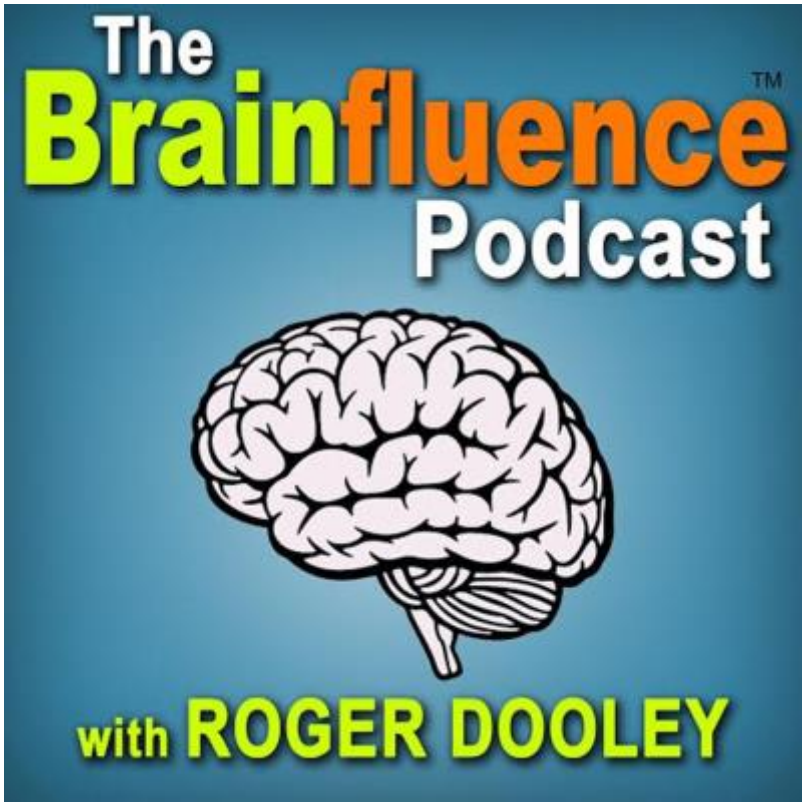
# Answers to Your Brain Questions with Dr. Art Markman




## Full Episode Transcript

**With Your Host**

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. Our guest this week is visiting us for the second time and it's my fault that it's taken this long to happen. Doctor Art Markman lives here in Austin and teaches at the University of Texas, where he's the, wait for this, it's long, the Annabel Irion Worsham Centennial Professor Departments of Psychology and Marketing, and is the founder of the Human Dimensions of Organization's Program, which offers both bachelors and master's degrees as well as professional training.

Somehow, in midst of all that, Art finds time to write in amazing number of articles at fastcompany.com, Inc., Psychology Today, the Harvard Business Review and many more. Art is the author of Smart Thinking and Smart Change, and is also the cohost of an Austin based radio show, Two Guys on your Head. The other guy in that equation is Doctor Bob Duke, also at UT, and Art and Bob are the coauthors of the relatively new book, Brain Briefs: Answers to the Most and Least Pressing Questions About Your Mind.

Among other accolades, Art appeared on the Doctor Phil show to discuss the book. We'll link to that video in the show notes, as the pressing questions and answers is why our brains like kitten videos so much. Art, welcome to the show.

Art Markman: Oh, it's great to be back, Roger, good to talk to you.

Roger Dooley: So, you're a professor in the psychology and marketing departments, are there others like you, or are you an outlier in that respect?

Art Markman: There are certainly a lot of people who span multiple departments, so if we look at the group here at UT, we have a lot of people who span psychology and neuroscience, we have people who span psychology and communications. I think I'm the only one currently at UT who spans psychology and marketing, but it is fairly common across a lot of other universities.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's good. Well that's a change I think from the past. I want to hear a little bit more about the Human Dimensions of Organizations program. Years ago at the other UT, or as they say in Knoxville, the real UT, when I was completing my MBA program, I took an Org Psych course, Organizational Psychology, and that was a long time ago. I think Freud was still working on his beard and Maslow had only hit on the first two or three rungs of his hierarchy. How has this field changed over the years, Art? In your own time span at UT are you seeing businesses more ready to acknowledge that they're composed of imperfect, maybe even irrational humans?

Art Markman: I definitely think so. You know, I think you've hit on it exactly. The foundation of business education for a long time has been economics. I think that money's important, economies are important, and economics is important. So all of those fields are crucial, but as you point out, people don't always flow the dictates of the *homo economicus*, the rational decision maker, and I think businesses have begun to recognize that more and more, both in terms of the people who work for them as well as the people that they're trying to serve. And they're looking for new insights for how to deal with all of those folks. The MBA program though, which I love, I'm a big fan of MBA programs, remains very finance and accounting focused, and it's a bit of a commodity at this point, which makes it difficult to change a whole degree program like that. And so, the alternative is to find a new way of providing education for those people who find that the biggest problems that they face in the workplace on a regular basis are the people problems. That's really where HDO, the Human Dimensions Organization's program fits in.

# Answers to Your Brain Questions with Dr. Art Markman

What we're trying to do is to provide a broad based education actually rooted in the liberal arts, the humanities, the social sciences and the behavior sciences to really help people to understand the people that they're going to work with. We started at the master's level, taking mid-career professionals, many of whom were trained in technical fields or even in business and now find themselves struggling with people problems, and helping those students to advance in their careers. The Master's program is entering its fifth year, we have professional training classes, so one day seminars that people can take, and in addition to that, starting last fall we launched an undergraduate program for liberal arts students who are interested ultimate in going into business in nonprofits. The HDO program at the undergraduate level now already has over 70 majors in it, in its first year.

Roger Dooley: That's great. One thing occurred to me when I was thinking about this, there's a lot of research that shows we're willing to acknowledge that other people are driven by cognitive biases and that they make imperfect decisions because of those, it also shows that we ourselves are really ... We think we make fairly rational decisions, and I'm wondering if that's why business has been kind of slow on the uptake for some of this stuff because even though they recognize say, in the fields of consumer psychology, consumer behavior, those stupid consumers will make all these emotional, irrational decisions, these same business people have been a little bit unwilling to realize or to accept the fact that they and their fellow team members might be just as irrational.

Art Markman: Yeah, I think that that could certainly be a piece of it, we're always blind to our own fault foremost, and I think that what we're seeing now is first of all, I think that a lot of business came to psychology precisely because of the recognition that they're customers and consumers weren't necessarily as rational as they ought to be. So they were trying to understand them better, right? So in fact, you could say, "Well okay, it's to our competitive advantage to recognize that the people we're serving aren't always rational, even if we are." But I think what happened was as more and more people in organizations began to learn more and more about

humanity, through psychology, but also anthropology, sociology, so understanding groups, cultures, I think they began to apply some of that learning in house and began to recognize that they also began to do things better in their own organizations once they also made the assumption that perhaps they themselves weren't quite as rational as they thought before and so it's begun to pay off in that way.

I will say, by the way as an aside, that one of the ways that you can see the degree to which business has embraced this is to really look at business publications. If you were to pull up a copy of, I don't know, Forbes or Inc., or any of those magazines from 20 or 25 years ago, the focus was almost exclusively on tech and finance. Money, investments, and there was very little about people. There were profiles of individuals, but there was very little about how people function. And now, I would say you pick up those same magazines, or more to the point, you go to the websites of those publications and what you find is that a full half of the things that are coming out on the websites of those magazines are articles about the human condition in one way or another and how it plays out in the workplace, so I think it's something that everyone is focused on right now.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, I've seen that in the digital marketing space, too, where it was pretty mechanical maybe eight or 10 years ago, where people were very concerned about analytics and SEO and very sort of rational type things and in the last probably five years in particular, there's been a real explosion of interested in influence psychology and cognitive biases and so on, because the great thing is in the digital marketing world, you don't need a lab. You've got it on your website or in your mobile app. You can test two different things and in a week get great, very valid results. And there's no arguing with actual data. So anyway, it's interesting.

Art Markman: I'll tell you, I'm going to tell you a quick story because I just think this is funny. Related to this issue of this recognition of the importance of people, I gave a talk about a year ago in Boston to a group of construction workers and the guy ... These were folks who run big

construction projects, right? I mean they build stadiums and oil rigs and refineries and things like that. And the guy who spoke before me was a guy named Noah Sands, who's in the industry, and he said something that I have been stealing from him and repeating ever since. He started his talk ... The panel that we were on was really focused on helping people in construction to recognize the importance of the human element in what's going on. And he looked out at the crowd and said, "So, how many of you out there have projects that routinely fail because of problems with communication?"

And you know, every hand in the room went up. And then he said, "So great, how many of you have projects that routine fail because of problems with your communication devices?" And not a single hand in the room went up. And he said, "See, so it's not the technology. It's the people." And I think it really got people thinking about the fact that the problems that they struggle with aren't ... new technology's not going to make them go away. Technology provides great tools, but we have to understand the people behind them.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, I think we're definitely making progress in that direction, Art. One last question about the HDO, it seems like it's mainly instructional. Are there any research activities associated with the program or are we going to see an HDO lab some day?

Art Markman: One of the things that's happened, whenever you get a bunch of faculty at a Research One University together and you get them to start talking is that research projects necessarily follow. So, certainly at the master's level, there hasn't been a lot of basic research activity because our students are in an applied program, so they do a capstone project at the end, but that's a research project that's really focused on their workplaces, or the kind of work that they're doing. But our faculty, because they've been engaging with these issues now for the last six years, seven years as we've all talked together, have begun to do research projects that address these same kinds of issues, so John Traphagan has been doing a lot of work on entrepreneurship in Japan, Clay Spinuzzi has been doing a

lot of work on the rhetoric related to new ventures and to businesses, and certainly I've always done a lot of work in the area of decision making, so I think what we're seeing is that the faculty are engaging with each other in ways that are creating new research projects as a result of the programs existence.

Roger Dooley: Great. Let's talk a little bit about Brain Briefs. For our listeners, I'll mention that, like my book, Brainfluence, it's a compilation of short, mostly standalone chapters, each one focused on a topic and offering research based insights. Unlike my book, though, Brain Brief focuses on all kinds of questions, ranging from the secret to a happy life to why it's difficult to spot continuity errors in movies. So that's quite a range. Art, let's start with the big question first, how does one achieve a happy life? And everybody will tune out as soon as we answer this one.

Art Markman: The first step in having a happy life is actually to have good genes, as it turns out. So select your parents well. It turns out that about half of the difference between people in their overall level of happiness is genetic. But that does mean that the other half is something that you can do something about, and I think that for that other half, there are several things that you can do to make yourself happier. One of them is to connect yourself to things that are bigger than yourself, to your community, to your family, to treat your workplace not just as a place where you go and do a job, but as something that's a calling that really allows you to achieve goals that affect society in some way and to frame your work in that way.

And by the way, framing your work in that way doesn't require that your job itself be something where the specific tasks are like that, there are great anecdotes from some of the founders of positive psychology like Ed Deener, talking about ... For example, Ed Deener has great story about a guy who's a hospital orderly, so his job is changing bed pans. But, he thinks about his job as being a fundamental piece of patient care, and so he loves his work, and can't wait to get to the office.

So, I think you can frame your work in that way. You also have to avoid some of the things that really make people unhappy. So, for example, minimize your commute to work, which is one of the things that actually really makes people unhappy. I think it's also important to try to find desirable, wonderful things you want to achieve in your life and go after them. A lot of us spend our time trying to avoid calamity all the time, and as a result, we spend our life in a constant state of stress punctuated by periods of relief. If relief is the best possible feeling you can have at the end of the day, then you're not really going to experience a lot of happiness. But if you go after those really desirable things, then you have a chance to really feel satisfied, happy, and joyful.

Roger Dooley: One of the examples in that chapter I thought was pretty interesting about how what we think will make us happy doesn't always do that, there was a particular study that involved academics who were being evaluated for tenure, which is clearly a very desirable state of affairs, if you want to be a professor, where once you've got tenure, you've got high level job security and high level of freedom to pursue various courses of research and so on, so that would be sort of a nirvana you would think for academics. And one or more studies looked at people who are in that pre tenure evaluation phase or coming up on it and then also those who had already been either granted or denied tenure, I want you to explain just a little bit about that, I thought the results were really interesting.

Art Markman: Yeah, it's absolutely fascinating. So what they did that was really brilliant, so they catch these people six months before they go up for tenure and they say, "So, how happy are you going to be six months after you get tenure if you get tenure?" And also, "How happy or sad are you going to be six months after the decision if you don't get tenure." And unsurprisingly, people predict, "Well, I'm going to be elated, I'm going to be really happy if I get tenure, and if I don't get tenure, I'm going to be miserable." When in point of fact, six months after the tenure decision, basically everybody is equally happy.

The people who got tenure, the people who didn't. It has to do with the fact that ... Well, it has to do with several factors. One, that we quickly adapt to our life circumstance. So, the week after you find out you get tenure, you are pretty happy. But at some point that fades and the rest of life takes over, and the other things that make you happy or unhappy kick in, and the same things happens with being denied tenure. For a week or two weeks or a month, you're unhappy. Then, you acclimate to that and all of the other factors that affect your happiness begin to kick in again.

As I like to say, if you walk down the street and you look at the people who are happy and sad walking past you, every single one of them has had tragedies in their lives, every single one of them has had wonderful things that have happened to them, and yet, this is their state on this particular day as they're walking past you on the street. We have to remember that all of those factors are effecting the way that we live our lives, and any one event, even one that seems extraordinarily moments like getting tenure doesn't actually have that much of a long term impact on our overall happiness.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Probably a good lesson there for all of us, we think that somehow that next step will really make us happy, whether it's getting our business to the next level, getting the big contract that's going to guarantee our businesses security for the next year or two or getting a job with Google or whatever our career or life objectives are, we think that, well, once I get there, it's going to be great, then that sort of set point effect kicks in and very, very interesting stuff.

I think we'd all be happier if we were smarter and the brain games are promising to do just that, to make you smarter. You wrote a chapter in the book about that, Art, what about these brain games? Should we all be subscribing and getting smart.

Art Markman: The short answer is no. But we can give a longer answer. It turns out that a lot of these brain games are based on very interesting ideas that very well could have worked. They're based on ideas like if we

could improve our basic capacity for holding things in mind, what's called working memory, that maybe that would be the thing that would make us smarter, or if we could just improve our ability to hold onto some information that somebody has just told us, then that would make us smarter.

It turns out though that when you look at all of the research on this, playing those games makes you better at the games, but it doesn't really make you better overall in your cognitive abilities, which isn't to say that you can't make yourself smarter, you just can't do it by playing those games. So the best thing you can do is to go out and read new things in an area you don't know anything about. To watch a nonfiction movie, a documentary and learn about some new thing, to increase that range of knowledge that you have. Those are things that will make you smarter, but sitting around playing an app on your smart phone is simply not going to do it.

Roger Dooley: Right, so you can increase your domain knowledge in a variety of ways, but you can't really make your brain function more efficiently and somehow make you smarter in that respect, which makes sense, but boy, there's a lot of folks who've invested a lot of money in the belief that those games work.

Art Markman: Yes, indeed. And unfortunately, they do not.

Roger Dooley: So, we're recording a podcast, so let's talk about speech errors, Art. I think I've already made a few so far, one way to force speech errors is with tongue twisters. Why do we make speech errors as humans, and why do tongue twisters seem to get us so tied up, especially if you try and repeat them a few times? It seems like the first time you can get through it, boy, but by the third or fourth time, you get tangled up.

Art Markman: Yeah, especially if you try and do it very fast so that you can't focus on your diction and your articulation. And I think that what we have to understand about speech, and most people haven't really spent much time thinking about the syllables that they speak. But actually, the

fascinating thing about the syllables you speak is that the first consonant in a syllable, and most syllables are a consonant and then a vowel, and then a consonant, sometimes either the first consonant or the second one or both are missing, the first consonant is actually mentally less strongly connected to the syllable than the second constant and the vowel are clustered together, which is why we think of words like cat, bat, and rat as rhyming, but we wouldn't say that cat, car and cam are all rhyming in some way, they don't feel psychologically similar, because it's that last vowel and consonant that are really tightly bound together.

The reason that that matters is because many of the speech errors that we make end up being things where we add the wrong first consonant to the syllable. Either we just blow it, or more often than not, we substitute or switch something else in the context that we might be saying soon before or after. So if you look at a lot of tongue twisters, so the classic Sally sells seashells by the seashore, you've got these two speech sounds that are very similar, your mouth has to make a similar movement to make them, the "sss" and the "shh" sound, and you put them all in the first position of the syllable, that initial consonant and you vary them kind of randomly back and forth, so now, you have trouble making that articulation effectively. So, that's a lot of what happens with speech errors. It's not the only kind of speech error you get though.

Every once in a while, you just use the wrong word, and that can happen for lots of reasons, there's the classic concept of the Freudian Slip, where I'm thinking of some concept and then it works its way into my speech, and certainly things like that can happen, where there's a concept that's activated for me, and I select the wrong word, and then sometimes I'm just going really quickly as I'm speaking and I end up retrieving a word that sounds like the one I'm supposed to use perhaps, but isn't quite the right one, and I use in anyhow. So all of those thing can give rise to speech errors.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, one that you mentioned is the classic one that seems to happen all the time at our house, where you are calling

somebody out by name and you choose the wrong name. First you choose the dog's name and then you choose the other kid's name, and then finally get to the point where, "Whatever your name is, stop doing that right now." And it's so funny because it's repeated over and over again and everybody seems to do that, but it seems like such a strange kind of error.

Art Markman: Yeah, so names are a funny thing because names are pieces of information that aren't particularly tightly connected to anything else about the individual. So, as a result of that, we seem to treat names specially and one of the things that we do is we seem to just lump all of the familiar names to us together. So all of those family names that you use frequently, the names of your kids, your spouse, the dog, all of those things end up in the same pile, and if you need on in a hurry, particularly when you don't have a good retrieval cue in front of you, so you don't have the kid sitting right there in front of you, you just trod out every single name in the list until you come up with the right one. You know, I used to call my first son by my brother's name and it's a very common thing to do.

Roger Dooley: I'm sure everybody who's listening is nodding their head right now saying, "Yeah, that happens to me." That's interesting, and it seems like there's a relationship where you're more likely, as you said, to call your son by your brother's name as opposed to your sister's name, so there's some kind of a grouping effect, I think I've noticed that.

Art Markman: Yeah, so certain things ... You're unlikely to call your kids by your spouse's name, your partners name. So, there's a little bit of information in there, but not a ton.

Roger Dooley: But you may call them by the dog's name I've observed. I'm not sure what the significance of that is.

Art Markman: Well it's, you know, I think it's because you're angry, right? So, who are the people you get angry at in the house? Well, your kids and the dog.

# Answers to Your Brain Questions with Dr. Art Markman

Roger Dooley: Right, good point. We talk about productivity here a lot. Everybody wants to get more done in less time, and people used to brag about being great multitaskers, but these days, it seems like most of the news about multitasking is bad and now sort of common wisdom is that multitasking is impossible and don't even attempt it. You spent some time in the book about that. What's the real skinny on multitasking?

Art Markman: Well, so the funny thing about multitasking is that psychologies have been studying multitasking for the last 50 years, we call it dual task performance, which is basically a fancy way of saying doing two things at the same time. And what 50 years' worth of research tells us is do two things at once, get worse at both of them. What we know is that you get worse in some very specific ways. So you tend to lose your place in any task that has multiple steps. So if you're trying to do two things at the same time and one of them is a recipe of some kind, you'll continually lose your place, do the wrong steps, skip a step, do something twice. So, that happens. I think another thing that's important to understand about multitasking is that the areas of your brain that you use to switch back and forth between tasks are the same areas of your brain that are crucial for monitoring your own performance, which means you are your own worse judge of how good a multitasker you are. So you need someone else to show you exactly how bad you are.

So I think, what we really need to understand at this point is, just don't do it. I think this is particularly true for people who have kids. The modern high school student has found clever ways to turn 45 minutes' worth of homework into four hours' worth of homework. And I think we really need to help them to not get themselves in trouble in that way. And in particular, I think that parents should create technology free zones where homework gets done in the absence of the smart phone, so that a little bit of focus can be put onto the work, because four hours' worth of homework is actually bad for a kid. Kids need some down time. But that downtime doesn't feel like down time if it's being done interspersed with the homework, rather than doing the homework in a block, and then getting it done and getting on with the rest of life.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, boy the whole issue of technology as an interrupter is really huge these days. People are finally recognizing that the companies that offer some of these technologies are doing their best to make their technology both very sticky, even addictive because they tend to make more money the more time you spend with whatever it is that they're doing, their app, and also, they're getting good at interrupting you, so they're giving you all these little cues, like "Hey, you've got a message waiting." Or you know, something happened, your phone beeps or you see a little number indicator by the app icon. It's really a deadly combination.

Art Markman: Absolutely. So we have to just say no.

Roger Dooley: One last question, Art, does time really fly as you get older?

Art Markman: It certainly seems that way. And I mean that very seriously, as you get older, your experience of time definitely feels as though time is speeding up. And there's a couple of reasons for that. One of them is the simple proportional element of it. When you're eight years old, a full year of your life is one eighth of your life. That's a huge percentage. It's not only one eighth of your life, it's actually about one fifth of the life you can remember, because you don't have a huge number of memories before the age of three. By the time you're 50, that next year is a much smaller percentage of your overall life, so that percentage influence your belief about the passage of time, but on top of that, when you look back on things, so you look retrospectively at time, your ability to really feel like a period of time took a lot of time has to do with the number of events that you remember. The events you remember tend to reflect really new and interesting things that are happening to you.

When you're eight years old, there's tons of new things that are happening. You're going to cub scouts for the first time or your taking up a musical instrument for the first time or your first time on an airplane. There's all these new things that are happening. Again, by the time you're 50, there's fewer new things that are happening. A lot of your days involve

getting up, going to work, coming home from work, hanging out with the family, watching some television, doing these same kinds of things, so, each day gets harder to tell apart in your memory, so it compresses in your memory and feels like it didn't take as long. As a result of that, you now feel like the years are whizzing by.

Roger Dooley: Right, so the hack to make your weekend last longer is to do new stuff.

Art Markman: Well, so here's the interesting things. Yes and no. The more deeply engaged you are with the thing you're doing, you can sometimes feel as though the time went quickly.

Roger Dooley: Like if you're in a flow state more or less?

Art Markman: Here's the rub, if you're deeply engaged, then you also lay down a lot of memories that might make that time feel longer in retrospect. So, for example, sitting in a doctor's waiting room for an hour feels like it takes forever, right? But then there's no landmarks in there in memories, so when you look back on it, you may have the explicit knowledge that I felt like I was there forever, but in fact, it doesn't really occupy much space in memory, so it doesn't make you feel like that period of time took very long. Whereas going on a trip for example, to a new location, that trip may actually feel like it flew by. Yet, it expands in memory because of all the wonderful things that you did.

Roger Dooley: That makes a whole lot of sense. I lied about that being the last question, I did want to sneak one more in, Art, since you are at least half marketer, have you seen any studies lately, or even maybe run across an older one, that gave you some interesting new insights into how to market or sell better?

Art Markman: Yeah, wow, so I would say that one of the things that's been really interesting for me lately is looking at a lot of the importance of being consistent with ... Making your language consistent with the motivational states of the people who are hearing that language. So there's

a lot of work demonstrating that at any given moment, people may be either in relatively an approach mode, meaning that they're focused on desirable things in their world, or in an avoidance mode, focused on undesirable things in their world, and it's really important to match your language in marketing to that mode.

So, for example, if you're marketing a health related product, most people when they are focused on health related product, put themselves in this avoidance mode because health is really avoiding disease and avoiding bad outcomes, so you want to actually have language in your marketing that is really prevention oriented, focused on, let us help you create the absence of disease. Whereas when people are at relatively more of an approach mode, for example, with ice cream or something, you really want to be focused on the great really desirable factors of that. And I'll give you an example of why this matters.

So if you think about something like ice cream, there are certainly potential avoidance concerns with ice cream, for example, it might be high calorie, you might be concerned about the amount of fat. So you might as yourself why is it so hard to market low fat ice creams? I mean, here you've got this product and it gives the people the opportunity to enjoy an ice cream, and then it's got this desirable characteristic of having less fat and fewer calories, but actually, what's happening is people want to have a good time with ice cream. They're in an approach mode. If you start throwing language at them that's avoidance oriented, thinking about dieting and lowering fat and things like that, then you end up creating a product where the language you speak is incompatible with the motivations of the people who are engaging with it. So, you really need to think carefully about how to create messages that are compatible with the motivations of the people who you're going to be reaching.

Roger Dooley: Great, well that's a great insight, Art. Let me remind our listeners, we're speaking with Doctor Art Markman, who's new book is Brain Briefs: Answers to the Most and Least Pressing Questions About Your Mind. Art, how can people find you and your content online?

Art Markman: Sure, I am all over the place. So certainly social media, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn. I believe I'm even on Pinterest. You can find information about books that I've written at smartthinkingbook.com, and the book Brain Briefs, as you mentioned in the open, is emerged out of a radio show and podcast that I do out of ... It's produced by KUT radio in Austin, called Two Guys on Your Head, and you can find more information about the podcast either at twoguysonyourhead.org, or if you go to any podcast app, whether it's iTunes or Stitcher or SoundCloud or any of those, we're also available on any of those formats.

Roger Dooley: Great, well that's a great tip. I've listened to it and I'm sure our listeners would enjoy your stuff as well. So, we will link to all those places, and any other resources we talked about, too, on the show notes page, at rogerdooley.com/podcast. We'll link to your Doctor Phil segment too there, Art. It's always a pleasure, I really appreciate your being on the show.

Art Markman: Oh, Roger, it's great to talk to you and I hope we get to do it again soon.

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.