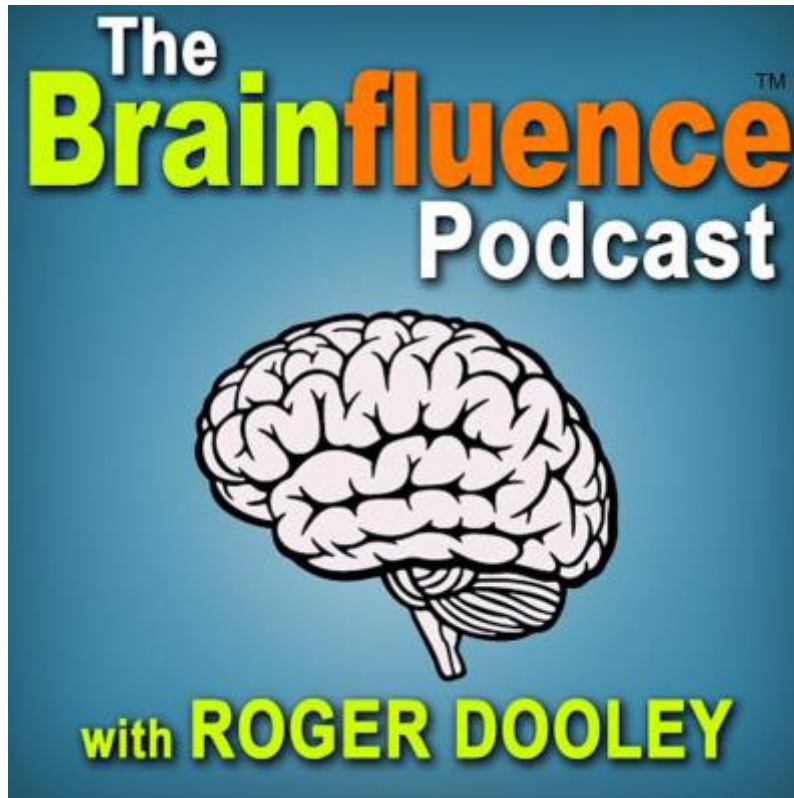


## Top 10 Science-Based Headshot Hacks



**Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host**



**Roger Dooley**

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## Top 10 Science-Based Headshot Hacks

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. Today, we've got a rare solo podcast, just me. I don't do many of these because a key reason when I create these podcasts is I really enjoy talking to smart people and then bringing their actual ideas to you folks to share them. But, if you do enjoy this podcast or have enjoyed a few of my other solo podcasts, feel free to let me that by leaving me a comment on the show notes page at [rogerdooley.com/podcast](http://rogerdooley.com/podcast) or ping me on social media. And, of course, this is a good time because I need to leave a request for your reviews if you enjoy these podcasts solo or otherwise, please, please leave a review at iTunes, or Stitcher, or at the player of your choice. It really helps us get found and I really appreciate it.

Now, anyone who's involved in sales or leadership knows how important first impressions are. In Science underscores, what all of us know through practical experience and that is specifically that first impressions are really important in how people perceive you, that they're long lasting and they're surprisingly hard to change once they're formed. Even when people are presented with evidence that contradicts the first impression, there's something about that first impression that still sticks.

Today, we're going to focus on your profile image. This could be a social media profile. It could be something that you use on your website or your company's website, in a press release or anything else. Now, if you look around the web, you will see a huge variation in what people use for their profile photos. You'll see some people who are very stern looking and unsmiling, others who are smiling and still others who appear to be in the middle of a huge laugh. You'll see people who are engaged in different activities, or perhaps looking very business-like, some who are very casual

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looking, some might be holding a glass of wine, or perhaps some object that represents what it is that they do for a living, there's just lots of different things that people do, but you might ask, which is actually what works? Which of these are the best approach?

Now, as with most things in life there is no single best approach that always works. We're going to look at a bunch of tips based on science, things that researchers have found through actual testing effect how people perceive those photos of people that they see. At this point I'll throw out a little bit of caution, which typically applies not just to photos, but to any kind of research and applying that to business. First of all, these effects may be modest in some cases, it may be a second order compared to other aspects of the photo or what's in the photo. Sometimes even the research can be a little bit contradictory and effect might help in one area, perhaps, but hurt in another. We're going to talk about smiling, and that can positively influence certain aspects of how people see you, but perhaps that same smile could reduce some other positive attributes.

A couple of other quick notes. For one, most of these tips had been covered in a post that I wrote at my Neuromarketing blog, and there you'll find not just the tips, but you'll see some actual illustrations of these effects, or perhaps from the research papers, and you'll see links to the research itself if you want to dig deeper. I'll put a link in the show notes page a [rogerdooley.com/podcast](http://rogerdooley.com/podcast) that will lead you to the Neuromarketing post where you can both see the illustrations and also dig deeper if you really want to. Also, some of this information is kind of lengthy, so I've created a quick little checklist that you can use if you getting ready to have your profile photo taken at a photographer, or having somebody shoot your picture for you, and you can download that, and I also include a link to that on the show notes page at [rogerdooley.com/podcast](http://rogerdooley.com/podcast).

With all that housekeeping out of the way, let's see what science says about what your profile photo should look like. Now, the first tip deals with whether you should have a photo that shows the left side or the right side of your face, and the answer to this actually somewhat predates what we

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consider to be modern science. For centuries artists have been somewhat bias toward one side when they painted portraits, and scientists have since analyzed this and have found, some studies have found that as many as 78% of portraits show the left side of the subjects face.

Now, you might wonder why that is, and this is true, by the way, for artists like Leonardo De Vinci, the Mona Lisa, excused her to the left side of her face a little bit, and many, many other artists tend to emphasis that left side, particularly for female subjects, but actually for both genders. So, modern experiments have born this out, too, there was one test at Wake Forest University that showed people who are exposed to a photo showing the left or right side of subjects faces not only expressed a preference on average for the left side photos, but also when the researchers measured pupil dilation, which is one way of measuring the arousal of the viewers, they also found, again, that pupils dilated a little bit more on average when viewing the left side photos.

Now, what's going on? Why does that left side preference exist? Scientists think there might be a couple of reasons. First of all, our faces are not perfectly symmetrical, but the reason that they speculate that we have this sort of left side bias is because of the way our brains are wired. Most people's left side of their body is controlled by the right half of their brain, which tends to be a little bit more based on emotion than the left side of the brain, so they guess that perhaps the left side of your face shows a little bit more emotion than the right side.

Now, typically in my experience what portrait photographers do is they will shoot some left side photos, right side photos, and straight ahead photos, and so on and see, which one looks best. You may find that one particular angle simply looks best for your face, or for other features, and if that's the case I would go with that, but if you're really on the fence between a left or right side photo, and they both look pretty good, or about the same, chose the left one, because chances are people who are looking at it will find it a little bit more attractive than the other one.

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The next tip has to do with the pupils in your photo. That is the pupils in your eyes. I think it was Shakespeare that said, windows are the eyes to the soul, and there's an element of truth in that, because our pupils will voluntarily dilate or contract usually based on the amount of light coming in, but also depending on other factors like arousal. When researchers had people evaluate photos of people where in some cases the pupils have been digitally modified to make them bigger, they found that if they analyzed a bunch of subjects looking at the same photos with different pupil sizes they found that when the subject in the photo's pupils were a little bit larger they reviewed as being more trustworthy, and that's a thing that is certainly good for all of us.

There's a couple of things you can do to make your pupils a little bit bigger. First of all, bright lights tend to contract the pupils, so if you're a photographer and use lighting that does not cause your pupils to reduce to pinpoints, that's a good thing. Also, just like those researchers did you could, I suppose, have the pupils in the photos photoshopped to subtly increase their size. While we're on the subject of eyes, there's something else called the limbal ring, and if you don't know what that is don't be embarrassed I didn't know what it was when I first heard the term. The limbal ring is the dark area in your iris that's the sort of center of your eye, that butts up against the white of your eye, so if you look at a photo of an eye you'll see, obviously, the white and then the circle in the middle that represents the iris, and there will be a dark pupil in the middle of that, but at the border of the iris and the white there will be a dark ring, that's the limbal ring.

Now, in one experiment scientists took photos of people and digitally modified the thickness of the limbal ring and then asked other subjects to evaluate how attractive these people were. What they found was that on average the photos that had the slightly thicker limbal rings, a more prominent limbal ring were viewed as being more attractive. The scientists speculate that this is sort of a marker for youth, typically younger people have thicker rings, so that might be an indicator that this person is a little bit younger, healthier, more robust, and so on. Now, you cannot change the

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size of your limbal ring, it pretty much is what it is. So, other than wearing really unusual hard to find contacts the only way you can change your limbal ring is using a tool like Photoshop.

Another really common question that comes up is, whether you should smile and if you do it should be a big smile, or a little smile? There is science on this topic, but it's a little bit more complicated, there's not a single good answer to this. Brian Knutson of Stanford, who has done some great research, he and George Loewenstein did the early study that showed that high prices actually activate those areas associated with pain in our brain. They did a study on smiling and looked at two different variables and how people are perceived.

One, was affiliation, which might be viewed in more simple terms as friendliness and the other was dominance, how dominant a particular individual might be perceived. In that same study used four different facial expressions. One, represented happiness, so the faces were predominately happy, another set of faces showed anger and disgust, others were neutral expressions and finally he had some sort of sad expressions in the mix. What he found was that the photos where people were angry or disgusted looking were viewed as being high in dominance, so these people were viewed as being relatively dominant individuals, perhaps because they were expressing this strong emotion, but also were viewed as being low in friendliness.

Now, the happy group, those photos where the people were expressing happiness were just about as high in dominance, but were also much, much higher in affiliation. It seems like the expressions that you'd want to avoid in your photo, one, would be neutral, people who were viewed as being neutral were not seen as particularly dominant, or seen as being particularly friendlier, and people who are viewed as being sad, where actually viewed as being significantly less dominant, they were negative on the dominant scale, and also were pretty much neutral as far as happiness or friendliness goes. Avoid very neutral expression, or definitely avoid a sad expression.

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Although, most of us wouldn't chose a sad expression for a profile photo, anyway. What I got out of that research was that in most cases it's going to be best to use a friendly smiling photo. There may be certain situations, perhaps, if you are say a litigation attorney, or some other position where both dominance and strength is important, but you don't want to necessarily convey that sense of friendliness that a rather angry, stern expression might work, but for most of us I'd go with a smile.

Another separate study showed that a small smile increased the trustworthiness of photos. In other words, when people are asked how trustworthy an individual might be when the photo was presented with a small smile that was the most trustworthy condition. A neutral expression, was less trustworthy, and sort of an angry downturn mouth, a squall, was viewed as the least trustworthy. Along with that, they also found that slightly surprised eyebrows, in other words, if your eyebrows were turned up just a little bit, maximize the feeling of trust. The benefits of smiling don't stop there, in another study found that a small smile increased the perception of intelligence on the part of the viewer, so it would seem like smiling is pretty much the way to go for almost any situation

But, as usual there are exceptions, and one exception is if you are a male and you are using a photo, perhaps, say on a dating site where it's specifically important to be perceived of as attractive, and perhaps sexually attractive for male subjects being viewed by female viewers a happy expression was surprisingly, perhaps, the least attractive of several other options. However, for females being viewed by males, a happy expression was the most attractive, so women can smile with confidence, whether it's a business portrait, or something that's going to be used on a dating site. But, for men, perhaps for that dating site portrait you want to use a little bit less happy of an expression.

Another question that comes up often in photo shoots is where should the subject be looking? There's an answer for that, too. Scientists in the UK in Australia ran a study, where they had people evaluate photos of the same person looking either straight at the camera, or with eyes slightly

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inverted to one side or the other. What they found was that a direct gaze was the most attractive, so again, in general unless you're going for some kind of special effect. Looking directly at the camera, will be seen as being more attractive. Seems to me, too, this is not a scientific conclusion, but I might be viewed as being a little more trustworthy and honest, as well.

Now, the next tip is probably the strangest one in this particular group. That is the effect of alcohol. For some reason, scientists decided to run a test where they had subjects evaluate photos of people on one of three conditions, and these three conditions were either no alcohol, or having had one drink, or having had several drinks, or the equivalent thereof, and what the scientists found, which was I found to be quite shocking was that the most attractive condition was the one drink condition. In other words, the people who had, had one drink were viewed as more attractive than their same photos when they had either zero drinks, or more than one drink.

Scientists speculate that perhaps that very modest amount of alcohol had a couple of effects. It might relax them a little bit, perhaps, make them a little bit more emotionally expressive, and it also might cause a slight flushing in their face, giving them a little bit redder, more healthy appearance. They couldn't really evaluate what the reason was, although they did hasten to point out that the effect occurred with just one drink, and after that the effects on the evaluation of the photos were negative presumably people's faces got a little bit more slack, and did not really convey the impression that you'd want to convey, but although I've never seen a photographer recommend this, this study would suggest that perhaps having one small alcoholic beverage before your photo shoot might make you just a little bit more attractive.

While we're on the topic of alcohol, there is one caution. One thing that I see very frequently on the web is that in their profile photos people will want to portray themselves as being a sort of happy, fun loving individual, so they'll be holding a glass of wine, or perhaps some other beverage, that's clearly alcoholic in nature, and there are studies that show



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that has a negative effect on the perceived intelligence of the person. In other words, the scientists had people view photos of a person either with alcohol in the picture or without, and when there was alcohol in the picture, the perceived intelligence of that person was lower. Those scientists speculate that perhaps alcohol is associated with cognitive impairment, and the mere presence of an alcoholic beverage in the photo, somehow, transmitted this cognitive impairment effect to the person shown in the photo. So, if you do want to have that profile photo with a glass of wine, use it on your Facebook page, perhaps, but not on your LinkedIn page.

Now, the last tip that I want to talk about is also, perhaps, quite strange. That is a mimicking effect, if you want your readers or viewers to experience a particular emotion, you can include your photo with that emotion, clearly expressed and it can produce that emotion in the viewer. Scientists in Sweden ran a test where they found that even very brief exposures to an image of a person who was expressing an emotion say anger, or happiness caused very brief changes in the facial expression of the viewer in the same way, in other words, the viewers unconsciously, and very briefly mimicked the expression that they were seeing.

There's also research going all the way back to Dr. Paul Ekman showing that if your facial muscles are in a particular position, even involuntarily or some sort of artificially created position, you will tend to form that same emotion. For instance, if you are a politician trying to get a message across, or perhaps a marketer, who wants your customers to feel angry about something, associated with the appropriate message you could include your photo with an angry look on your face, and that would amplify the emotional impact you're trying to create.

Those are all the tips we have for today. I'd encourage you to visit the show notes page at [rogerdooley.com/podcast](http://rogerdooley.com/podcast), because we will have there, first of all, a transcript of this podcast if you want a version you can read in PDF format, or save for later. There will be a link to the original blog post at my Neuromarketing blog and also a link to the quick download checklist, so that if you want to scan these before you have your picture taken it will be

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there in a really simple, brief format. Thanks for listening. We will 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](http://RogerDooley.com).