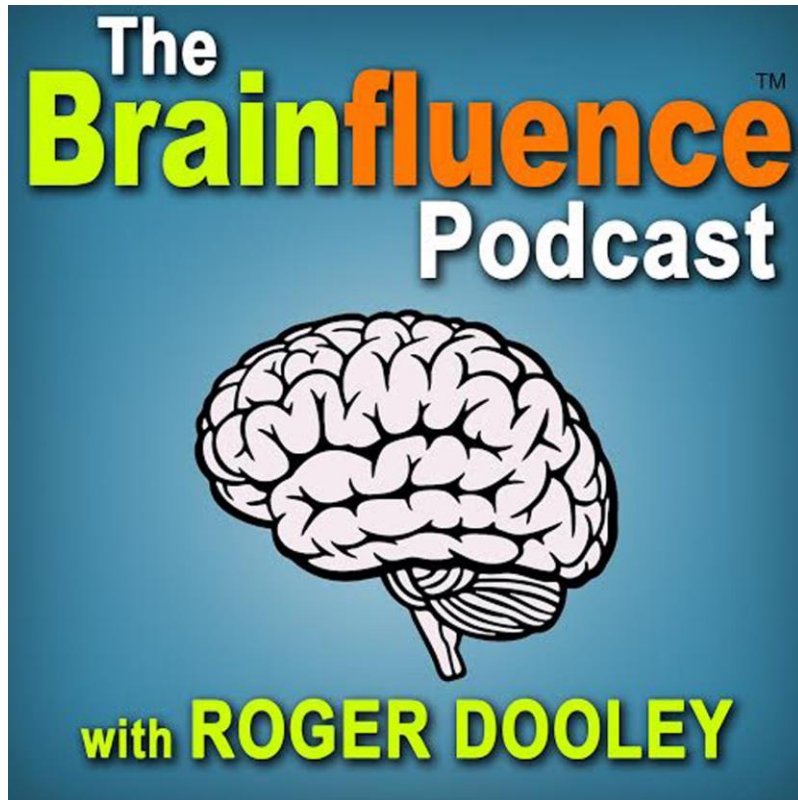


Ep #36: Psychology Goes Prime Time with Daniel Pink



Full Episode Transcript

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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. I'm Roger Dooley, and I'm really excited to be able to spend some time with this week's guest, Dan Pink. Dan is an expert in human behavior and the author of five bestselling books on the topic. His most recent books are *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* and *To Sell is Human*. I highly recommend both of those books.

I think it's fair to say that Dan has done more to bring the science of behavior out of the labs and into the popular consciousness than just about anybody. He's even been interviewed by Oprah Winfrey, which leaves the Brainfluence Podcast as one of the few boxes on Dan's resume left unchecked.

Today we're going to take care of that by focusing on what may be Dan's most ambitious project yet, Crowd Control. It's a prime time series on Nat GEO that uses hidden cameras to record how people react to a variety of behavioral interventions.

Dan, welcome to the show.

Daniel Pink: Roger, thanks for having me. It's great to be with you.

Roger Dooley: Dan, the science of behavior doesn't exactly sound like a compelling concept to pitch to TV executives.

Daniel Pink: No, and I'm glad that we didn't use that title, because the meeting would have ended in 30 seconds.

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Roger Dooley: How did you get to this point with such a, I wouldn't call it an off-the-wall concept, but perhaps off-the-beaten-track concept for a show?

Daniel Pink: Well, actually, I came in pretty late in this. There's a wonderful production company called Tigress Productions that has made a number of television shows ... most of them in the UK ... for various BBC channels and what not.

They actually conceived this show more than a year ago and early on pitched it to National Geographic, before any shooting or anything like that brought me in just for a little bit of consultation and whatnot, and I just found it so unbelievably interesting that I decided to ... and they let me ... get more deeply involved in both crafting the show, which we did with incredibly talented and diverse team, and then hosting the show and essentially trying to be the explainer-in-chief for the program.

Roger Dooley: That's great. So you went from being a consultant to being pretty much the face of the show.

Daniel Pink: Very informally. They said, "What do you think of this?" "Would you be interested in this?" I just thought it was such a great idea, and it just so happened at the time that I was just pure serendipity at the time that I was actually had a couple of television programs on the drawing board myself that I was going to try to go out there and pitch, and this one was a heck of a lot better than anything I'd come up with.

Roger Dooley: Along the way, did you assist in the pitch process and anybody say, "This will never work?"

Daniel Pink: Well, you know, it's interesting. It's a really interesting question, and I would imagine that the marketers in your

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audience, I think they can relate to this, which is that at some level when you're working with a client to a certain extent, and in a television production, the network is a client, you're always pitching. It's not like you pitch once and it's all over.

I mean, there are various stages along the way where you say, "What about if we did it this way?" "What about if we did it that way?" "What about if we move this piece over here?" At some level you're always pitching.

What's true, I think in the television business is true in all kinds of work; that is, it's never over. You're always trying to get people to see things your way.

Roger Dooley: Very good. The show has been airing now for a couple weeks at the time that we're taping this, so I'm guessing that at least some of our listeners have already spotted it. But for those who haven't, Dan, can you describe the flow of a typical show?

Daniel Pink: Yeah. This is a show, as you said, it's on National Geographic Channel. It's on 9:00 pm Eastern time on the National Geographic channel. What we do is this. We go out and we find problems. There are plenty of problems out there, as your listeners know. It could be small problems, sort of minor irritating problems, like people double-dipping guacamole, kids peeing in swimming schools, people walking down the sidewalk with their faces in their cell phone bumping into other people.

We also take on more significant things, like we're doing a couple of things on speeding. We've done something on jaywalking, that actually are matters of life and death. What we do is we look at these problems. We check out the behavioral science; what does this ever-growing body

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of social psychology and economics and cognitive science tell us about how to solve these problems, and then we go out into the world and put our solution into place. We turn on our cameras and see what happens.

Sometimes we manage to solve the problem. Sometimes we just completely fall on our face. Obviously your listeners, for people who are interested in what makes us tick, the people who liked psychology class in college, the people who are reading books by Dan Ariely and Malcolm Gladwell and Adam Grant and Dan Gilbert, this is really a way to understand these ideas but using the medium of television, which has the advantage of being really, really visual, obviously, and allows us to do some storytelling in some really, really fun and compelling ways.

Roger Dooley: It's really great. One thing that I've enjoyed a lot, Dan, is seeing some of these dry lab experiments that we read about in books, and they were probably conducted on some sort of semi-unwilling undergrads who are trying to score a few extra credits in psychology class suddenly translated into the real world. That's been great.

A few weeks ago I had Bob Cialdini on the show, and I asked him if he thought the concepts of social psychology and behavior science were getting more play these days and were more familiar to people. He tended to agree with that.

This is shortly before your show began airing. I guess now the question would be, "Well, I guess so." It makes the question almost superfluous.

Daniel Pink: Well, no. Again, I actually think you make a very good point in that those of us who are doing what we're doing, those people I just mentioned, plenty of other people.

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Susan Cain has written about introversion and harnessed a lot of that social science.

Everybody I just mentioned who is writing about social science and behavioral science for a popular audience rather than a merely academic audience stands on Bob Cialdini's shoulders. He is the one who, he was the first mover. The fact that you and I can talk about the psychology of influence and all that, it's like that old line, "The reason we can see so far is because we're standing on the shoulders of giants," and that's what Cialdini is.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, definitely. Definitely.

Speaking of getting into the real world from the lab, one of your segments had you on Bourbon Street in New Orleans, which is about as far from a normal lab as you can get.

Daniel Pink: My God, you're right about that.

Roger Dooley: Tell us a little bit about your experience there with these unwitting subjects and maybe occasionally impaired subjects.

Daniel Pink: I wouldn't qualify the "occasionally impaired." Yeah, it was quite an experience. Actually, I had never been to Bourbon Street, and we, our crew, our whole team, went there, and we were there for a long time. In terms of hours, we were there from about 4:00 in the afternoon till 4:00 in the morning. You can basically see the entire scope of human degradation in those 12 hours.

Roger Dooley: It probably got more interesting as the time went on.

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Daniel Pink: Yes, it did. Yes, it did. There was a distinct difference pre-midnight and post-midnight. It's really quite remarkable. That itself is fascinating.

What we did is in Bourbon Street, Bourbon Street, people are allowed to walk around the streets carrying alcohol in open containers, which is unusual, to put it mildly, and creates all kinds of problems. One of the biggest problems, one of the most pernicious problems is litter.

Now, what's so interesting about that is that litter isn't really a problem in lots of America. Littering has been so stigmatized through public information campaigns and just changes in cultural norms, but in Bourbon Street, even though there is a garbage can literally on every corner of this area, there's still garbage all over the place. What we decided to do was see if we could try to address that problem at least in the short term.

What we did is we created essentially a litter game, and we built this big apparatus that displayed a trivia question, and the trivia question gave you three answers. You would say, "Who was major league baseball's first free agent," and it would give you a bunch of choices, A, B, C. And if you knew the answer, let's say C, Jim Catfish Hunter, you would put your garbage into the receptacle marked C. There were three different holes, A, B and C, and if you put it in and got the right answer, if you put your garbage into the right place, you won.

Initially you just won the adulation of your friends and colleagues. Then eventually we reconfigured it so that people got tickets that they could trade in for caps. The idea was this, that if you can take something that is really mundane and boring and turn it into something that's more fun, you can affect people's behavior.

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Along with that there's a large body of evidence showing that giving people prizes for short-term behavior is pretty effective. It doesn't work for a lot of things, but on short-term simple behavior it works pretty well.

The other thing that we were trying to do more broadly is a little bit more complicated, which is this. There's some really interesting research showing that people are more ... Research was done in a parking lot. People turn out to be more likely to litter in a parking lot that already had litter in it rather than a parking lot that had no litter.

Now, this might seem self-evident, but it actually made a huge difference. It goes back to Cialdini's point about social proof. That is, if people saw litter, they would say, "Oh, it's OK to litter here," and they would throw away their trash. The problem that we had in Bourbon Street is that the presence of litter actually encouraged more litter.

What we tried to do is reverse that social norm. What we ended up doing was having actually some amount of success in using this game to get more litter off the street and then to try to change that social norm. That's just one example of what we tried to do. It was reasonably successful.

I think what's really interesting is that at a certain point people started walking around the streets picking up trash on their own ... it wasn't their trash ... and then throwing it away.

Roger Dooley: Right. That was kind of amusing. At one point it looked like a couple of people were actually fighting for the same scrap of litter so that they could toss it in.

Daniel Pink: Oh, yeah, okay. Yeah. We had that.

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It would be interesting to try that same sort of thing in an area where there wasn't as much drunkenness. But it was fun to watch it in that realm.

Roger Dooley: That makes psychology fun; right?

Daniel Pink: Sure.

Roger Dooley: I saw that you traveled to my hometown of Austin to film a segment about parking violators, folks who are able-bodied but would park in a handicap spot. How do you pick Austin? Does Austin have a national reputation for inconsiderate parkers, or did you just decide that it would be a good time for barbecue and craft beer? How did you pick Austin?

Daniel Pink: We did spend a few days in Austin doing this, and we had some great barbecue, as always in Austin. I guess what treading us to Austin was a fellow named Mack Marsh, who you see on the show. Mack is a fellow who is in a wheelchair and has been a really powerful advocate for the disabled and has helped ...

His operation is called Parking Mobility. He has developed a really interesting app that allows people ... You put it on your phone, and it allows people, if they see someone park in a disabled spot, they take a photograph of that, send it in, and it makes its way to the local police department, and eventually that person is issued a ticket. Sort of deputizing people to enforce this. He was a really interesting guy doing some good work.

I have to say, I was skeptical about the existence of this problem of parking in disabled spaces, because I've never parked in a disabled space. I don't think I know anybody ... I've never seen anybody do that. I was skeptical going

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in there, thinking, "Oh, my God, we're going to ride around for days trying to find someone who's violating this rule." Literally, we found somebody in the first ten minutes. It was just shocking to me.

One of the things we ended up trying, though, which was really, really effective, and it's a really powerful idea, and it was this. Typically, what happens is that the way that we enforce these kinds of rules is that we have signs that mark the spot and then we hold out the threat of punishment, a fine, if somebody doesn't do that.

I think what happens is that people sometimes forget why the rule is in place, and at some level they're making a risk calculation. They say, "Ah, there's no cop around. There's nobody around enforcing this. I can probably park in here for ten minutes and not get in trouble."

What we tried to do is take this out of the realm of just pure punishment and compliance and try to get people to understand why these spaces exist and actually to enlist empathy as a lever for changing behavior.

What we did is this. We went to a big parking area in Austin, and we created some new signs. These signs didn't replace the regular disabled parking signs, those blue signs with that well-known logo of someone in a wheelchair, but they accompanied them. We added an additional sign, and these signs said this: "Think of me. Keep it free," and it had a photograph of someone from the Austin area who was in a wheelchair.

We went out and took photographs of people in Austin who are in wheelchairs. This is not some stock photography or anything like that. Real people from their communities.

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We put those signs up, and where those signs were posted we eliminated illegal parking in disabled spaces during the time that they were up, for the whole month they were up. It was a really, really powerful idea.

There are so many interesting things about this, but one of the interesting things is that we found out subsequently that two days after the signs came down, because we weren't permitted to put them up indefinitely, two days after the sign came down, they had a violation.

The other thing is that there are now several cities in Texas that now want to try this idea, and since that show has aired, literally in my email right in front of me I have emails from people in Connecticut, emails from people in Arkansas. Here's an email from somebody in Wisconsin, another one in Maryland, saying, "Wow, that was so great. I want to try to do this in my city."

That's what I really like about this show, is that we try to do things, and I think it's entertaining and enlightening, but at some level we all hope to make some kind of difference out there in the world, by if people watch these good solutions and try to put them in place in their own realm.

Roger Dooley: Right. That's such a practical and simple-to-implement solution too. Obviously, a gain that has trivia for dumping your litter in a hole, and that's going to be hard to scale and hard to maintain, but simply modifying the signage, that's a trivial thing, and I don't know. I suppose people might become habituated, but I think that probably just that little reminder that, okay, you could be affecting a real person here as opposed to some sort of faceless authority figure is probably a big mover there.

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Daniel Pink: You've got it exactly right, and particular your point, "faceless." One of the things that we found in a number of different experiments is that when you put a face on a problem, then it changes people's behavior more powerfully than if it's a pure abstraction.

I think your point about habituation is very well taken too. I actually thing that people have habituated to those blue disabled parking signs and that now iconic logo. I don't think they think about it. I think it's an abstraction for them.

Roger Dooley: Right. It's no longer interesting to the brain because they've seen it a million times.

Daniel Pink: Right. And they don't even think about what it is. To them it's like, do not park here because the city has determined there's no parking between four and six. It's just another prohibition out there, and people have forgotten the reason why it's in place.

Habituation ... I'm glad you brought that up ... is a really challenging issue. It ends up underlying a lot of the problems that we're trying to solve.

Roger Dooley: Maybe the ultimate hack would be to have a little video screen there that every day would have a new person on it and keep refreshing people's awareness of it.

Daniel Pink: That's actually a pretty good idea. Yeah, I like that idea.

Roger Dooley: You can have that one, Dan.

Daniel Pink: Yeah. Yeah. All right.

Roger Dooley: The facing reminds me of an experiment that involved radiologists reading x-rays that tended to make fewer errors and miss fewer problems when there is a picture of

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a person attached to the x-ray. Rather than just seeing this black and white image, they saw a person. It actually influenced the amount of attention that they paid to it.

Daniel Pink: I know the study you're talking about. It's out of Israel and it's a fascinating study, and that's exactly it. I think one of the really big lessons for those of us trying to shape behavior is to get out of the realm of the abstract into the realm of the concrete, to get out of the realm, as you say, of the faceless, and into the realm of putting a face on things.

Roger Dooley: I'm going to bring up a topic that I deal with on a daily basis, but I know that I've never discussed it on the podcast before, and in fact I'm pretty sure I haven't mentioned it in ten years of writing about neuromarketing consumer behavior, and that is dog poop.

One of your segments involved the problem that exists probably everywhere in the world where there are dog parks in cities and urban areas and so on, and that's people failing to pick up after their dog.

What was your behavioral intervention there, and how did that work?

Daniel Pink: One of the things we did was actually somewhat similar to the litter game. We came up with what we called a poop-o-meter, where when you put your dog's poop into this receptacle; it would measure the heat that was being emitted and give you a ranking from "Glacial" to "Inferno."

It's amazing that people are ... kind of funny with dogs ... that people were actually really concerned ... not really concerned ... but people were more concerned than would be rational for how their dogs did. It's like parents

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and their kid's schoolwork. They want their kid to get an A. These dog owners wanted their dog to get the “Inferno.”

There's one guy who I guess he waited a little bit before putting the poop in, and he got “Glacial,” and there's this look of disappointment on this fellow's face.

There's another guy in there ...

Roger Dooley: Clearly, his dog didn't measure up.

Daniel Pink: Yeah.

There's another guy in there who's dog got “Inferno,” and he was giving his wife a high-five.

We also did another one where when you put your dog's poop in the receptacle; it would trigger a dog treat. That one actually worked reasonably well, because people ... It avoids some of the problems with these kind of contingent rewards, because the reward was actually going to somebody else, somebody they cared about. They were able to do something good for their dog. That was an interesting one.

There are some other interventions out there for this. One of the best I've seen was in my own neighborhood here in Washington, DC, where not too far from where we live there's a church on a corner. On the corner it's a very big lawn. We get a lot of dog walkers in this neighborhood, and so dogs and large lawns often don't make a great combination.

What this church did is they had a sign on their lawn that said, “Children play here. Please pick up after your dog.” You can imagine signs that say, “Pick up after your dog”

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or "Please pick up after your dog," but I think the addition of that phrase, "Children play here," we didn't test this in the show. There's no experiment testing it, but I always thought that was a really fascinating idea.

Again, it goes back to this idea that instead of telling people, "This is the rule. You must comply," just remind people why the rule is in place. Because most people aren't unreasonable. That's one of the things that you see out there when you watch people behave in the wild, most of us are not unreasonable people. What we are is we're people who are clueless; we're just on autopilot. We're locked in our own little world, and if you can jar people out of that through novelty, through surprise, through a sense of why, you can actually reshape some of their default behaviors.

Roger Dooley: Right. I'm ready to, once you commercialize the poop-o-meter, I'll be ready to put one in my neighborhood.

Daniel Pink: Yeah. I do not have a stake in the poop-o-meter. I don't know who holds the patent. It's a cool idea. I'm not going to bet the mortgage on that one, though.

Roger Dooley: No. Nope. Another one of those fun to play with but tough to scale ideas.

Daniel Pink: Yeah. Yeah.

Roger Dooley: One of the other amusing segments that you had was in a Florida DMV office. We know how we all love the Motor Vehicle offices where you have to go to get your license plate or your driver's license, and somehow, for whatever reason, it always seems to take hours or much longer than you expect there. You had a really crazy intervention

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in that one, I wasn't quite sure how I felt about that one. Why don't you tell us about that one a little bit.

Daniel Pink: There were two, and I think I know the one that you weren't sure how you quite felt about. One of them was we brought in somebody, basically, a professional laugher to sit with people and start laughing. Laughter being quite infectious actually changed the mood of the room. It's a woman named Pat Conklin, who is a certified joyologist. She laughs for a living.

Roger Dooley: How do you find a professional laugher? I've heard of professional mourners who will show up at somebody's funeral and cry.

Daniel Pink: I've not heard of that. That's kind of interesting.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. But never a professional laugher.

Daniel Pink: Yeah. As it happens, about a decade ago I wrote a book called A Whole New Mind, and in that book I happened to write about something called Laughter Yoga, which was started by a physician in India, who had what seemed to be a cockamamie theory that laughter, not laughing at jokes because they're funny, but simply the physical act of laughter could have both a physiological and psychologically therapeutic effect, which seemed like largely nonsense.

Then what happened was is that some of the science began to back him up, and so he helped trigger this movement around the world called Laughter Yoga. Your listeners can go onto their favorite search engine and look for it right now and find all kinds of stuff.

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This woman happened to be the Laughter Yoga leader of central Florida, and so we brought her in. It had a nice effect.

It's very interesting to watch people in a DMV start laughing, and it's very hard to watch somebody laugh without laughing yourself, so you realize that laughter is itself a form of communication in many ways.

The other thing that we did there, which I thought was really, really interesting was this. We're always looking for measurements. How do we measure whether people are feeling good or bad at a DMV without asking them? Because that intervention takes time, as you say, about some of these things, it's harder to scale.

So we found a fellow at MIT, a computer scientist, who developed this mood meter. Basically what it is, is that you video people. You have a live video of people, and the software measures their facial expression and determines by their facial expressions whether they're happy or sad. That's actually relatively easy to determine. The software side of it is difficult, but if you give people still photographs of folks, they can tell their emotional affect pretty easily.

We used that to measure people's mood in the DMV. What the software did is that if you were smiling, it put a little yellow round happy face over your face in the video feed, and if you weren't, it put a neutral kind of emoticon, a neutral face. We used that to measure people's, the affect in the room. It was very, very low.

But then what we did is we said, "Well, what if we let the people in the room see how they look?" So we put the video feed on a video monitor that was in the DMV. You'd

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be sitting there, and you would look at a monitor, and you would see everybody sitting in there with you, but instead of seeing their actual face, you would see whether on the top of their neck was a yellow smiley face or a green neutral face.

What was really curious about that is that seeing how you behaved, seeing your mood, changed people's mood. Once they saw that, "I don't need to be that sour about things," and they smile. Then when other people look around, they see other people smiling, and that actually had a pretty big effect.

Roger Dooley: Interesting stuff. Facial coding is growing in popularity in a variety of areas.

Daniel Pink: It's huge, yeah.

Roger Dooley: They're using it to measure reaction to ads or user experience on websites and so on pretty much in real time now, and probably going even a little bit deeper than the smiley versus frowny. That was a pretty cool segment.

Daniel Pink: It's pretty interesting. I agree with you. If your listeners have read the work of especially Paul Ekman, who is a pioneer in the field of facial expressions as a window into people's emotions, I think marketers can learn a lot from that, because it's actually, it's hard for people to fake that. I can say, "Ooh, your pie is delicious," but it's hard for me, for my face to say that in a non-lying way if I don't really believe it.

Roger Dooley: Right. That's really the whole premise of neuromarketing technologies, to sort of get underneath what people are saying and figuring out what they really feel, whether it's being done by brain wave measurements or facial

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expressions or biometrics or any of the other techniques that are out there.

That was a lot of fun.

I could see that in a variety of offices, where I do agree that if presented with yourself and you look like you're frowning, there's going to be a tendency for you to try and pick up the corners of your mouth a little bit and get rid of it.

Daniel Pink: Yeah. I always thought you could do something similar to that for something ... Let's forget about emotional affect, but something a little more physical, which is posture. I have to say, I'm sitting here in my office and I'm leaning back in my chair and I have my feet on my desk; okay? Because I'm relaxed, talking to you, Roger. Everything is cool. But it's probably not great for my back or my spine or anything like that, and my guess is that if I were in a group and I saw everyone's posture and I realized that mine was really, really bad, I would probably straighten up a little bit.

I think there are opportunities to use this in the real world to actually improve people's physiology.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, that's a great idea, because I find that my particular failing in that area is to sit hunched over a keyboard for many hours of the day.

Daniel Pink: Right.

Roger Dooley: And trying to counteract that. It's tough to sort of remember to spontaneously do it, but if there were some kind of little intervention that would say, "Hey, straighten up," I would probably tend to do that.

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Daniel Pink: Yeah. Yeah, so would I. These are some of the kinds of nudges that we're looking for. We're not trying to coerce people or trick people, but what we're trying to do, and again, in all of these things ... We went out and did 45 experiments around the country. The big, big takeaway is, for me, as someone who has written a lot about behavior, but to go out there and into the wilds and see people, you just realize how much of our behavior is purely, purely on autopilot. It is unconscious. We are not thinking about it.

You're not intentionally saying, "Gee, I'm going to have bad posture today." You're not even thinking about it. Posture hasn't entered your head the entire day in the same way with all these other kinds of things. If we can make tiny tweaks to our environment, we can do things in a non-coercive way to actually improve people's lives.

Roger Dooley: Dan, is there a possibility of a second season of Crowd Control?

Daniel Pink: I hope so. It depends on how our ratings do. Right now they're looking pretty good. People seem to be interested in the show, so I'm knocking wood right now. We'll see.

What we're hoping is that, yeah, there will be a second season, and even better, people who have seen the show will say ... and we're getting these emails now ... "Oh, my God, I hate it when people on the subway stand on the left side of the escalator rather than on the right side of the escalator, blocking people who want to walk up the escalator."

I did a radio show the other day and calls were coming in, it's here in Washington, DC. "You know how in subway cars people just bunch at the entrance and they don't feel

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up the empty space in the middle of the car. How can we do that?”

“What if there's a bicyclist and I'm in a car and there's a bicyclist in front of me and he's going really slowly and there's a bicycle lane and he's not in it. Do I honk? Do I try to pass him? How do we stop that?”

Everybody's got something out there. What I'm hoping is that over time this becomes a conversation where people say, “Hey, here's something that's bugging me,” and we go in and say, “Let's look at the science. Let's figure it out. Let's talk to smart people for solutions, and let's build something cool to try and make it better.”

Roger Dooley: That's sounds like a plan, Dan.

Say, we're just about out of time, so let me remind our audience that we've been talking with Dan Pink. He's the author of the bestsellers *Drive* and *To Sell is Human*, and is now the host of the Nat GEO prime time show about human behavior, *Crowd Control*.

We will have in the show notes links to the TV show, Dan's books and so on, and also a full text transcript of this.

For our listeners, you can find that at rogerdooley.com/podcast.

Dan, how can folks find the TV show and find you online?

Daniel Pink: Well, I'm glad that they can find the TV show at rogerdooley.com/podcast. That's good. They can also find ...

Roger Dooley: There might be a shortcut. You never know.

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Daniel Pink: They can also go to my site, which is www.danpink.com. There's all kinds of free videos and downloads and information about the show and all kinds of other groovy things.

Roger Dooley: Great.

Dan, thanks so much for being on the show.

Daniel Pink: Roger, it's been a pleasure.

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.