Ep #131: Hack The Mind of the Online Shopper with Jennie Wong

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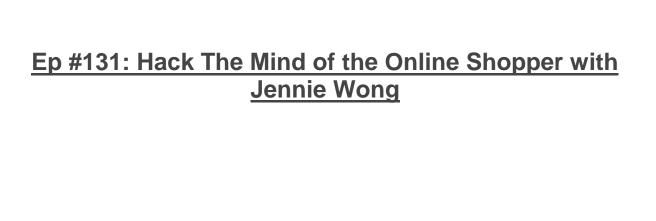
Welcome to the *Brainfluence Podcast* with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to the *Brainfluence Podcast*. I'm Roger Dooley. My guest this week joins us from Silicon Beach, a part of Los Angeles that's home to more than 500 startups. The firm she cofounded, Shopping Quizzes, has won some notable honors, including the TechCrunch Radio Pitch-Off, Digital LA Startup Showcase, and an award and grant from the USC Incubator. The firm claims to be the world's leading provider of interactive product recommendations for e-commerce.

She earned her Ph.D from the University of Southern California at the tender age of 22. Now she's authored a new book, *Seven Ways to Hack the Mind of the Online Shopper*. Welcome to the show, Jennie Wong.

Jennie Wong: Thanks, Roger. It's a pleasure to be with you today.

Roger Dooley: How are things in Silicon Beach? I know we've got a lot of international listeners and they might not all be familiar with that part of the country compared to its much more famous neighbor to the north. Explain a little bit about where that is and what it is.

Jennie Wong: Sure. Silicon Beach is a term that people have adopted for the general LA startup scene. It is really growing by leaps and bounds down here. It's really amazing. We have had our startup here, which is my hometown, for the last couple of years. I think the Bay Area still

[The Brainfluence Podcast](#) with Roger Dooley

represents the mothership for startups but LA is growing incredibly fast. The technology scene down here is lightyears ahead of where it was, even just two years ago. It's not only by the startups based out of a garage but also by the increased presence of giant firms like Google and the new giants like Snapchat.

Roger Dooley: It sounds like real estate prices are approaching the same crazy levels they are up north too.

Jennie Wong: Actually that's one of the funny things is that LA is still extremely affordable compared to the Bay Area, and it's got much better weather.

Roger Dooley: Right. Yeah, I guess I was looking at some of the prices in Venice and whatnot where a tiny shack with nothing in it is a million plus dollars.

Jennie Wong: Yeah, it's getting up there. But compared to what that shack would cost you in Palo Alto, you actually are still getting more for your money here.

Roger Dooley: Right, probably seems crazy to most of our audience outside California to be talking about how affordable southern California is.

Jennie Wong: Right. It's only such in comparison to the Bay Area, but yeah, Silicon Beach is thriving. It's, "Come on in, the weather is fine."

Roger Dooley: Great. First, I want to hear a little bit about your company, Shopping Quizzes. Your website makes the claim that your patent pending approach to retail personalization combines the latest research in human cognition and decision science with decades of

experience in web development. Explain what your unique approach to personalization is and how it involves decision science and human cognition.

Jennie Wong: Absolutely. Our solution is incredibly simple to experience and to understand. If you were to go to shoppingquizzes.com and click "try a quiz" and you take one of our quizzes, it would literally take you five seconds.

For example, if you were shopping for a pair of golf shoes. You would see a single question with only two choices initially, like spiked or spikeless. Then after you made that click, you would see another choice of, "Do you like athletic style, like sneaker-looking golf shoes or do you like the classic dress shoe-looking golf shoe?" You would make a click and then you'd see a third and final question. "Do you prefer colorful or neutral?"

Those clicks literally take you less than five seconds. Then you'll immediately see a personal top three recommendations. Those recommendations are, there's a fancy word for them, which is they're multivariate exact match which means that we're only going to show you a personal top three that is spikeless and athletic and colorful.

That's the power of the interactive recommendations is that they're heavily curated and then the experience is very much like human conversation. It's really built on a model of what human communication looks like when you're in a store versus this kind of cognitively unfriendly model that we see in a lot of e-commerce sites, where you are given hundreds of search results

or you're given left side filters that are falling off the bottom of your screen and don't work at all on mobile.

We took our understanding that was gleaned from not just the latest research but even a lot of the classic research on the paradox of choice and reactants and micro-commitments which Cialdini refers to as a commitment and consistency. We take all of these principles that are used and well understood in academia. Then we use them to build a really simple e-commerce solution that is up and running and has been selling golf shoes for quite some time now.

Roger Dooley: My friend Ryan Levesque lives here in Austin. He's written a lot about using quizzes and surveys to understand—well, not only to understand what the consumers are looking for but then also to integrate into the sales process. How does your work relate to Ryan's Ask Method?

Jennie Wong: I think that's it very complementary to the Ask Method because it is about engaging your customer by asking questions. It's also about the conversion power and the persuasive power of then being able to reflect your customers' answers back to them, because everybody's favorite topic at the end of the day is themselves.

The more that you are making your pitch, whether you're an e-commerce company or whether you're B to B or whether you're trying to generate email leads, no matter what it is that you're trying to get the other person to do, you're going to be most successful if you couch it in terms of them and their preference versus you and what you have to sell.

[The Brainfluence Podcast](#) with Roger Dooley

Ep #131: Hack The Mind of the Online Shopper with Jennie Wong

Roger Dooley: That makes a huge amount of sense, Jennie. I think that micro-commitment or micro-conversion principle is often overlooked. Ryan talks about that too. The basic concept for our listeners is rather than giving somebody a bunch of questions, saying, "Answer these five questions and we will tell you what you want or what you need." Or in the case of Ryan's, what kind of golfer you are so we can determine your shoe.

Instead of doing that, you let them answer one at a time, typically starting off with very unthreatening questions to ease the people into the process. Then that builds, as you said, it uses Cialdini's commitment and consistency principle. That, "Gee, I've already answered two questions, I might as well answer this third one too," and so on.

Jennie Wong: Yes. There is a real art to the way of asking questions which starts with the total number of questions. One of the things that you will see some companies doing is they want to take this very exhaustive style inventory up front, before they've really given you anything or even shown you a product. They want you to answer maybe two dozen questions about what you like, what your preferences are, this starts to feel laborious.

The other thing in the art of asking questions is how quickly can you create instant gratification. The shorter the path to instant gratification, the more effective the whole quiz machinery is going to be. Then there's another really hidden art in asking the question. This is something that I think cognitive scientists and social scientists who study this area know really well, but a lot of people they think that you can ask a question with

let's say four options and that is better than asking two questions with two options.

But the principle of processing fluency actually says that somebody would rather answer two questions that has only like a wider [inaudible 00:08:49 wheat] option and then a subsequent one, like with or without crust. Instead of seeing all four options laid out initially, for the reason that it feels way more fast and fun to answer those two questions in rapid succession. So that's the other thing is number of options given for a question.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, I think what you mentioned just a second before about immediate gratification is important. I worked on a project a few years ago to create a greatly improved college search or college matching engine for students who wanted to figure out what some of their best college choices might be.

The typical methodology up to that point was to give people this sort of exhaustive questionnaire to fill out and there are literally dozens of questions that can go into that process. So it's a huge thing with typically multiple long pages of checkboxes and radio buttons and kind of a brutal process to go through to get some results.

Jennie Wong: Absolutely, and it was probably all text because that's the other thing about Shopping Quizzes is that every answer has a visually reinforcing graphic so that we can process with the visual cortex instead of the language component in the neocortex.

Ep #131: Hack The Mind of the Online Shopper with Jennie Wong

Roger Dooley: We came up with a solution and I credit the primary designer for coming up with that, it wasn't that we spec'd it out so superbly that he just sat down and coded it.

Every time the individual answered one question, there was this immediate very quick reshuffling of that person's top schools. He or she could actually see the list change as they made choices about where, the size of the school, different aspects, or their own personal interests, their majors, and so on. Really, it was a tremendous product, might be patent pending, I'm not sure. I know that there was a patent applied for it but I never got word that it came through. So don't know what happened to it.

Yeah, that immediate gratification is something that's so overlooked as a way of keeping people engaged in filling out forms because people hate filling out forms. I think that's a truth that, people say, "Well, yeah, but it's important. If they want to get what we have to give them, they have to fill out this form." But boy, you sure can make it a lot more fun and interesting.

Jennie Wong: Yeah, and isn't that just so cross cultural? Like we have yet to find the tribe in the rainforest that loves to fill out forms.

Roger Dooley: Right. That's an interesting study for some anthropologist somewhere, but maybe they'll succeed—some lost group high in the Andes or something.

Jennie Wong: [Laughter] Well, they died out because they were busy filling out forms. But no, I love the idea that you were

showing that instant reshuffling, that makes such a huge difference to have the sort of hit of dopamine happening a second later right after the click.

You contrast that to stuff that feels almost like clickbait. Like sometimes you will see a company and they will say, "Take the quiz." You go, "I like quizzes." So you take the quiz and sometimes you take a lengthy quiz that's like 10, 20 questions long and at the end of that it says, "Give us your email address and we'll send you your answers" versus giving any sort of immediate gratification. I might give you my email address for more, but give me some gratification for what I just did before you make that ask.

Roger Dooley: Right. Yeah, that's a really good point. Jennie, let's talk a little bit about your book which again is *Seven Ways to Hack the Mind of the Online Shopper*. Listeners can't see it, but in paper form it's a fairly slender paperback, about 50 pages, but it's filled with color illustrations showing what to do.

I'm going to pause for just a second to tell our listeners that you mentioned that at the end of the show you will give them a link where they can find a free Kindle version of this book, although the paper version is quite nice, the production value I think are very nice cover, the color illustrations and everything, but you can't beat free.

In any case, one of the things I liked about the book is that it resembles my book, *Brainfluence*, a little bit because in every chapter you start with a scientific principle or study and go from there to very practical advice on how to apply that in e-commerce. You've got

such great illustrations too that talk about processing fluency, this is probably five times as fluent as most e-commerce books and certainly including my book.

Jennie Wong: That's high praise coming from you, thank you so much. Yes, when I describe it as a book it's a bit of a double edged sword because yes it is a book but I think people have an idea that books take a long time to read. I try to impress upon people that while it may take you a while to apply everything that you find of value in the book it can actually be skimmed very rapidly. That is because it is full of screenshots from real, live e-commerce sites. The pictures really are worth a thousand words.

One of the reasons I like to start each chapter with the key experiment, sort of the classic study in the field, is because they're actually stories. When somebody goes to the trouble of reading the dusty journal article for you and then condenses it into a paragraph and a quote, it actually becomes a story that you can visualize. Visualizing the physics students that are getting traditional lecture versus those physics students that are getting just in time information in a flipped classroom and how that applies to trying to educate an online shopper.

That's why I like to do that is because actually there is obviously the credibility of the research that's coming out of Princeton or what have you, but it's also because it communicates the narrative.

Roger Dooley: Were you tempted to make it 37 ways or something? My only complaint is that the current size makes me want more. It's like, okay, yeah, this great. I want to

keep flipping pages and see some more of these good examples. How did you pick seven?

Jennie Wong: These are the principles that Shopping Quizzes I feel like is built on primarily. So the book really came after the product. I found that I was explaining this huge and diverse body of research off the cuff in a lot of my sales meetings. I thought, you know, I should really write this down in a resource that can be easily consumed and easily understood, even by people who don't want to buy Shopping Quizzes, as sort of like a gift, sort of like my cheat sheet of all these studies that I had consumed over 30 decades of being a social scientist.

Then when I sat down to write it I realized what I really had was sort of a short book. But in terms of wanting more, I think there is definitely more to talk about in terms of the cognitive principles as applied to online shopping and general digital engagement and conversion. I'm actually already starting to outline the next one which will focus on engagement principles around the art of questions, somewhat like we have already alluded to. Then this sort of stands as like the initial manifesto of what you need to be aware for your site to convert.

Roger Dooley: We can look forward to that in hopefully not too far down the road. We talked about processing fluency a little bit, what's the science behind processing fluency? You mentioned the two versus four choice thing, how else can that be applied in e-commerce?

Jennie Wong: Processing fluency goes by many other names and has many angles from which we can understand it.

Ep #131: Hack The Mind of the Online Shopper with Jennie Wong

The classic study for processing fluency is based on a shopping experiment but it had to do with making a font hard to read.

Normally, adults are good readers and they're able to read a description pretty fluently and be able to understand what they're reading but what happens when you throw a monkey wrench into that fluency by making the font blurry or hard to read? That's just one example of studying the effective fluency either to the positive by making something more fluent or to the negative by making something less fluent.

The outcome of that study was that not only did you not get the impact that you wanted but shoppers essentially deferred buying anything at all, which I think is a very powerful story for anyone that's selling online. Your competition is not actually that other retailer, your competition is actually just walking away and not doing anything. That's the biggest threat to your livelihood is just that they don't buy anything from anyone.

Roger Dooley: Right. I talk about fonts a lot in my stuff, in just about every talk I give I end up citing the University of Minnesota study about people estimating how long it would take to perform a really simple little exercise involving tucking your chin down to your chest and repeating six times and on. Two sentences presented in two different fonts, one easy to read, like an aerial font and the other just a little bit harder to read. Not very hard to read but brushy font that might slow down your brain just a bit. The latter group they estimated about twice as long to perform the exact same exercise.

[The Brainfluence Podcast](#) with Roger Dooley

When you apply that to an e-commerce site what you're saying is it makes it look more difficult, even placing an order looks like it's going to be more involved and more difficult than it should be. So folks bailing out before they complete the purchase.

Jennie Wong: Yeah. I always say, "Don't let your designer talk you into a grey font." I see that. That's where I see it is sites that have very beautiful designs, very high design, very design forward, sometimes the fonts are difficult to read. I think you have to weigh that really carefully.

On the positive side, you can increase fluency by using things like rhyming and alliteration because things that rhyme are perceived as more true. They're easier to remember. Things that are alliterative actually process in a way that's very fluent.

One of the quizzes that we're developing for a customer right now uses an alliteration to really increase the resonance of the concepts. We're saying like, "What's your safety style?" Safety style is something that we came up but safety style is alliterative and it increases the power of that idea.

There's other things that are technical in nature, like making sure your page has really good loading speed. Pages that load fast feel fluent to the user. Avoiding jargon. Then like I said, the other thing is really looking at how many choices you're getting at the point of action because every additional choice beyond two or three increases the amount of brain cycles required to process it.

[The Brainfluence Podcast](#) with Roger Dooley

Ep #131: Hack The Mind of the Online Shopper with Jennie Wong

Roger Dooley: How do you explain Amazon? Because as we've been talking, they violate multiple principles that we've talked about. Their filtering process when they offer it is exactly what you describe, this long list of stuff on the left margin that scrolls beyond the visible screen. The choices may not always be exactly what you're looking for. They present a page full of products to you and they always give you a page full of products as best their engine can match them. They always can find 24 matches or something or however many products they stuck on the page.

Jennie Wong: Yeah, it's about 20 products on the first page, yes.

Roger Dooley: Right. They're very successful, is this because of other factors or are they doing something that helps mitigate the negative aspects?

Jennie Wong: Yes. One of the ways that they compensate—well, I should put it this way—Amazon really does evoke the paradox of choice, right? Shopping for something on Amazon that's not a reorder can be very cognitively challenging. I think everyone can think of a time when they went on Amazon to make an unfamiliar or novel purchase and they found themselves 45 minutes later still reading descriptions, reading reviews, going maybe even deeper and trying to cross reference to manufacturer sites or Consumer Reports. I think everyone remembers having that experience.

Roger Dooley: Personally, that's never happened to me, Jennie, but I've heard of it happening.

                 [Laughter]

Ep #131: Hack The Mind of the Online Shopper with Jennie Wong

Jennie Wong: Okay.

Roger Dooley: No, I think every time I shop for something at Amazon it happens. Although, you end up often feeling like you made the right choice. The other day I was shopping for something as trivial as a kitchen timer. One thing that really surprised me was now there are mechanical timers and then little digital timers. You recall the old mechanical timers, just like rotate a knob to 12 minutes or 23 minutes or whatever you want in time.

Jennie Wong: Yeah, a spring inside.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, it seems like an incredibly simple product but what I found was that basically at least with today's technology and a lot of the stuff is probably being sourced in very low cost areas, all the mechanical timers suck. The ones that look nice, they look like that timer that lasted for 40 years in your grandmother's house, in fact, you read the reviews and 20 percent of them are failing out of the box or they don't ding when they're supposed to, and all these things.

                  You end up spending more time but ultimately the choice that I made was a little bit more expensive but it seems to be a great choice. I feel very satisfied with it, not just with the fact the product is fine but also that I really avoided a few pitfalls along the way, even though it's a product that you could walk into your supermarket and pick off the shelf in 15 seconds or something.

Jennie Wong: Absolutely. I think the irony is if you think about what your hourly billable rate is for consulting compared to the amount of minutes it took for you to figure out

which reviews showed poor performance and the ultimate price of the purchase, that's where things get a little crazy in the calculation.

That's actually the origin story of Shopping Quizzes is that I was trying to buy a pack of bibs, which is about a $15.00 purchase for my second child. Back in the day, this was about four years ago, there were like 36,000 results that came up for the word bibs and now if you go on and search for the word bib I think you actually get like ten times that or something. I just thought that was really crazy, the amount of time that it took for to read through reviews and descriptions, just of a subset of the first page of results. So I really thought we could use a better solution.

Amazon suffers from the overwhelming choices, obviously, they're one of the largest marketplaces in the world, maybe second to Alibaba but it compensates with a couple of key indicators. Obviously one of the things it's has done is that it's trained us to think that we should not have to think about shipping costs, not have to think about entering our credit cards because we've already done that. We're also habituated to going there as a first stop.

The other thing they do is they use those little flags like "best seller." They've introduced a new called like "Amazon's choice." Now they're even showing white label things like "Amazon basics" in a lot of different categories. People can use those as shortcuts to get to a decision and also another really common shortcut is that you pick the one that has Prime shipping.

[The Brainfluence Podcast](#) with Roger Dooley

Ep #131: Hack The Mind of the Online Shopper with Jennie Wong

Roger Dooley: Right. All those really do help narrow your decision process, even if you don't actually filter for them, you visually see them and say, okay, this one is best seller, it's got Prime and it's got a 4.8 rating. I'm done. So you don't have to look at the other 300,000 bibs.

Jennie Wong: Exactly. They've condensed all the reviews into an overall star average. The lesson there I think for other retailers is that if you have a lot of skews, you want to give your shopper useful shortcuts so that they don't get overwhelmed. So that the person who is really a high intent shopper can get in and out and accomplish the job to be done in expedient fashion.

Really understanding that you have two types of visitors coming to an e-commerce site. You could consider it 80 percent that are low intent. These are people who are window shopping, they're looky-loos. They're looking to be entertained, and that's great. They want to interact with your brand. They want to look at some pretty pictures. That's fantastic.

There's another 20 percent of your traffic, roughly obviously, this varies by site. Think of that 80/20 rule as you have that proportion of your site that is high intent, like they need to complete a single purchase before their boss walks in or before their kids come home or before they run out of time for shipping. They really need to accomplish a job. Is your site design enabling those high intent shoppers to get their job done?

Roger Dooley: You wonder if Amazon for example couldn't use some kind of an AI based shopping assistant as a front end, at least for some kinds of shoppers where instead of

looking at the overwhelming choice, this little bot, which of course would be rather human like would narrow some choices and help so I wouldn't have to spend 20 minutes reading reviews of $10.00 kitchen timers. Just say, "You want a mechanical timer or an electronic timer?" and "Should it be Prime? What kind of rating do you want?" and bingo.

Jennie Wong: Yeah, I'm not obviously privy to any inner workings of Amazon but I will say that I think marketplaces might find that a bit dicey because in order for marketplaces to create critical mass on both sides they need to be careful about really aggressive filtering where some of those sellers aren't going to be shown.

I mean, they already do have that because you already are only going to make it to the first page of Amazon under certain circumstances if you're selling on there. But I think it's a little bit easier I would say politically for brands and traditional retailers to put in these kinds of curated solutions whereas with marketplaces they might have to be more sensitive.

Roger Dooley: What's the effect of mobile? How does that vary what e-commerce sites need to do? Mobile makes an understanding of cognition and attention all the more critical because with the amount of real estate that you have available on a smartphone you really have to ask yourself how much are you asking your shopper to hold in their minds? To hold in their mental [inaudible 00:27:45], right?

When you have more screen real estate you can visually hold more options simultaneously but on the small screen you want to be able to present something

that works without having to remember, "What was that last product? What did it say?" To be able to see at a glance in three to four inches. So it's very important for mobile to understand when you are exceeding the working capacity of human memory.

Roger Dooley: I know I find shopping frustrating because I'm trying to keep sort of a million things in mind and within easy access. It's much easier on a full screen than on a mobile screen.

We're getting close on time here, let me ask you one last question. What are some major mistakes you see even on fairly popular e-commerce websites?

Jennie Wong: One thing that I see that is somewhat surprising is when they're not using deep linking as a best practice. This is actually one of the examples from the book where you'll see an advertisement that's for a very specific product segment. Like not just bras, but wireless bras.

So then somebody will click on that but instead of taking them to the appropriate deep link, the shopper gets taken to a high level link and then once again their lost in the wilderness of like every possible bra that's sold on that site. I think that is a mistake. I think that deep linking should be practiced much more often and much more consistently across retailers and products.

Another thing that I see is duplicate thumbnails. This is a pet peeve of mine where a retailer, either they're trying to look like they have a lot of things or they're trying to look like they have even more things that they really have. They're showing duplicate products by

every color that they have and this creates a lot of confusion.

I think a best practice is to use color swatching underneath a particular product. Pick one good product shot that shows the detail of that t-shirt and then underneath it show that you have it available in several colors. Don't confuse me as to whether or not this V-neck t-shirt is the same as this V-neck t-shirt or is it just a different color. So those are a couple of my pet peeves for sure.

Roger Dooley: Mine too. Let me remind our listeners we're speaking with Jennie Wong, cofounder of Shopping Quizzes and author of the new book, *Seven Ways to Hack the Mind of the Online Shopper*. Jennie, how can our listeners find you and your book online?

Jennie Wong: In order to find me, it's probably easiest to get in touch through shoppingquizzes.com. That's our website and that's our company. That's our solution for agencies and retailers. We're a full service quiz provider. You just go to shoppingquizzes.com. Then in terms of getting the book, the book is available on Amazon, our beloved Amazon, but the first 20 of your listeners can get a free Kindle download of *Seven Ways to Hack the Mind of the Online Shopper* just by going to by Twitter handle. Don't have to follow me or anything, but if you go to @DrJennieWong, that's D-R-J-E-N-N-I-E-W-O-N-G, you can find that free Kindle download for the first 20 listeners.

Roger Dooley: Great. We will link to those places, including a deep link to the product. We won't just link to books at

Amazon. We will link directly to your actual book, Jennie.

Jennie Wong: You're a fast learner.

Roger Dooley: I just learned that a few seconds ago, so we're going to do that from here on out now. Who knew? That will be on the show notes page at rogerdooley.com/podcast. We'll have a text version of our conversation there too. Jennie, thanks for being on the show.

Jennie Wong: Thanks for having me. This was great.

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.

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