thing you could do perhaps is throw a price out and they accept it immediately and you know that you really blew it at that point.

Tell me a little bit about why you might want to make the first offer.

Dr. Cialdini: That first offer serves as an anchor for all subsequent thinking about pricing with regard to the exchange. That

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first number that hits the environment grounds all other opinions and offers. If you begin with your best offer, the one that you think will be not only beneficial for you but beneficial for all concerned and you put it out there, that's the one, that's the flag in the ground that people will now refer to from that point on.

Roger Dooley: On a related principle in another chapter, would you make that a round number or not?

Dr. Cialdini: No, it needs to be a specific number. You've pointed to one of my favorite small bigs, the idea that in any negotiation, instead of saying, "Okay, our offer is ..." whatever ... "Seventy-five thousand dollars." If you say, "Our offer is \$75,102, people are less likely to counter it with a big offer of their own that is deflected away from yours. Why?

The researchers found that if you give a precise offer like that, they recognize that you've done your homework. You have researched the question and come up with an exact number instead of just some round number like 75,000. They don't know from 75,000 that you have done that work, but when you present exactly the number that fits with all the homework that you've done, the research you've done, they say, "Oh, this person knows what he or she is talking about," and they're less likely to push back in some kind of resistant way.

I always liken this to when I was in school taking a math or a science class, the instructor would always say, "Now, on your homework or on the exam, don't just give me the answer, show your work. Show me how you got there." Right? "Show your work."

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Well, that's the lesson of this small big. If you've done all the thinking and adjusting and accommodating of the various factors in the situation and you come up with a number that says, "The fairest price is 75,102," say it. Show your work and people will recognize that be less likely to push back away.

Roger Dooley: Interesting stuff. One of the most bizarre examples I think in the book was the example of a food shop that put Vespa Scooters, which are not the little scooters the kids ride around but something more in the small motorcycle family, on their menu. Why would anybody do that? It seems like a distraction but did it actually work?

Dr. Cialdini: I don't know if it actually worked, but it was consistent with a principle that certainly does work, and there's a lot of evidence that it does, and that's the contrast principle, that says that, once again, in keeping with what we talked about earlier, the first number that comes into the scene serves as an anchor and then people react to all subsequent numbers in a way that takes that first one into account.

If you've got the price of a Vespa scooter on your menu ... This was a restaurant that was actually selling this. You could buy a scooter from them. Now when you got to the price of their bottles of wine, they seemed inexpensive compared to that big number.

Now, that's I think a strategy that I don't like. I don't like it because it's not ethical to put a Vespa scooter on your menu. It seems to me a way to fool your customers.

But let's go back to that wine list. A lot of restaurants will start with the least expensive wine and then as you go

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down the list, you increase in the cost of each bottle. That's a mistake, because the first number that people encounter, an inexpensive bottle of wine, will serve as an anchor for them. Now when they get to the intermediate bottles, they will seem relatively expensive compared to the first one.

If the managers just switched the order of the sequence of the presentation and put the most expensive bottles first and then went down the list, by the time the customer got to the intermediately priced bottles of wine, they would seem relatively inexpensive compared to the first that was encountered.

That strikes me as altogether ethical. You have to present your wines one way or another. You're not required to present it in a way that puts you at a disadvantage.

Roger Dooley: And probably want to lead with a lobster and steak dish too on the menu portion.

Dr. Cialdini: Yeah.

Roger Dooley: Then get down to the pasta chicken a little bit later.

Dr. Cialdini: Right.

Roger Dooley: Great.

Well, Bob, I'm sorry to say we're almost out of time here. What I'd like to do is remind our audience that we've been talking to Dr. Robert Cialdini, who is the acknowledged inventor of persuasion psychology but is also the coauthor of a brand new book, *The Small Big, Small Changes That Spark Big Influence*.

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If you want to hear the rest of the 52 ideas in there, you'll have to get the book, which I've got it. It's great. It's composed of bite-sized chapters that are very easy to read but also very practical advice that you can apply either in business or in your personal life.

Bob, in parting here, I'd like to thank you both for being on the show but also for really all you've done for the field, both in terms of creating the original research and concepts, and then also in popularizing the field as well.

Bob, thanks so much for being here.

Dr. Cialdini: Well, thanks, Roger, I enjoyed it.

Roger Dooley: As a reminder to our listeners, you can get links to Bob's stuff and connect with him via the show notes page at RogerDooley.com/Podcast.

Thank you very much.

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.