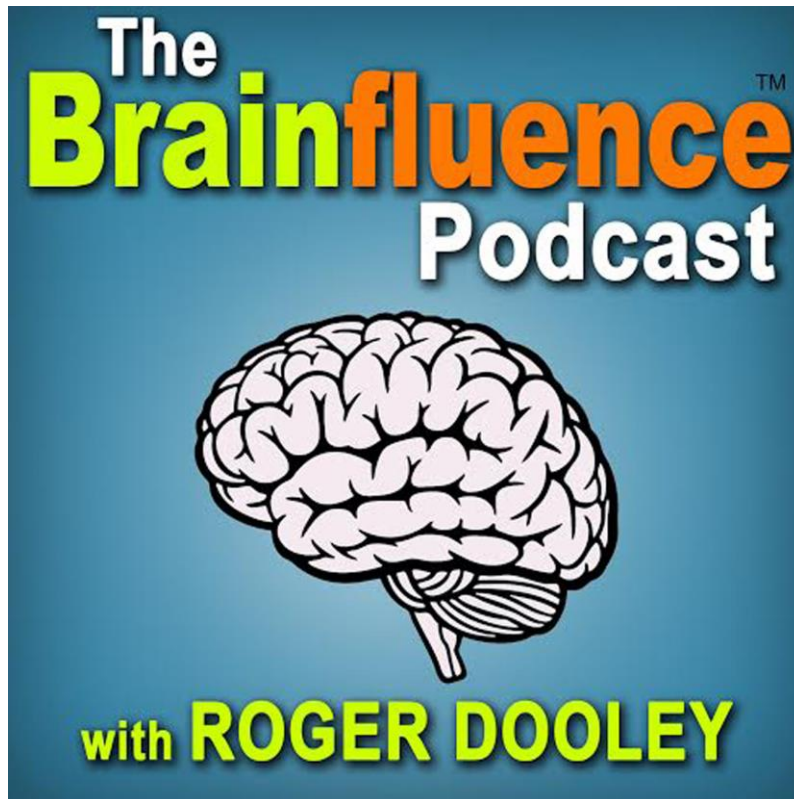


Ep #126: Robert Cialdini's New Insight: PRE-Suasion



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Roger Dooley

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

Roger Dooley: Welcome to the *Brainfluence Podcast*, I'm Roger Dooley. Even though our guest this week needs no introduction to this audience of influencers and persuaders, I'll do a short one anyway.

He's the author of the best-selling business book of all time with three million copies sold and 30 foreign language translations. His ideas have been at the center of applying behavior research to real world influence and persuasion. The book is *Influence* and as you probably guessed, we're speaking today with Dr. Robert Cialdini.

Most exciting of all, he has a massive new book out, *Pre-Suasion: A Revolutionary Way to Influence and Persuade*. You're going to want to read this one. Just as his original book, *Influence*, established the principles we use every day, *Pre-Suasion* will change the way you think about influence and how to apply it. Welcome to the show, Bob.

Robert Cialdini: Well, thank you, Roger. I'm glad to be with you and your listeners.

Roger Dooley: This book has been a long time coming, Bob. How long have you been working on it?

Robert Cialdini: I've been working on it in this form for over three years. In fact, a lot of people have asked me, "You know, it's been over 30 years since you wrote *Influence*. When is

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the next sole-authored book going to come along?" I always had to say I don't know because the truth is I haven't had an idea big enough to warrant a sole-authored book since. But that changed with this book, *Pre-Suasion*. I feel that there is a book-length treatment that is warranted. So that's the stimulus for the new book.

Roger Dooley: Right. I definitely believe it is warranted, Bob. There's a lot of information in there. A lot of it will be new to our listeners as well. I guess the science of physics has advanced in part because scientists have added new dimensions. In many cases, some of the dimensions that physics adds are almost incomprehensible to mortal people but is it fair to say that a big part of *Pre-Suasion* is adding a new dimension, time, to the science of persuasion?

Robert Cialdini: Yes. The time really comes down to the moment before we deliver our message. There is what I'm calling "privileged moments" when if we know what to put in that moment before we deliver our message to ready the individual, to make that person more receptive to what we're about to say, we gain a new dimension of leverage over the communication process as a result.

Roger Dooley: I think maybe one way to help our audience relate to that is your personal example of being asked to teach an MBA class, kind of unexpectedly.

Robert Cialdini: Yes, I was on a leave of absence. I was going to try to write this book at a business school, a well-known school. I got a call from the associate dean who gave me some good news. He said, "Bob, you know that office that you wanted? We've got it for you. We've got

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a more powerful computer in there than the one you asked for. Don't worry about phone or library or parking privileges, we'll take care of all of that." I said, "Well thank you very much. I really appreciate that."

He waited a count and said, "Well, you know, there's something I'd appreciate from you. We're in a bind right now. We need somebody suddenly. We've had an illness and we need somebody to teach a marketing course to our MBAs. Could you do it?" You know, Roger, I had never taught an MBA course. I'd never taught in a business school. I hadn't ever organized a course like this. I knew that doing that would torpedo the chance that I would be able to write this book that I wanted.

But in the moment after I had said how much I appreciated what he had done for me, it wasn't really possible, at least socially, for me to say, "Well, I'm not going to do this for you." I wound up agreeing to teach this course because he asked me in the moment after I said how much I appreciated what he had done for me. If he had called me a day later, I think I could have marshalled the ability to say, "Well, you know, I have a book that I need to write. I can't really do it." But not in that moment. There was something about the moment before he delivered his message that made me say yes.

Roger Dooley:

That's really interesting because I think we've thought of reciprocation as being something more Don Corleone, *Godfather*-type reciprocation, where I'm going to do a favor for you today and someday maybe you'll do a favor for me when I need it. But you're saying that really there's a time effect there and

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recency is important. What's going on, is your brain temporarily hijacked by this emotion? Is there any clue from research as to how long that might last or is it very situational?

Robert Cialdini: I have seen some research that suggests that what happens is after a favor has been done, in that moment the recipient values it most highly. As time goes by, the value associated with what was received declines. People see it as less important, less significant.

The opposite happens for the giver. As time goes by you, if you've given, see it as a bigger favor that you've done. So you've got these opposite trajectories. It explains why we should arrange ourselves so that after we've done a favor and people say thank you, we should say something in return that makes them, if not likely to give back right then, we should say something that puts them on record that this is something that will make sense to give back in the future.

I like saying something like, "Well, you know, I'm sure you would do the same for me if the situation were reversed in the future." So we don't say, "I'm sure you would have done the same for me." That's putting it in the past. Instead saying, "I'm sure you would do the same for me if the situation required it in the future." Now we've put people on record that, yes, think about this for the future. That I think is likely to be more successful.

Roger Dooley: Right, so if you don't need that favor in the moment then at least that may add to the duration of reciprocation a little bit.

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Robert Cialdini: Yeah.

Roger Dooley: You also mention later on in the book, when you are giving somebody something, that that should really have a few characteristics to make it especially impactful.

Robert Cialdini: Yes. The research shows that if what you give is perceived as meaningful for the person who's received it, is unexpected, it isn't just part of what's naturally done in exchanges between people, and it finally is customized or personalized to that individual's needs and challenges, now you have arranged for the recipient to want to give back to you at the highest possible levels.

There is a recent study that I saw that really makes this point. Researchers set up in a fast food restaurant. As people came in they had the manager for one third of these people greet them warmly and then usher them over to the counter where they could order their food. A second sample of individuals when they came in, they were given a small gift. It was a nice keyring. Then they were ushered to the counter where they ordered 12 percent more food than those who were simply greeted warmly—because they were given something, they wanted to give back. 12 percent more food.

Now, here's the third condition that I think is so important to understand because it involves the concept of what you give being customized to the needs of the customer or the recipient. When this set of people came in, the manager greeted them warmly and gave them a small cup of yogurt and then ushered them to the counter. They purchased 24 percent more

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food than those individuals who were just warmly greeted.

So you go 12 percent if you receive a favor, 24 percent more food if you get a favor that was customized to your needs. That is, why do people go to a restaurant? It's because they're hungry, because they want food. If somebody gives you food, an economist would say that's a big mistake for the manager to do that because now you've arranged for them to need less food to buy from you. That's a mistake. Well, a psychologist knows better. If you give someone food who is hungry, they feel especially grateful to you. They will do something in return. In this case, increase their order by 24 percent.

Roger Dooley:

That's interesting. I've seen other research on supermarkets too where some are rather aggressive samplers. I know that here in Texas we have a chain called HEB and they're extremely successful and dominant within the state. They really don't operate outside the state except in Mexico as well. One of the things they do is very aggressive sampling.

They really employ a lot of great psychology. They do a great amount of appealing to Texas branding because Texans, as you may have encountered, tend to have a pretty high opinion of their state and feel more of an allegiance to that state than perhaps residence of some other places. They do a lot of really smart things like that but very aggressive sampling is one of them.

Robert Cialdini:

That's not so different from what we've seen in other states, although I think you're right about the allegiance that a lot of people feel to Texas. One of the

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greatest public service campaigns of all time was "Don't Mess with Texas," the anti-littering campaign.

Roger Dooley: That was brilliant.

Robert Cialdini: It was brilliant. But for example, we've seen research that shows...

Roger Dooley: It has rhyme going for it too.

Robert Cialdini: Oh, yes. Right. Some of the newest research I've seen shows that if people receive a survey to fill out with no compensation, they're more likely to fill it out if it came from a university in their state than from a university outside of their state.

An even more telling example is that during the time when the U.S. was heavily involved on the ground in Afghanistan, if there was a fatality, a report of a fatality, it would reduce the support of individuals who heard about that fatality to the war effort. But that was especially true if the fatality was from their home state. So there's all this kind of allegiance to the unit in which we reside that makes some of these appeals especially effective.

Roger Dooley: Right, well certainly a lot of the social identity research showed how easily that can be created and even manipulated.

Let's change gears a little bit. Something everything in our audience knows about, Bob, and they've heard it so many times is the power of stories and storytelling. There's no doubt that stories grab and hold the attention of the listener better than facts and figures or other dry information.

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You found a particular kind of story was far more effective and even incorporated it into your classroom teaching. What's even more amazing perhaps is that almost all of us personally enjoy this kind of story either by reading them or by watching them on television but very few of us use this kind of story in our own writing and speaking. So before this gets even more mysterious, I'll let you explain, Bob.

Robert Cialdini: Yeah, the classic narrative structure that marketers are taught to include in their messages is the hero's journey essentially in which some protagonist has a challenge and overcomes it by choosing the right approach and winning the day essentially. You usually are urged to do that by making yourself available to the products or services or offerings of whatever the marketer has for you.

I'm suggesting a different kind of story that may be even more effective than that. That is the mystery story. The one that begins with some kind of puzzle, something that doesn't make sense on its face. What the marketer does is to invite people in to his or her material as a way of solving the mystery by understanding what the message is and understanding the details of that message. At the end, you will be able to solve the mystery.

What is so interesting about this is that it gets people to do something that marketers have been beating their heads against for centuries. If you've got a complex message, how do you get people to pay attention to the complexities, the details, of it? Well, the mystery story does that. It does it because the way you solve a mystery is to understand all of the details

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associated with what happened. That's the only way you get to figure out the solution in a detective novel or a mystery story.

If you setup that mystery, let's say it's like this: We have only been in existence for one year and yet we, of all the brands, some much more established than we are, have the greatest success in the last six months of any of them. How do we explain that? You know what you've got now? You've got me listening. You've got me interested because I need closure on the puzzle. Tell me, how did this happen? Now I'm listening for the details of it. If you've got a complex story to tell where normally that turns people off, they're not interested in the boring details, you can now present that information and people are going to be attuned to it because they want to know the answer at the end.

Roger Dooley: That's great. How difficult is that to do would you say, Bob, in most situations? I know it's a little bit counterintuitive to take information that you want to convey and turn it into a suspense story. Do you think there is usually a way of doing that if you think about it long enough and get creative?

Robert Cialdini: There is, Roger. I've begun to use it in my teaching so that at the beginning of every lecture that I give in my university courses, I begin with some kind of poser, some kind of puzzle, about human behavior that doesn't make sense on its merits. I promise my students that if they listen to all the details of my lecture, at the end of the class they will be able to solve that mystery.

One of the things I say in the new book is that I learned how powerful this is when one time I was doing it while

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I was fairly new at the process and I got the timing wrong. The bell rang before I had a chance to give all the information that solved the mystery. Normally, about five minutes prior to the end of a class things start to happen inside the classroom. People start putting their notebooks away. They start closing up their laptops. They start putting away their pens and pencils. They start zipping up their backpacks.

Roger Dooley: Their body language is definitely telling you that the class is almost done.

Robert Cialdini: Yeah, they're telling me. So when I use this mystery story, none of that happens. In this particular instance, when the bell rang people sat stock-still. They didn't leave. I said, "Well, I'll have to finish this up next time." They said, "No. No. You have to solve the mystery before we're going to leave." I remember saying to myself, "Cialdini, you stumbled on dynamite here."

Now, I have fashioned every one of my lectures so that it begins with a mystery story. It causes those students to sit in their seats, taking notes on every detail so they can solve the mystery. The other thing is that they do better on the exams because now they've been processing the information in a deep way that they weren't before.

Roger Dooley: That's great. Maybe that explains the longevity of Paul Harvey, the news announcers who would always tell a story at the end of his broadcast and at the end would reveal who he was talking about or some surprising fact at the end. It's the same thing.

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Robert Cialdini: You're right. I remember Paul Harvey. I used to listen to him and that was the thing that always would get me listening through a commercial.

Roger Dooley: Another topic that you deal with, Bob, is the connection between what you call association and language. One thing I found pretty amusing was that you were going to do a speech for a healthcare firm and their executive cautioned you not to use bullets or tell them how to attack their problems. That might be good advice for presenters in general, since bullets aren't always good, but their concern was the language—bullet and attack and terms like that are kind of war-like or hostile.

Robert Cialdini: Right.

Roger Dooley: I would guess that a lot of our listeners would think that's kind of a New-Agey sort of affectation or something but there's actually some science that backs up their concern, isn't there?

Robert Cialdini: That's right. When you use language that is associated with aggression, people become more aggressive afterwards. In one study for example, simply giving people access to aggressive words in sentences that they had to construct with various words, later in the next part of the experiment they had to deliver shock to a fellow subject. They decided to deliver significantly more shock if the words that they had been exposed to earlier had aggressive connotations versus neutral connotations.

This healthcare firm, which is dedicated to healing people, never harming them, decided that they were not going to have bullet points in their speeches. They were not going to attack a problem. They were not

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going to beat their rivals. No. They would have information points. They would approach a problem. They would outdistance their rivals. At first, I thought, oh, this is New Age. But now that I've seen this research, I think that actually they're right to avoid this kind of thing.

What they did do that built success for them was to include language that had to do with achievement. Outdistancing your rival. Challenging and so on. Those are things that lend themselves to achievement. The research also shows that if we give people access to achievement-relevant words or images they become more achievement oriented and succeed more.

There's one study that I just love in this regard. It had to do with call center employees whose task for that day was to call individuals who were alumni of a particular university and ask for donations to that university. They were given a sheet with points, tips, that they should be sure to raise in their discussions as to why this was a good thing, why the university deserved contributions and so on.

For half of them, the tip sheet was written on plain paper. For the other half, it was written on paper that had a picture of a runner winning a race on the sheet. So every time they picked up this sheet and looked at the tips that they were supposed to include in their message, they saw the picture of somebody winning a race. Those callers collected 60 percent higher donations that day than those who just saw the same tips on plain paper. Here we see that it's not just words that can pre-suasively send people in a particular direction. It can also be imagery that we present to

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them immediately before they receive our message. That can also send them in that direction.

Roger Dooley: So maybe those motivational posters that we all love to mock as being kind of lame, maybe they really do some good when they see people climbing mountains and such.

Robert Cialdini: You know, Roger, I always thought they were laughable in terms of the likelihood that they would make a difference. Not anymore. Not anymore.

Roger Dooley: Reminds me of another experiment I read about a few years back about people who saw an image of an Edison-style light bulb being more creative problem solvers on a test. I actually put a picture of as close as I could approximate to an Edison-style light bulb on my login screen on my Windows computer with the thought that maybe it will make me a little bit more creative when I login every morning.

Then finally, that was a corporate computer and the system administrators pushed out their own solid grey background and wiped out my inspirational image. I haven't been creative since.

Robert Cialdini: You know, Roger, I think that is a brilliant example. What you did was a brilliant example of how you translate this information that we've just talked about. What you put in your consciousness before you take an action shapes and directs your action so that it aligns with that element that you put in your consciousness.

There is research that shows for example that if you show people a picture of Rodin's *The Thinker* statue,

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they become more thoughtful. So what you are doing is exactly right. The corporate overlords who pushed their uniform background took that advantage out of the production system of their employees.

Roger Dooley: Now I have full control over my desktop so I can use I guess whatever imagery I'd like. Although sad to say it's not a lightbulb anymore. Now I've got a *Game of Thrones* Iron Throne symbol of power. So maybe I'm trying to subconsciously motivate myself in some other direction.

Robert Cialdini: Maybe. But I think the key takeaway from this is that depending on the nature of your task, if you've got a task where a lot of energy and achievement orientation is necessary, maybe you need to do a lot of work or make a lot of phone calls or make a lot of contacts, then the picture you should have on your screen over in the corner is a runner winning the race.

If your task is to be thoughtful and contemplative and considerate about what you're going to say to those individuals once you establish contact with them based on their situation and their needs and so on, now you change the image on your screen so that it's Rodin's *Thinker*. Now you're going to be more deliberative and analytic about a situation that requires contemplation.

Roger Dooley: So maybe as you're working on your daily calendar, you'd actually have a selection of imagery that you'd launch each activity with.

Robert Cialdini: I think that's a great idea.

Roger Dooley: One thing that was kind of amusing I thought was that you even have an explanation for why young women

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fall for musicians when from a rational and economic standpoint that's rarely the wisest choice.

Robert Cialdini: Again, it's because of the association process. Music is associated with romance. So what you find is that in a shopping mall if a man walked up to a young woman, said, "I think you're very attractive. Could I get your phone number to call you for a date later? I'm on my way to work and I can't do it right now, so could you just give me your phone number?"

Giving a stranger a phone number in a mall is a risky thing, right? But the guy doubled his likelihood of getting a phone number if he was carrying a guitar case on his way to work because he was a musician. Music is associated with romance.

Roger Dooley: Interesting. Probably also not associated with being a mugger or a violent criminal too.

Robert Cialdini: Right. You know there was another study also done in this shopping mall where the same guy asked woman for their phone number in front of different kinds of shops. There was one shop where he doubled his success. It was a flower shop. As they passed the flower shop, if he asked for a phone number, he was twice as likely to get a number than any other shop because flowers are associated with romance.

Roger Dooley: You know, it was funny, when I was in college I never was able to get a research gig like that. In the name of science, I'm going to go to the mall and ask girls for their phone numbers. Nice gig if you can get it.

We're in the midst of a political season now with the presidential election in the U.S. I'm curious whether

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you've seen anything really from either side, not wanting to go pro or con here, but that you see them making either probably intentional or perhaps inadvertent use of some of these influence techniques?

Robert Cialdini: I typically don't like to talk about politics in the same time that they're going on because the emotions are so strong there that I don't. But if we go back into some other eras, I'm happy to talk about what I see as having been effective.

What I'd like to talk about is for example the success of two presidents who were on different sides of the ideological continuum, Ronald Reagan on the one and Bill Clinton on the other hand. Each seemed to be sort of Teflon presidents. Things would just slide off of them because people liked them so much. Analysts who've looked at their communications have identified a typical reaction that members of their audiences would have. They would say, "It was like they understood me. It was like they were talking directly to me that made this sense of a bond that I felt with each of these guys so strong."

It's interesting that these two guys, they had different political starting points but they both used this liking principle to be successful, kind of no matter what they said. It didn't matter if the crowd liked them. If they got the connection to the audience then what they said got to be accepted to a much greater extent.

Roger Dooley: Was there some specific strategy that they were using to achieve that liking?

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Robert Cialdini: I don't think there was—it was something conscious as much as it was sort of natural...

Roger Dooley: Just their personality and the way they communicated.

Robert Cialdini: Yeah, a tendency to really focus in on your audience and understand the audience and feel what they were likely feeling. That sort of connection was the key.

Roger Dooley: Getting close on time here but it seems like a lot of books about influence and persuasion talk about the same studies, particularly the ones that were most significant. A lot of the new research doesn't seem particularly groundbreaking. I'm wondering if you've seen any studies in the last couple of years that really changed the way you thought about things or that you thought were particularly significant?

Robert Cialdini: I'm going to talk about two studies that I think fit because they align very well with the idea of pre-suasion, that seems revolutionary to me. The idea is it's not what we put in a message, it's what we put in the moment before we deliver that message that is so important.

So here's the study. Researchers arranged for the owners of an online furniture store to send visitors to the store to one of two landing pages. One landing page had as its background wallpapers pictures of fluffy clouds. The other wallpaper had pictures of pennies, coins. Then they looked at what happened to the visitors who went to the clouds versus the coins website.

Those visitors who saw clouds in the background searched the website for more comfortable furniture.

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When they were asked later, said that they thought comfort was a more important dimension than price. Finally, they decided that they preferred more comfortable sofas than more inexpensive sofas.

Those who were sent to the coins website did the opposite. They searched for cost-related information within the site, saw price as more important, and wound up preferring inexpensive furniture to purchase. So what you put in the situation immediately before your message, before the details of your message, sends people in a direction that is aligned with that element that you've put there first in their consciousness.

The thing about it that was so remarkable is that no one recognized that those coins or clouds had made a difference in their responses. They all were sure that those coins or clouds had no impact on their behavior, when in fact, it was multi-leveled, multi-layered impact. That's one such study.

Roger Dooley: Let me interrupt you for a second too, Bob, because I think a lot of our listeners may think of research as being the provenance of university professors and post docs and grad students and so on, but a landing page experiment like that is something that just about everybody has the capability of doing because that sort of testing is so simple now.

You may not be trying to tease out the underlying psychology, depending on what your marketing message is, you might test different backgrounds to see which background is most congruent with what you're doing. Also, of course, you think about the landing page as well which we have to have the right

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headline, we have to have the right hero image or something. Even the background can be significant.

Robert Cialdini: The background, yes. I think what you're saying is just so perceptive because what we typically fail to recognize is how it's not what we are offering and the content of it that optimizes our success. It's what we've put ahead of that content.

Just as you suggested, here's what I would say every marketer who has a website should ask themselves. What is the feature of what I have to offer that I think would be the basis for a wise choice by my audience for choosing my product? What is it about my product that would make it a wise choice for people to select? Then put a representation of that dimension, or that trait, or that concept, on the background wallpaper. It's going to send people toward that thing that will allow them to make the wisest choice in your direction, which makes it not only effective, it makes it ethical.

Roger Dooley: I'm sorry to interrupt, you had a second study you were going to mention, Bob.

Robert Cialdini: Yes. It's a study that was done in Belgium where researchers were asking, "How do you make people more helpful, more cooperative?" They thought, "Well, one thing is to give them images associated with togetherness, the idea of togetherness." They had people come into an experiment.

They showed them photographs of household objects. In the background either there was one person standing behind the household objects, or there were two people standing apart from one another behind these objects, or there were two people standing

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together, shoulder to shoulder, behind these household objects. In other words, conveying the idea of unity or togetherness.

Then the researcher stood up from the table and, I'm putting this in air quotes now—accidentally—dropped a set of items onto the floor. The researchers asked who gets down on the floor and helps the researcher pick up these items? The answer was unquestionably it was those who had seen pictures of people standing together, shoulder to shoulder. Three times more likely to get down on the floor and help that person, because togetherness is associated with cooperation and helpfulness.

Now here's the thing that I had never seen mentioned in any of the books that are out these days on behavioral science. That result occurred among subjects who were 18-month-old children. 18-month-old children were susceptible to this pre-suasive approach to make them more helpful. 18 months old. They can hardly talk. They can't reason yet. They can't plan. They can't reflect on a decision. But this process is so primitive, so fundamental to human functioning that it tripled the likelihood of 18-month-old children to be helpful. So those are a couple of the studies that really took my breath away when I read them.

Roger Dooley: Actually, I know our listeners really like that sort of info and what I should tell them is that one of the best parts of your book is the huge amount of space that you devote to references and endnotes. The references are the usual sort of specific papers and books that you cite.

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The endnotes are a little bit different. They're almost like guided additional research into the topics that you cover. I'm not sure what it will represent in the final book, in my galley that I saw those ran 130 pages, which is pretty phenomenal, but I know that I really appreciate that thoughtful approach. I can't stand books that leave me hanging where they state some important fact but give me no way of figuring out where that important fact came from. So you've really done a masterful job with that.

Robert Cialdini: Thank you. You know where that came from? I'm something of a sports fan. When I watch a game and there's an announcer that talks about some play or another in the game or in the match, I love having somebody who's a color analyst, who provides color about the players or the situation or the game and so on. So that's what those endnotes are designed to do, provide additional information that fill out the larger story associated with a particular finding or implication.

Roger Dooley: We could go for hours, Bob, but I think we'll wrap it up here. I'll remind our listeners that we're speaking with Dr. Robert Cialdini, professor, researcher, speaker, and author. You may know him from his best-selling book *Influence* but you're going to love his new book *Pre-Suasion: A Revolutionary Way to Influence and Persuade*. This book is going to add another dimension to the way you think about persuasion. Bob, how can our listeners find your content online?

Robert Cialdini: Probably the best way to find our content is to go to our website, www.influenceatwork.com. "Influence at work" is all one word, dot com.

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Roger Dooley: Right. We'll have that link, we'll link to both *Pre-Suasion* and your older books, Bob, and any other resources that we talked about on the show notes page at RogerDooley.com/Podcast. We'll have a downloadable transcript of our conversation there as well. Bob, thanks so much for being on the show and congratulations on your new book. You set a high bar with *Influence* but if anything can clear that bar, I think it will be *Pre-Suasion*.

Robert Cialdini: Thank you so much for saying so. That's very gratifying to hear from someone whose opinion I value as highly as I do yours.

Roger Dooley: Thanks, Bob.

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.