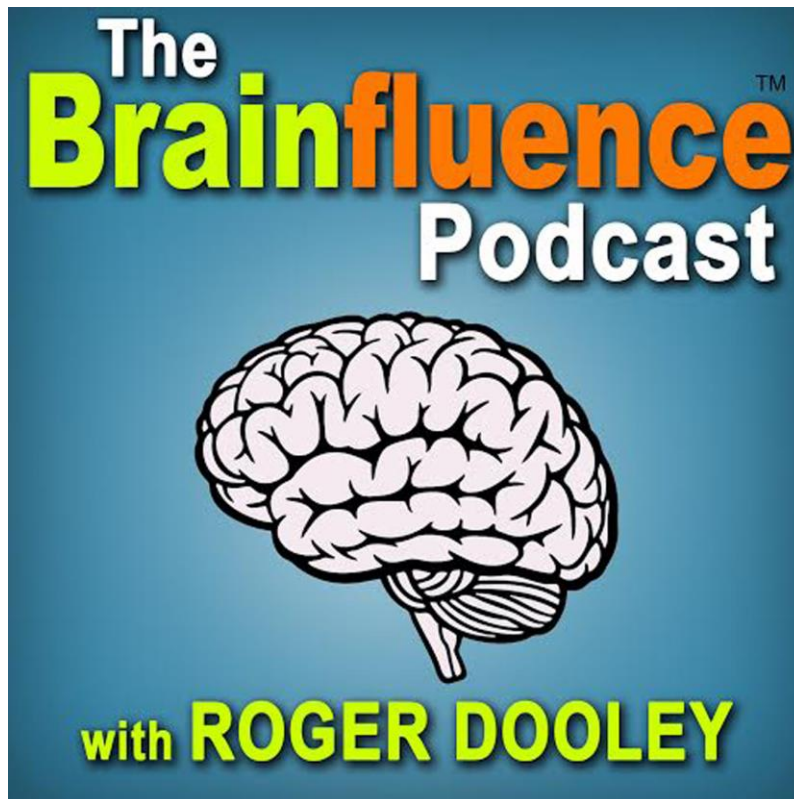


Ep #88: Brian Solis on X: Experience, Business, Design



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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 am Roger Dooley. Our guest this week doesn't really need an introduction, but good host that I am, I'll supply one anyway.

He's a principal analyst at the Altimeter Group and a frequent keynote speaker. He's a fellow Wiley author who has written multiple bestselling books. Past titles include *The End of Business as Usual* and *What's the Future of Business*. His insights on the future of marketing and business, and in particular, the impact of digital technology and media have been influential around the globe. His newest title is *X: The Experience when Business meets Design*. Welcome to the show, Brian Solis.

Brian Solis: Roger, thank you for having me on, man. It's been many years since we've been friends and I always look forward to chatting with you.

Roger Dooley: Right, well I enjoy our occasional meetings at conferences and I know, Brian, your thinking on the balance of power between customers and businesses has definitely influenced my own thoughts. I frequently refer to you in my writing. So it's great to have you on the show finally.

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Brian Solis: Oh man, well, you know, I'll tell you, it's sad but true that these things like releasing a book are the things that bring us together, but I have to say that I'm a big fan of your work. I have to say that you're one of the good guys. We need more of us out there, you know? Fighting the good fight. Trying to bring people into the spotlight.

Trying to remind people in—I'll just call them executives for now—but executives and decision makers that we're all people and we all want to do business a certain way. We all want to be heard and we all want to be treated a certain way, whether it's in business or government or education. Everything's ripe for revolution and I think that's what we're out here to do.

Roger Dooley: Right, well you are my favorite revolutionary, Brian. This is, of course, is an audio recording and I don't usually miss the visual element, but this is one time when really I wish we were on camera because your new book is really gorgeous. I guess the listeners will have to settle for, at the moment, for a description of it.

It's printed in landscape format with a really high level of graphic design, great paper, and just about every page has some color on it. There's lots of illustrations. It's really a gorgeous production. Everybody talks about how paper books are going away and pretty soon they'll be completely gone. I think this book, Brian, along with your previous one, the *WTF* book, are a good argument for the viability of print as a medium.

Brian Solis: You know, Roger, I'm really glad that you're bringing this up because that was actually one of the untold stories

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behind the making of the book. If you'll indulge me I'll just sort of...

Roger Dooley: No, by all means.

Brian Solis: Tell a quick story. So *WTF*, for those who don't know, *What's the Future of Business*, was my first foray into full-color experimentation. What a lot of people don't know, those who have read it, was that I started this new book, *X*, before I started *WTF*. *X* is a very complex book to get your mind around as I was developing it. We'll get to that later, but I had an insane case of avoidance behavior syndrome. It was very difficult to write and design that book so I took a break.

As one I guess would do, I took a break from writing a book to write another book, which was *WTF*. *WTF* became a light experimentation in design and also served as the bridge, because the book before that was *The End of Business as Usual*. And Wiley, Shannon Vargo specifically, wondered how do go from *The End of Business as Usual* to *X*? Maybe you need a bridge, like *What's the Future of Business*.

That's where I decided to experiment with some design elements. But it wasn't just about design. It was about whether or not you could make paper matter in a digital world. To do that was quite the challenge. People I think will mistake this for a coffee table book, and I'm happy to take that compliment, but what they don't know, and what I think they'll say, "Oh my goodness, that makes all the sense in the world" once they have a chance to look at that book and hear it. Is that with *X*, more so than *WTF*, *X* we went all out.

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I studied how you and I use phones and tablets, the apps we use, how we scroll, our attention spans, what we share, what we pinch and zoom on, what we swipe right and left on, and reverse engineered that to paper. The working inspiration was a high school student to see if what would it look like. All of those gorgeous elements that you're talking about are a byproduct of creating what I ended up call an analog app.

Roger Dooley: Very cool. It is really a very nifty design. I guess that leads me to another question, Brian, you used design in the title and it really seems like you're using it in a dual sense.

One is that businesses have to design the experience instead of just letting it happen, which I think that in a lot of cases, that's what businesses do. It's not that they don't design elements of it but they don't really design the total experience. The second meaning will be more specific, talking about design, such as the design of this book. There's a lot of graphic design and artwork that went into it. There's a unifying concept behind it. So is that accurate?

Brian Solis: Oh man, yeah. Very astute observation, Roger. There is a duality and there's actually a lot of Easter eggs in this book. The title is one of them. You rightly picked up on the aspect of design in this manner so I'll just give away some of the secrets.

Design, look, the irony wasn't lost on me that I was going to ask businesses to change. The theme of the book is how we need to create meaningful and charitable experiences throughout everything. Things

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that are much more relevant today, beyond creating great products or having great customer service or having great marketing across all of the channels.

We have to think holistically about, what is the experience we want to have? What we want people to have and share. So the irony was, “Hey, I’m going to tell you that in a book.” So all of the work that I spent in understanding how to recreate or how to design an experience and the frameworks used to teach businesses how to design experiences, I applied to the book.

So when the book was done being written, I went back and tried to use the elements to inform the design. I acted as the creative director and Mekanism was my partner in all of this. It was very interesting, Roger, because I had to go back and redesign a lot of the frameworks because the book wasn’t coming together in a way that I’d hoped it would in terms of experience.

So to make the book an experience, I actually used the book to create experiences. It’s very meta. Hence, design went into the subtitle after all of this work was done.

Roger Dooley: Well, very good, I think it worked.

Brian Solis: Accomplishment and validation in that. Thank you, thank you. It was no small feat. It took three and a half years to do but that’s the backstory behind all of it.

Roger Dooley: Interesting. I’m curious, Shannon brought me into Wiley as well. Do you get pushback when you're talking about a book that is clearly really expensive to produce or do

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you think that's the way publishing is heading? Are all of the big publishers going to have to stop thinking about getting words on a page and creating books that are more experiential?

Brian Solis: Well I'll tell you, let me answer the first part because Shannon is a mutual friend of ours. I will say this, that what I ask you to do in the book, what I acknowledge full well, is that in order to change, you have to challenge convention. In this case, the convention is a regular book, Times New Roman font, same paper, same processes that's always been used.

I too had to go back to not just Shannon but to her boss and his boss and make the case for an experiment using all of what we're talking about today. To say, "Look, I think books are brilliant. Personally, I love to hold the physical, tangible version of a book. I love reading it." I shared a lot of my science, research, I really spent a lot of time before I even put the first word down on paper to see if I could bring them along on the journey.

It wasn't easy. I had to do it twice for *WTF* and for *X*. *X* being radical in terms of its extreme evolution beyond *WTF* but it wasn't easy, Roger. I'm not going to lie. But they were also very supportive. I had to make certain commitments, not just in terms of volume but also in helping them source new production partners to make this happen.

As you can imagine, to be able to put that level of color and graphic and visual on a page you have to have a special kind of paper. In our early experiments, we were jamming printers left and right.

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The other challenge was, how do you take a book that is obviously something that looks like a \$100 book and still bring it down to the business book price point? So none of this was easy but they were very supportive. I was very involved though. That was part of the deal is that I couldn't just hand it off. I think the do is that I went through it, I fought for it, I found new ways, but I challenged convention because I could've followed the route of just creating an amazing iPad or Kindle book.

But there's a term I introduce in the book called mediumism. Mediumism was this idea of leveraging new channels for the sake of new channels. That seemed like the easy way out. And I thought, "Well why not bring that work to paper and then take that same philosophy to digital later?" But if you could do it on paper, imagine what you can do with anything in life.

I use examples of the book, it's called skeuomorphism, it's a funny term in design but Steve Jobs was a big fan of it. So that's why when you open iBooks, for example, and you turn the page on an iBook, it curls. It's meant to emulate a real-world feeling. I thought, "Why not reverse engineer that?" Say instead of doing that on digital, make paper altogether new so that digital has nothing to emulate. There's a beauty and also a struggle in all of that.

I know this is a long answer, but this is one of the reasons why that thing took three and a half years, is because part of the backend was convincing people that this was possible and then trying new partners and economies of scale to make it work.

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Roger Dooley: Very good. Well, fascinating story, Brian. You talk about the distinction between digital and physical dissolving which kind of relates to what we've been talking about. What do you mean by that? What's driving that change?

Brian Solis: There's a big trend in the world of retail. I study the future of everything and I was inspired by this thing called showrooming, which I'm sure more than many of your listeners know about. Showrooming, for those who don't know, is if you go to let's say a Best Buy and you're shopping for electronics. While you're in store, you will search Amazon and you will search online and you will look for better prices, you will look for reviews. You might just use Best Buy as like the physical showroom for Amazon.

But with Millennials, and then connected customers, and highly-connected customers in general, there's a thing called webrooming. With webrooming, which is the opposite of showrooming, you have people who from the comfort of their home or office are looking at whatever product that they want to purchase, they're Googling it, they're YouTubing it, they're reading Amazon reviews and they'll go into their local store or retail outlet to purchase it for the sense of immediacy.

Now, each of those groups have to respond to both of these trends. So who wins? I think what's interesting is the customer wins because of something new. For example, if you wanted to have some type of electronics and you needed it immediately, you knew Best Buy had it in stock, you could have a partnership between Best Buy and Instacart and that, or Best Buy and any number

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of these apps, and that product could be delivered to you within 30 minutes or less, like a pizza I guess.

So Amazon has to respond to that and they're looking at partnerships with Uber and they're experimenting with drones. But the point of all of this is that so the line is blurring, but that's okay. I think the point of all of this is that there is nothing in stone [laughs]. Who uses that expression anymore? I guess I do. There's nothing written about the future in terms of what it's going to be and what you have to do about it.

Roger Dooley: Well, people are talking about omnichannel these days and it seems like there are definitely some retailers who are trying to bring those two worlds together very effectively with a website that will show you what's in the store, you can pick it up at the store, they can deliver it to the store. Or, as you say, even now, we'll pretty soon maybe we'll be having delivery within hours.

But not all of the retailers out there seem to be equally effective at this. Do you think that the survivors are going to be the ones who manage to create a more or less seamless experience?

Brian Solis: Yes. I think that the idea ... well, so you bring up a really good point because omnichannel is a word that's used I think a little too freely. And by the way, I fully acknowledge that the word "experience" is the same thing. I just wonder, and I hope, that when we look at the idea of what I introduced in Breakout called experience architecture, all of this is meant to be created from scratch.

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Let me give you an example, you have Uber that's disrupting taxis. You have Airbnb that's challenging the hospitality industry. But they're doing so because they have the luxury of starting traditional industries to respond to all of these opportunities. I jokingly use ... as an example, among many, by the way.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, I think Uber, you would have to say is being so successful because their experience is fundamentally better. I mean, they took an industry that basically had a fairly awful customer experience, and a very inconsistent customer experience, and transformed into something that is replicated in hundreds or thousands of cities around the world. It's pretty much the same experience. It's seamless, it's smooth.

That, to me, is the reason that they've been adopted. Obviously, they've got a bunch of innovations in their whole process but in my own experience, the reason that I like to use them is just because it's from a customer standpoint, from my standpoint, it's a lot better experience.

Brian Solis: You bring up a really good point, Roger. That is something that I think a lot of people don't necessarily consider. There's a lot of debate about, is this right for the taxi industry? This a 100-year-old industry that has laws and regulation and protection for it. But Uber does deliver a great experience, right?

I call it the ego system because people have the power of their phone and in real time, they can get a car to them on the spot, right? And they'll know everything about the driver. They can pay seamlessly. Everything's

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invisible, it's a fantastic experience. I also talk about in the book how Uber is like the ketchup bottle.

Heinz, for years forced us to try to get ketchup out of that glass bottle. You know, everybody had the ... try to hit it at the 45 degree angle. Other people had it like, "No, no, you've got to smash it at the soft part of your palm." But then they came out with the squeezable bottle that was upside down with the cap. You know, you open it and you can squeeze it right out using gravity.

Roger Dooley: No more anticipation.

Brian Solis: Exactly. So it was the first bottle was designed for the product, which arguably can be the taxi industry and then the other one was designed for the experience, which was the new bottle, which is Uber in that comparison. Now, Heinz innovated, right? The taxi industry at best iterated.

That's really a part of the challenge, is in customer experience or in experience architecture in general, right? Whether it's employees, customers, what have you. You have to think basically from scratch. What is best for today's customer? What are their expectations, their values, their mannerisms, their behaviors? Their value systems.

Then use that to innovate in terms of design, and product, and service. So, yes, it's a lot to ask, right? But it's not unlike what I went through with this book. It's everything and anything in our society, in our world today, can be reinvented to be more relevant and more effective and more productive today.

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That's the challenge. That's why taxis are completely upset and literally suffocating because of Uber. But at the same time, anybody who uses Uber didn't do so because they loved taxis.

Roger Dooley: Right. I think that particular industry too was very fragmented and there were a lot of structural barriers to innovation, but part of it is just realizing what could be done. Because I don't think that there were a lot of taxi users out there just saying, "Wow, if only I could see where all these taxis were on my phone. If only I could pay through my phone." This wasn't something that customers were demanding.

It was something that at least one person or perhaps several, had a vision of what could be and then they tried it, and presumably improved it as they went along and created a greater and greater match with what the customers were really looking for.

Brian Solis: Well, yeah, now taxi companies are introducing Uber-like apps. It's a little late, right? Because it's not the app, it's the experience. And I think this is where, gosh, you bring up such a good point, Roger. This is where a lot of companies get in trouble.

It's not technology. Technology is not the savior. You still have taxi issues with the car, the driver, the cleanliness, just the overall in-car experience. You're not just getting from point A to point B. You're doing so in a way that is experiential.

Now technology is an enabler. Uber used technology and mobile and real time and social and evolving customer expectations as enablers, as the source for a

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new type of service. But when they market it, it's everybody's private driver but then they're also marketing towards drivers. Like, what is your aspiration? Uber will bring you to your aspiration.

It's a lifestyle play, it's not a transportation play. Just like Airbnb is not a hospitality play, it's a lifestyle, it's an aspiration, it's go out and experience the world. Then if you're a host at Airbnb, it's not just make extra money, because you could do that doing anything. It's create a community of people where you get to be the host for your environment. Isn't that wonderful?

So everything's changing and it's not just customer first and it's not just digital first. It's just because the expectations of today's society and their patience, their attention spans. Look, I'll just say it, their narcissism, in a good way. It's all forcing companies to think beyond product. To think beyond brand. To think beyond any single department within an organization.

They now have to, what do we stand for? What's our purpose and, Roger, how would you align with me? And how would we align together to create this bigger community of something that matters together? Where the product is just one of the functions of the experience.

Roger Dooley: You know, Brian, you mention a few companies in your book, of companies that are getting it right. A few of them are like Apple and Disney and I don't think that probably many of our listeners could identify with them as being role models just because anybody trying to reproduce the Apple experience or the Disney experience, a pretty difficult order.

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But, what are some other companies that you think are getting it right and really creating a transformative experience?

Brian Solis: So, Roger, that's the ... I know, I know, I was guilty of using some of the usual suspects in the book as experiential standards. I want to say that I did so absolutely intentionally. I don't know if you noticed, I hope you did, that the level of depth to which I go through to describe how these company's experiences are not only necessary but also probably a lot of it was unheard of before.

That's because we all, it comes back to the word "experience" and we all talk about ... And I promise Roger, I'll give you other examples, but I want to get this out there. I think we use the word experience in the wrong way. And a lot of this was sort of the inspiration too for the book which was you ask ten people, you get twenty different answers about what experience is. Now, that's okay. It's a great product. Is it great customer service?

At the same time, it's everything. Experience is everything. It's an emotion. If you and I talk to one another, we're both going to leave with an impression and an emotion about that, that sentiment about that moment. So experience is ... at least at the high level. So what the book really tries to teach is, what is the experience you want someone to feel and share? Appealing to all of the senses. And how does that come alive?

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Roger Dooley: Yeah, you mentioned sharing. That's a key part of your customer journey, isn't it? It isn't just enough to buy the product and be satisfied with the product but ideally there's a sharing element that goes on that introduces new customers to the product or service.

Brian Solis: That's exactly right. We live in a connected society. Sharing is more than caring. Sharing is just a function of society. Every time we share something online, it doesn't go away, it doesn't vanish. That's why I think that experiential companies, any company can be experiential, right?

There's a butcher shop in Australia called Victor Churchill that is experiential and it's shareable and it's gorgeous. It's a wonderful experience. But we just have to think that way. It's different. We all think of Apple as a great company, but at the same time, no one really just breaks out for you why Apple is incredible and what happens when you take moment-by-moment designs, like what exactly about Apple is amazing?

I take you through the entire customer journey using the iPad as an example to show you just how methodical they are about designing experiences. Roger, I even found out about the guy whose job it is to open boxes all day to help find what the best box experience is. I learned that there was a story arc designed that's meant to carry out throughout every moment of truth including the box design, including retail, including product design, including support.

I even found job descriptions for geniuses around iPads and I share that in the book. So you can see that

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everything is actually stitched together, it's one big narrative. It's meant to be amazing. It's meant to be personal. And when something is personal, it's sharable.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. I think your use of Apple in the book is fair, Brian, because rather than just throwing it out as an example of, "Gee, a brand we all like to emulate." Or, "Don't you wish you had a brand like Apple?" You show the many ways they work at building that brand around the customer experience. It's not just that they've had raving fanatics since the early days and somehow these old fanatics have infected new ones but this is an ongoing thing for Apple that they keep working on.

Brian Solis: Yeah. That's exactly right. Look, it was challenging. It took me a very long time to write that chapter. And I dedicated a whole chapter to the Apple universe and I worked with ... to help me design in that one visual, everything I learned about the Apple universe. You can see just, it's not just inspiring, but it's a framework.

Any business can borrow from that and you don't have to be Steve Jobs. You just have to care about be in those moments in ways, or making those moments matter. That changes your whole approach to marketing, product, service, it changes everything. That's what I'm asking people to do is if you could start from scratch, what would it look like? You don't have to start off completely over but you can solve for that.

I'll tell you one of the most common places for friction is just the customer journey in general because much of what we've laid out for people is designed in some cases pre-internet and it doesn't feel natural. It's not

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native to a lot of customers today. It doesn't match the apps or the services used and when they want to do business with you, they want it to be as natural as the way that they use these apps and services every day. So just reimagining to be modern, to be native, be mobile.

Roger Dooley: Okay, Brian, that seems like a pretty good place to wrap up. Let me remind our listeners, we're speaking with Brian Solis, business futurist and author of the new book, *X: The Experience when Business Meets Design*. Brian, how can people find you and your content online?

Brian Solis: They can find me at BrianSolis.com. They can find the book at Amazon or any bookstore or more at XTheBook.com.

Roger Dooley: Great, well, we'll link to those places as well as your other books. We'll also have a text version of our conversation on the show notes page at RogerDooley.com/Podcast. So, Brian, thanks for being on the show.

Brian Solis: Thank you so 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.