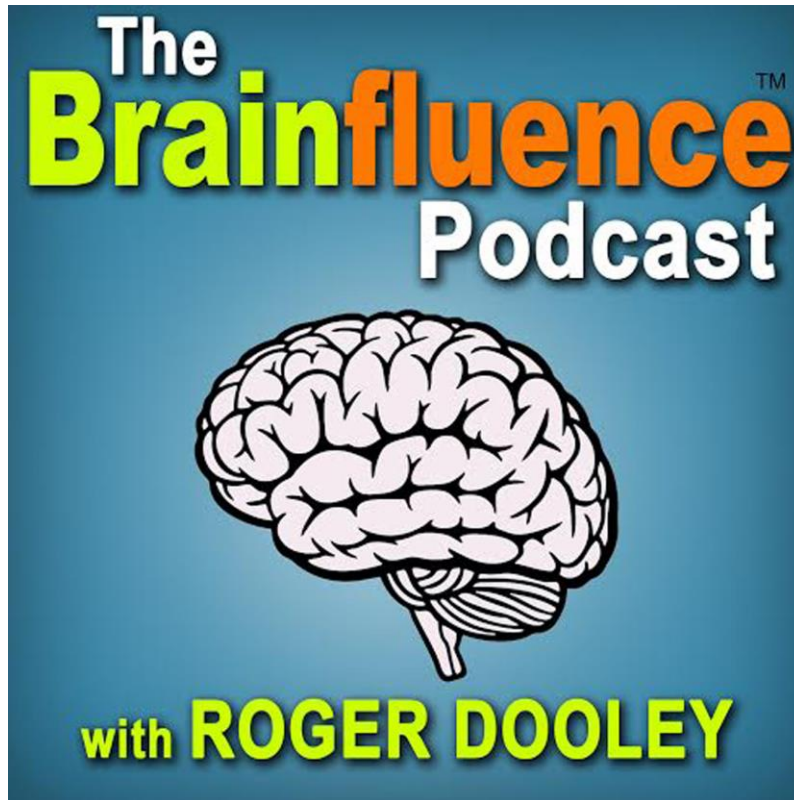


Ep #31: Selling Secrets of Magicians



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host



Roger Dooley

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Ep #31: Selling Secrets of Magicians

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.

Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast. This is Roger Dooley, and you will just have me doing a relatively short podcast after last week's epic interview with Dr. Robert Cialdini. If you did miss that episode, I really encourage you to go back and listen. We answered one really pressing question 30 years later: Are six principles still enough or would Dr. Cialdini perhaps say add another one or two to his famous list?

Also, he gets into some really fascinating research and actual business strategies from his new book "The Small Big." It's a great book. It's a fast read. Fifty-two bite-size chapters, each with a description of some research either scientific research or in some cases real-world testing and then some actual ways to employ that in your business, your organization nor even your personal life. Highly recommend it. For starters, go back and check out the podcast. It was real privilege to have Dr. Cialdini on the show.

In any case, back to magic and neuroscience. Now these don't seem like areas that would go together very well, but in fact both of them do have something in common. They both deal with attention and consciousness although in somewhat different ways. I think that marketers can learn from both groups and in particular the intersection between those two.

Given as a brief introduction, most magic really exploits the fact that our attention systems as human are imperfect or at least not perfect, they just simply can't focus on a lot of things at once. This is in certain ways a good thing. If you were going to say, cross the street in Times Square, if you were looking at everything going on at once and trying to process all that, you simply couldn't do it. It wouldn't work.

Ep #31: Selling Secrets of Magicians

In fact, your brain is pretty good at discriminating what's important so it throws away thousands and thousands of visual stimuli as well as perhaps audible stimuli and focuses on the few things that are most important such as bus coming down the street in your direction.

On a smaller scale too, attention can really be manipulated. If you haven't ever seen a video of Apollo Robbins, I really recommend that you do that. We'll link to one or two in the show notes. He is a professional pick-pocket who does what appears to be impossible and even on the video, you can see as an observer that he is talking to somebody and relieving this person of their wallet, their keys, their watch, and the person, though, is completely unaware that all this is happening even though as an observer, it's obvious to you and you just can't imagine how he's doing it.

You would think certainly that if you were standing there, you would feel his hand removing your watch or going into your back pocket to take something out of it, but in fact, Apollo is exploiting your attention system that can only focus on one thing so he is distracting you perhaps by touching you someplace else, by talking to you, by making you look at something. As a result, your brain can't process the multiple stimuli coming in and his particular expertise is ensuring that you are focused on what he wants you to focus on and unable to process the other stimuli that might tell you that your pocket is being picked.

That actually leads us right you in the first selling secret of magicians. This is from a blog post I did awhile back and analyzed the way magicians ply their trade and came up with six ways that marketers and salespeople can apply those same techniques. The first key understanding is that people focus only on one thing. In essence, our attention is a spotlight. That spotlight is focused on one thing and it tends to ignore everything else. Obviously something that can take over our attention and distract us but by and large we can focus on one thing.

A great example of that is the Invisible Gorilla movie in which people are asked to watch a short film and count the times a basketball is passed back

Ep #31: Selling Secrets of Magicians

and forth between members of a basketball team. Most people can do it and come pretty close to the correct number of basketball passes but what most people do not do is notice the fact that in the middle of this film, a person in a gorilla suit walks out onto the basketball court amongst the basketball players, stands there for a bit, and then walks off.

People are so focused on the task that they were assigned, which is counting the basketballs and keeping track of the basketball players, that they simply reject the information that is this gorilla walking out in the middle of the court. It's not relevant to their task and their brains simply tune in out. Even though, if you point it out, they will immediately notice; or if you tell them to go back and watch the movie and look for the gorilla, they can't believe that they missed it the first time.

The marketing lesson from this is that you should never make your customer or your audience multi-task. If they are distracted by something else when they are viewing your web page or listen to you speak, they will not process what you want them to process. You want to eliminate unnecessary stimuli. For example, if you're designing a website landing page, conversion experts will always strip everything off that page that isn't absolutely essential. Images that aren't necessary go. Navigation links to other parts of the site are removed. Anything that isn't part of that conversion process that's either motivating the customer to take action or is the actual a call to action gets taken away.

That's true whether you're talking to somebody in person, whether you're presenting to an audience. You want to eliminate anything that will be taking their attention away from you because they can process only one thing at a time.

A second lesson is that motion attracts our attention. This is how people like Apollo Robbins and most stage magicians distract you. They know that you, your eyes and your brain will be drawn to some kind of motion, so they will move their arm, they'll let a dove fly out of a hat or pull it out of their pocket, and they know that everybody in the audience will immediately

Ep #31: Selling Secrets of Magicians

focus on the thing that's moving. It's just the way we're programmed. That's a good thing.

As I mentioned, if we were crossing a street, we don't really need to know about all the buildings that are standing there, the trees, the signage, and so on. We need to know about the car that's speeding toward us or the child that's about to step out into the street in front of a bus. That's the stuff that's important.

Normally our visual and attention systems serve us well but magicians are definitely good at exploiting that. The lesson here for you is if you want to attract the attention of your audience, use motion. If you're speaking or presenting, motion will snap their attention back to you. If you are designing a website, sometimes a little bit of motion can help people although I don't highly recommend using a lot of animated GIFs.

In fact, I remember seeing a really great presentation at South by Southwest a few years ago by a trial attorney where they had actually done tests of jury recall of accident reconstructions and they compared static imagery in a PowerPoint where the jury would be presented with an image of what happened, diagramming the intersection and the cars, or a very simple PowerPoint animation.

If you ever used PowerPoint animation, you know that it's very rudimentary. It is not a sophisticated animation system but it can do things like show an object moving across the screen and bumping into another object. They found that just adding that little bit of motion and perhaps even a background sound at the time of the collision caused jury recall to increase tremendously versus just looking at either somebody talking or a static image.

Remember, if you want to get people's attention, use motion. You want to use it judiciously because if there's too much, you will fatigue them and they will probably find the whole thing annoying. Motion will grab their attention.

Ep #31: Selling Secrets of Magicians

That brings us to lesson number three, and that is that big motions are more important than little motions. Again, this is how magicians fool you because they, as part of their act, typically have to be concealing things in their pockets or in their sleeve or perhaps removing things from concealment, and we as the audience are looking for that. Everybody is saying, "The magician is not going to fool me. I'm going to spot where he's putting the coin or the ball or whatever it is."

Inevitably, we fail to do that. The reason is that the magician will typically distract us with a bigger motion so while the left hand is making a very subtle move toward a pocket or perhaps around to the back of the jacket or something like that, the right hand will be making a big move, a sweeping move, and again, our brains can't help but look at that. They're compelled when they see a big motion to check it out.

There's one other aspect of that too. It seems that curved motions are more effective than straight motions. Neuroscientists think that the reason for that is that our brains can process straight motions more easily. Our eyes are set up to process straight lines. When there's a sweeping curved motion, it requires more of our brain's attention to process it. Of course, this is why magicians will exploit that and make a sweeping move with their arm or pull a colorful scarf out and wave it. All those things will distract us.

The lesson there is, again, if you really need to get the attention of somebody, perhaps during a presentation if you want to get the audience back in sync with you, a big sweeping motion will get their attention. They might even look from their phones where they're checking their email or tweeting.

The next lesson is kind of in the same vein but it's a little bit different, and that is the unexpected attracts us. We do try to filter out stuff that isn't important, so things that are familiar tend to be unimportant. We've all walked into a room and noticed that there's one thing that's out of place or one new item, and we are programmed, if you will, to look for novelty, things that are different than what we're expecting.

Ep #31: Selling Secrets of Magicians

On the one hand, if the magician is trying to trick us with a motion, they'll use something that's very familiar, scratching the magician's ear or shooting his cuffs, which is a motion that we've seen thousands and thousands of times done by many people, and so we really don't think of it as important.

On the other hand, things that are unexpected attract us. For example, if the magician put his hand on top of his head, that would immediately get our attention because we don't normally see people putting their hand on top of their head.

The concept of novelty and delivering the unexpected is something that is really important in marketing. That's why for print ads you'll see visual imagery designed to be striking and often different and unexpected to. That's why in TV ads you'll see surprise endings or twists that are designed to make the viewer snap to attention.

Certainly in any kind of advertising, simply using the word 'new' is very powerful. Every time you see a list of the most powerful words in advertising, 'new' is at or near the top. That's because our brains seek out novelty and when we see that 'new,' we immediately say, "Hey, oh, that's different. That isn't something we've seen before. Maybe it'll be good for me."

If you're in-person and you want to get people's attention, by all means make a move that's a little bit different, but in a much broader sense, always try and bring out something new or unexpected. Even if it's just using the word 'new' because that will attract the attention of your viewers or customers.

The fifth lesson is exploiting mirror neurons. Mirror neurons, which you may have heard of, are neurons that react when we see somebody else doing something and in particular performing a familiar action. Scientists first discovered mirror neurons when they were measuring brain activity in monkeys and they noticed that when one monkey was observing another

Ep #31: Selling Secrets of Magicians

monkey eating a banana, that first monkey actually had activity in its brain corresponding to the same motions that the other monkey was performing.

This was a real surprise but that is how the name mirror neurons came up because, in essence, the observing monkey's brain was mirroring the brain activity of the monkey performing the action.

Magicians use this by using decoy actions that are very familiar to us. For instance, the magician might take a drink from a cup and, in fact, perhaps he's using that motion to pass a coin into his mouth or somehow secreting it in the cup or something like that. Our brains don't perceive that because the action that the magician is performing is so familiar that we mentally process it as he's expecting us to process it -- not catching his little variation on it.

Normally, as marketers, we're not trying to do sneaky things to distract or deceive our customers but mirror neurons can be very important. For example, if you're selling a product, imagine you're selling a beverage. If you can show somebody taking a drink of that, that will cause the viewer's brain to perform the same action. That will be much more powerful than simply showing somebody a picture of a bottle of the beverage.

If you can create a familiar motion and this works, of course, in person too, that your viewer's brain will be familiar with, you can get them to duplicate whatever it is that you're showing them.

The last lesson is to cut the chatter. Magicians don't cut their chatter. In fact, if you've ever been to a magic show, almost always the magician keeps a steady stream of conversation going. He's talking about what he's doing, why he's doing it, what he's going to do next, sometimes talking about totally irrelevant stuff. There's a reason that the magician does that. This chatter is distracting. It occupies a good part of your brain's activity and makes it that much easier to deceive you by using small motions with another hand.

Ep #31: Selling Secrets of Magicians

The stream of chatter serves the magician's purpose very well. I encourage you, if you do watch a magic show, just watch how much the magician is probably talking because you listen to that. It takes up part of your brain activity but from a sales and marketing and presentation standpoint, that chatter works in exactly the wrong direction.

If you have multiple streams to listen to, if the salesperson is talking while the customer is, say, studying the product or looking at its specifications, that chatter will cause distraction and probably neither will be processed very effectively.

Sometimes it's much better to be silent. Let the customer or the viewer absorb whatever they need to and then, if necessary, resume the dialogue. That's true in advertising like video, for example. If you want the customer or the viewer to be focused on what's on the video, then you don't necessarily need a monologue going on in the background because it'll be less effective.

Another great example is the typical PowerPoint slide that has multiple bullets on it. We've all been told that PowerPoint bullet slides are bad but there's a reason that they're bad and that is because if the audience is trying to read the content on the slides at the same time that the presenter is presenting perhaps a slightly different version of that same content verbally, there's too much distraction going on and chances are neither will be processed very well.

Really, as a presenter, you want to make it one or the other. If you're going to present visual information that the audience has to absorb, you may want to just put that up there and pause for a minute to let them absorb it.

On the other hand, if you want them to be paying attention to what you're saying, then you don't want to distract them by giving them sort of a second audio channel on the screen that they have to try and make sense of.

That is pretty much it. You may have some ideas and I'd certainly be happy if you left them in a comment if you've perhaps observed a trick that

[The Brainfluence Podcast](#) with Roger Dooley

Ep #31: Selling Secrets of Magicians

magicians use that you think has applicability to the sales process or marketing or presentation.

With that, I will remind you that links to relevant material will be in the show notes at rogerdooley.com/podcast and I thank you for listening this week. We'll see you next week.

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.