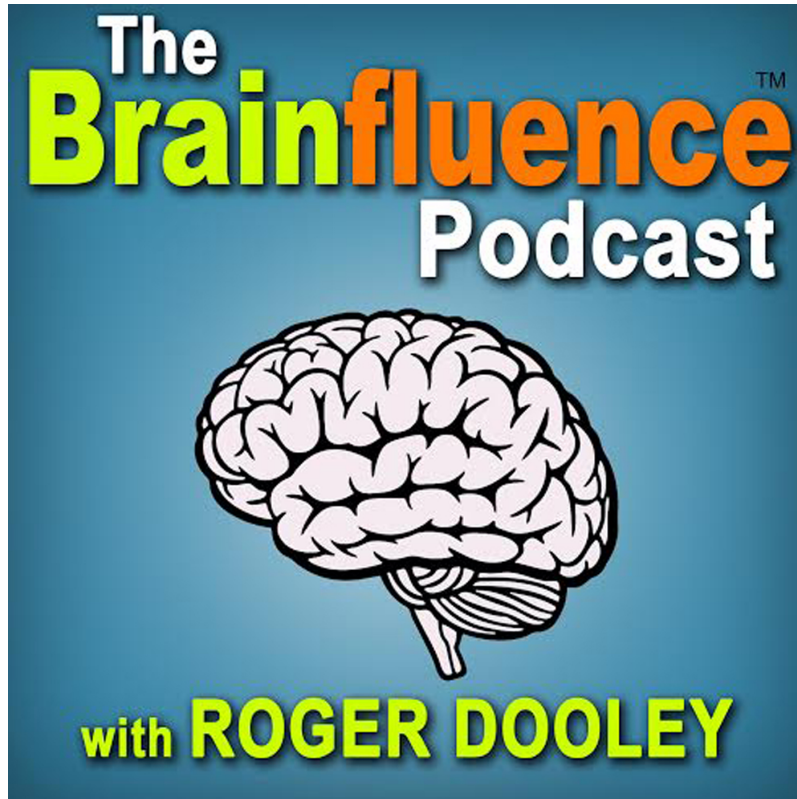


Supercharge Your Content Marketing with Strategic
Storytelling



Full Episode Transcript

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Roger Dooley

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Supercharge Your Content Marketing with Strategic Storytelling

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: Welcome to The Brainfluence podcast. I'm Roger Dooley. Our guest this week is Alexander Jutkowitz. He's a content marketing and strategy expert, with more than 20 years experience in a wide variety of disciplines, from political polls, to digital architect, brand strategist, to content creator. Group SJR, a firm Jutkowitz co-founded, helps brands tell their own stories. This he says, helps them innovate faster, inspire unparalleled consumer loyalty and make long-lasting gains in reputation. He's worked in more than 30 countries around the globe, leading communication, marketing, and political campaigns for multi-national corporations, not for profits, prominent individuals, governments and trade associations. Alex has not one, but three CEO jobs today. Two are at Group SJR, and Trufflepig. And the third is the CEO of Hill+Knowlton Strategies, in the US. And Alexander is a fellow Wiley author. His new book is, "The Strategic Storyteller: Content Marketing in the Age of the Educated Consumer"

Alexander, welcome to the show!

Alexander: Thanks. Thanks for having me. I really appreciate it.

Roger: You know, Alexander, it's clear from the intro that you're a really busy guy. How do these three CEO positions fit together? You're all part of the same group, right?

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Alexander: Well, yes. They're all part of the same group, but ultimately Roger, it's not about three different positions. It's about a point of view that I have in terms of marketing and communications and applying that to different challenges. And so, they're all inextricably intertwined. It isn't the case that they're all three, totally distinct opportunities, or roles. They really come as an expression of the ideas and point of view that I have.

Roger: Oh, we'll learn more about what that point of view is in our conversation, I'm sure. When I looked at the WPP website, and I saw there was something like 402 entries in the, Our Companies section, and my first thought was that if I were Sir Martin, I'd immediately start combining and consolidating. But I guess there's probably a good reason for keeping these various distinct entities with different emphases and so on. Why so many moving parts, do you think?

Alexander: You know, look, I'm not going to hazard a guess as to what the rationale is for the moving parts. I can tell you that WPP is the ... And you already know this, the most successful agency holding company and has the greatest diversity, in terms of offerings. So I think that that's for me, an environment that I like to live in and one that has been very useful, the last three years that I've spent here.

Roger: Great. Well, it seems to be working so in some cases, maybe the focus that the complexity brings is better than just saying, "Okay well, we've got too much going on here to keep track of."

So, now I'm going to start by sharing a challenging quote, from the latest issue of Fast Company Magazine. And it's from a CEO of a big brand company, but they don't name him or her. I don't think they identify the CEO by gender, but we'll say. "Him." And they asked a panel of commentators a question, "What are

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the major challenges for marketers right now?" And the marketing folks all talked about the complexity of platform proliferation, the challenge of voice-related marketing, because people won't be typing anymore perhaps, and so on. And the CEO came out with a really different reply. And it kind of stunned me. But I'm going to tell you what he said, and then I'd be interested to hear your commentary on it.

So, this is for the biggest marketing challenges marketers face, he commented, "Be relevant. There's nothing better than word of mouth and organic marketing. You're not needed that much, dude. I think marketers should be nervous. There are so many agencies that should just die. All these useless barnacles that have been living on the ass of major brands should just be lanced."

You know, it strikes me that maybe you lance a boil, and this is me now, lance a boil, not a barnacle, but regardless of the metaphor, this kind of fits with a study from a couple of years ago, that showed CEOs trusted their CIOs and CFOs not to be competent at a rate of about 90%, but their CMOs only about 20%. Now that was a small study and it was five years ago, but why do you think it is that CEOs really don't respect their marketers that much?

Alexander: You know, look, I don't know that it's that they don't respect the marketers that much, it's that marketing has some inherent pressures and leading marketing has inherent expectations. So it's a question of what it takes to actually achieve those. To me, those expectations. I also don't sit that ... Having come from a background as a pollster and spent a lot of time around data, all data can be moved to tell the story that we want it to tell. I don't look at Fast Company and you see an anonymous quote from a CEO, it's not exactly a position of strength. If a CEO wants to

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really have a discussion, I think more often than not, they're going to be quite pleased with their marketers. And if they're not, they make a move in another direction. But I have to say that that argument and that sort of lie, it's not woe is me are the marketers, because they have greater challenges and they're not respected as much or they're not trusted as much. I don't buy that for a minute.

Roger: Okay. Well, good. Fair enough. So, let's talk a little bit about "The Strategic Storyteller". Early in book Alexander, you mention a study of Superbowl ads that I apparently missed when it came out. I usually keep up with these things, but the researchers found that the most liked ads, all told a story. And they did better than ads using sex or humor. The brand being advertised didn't even seem to matter.

Why don't you explain a little bit about what was going on there, and why you think that is?

Alexander: Well ultimately, let's pull back a little bit. When we think about storytelling, we often talk about it and it's a word that's used all the time, but we don't lend it power or impact. It's a kind of thing that we throw in, sort of like the word creative. What I really attempted to do in the book, and in looking at that study that you cite and other data that I looked on and just in my experience, was to take a harder look at storytelling. Ad really study storytelling for what it can do and what its impact is and the power of it. We don't often think that it has power and that it has impact.

But there's a huge difference between those in the world ... The world is divided into two kinds of people, those that can tell stories and those that cannot. And if you want to track success

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or ROI, the former group does much, much better than the latter group.

Roger: And probably a lot of our listeners too, are familiar talking about the power of stories with some of the neuroscience work that involves stories, that showed that people unconsciously activate the motor areas of their brain, if they're hearing a story that involves motion for example, even if they're immobilized in an FMRI tube. And another study showing two people in separate FMRI machines actually synced up their brains when one told the other a story. So, this isn't news.

Now let me ask you a question. People clearly liked, or paid most attention to the story-based ads, but what does that mean for either brand recall, is one metric, or really the perhaps gold standard, of people actually buying the stuff that's being advertised?

Alexander: Well, I think it bodes well for those who tell a story. And I think it doesn't bode so well for all of us that think that we can reduce everything to a transaction and a quick transaction. There's no way to actually tell stories, or get to what you want, without building a narrative, developing that narrative, and repeating that narrative frankly, in a serialized way, in a way that the story grows. As opposed to knocking somebody over the head with the same idea or the same message over, and over, and over again.

We're now in a world where you can cut your cord, when you can walk away, when you can change the channel so epically quickly, that it really actually becomes incumbent to be a little bit more thoughtful about how we go out into the world.

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Roger: You know, and I think undoubtedly, one of the keys to not just effectively telling a story, that's one piece, but incorporating the brand into that story, the most effective ... A few years ago, when they did neuro marketing studies of Superbowl commercials, the mini Darth Vader ad was the one that was seen at that time, the most engaging ad that Sands Research had ever tested. And it was really a very enjoyable story. I've used that in a lot of my presentations and it always gets a laugh from the audience. And people are really engaged by it.

And you could actually see in the neuro marketing data, the level of engagement waxing and waning through the course of the ad, but there's really not a lot of brand mentioned until the very end. And I suppose you might subtly be aware that the car involved was a Volkswagen, but I didn't really notice that until at the very end. And then of course, they have the little final tagline, for just a split second there. But it's sort of like product placement. I think where there is data showing that product placements in movies don't always resonate unless the product somehow becomes part of the story. And in that case, people do remember it.

Alexander: Well, ultimately I think that we were as marketers, taught this idea of disruption. And it's gotten prohibitively more difficult financially and in many other ways, to actually create disruption. We've moved into a world where I would say the new disruption is seamlessness. How can you seamlessly introduce your ideas, your product, your approach, into the day-to-day lives of the audiences that you're trying to reach?

So, what you just described to me, is a perfect example and product placement is a perfect example, of seamlessness. If it fits logically into the narrative, into the story, if you will, the acceptance and the taking it in is that much more effective than

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the disruption. I think we're in a post-disruption age, frankly. Disruption works well for disruptive technologies, but in terms of marketing and communications, we've really got to think about things a little bit differently, and move towards a seamless model.

The campaign model that has been created off of disruption also needs to be changed. We don't have these inflection points, these moments in time, in the same way that we used to. They're harder to manufacture. They're expensive. They're complicated. And frankly, they don't pay off in the way that they used to. So we really have to re-think things in the new model.

Roger: I know that your agency helps larger organizations develop content marketing strategies. And in the book, you used an amusing term there. You described it as coming in and helping a company develop a content marketing strategy as a benevolent alien invasion. What do you mean by that, Alexander?

Alexander: Well, because particularly in the early days, when I started working in this ten years ago, but still now, the alien invades into an organization because you're there to learn and say, "Take me to your leader." And learn and figure things out. And the body of politics of an organization isn't necessarily ready for that type of engagement. We all think about content marketing, but what it means is, taking a look under the hood, asking more questions, questioning the way that things are done and the way that even the marketing and communications apparatus organizationally runs, the cadence that it creates, what it creates. All of these questions are a little bit off-putting at first, but they really can lend themselves to a terrific outcome, given some patience, some time, and some collaboration.

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Roger: So, when you or somebody in your line of work goes and invades a company, what are the things that you're asking? What are you trying to uncover?

Alexander: You know, I think ultimately what we're trying to uncover is the knowledge, wisdom and delight inside of an organization. What is its super power? What is its story? What are its narratives? What is its expertise and how do we take that knowledge and those ideas and bring it to the world?

Roger: Yeah, well one of the comments that you make, and I think many of our listeners are from smaller companies, too, that aren't necessarily going to go out and hire a big, specialized agency, or even a small one to help them develop their story. And in the book, you say that if they're hunting for their own story, the first question should be, "Where in the company are people having the most fun?" Now that doesn't strike me as the most obviously question. Obviously, you've got a good reason for suggesting that. Why would the area where people inside the company are having fun be relevant in telling the brand's story?

Alexander: Ultimately that is the brand. The fun is the wonder, wisdom and delight. It is the embodiment of the brand. It is the core of the story, where you're having fun is where the narrative is at its best. When you're not having fun, that's not where you're gathering. That's not where you're sharing stories. We want people to be gathering and telling stories, because ultimately in the workplace, that's the core of the brand. That's the brand essence. We can all over try to manufacture or create a brand essence, but the brand essence really is where the fun is.

Roger: Yeah, and I think that's a great tip for the audience, because I'm sure that if you ask a lot of people, particularly those in smaller

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organizations, or organizations that haven't been around for a long time, they'll just say, "Well, we don't really have a story." Or, "Our story isn't very interesting. We're just people trying to seel some stuff." By looking for those fun parts, maybe that's where the seed of a story is.

Alexander: Well, it is the story. So, chicken or the egg? Fun is the story, story is the fun. So I mean, it's not where the seed of the, it's that is the story. That's the eye of the hurricane. That's where it's happening. We all want to identify a hotspot. That's how you find the hotspot.

Roger: Very good. So, if the role of the content marketer is to educate the consumer, it seems a lot of educational content doesn't really fit a story format, or ... How do you reconcile those two things? Do educate through stories, or do you have content that's useful hoe-to type stuff, and then just also integrate some different stories into the content marketing?

Alexander: You know, I think you made it sound awfully clinical. It's organic to each organization, but stories are told in many ways. Stories are told both on a larger level and then on a detailed level. So, you're actually doing both those things at once. You can have ticks and fleas. You don't have to make false choices.

One of the paragraphs in the book talks about this idea. You're always asked in a setting, "Is it this, or is it that?" And the answer almost always is, "And." It's combining things. We need to combine and bundle. We don't need to separate We create a lot of false choices for ourselves and we follow paths that frankly, are too bifurcated and don't really ladder up to anything in particular.

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Roger: And maybe sometimes the content may fit into a bigger story, so I'm reminder of the, one of the really early examples of content marketing, about the pool guy who wanted to develop his local pool business, so he started posting how-to videos, and before he knew it, he had more customers than he could handle and a gigantic following on YouTube and so on.

Now, he wasn't using stories per se. He was showing you how to fix a pump or a water level control, or smoothening. But he was in one other sense, probably part of the story himself, that he's a pool guy, that helps people and selflessly teaches them stuff. So, that's a kind of narrative there, I guess.

Alexander: Yeah, it certainly is a narrative, but I don't think it's about just teaching, it's about knowledge and it's knowledge that you are either interested, or not interested in. It's about the wonder, which is about what's actually done, the delight, the fun that's being had.

The brain doesn't work in ... We're not left brain or right brain thinkers. We're actually all brain thinkers, unless you've had some sort of traumatic brain injury. We get too caught up in, "I'm a creative ... " or, "I'm an analytical person." That's not true. We're all things all of the time. And as you know because of your study of the brain, that good decision making is a combination of logic and emotion. It isn't just pure logic. The reality is that you'd be a decision maker, if you were all logic, all the time.

Roger: Oh, for sure. And I think that point will resonate with our audience. I think we've done a lot over the years, to convince them of the idea that their customers are all just focused on product features, and very rational benefits. And that emotion

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and non-conscious factors play a big role in decision making, even in business to business.

You think about it in terms of some consumer products, but it's really true across the board. So, a few months back, we had Mark Schaefer, a marketing author on the show, and he popularized the term, "Content shock." That so many companies are turning out so much content, often pretty decent content, that it's getting harder and harder to cut through the clutter.

Do you agree with that premise, I guess? And if so, how do companies address that and try to make their stuff more compelling than everybody else's?

Alexander: Look, there's a lot of ... Any room I ask, if I ask a room, "Does the world need more content?" Nobody raises their hands. And then I ask everyone in a corporate setting, "Are you creating more content?" They all raise their hands. What's the significance here? It's a little bit to paraphrase and twist a little bit of George Orwell, which is, all animals, all content is equal, but some content is more equal than others. So instead of animal farm, perhaps we have content farm. I don't think about how much content is being made. It's about the quality of the content. And yes, some people do it well, but not that many people do it well enough on a consistent basis.

That's personally speaking, or that's from corporate content as well. So I'm not worried about the proliferation of content. I am more concerned about quality and how you actually create engagement. Anybody can create content. Content doesn't essentially as a word, mean anything. It's like tofu. It acquires the flavor of what's it's around. It doesn't actually mean

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anything. So we don't focus enough on the quality of the content. And that's where I would disagree with the gentleman.

Roger: Yeah. And I think your question too, "Do we need more content?" No, but so I'll say, what if they were going to make another two seasons of Game of Thrones? Who would be in favor of that? And everybody's hand in the audience would go up, because as you say, they're tired of too much content, but if you can give them good content, they'll definitely be in favor of that.

Alexander: Yeah. No, and look, that's exactly right. So I'm not particularly interested in the content business. There great to good content business, I'm quite interested in.

Roger: So, what's a content hub, Alexander? And who needs one?

Alexander: A content hub is what we've called a blog, a micro-site, a media property. What's important about it is, it is a centralized repository for research perspective, but also even more importantly, it's the center of the story, where the story gets told, where our best selves are there every day as corporations.

Roger: And how important is video in storytelling today? And I guess the extension of that would be, what about AI, VR and so on? Is That on your radar in a big way?

Alexander: Video is part and parcel of great storytelling, because we don't just think with the written word. We also get ideas from a visual vocabulary. And we need to develop visual vocabularies. Now, there is a caveat there, most videos suck. So the reality is, while we have a lot of video, most of it isn't good. And we don't think a lot about the audience, when we create the video. We

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tend to create video from a rather precious and insular process, where we don't really think about the audience enough.

In terms of AI and VR, I'm sorry, in terms of VR and 360, we do a lot of work in that area. I think that it's foolhardy to think that it's here today and it's highly effective, but I think it's even more foolhardy to say that it won't be something more and more relevant, as time goes on. So I think it's particularly important to double down on it and explore and see what you can do.

Roger: So, I'm sure you've seen plenty of content marketing successes, but I wonder if you've run across a content marketing failure too and could explain what you learned from that, Alexander? You may not have personally experienced that, but perhaps a friend did?

Alexander: No, I've experienced plenty of failure and I think it's okay to have plenty of failure. That being said, I don't think there's such a thing as a content marketing failure. There's always a failure ... There can be a failure of strategy and in what you create. And sometimes the collar doesn't match the cuff. And that's not so unusual. You see that every day, frankly. It's the disconnect between what the intention is, what you make and how the audience interacts with it. And that's a pretty ... Those are three things that are challenging all, to pull off. So you see that failure every day. But it's not catastrophic. Like anything else, it's designed to be an MVP. You can dust yourself off and get back into content, the next hour, the next day, the next week, the next month. That's another of the great things about content. It's fundamentally resilient.

Roger: Yeah. Well it ties back into what you just said about video, too. That there's a lot of video out there and a great portion of it is bad video, because it's not really focusing on what the

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customer wants to see. How should either a small company, or a large company figure out what the customer wants to see or experience, if it's not video, if it's written content or something? It seems like it would be obviously to sit back and say, "Well, I'm going to think like a customer. What would I want to see?" And then do that, but obviously many people fail to do that.

Alexander: So I will tell you, that it starts in one place. Most organizations big or small, do not have a content strategy. If you don't have a defined editorial voice, channel strategy, and audience strategy, you are guaranteed to have content marketing failures. That's where you start. That's where you can get a framework. That's where you can have a playbook. It isn't just about the look and feel. It is literally about quantifying these things and having those discussions internally. It doesn't matter the size of the organization. But every organization I've ever seen, has a rand strategy. They certainly have a communications plan, but most do not have a content strategy.

Roger: Yeah. Where does personalization fit into the content marketing universe?

Alexander: I think that it's absolutely key. Personalization just means an understanding of the audience. Understanding of the audience is the key to marketing. It's one of the fundamental tenets of marketing. You have to know your audience. If you're able to personalize and get response ad ultimately content actually is research product. It allows ... It's an insights product. It allow us to engage with a customer, or a consumer. In the case of personalization, it really allows you to customize and you get data and feedback and then you know what works and what doesn't work and you can do better, or do more of something.

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Roger: Right, so are you talking about at the individual consumer level?

Alexander: Yes.

Roger: Yeah, okay. And I guess that brings me to a related topic. Machine learning, deep learning, how big of an impact do you think those technologies will be in the content marketing space, where you just talked about some of the analysis you can do at the individual level, but as long as you've got humans doing that, you're kind of limited in how much they can ... obviously they can use machines for part of it, but do you see these newer technologies as being really critical?

Alexander: I don't think that they're critical. They're going to be important at every stage, whether it's the insight phase, the content or creative phase, or the audience development phase. There's got to be a combination of human talent and experience and technology. And I think machine learning and other types of advances in technology are going to be useful at all of those different levels of call it the content stack, if you will.

Roger: Jumping to another topic, Alexander, you mentioned asymmetrical thinking in the book. What do you mean by that? What are you advocating people do?

Alexander: I'm advocating that people don't sit there and think about being in a box or inside a box, or being outside of a box. That they actually draw a new box. You change the rules. You poll in information and ideas from other areas and bring them to whatever discipline that you're in. You do not just stay in your lane. Staying in your lane is not the most successful way to think in today's world. Thinking asymmetrically allows you to

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look at situations that seem untenable and actually turn them into an opportunity.

We have to build in resourcefulness, creativity, velocity, which as you know, since you were a good science student, speed with intention ... Speed isn't so great, if it's without intention. We want to develop different kinds of skills to be able to deal with the challenges in today's marketing environment.

Roger: Do you have an example of that, just to make that a little bit more real for our listeners?

Alexander: Yeah, I think that the clearest examples tend to be military examples. So I kind of loathe to get too involved in those, but I'll give you one in civil society. What's the best way to defeat the largest colonial power in the world at the time, in the 20th century? That was the United Kingdom. In India, what did Gandhi do? Did he fight fire with fire? Meaning, did he go and raise weapons against one of the foremost militaries? No. He used civil disobedience and peaceful tactics. He changed the discussion. He changed the way that conflict was carried out. Conflict can manifest in many, many different way. So if you look at someone like Gandhi, he led a peaceful revolution. Now, that doesn't work everywhere and it doesn't apply in every situation. We've certainly seen it fail, but he was thinking asymmetrically. We all get caught up in fighting fire with fire, or matching vitriol, with vitriol, or matching energy with energy. And sometimes you have to change the energy. Or in my case, change the discussion, change the conversation, change the narrative, create a new story. That's asymmetrical thinking.

Roger: So for a brand, it might mean what? Developing a totally different kind of message, rather than doing what they've been

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doing and the competition's been doing, or seeking out different channels to get that message out in?

Alexander: Certainly different channels do things differently. Change up. Consider not doing something. The true measure of a brand, after all, is what you turn down, as opposed to what you do.

Roger: Okay. Let me ask you one last question, Alexander. Lots of our listeners have an interest in marketing driven by behavior science, neuroscience and so on. What's your take on the impact of these areas on marketing in general and in your content space, in particular?

Alexander: I think that the only way that you do marketing, or you think about marketing, is by understanding the way that the brain works. So, the impact of behavioral science is, for lack of a better word, or to just choose one word, profound. It has had a profound impact and will continue to have a profound impact. Because ultimately, we need to understand how the brain works, to be able to do anything and to particularly when it comes to marketing, when you're going out and trying to fill knowledge gaps, delight gaps, about brand or products, it's inextricably intertwined with the success of today's modern marketing. You can't be a marketer and not have some aspect of behavioral science baked into your methodologies.

Roger: Can you share any examples from your organization? Or I know that sometimes brands and others are reluctant to talk about details, because it sounds kind of spooky, but anything you can share with us?

Alexander: Yeah, I don't generally talk about brands, or in brand marketing. Even in my book, I don't do that. What I would say to you is, in terms of understanding how the brain works, one of the

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significant changes in my line of work, has been moving away from traditional demographic targeting, in terms of the audiences we're trying to reach. And moving much more into behavioral psychographic targeting. What the inner desires and inner needs of particular audiences are and marketing to that, as opposed to their age and where they live and their gender.

Roger: Okay, well that's a great place to wrap up, Alexander. Let me remind our listeners, we're speaking with Alexander Jutkowitz, author of the new book, "The Strategic Storyteller" Alexander, what's the best way for our listeners to find you and your content online?

Alexander: You can Google my name, Alexander Jutkowitz, J-U-T-K-O-W-I-T-Z, or alexanderjutkowitz.com, or group, s as in Sam, J as in John, r as in Roger, .com.

Roger: Great. Well, we will link to those places and in any other resources we mention on the show on the show notes page and rogerdooley.com/podcast. And we'll have a text version of our conversation there too. Alexander, thanks for being on the show and good luck with the new book.

Alexander: Thank you, have a great day.

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.