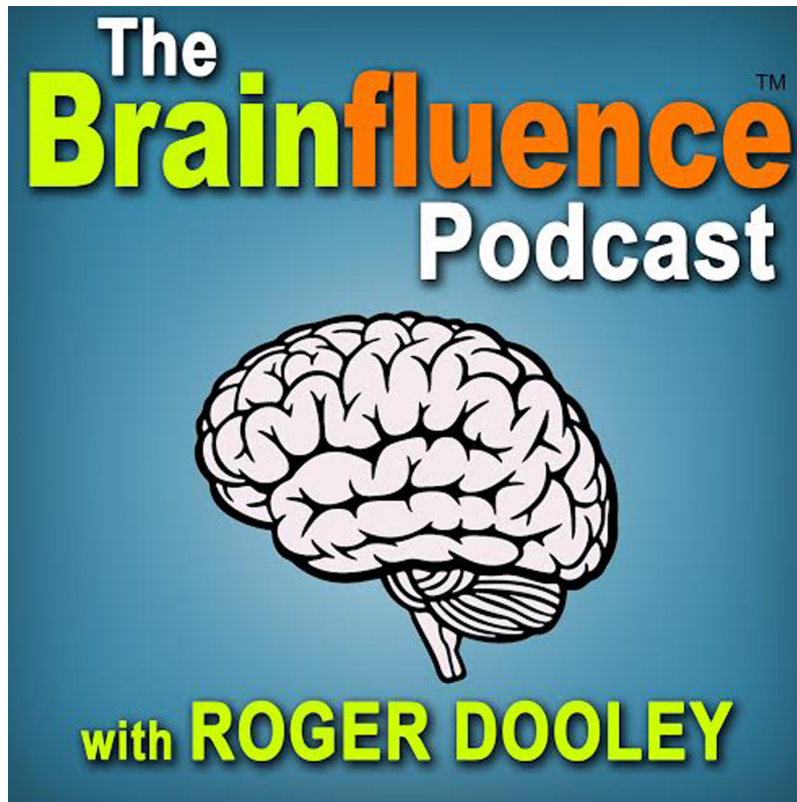


## Carl Marci and the Science Behind Ad Compression

<https://www.rogerdooley.com/carl-marci-ad-compression>



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# Roger Dooley

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

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## **Carl Marci and the Science Behind Ad Compression**

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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 has been on the show before and a repeat visit is way, way overdue. Dr Carl Marci is a lot of things. He's a medical doctor and an entrepreneur. He became a pioneer in neuromarketing when he founded Interscope Research back in 2006. Today, he's chief neuroscientist at Nielsen Consumer Neuroscience and he's also on the faculty at Harvard Medical School. Welcome back to the show, Carl.

Carl Marci: Roger, I'm happy to be here.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, so Carl, what is a typical day in the life of Nielsen's chief neuroscientist look like?

Carl Marci: Well, it's a very privileged position. Having been doing this now for almost 12 years, I have an opportunity to literally go around the world and talk to clients and marketers and market researchers about the importance of the brain and neuroscience and measuring engagement and understanding non-conscious processing in advertising to really a very broad audience. And so, I think it's really exciting that we're in a position to help some of the brands we work with solve the biggest challenges of today.

Roger Dooley: Great. So you can be part evangelist and part futurist along with probably some less exciting activities.

Carl Marci: Yeah, and sometimes a practical advice giver for folks to think about, what I think we're all experiencing, which is

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this incredible age of distraction, more choice, more platforms, more content, more ways of advertising than ever before.

Roger Dooley: So, how big is Nielsen Consumer Neuroscience now?

Carl Marci: Well, so we've got about 15 labs around the world, over 250 employees, 25 PhD or equivalent neuroscientists around the world. We're really built for scale and we've had pretty steady growth in our advertising, testing market over the last three years since Interscope was acquired.

Roger Dooley: Carl, how do you think the attitudes towards neuro marketing or consumer neuroscience if you prefer are changing. I'm thinking of the attitudes, not on the part of industry insiders so much as the public and consumer groups and so on because it seems like in the early years, there was a lot of fear about somehow this was a mind control, the idea of pushing the consumers buy button and so on. Over the years, it turned out that that really wasn't much of a concern, there was no buy button in the brain per se and you couldn't really create an ad that was so powerful and make people do things that they didn't want to do.

Now, I think, I sort of detect the pendulum swinging the other way, not so much directly on the marketing side, but, there are a couple of factors that I see sort of adding up that might affect neuro marketing. One is this fear of really high level of personalization because Google and Facebook and others have massive amounts of data about us, our behaviors, our personalities, and that somehow, this could be used to target us as individuals. And then the other piece is there's a fear that behavioral science is being applied in ways that are not entirely good

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for people. There is just very recently 50 members of the American Psychology Association sent a letter basically saying that the application of either persuasive design or behavior design might actually go against the organization's code of ethics.

I can see where neuro-marketing or consumer neuroscience might get sort of lumped in with those kinds of activities that certainly have some basis in reality. What do you think Carl?

Carl Marci: There's a lot to unpack there. I have a couple of thoughts. I think you're absolutely right. In the beginning, the specter of finding a buy button or creating ads that are so powerful that consumers blindly purchase whatever the ad is promoting has died down considerably, mostly because there is no buy button.

Roger Dooley: As hard as you looked for it, Carl, you couldn't find that.

Carl Marci: We looked. But you know what's really interesting is there's been a really big shift I think in the perception of marketing and marketers since I started. In 2006, I had no background in marketing and over the last 10 years I think there's been a shift and that shift is from what I originally perceived marketing as authorities who use rational arguments to persuade people to buy things, and I think that shift has been from authority to authentic, from rational to emotional and from persuaders to engagers. I think in large part that shift has come from consumer neuroscience because that's what our data and measuring non-conscious processing tells us people want. They want emotionally engaging ads that seem authentic from brands they can relate to. I think that's overall a positive thing.

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Now, to your point about other perceptions, there's no question that big data and a lot of what we're seeing happening with some of the social media platforms, privacy issues have really taken over in the public's mind and I think to some extent in marketers' minds concerns, right? When you look at what consumer neuroscience is doing, which is essentially giving people full consent, right, we have a one page consent form, there's no risk of injury and we're using experimental design and various technologies to monitor non-conscious processing on a small group of people and then using that to make recommendations for what might happen in the world.

I think that's very different than what's happening with big data and some of these behavioral psychology algorithms and things that are happening that you mentioned. So, I think that people are appropriate to focus on those and as a society we have to figure that out.

Roger Dooley: The alternative I would say to neuromarketing testing of ads is people getting more boring and annoying ads that not only don't change their behavior that they don't like. I think at least an ad that has gone through a vetting process like your company might provide, we'll probably not be as annoying to consumers as one that didn't in most cases.

Carl Marci: That's right. And if you think about it, annoying today is really something that people just don't pay attention to because we have so much choice, whether it's picking up our mobile phone while the TV's on or surfing to another website or changing apps or skipping. I think consumers are in some ways more overwhelmed but also more empowered to sort of manage their experience with brands than ever before. So it's really amazing the shifts

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that are occurring as we move and see more and more resources going into the digital landscape.

Roger Dooley: So Carl, at Nielsen, you've got quite a few different technologies that you use. You've got EEG, biometrics, facial coding, eye tracking, and maybe even sometimes you ask people questions, did I miss any?

Carl Marci: No, you got them.

Roger Dooley: Are you finding that one approach is more effective than the rest or how would you characterize the interplay between those technologies?

Carl Marci: It's a great question. As you know, when the field started in the sort of 2004, 2005, 2006 era, companies were largely focused on one technology. So we were founded as a biometrics company. There were EEG companies and there were companies just doing eye tracking. And I think over time, what we've learned as an industry is that no one technology or methodology has a monopoly on the truth and that they're all actually measuring different things. And so, we have put together various protocols and packages of technologies that are designed to solve our client's business question.

So, video advertising, which we used to call television advertising, but now video is lived on a variety of platforms really because of the sight and sound and motion nature of the platform, and the format requires multiple measures. So, for our video ad explorer product, we combine EEG with facial coding, with eye tracking and self report. Those different technologies do different things. So EEG is very powerful, direct measure brain activity. We can derive measures of attention, emotion,

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and memory activation from that signal, whereas eye tracking, as you know, is really just visual attention. And facial coding is the expression of emotion but not particularly accurate or useful when people are just blankly staring at the screen. That doesn't mean that the brain has turned off.

So what we see is that the combination of different measures is really important. And then the biometrics we find very useful for a long format. When we're working with our media clients and looking at half hour, hour or several hours in the case of the Super Bowl, we'll use a signal that is more resilient to movement and more comfortable for our participants to wear and use. Does that make sense?

Roger Dooley: Yup, yup, totally. I guess a couple of technologies that we didn't mention are implicit testing or implicit association testing and fMRI. Have you looked at adding those to your suite?

Carl Marci: We've used both of them. Let's start with fMRI. As you are probably aware, there's been a number of companies over the years that have tried to launch a consumer neuroscience business around that type of neuroimaging. I think it runs into a number of problems. One is just cost, right? The machines are several million dollars each and require hundreds of thousands of dollars just to maintain. You then have the issue of complexity. You get these very complex brain images that require incredible sophistication to understand. That has to be translated to clients and then ultimately that leads to scale, right? It's very hard to have a network of fMRI machines around the world to deliver results.

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So, I think of fMRI as sort of the gold standard for basic science and understanding, and I think whether that's academics using them or us working in partnership. For example, Temple University was one of the first universities in the US to have an fMRI machine in the business school that's dedicated to consumer behavior and partnering with them to do various studies. I think that's where fMRI today lives and serves as well to continue to add to a body of knowledge and our understanding of the brain, which as far as it's come over the last three or four decades, there's still more work to do.

I think implicit response time, another tool we've used, continue to use, continue to evaluate, has sort of a little bit of the inverse problem, where it's highly scalable because you can do it online and it's much more affordable than fMRI. One of the challenges is finding the right application for that tool and making the results robust enough and detailed enough and diagnostic enough for clients to act on. We consider both of those important tools in our toolbox but we don't lead with them.

Roger Dooley: Okay. It seems like EEG maybe more powerful than a lot of us thought. Not too long ago, University of Toronto announced that they were able to use EEG to reconstruct images of what people were seeing at that moment. Not even simple shapes like squares or triangles or something, they were actually getting facial features and facial expressions from this. I'm curious if you were surprised by that and are there any other uses of EEG that sort of go beyond what most of us are familiar with?

Carl Marci: I'm not specifically similar with what you're talking about but clearly we've seen advances in our ability to capture

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EEG signals and model using sophisticated computer algorithms, all kinds of mental activity. I think that will continue to evolve and it's a wonderful signal because it is a direct measure of brain activity, but it's also challenging because it's a complex signal. And so really understanding how to process it and use it and interpret it in a way that's actual for clients, that's something that I think we've spent a lot of time on and have seen a lot of success.

Over time, I think when people ask me about the future, like a lot of technologies faster, smaller, cheaper, right? And I think we're still not quite there with EEG because of the complexity of that signal where you can have a small affordable dry electrode device that gives you the same signal quality we get out of our labs where we, we continue to use medical grade technology in very controlled environments.

Roger Dooley: So Carl, we've brought up cost a few times. I know this is a hard question to answer but for those folks in our audience who may not be part of big brands, who have gone out shopping for consumer neuroscience studies, what would a typical range of cost be for evaluating say a 32nd spot or maybe a package for some kind of consumer good?

Carl Marci: Depending on a number of factors, what population or consumers are you trying to target. How many of those do you have or you're looking to compare? We're in the range of between 15 and \$20,000 for a test like that. I think that that's in line with a lot of traditional large surveys. But what's really interesting is that when you look at recent ANA survey and you ask marketers who are familiar with and use consumer neuroscience and you

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ask if they can attribute that to a return on investment, of those who could, the average response was about 16 percent growth or lift in sales. Now among those marketers, that translated to 80 million dollars in return on investment. And that to me suggests that focusing on the cost of the study isn't the whole story. We need to also focus on the impact in the marketplace and the ability to break through this distracted world and really engage consumers the way we need them to be as part of that equation.

Roger Dooley: Right. I think that certainly for justifying it, if you're going to be running a major campaign of some kind, you definitely have to look beyond the cost. But I know that some of our listeners might hear \$20,000 and say, gee, my whole campaign is going to be 50,000 or 100,000. And they can be in a smaller company or they could even be in a bigger company that just has a lot of different little moving parts. So is there any neuroscience solution for companies that have a very limited budget?

Carl Marci: Well, I think the best solution for companies that you're giving examples of would be to look at the best practices that are out there and case studies for what has worked based on these methodologies and our understanding of the brain. You're probably familiar with the textbook that came out from MIT Press end of last year, right? Consumer Neuroscience. I have a chapter in there on emotion and there's a number of contributors. There are case study after case study after case study in that book and other resources such as your blog and others where you can really learn how marketers are applying these technologies and methodologies and get a sense for some of the themes we see over and over and over

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again. I think that is where I would direct some of those folks to start.

Roger Dooley: I couldn't agree more on that, Carl. I've been sort of espousing that approach for years drawing both on neuromarketing studies as well as the thousands of behavioral science experiments that are constantly being published, finding those that are going to be relevant to what you're doing and use them at least as a starting point for testing. And in these digital days, it's so easy to do A/B tests assuming that it's a digital product of some kind that you know you're going to be using a website or an app where you can conduct those kinds of very simple, inexpensive test to see whether your hypothesis worked, whether making it more emotional or adding a different emotional appeal works or not. So, good advice.

Carl Marci: I agree with you. One comment on the A/B testing and I think that is perfectly reasonable approach as long as the content you're testing is informed by some of these principles because you will always have a winner in an A/B test. What you don't know is that winner, the tallest of the midgets or the shortest of the giants. So that's something that we encourage people, even our biggest clients who do lots of testing, who then go off and think, oh, we've learned everything we need to know, eventually come back because it's really hard to find a message that really resonates, that breaks through the clutter and distraction of the modern world and gets that return on investment. It's a real challenge for marketers who are also overwhelmed by different platforms and different types of ad units and different ways of advertising on an unprecedented scale.

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So, I'm sympathetic to marketers who feel overwhelmed because the environment has changed so much, it very much can be overwhelming. That's where I think we're seeing a real uptick in some of our offerings to really help navigate some of those seismic changes that are occurring.

Roger Dooley: To your point, I think that today's digital marketers can take a page from the book of direct mail marketers. They would constantly test different pitches in mailings, whether it was a catalog or perhaps a direct mail letter, sort of the classic direct mail format. They never felt like they arrived at the best solution. When they had a winner, that became the new control and the thing to beat and they would hire a different copywriter to see if he or she could beat the control and they'd run tests and usually the control because was pretty good one, but every now and then, somebody would take a very different approach and become the new control. It was a constant evolution.

Carl Marci: That's right. And that kind of test and learn is something I think our most successful clients have really embraced. Among the feedback we get working with advertisers is that the diagnostic insights, the specificity of it and the way we can hone in on what's working and then make recommendations about improving areas that need to be improved is really what advertisers embrace. But importantly, the advertising agencies embrace. I think as you know, over the years, there's been a tension between some of the creative agencies and research. I think that tension in some ways is starting to dissipate as they understand that we're all in the business to build more engaging advertising and to learn and serve our advertising clients in the best way possible to engage their target consumers.

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Roger Dooley: Carl, some of your work is focused on how people consume media on different devices or both media and ads. What are the latest results on that in terms of watching something say on TV or whether it's controllable or uncontrollable by a DVR and pause and fast forward buttons versus various kinds of mobile devices?

Carl Marci: I think it's a great question and a really important one. I think first and foremost, what we've learned is that great creative can break through on any platform. One of the evidence, pieces of evidence for that came out of one of the other divisions of Nielsen called Nielsen Catalina Solutions. They use what's called single source data, which allows Nielsen to match households. So imagine homes where an ad is served being compared with homes where the ad wasn't served and then tracking purchase data over the course of the next eight weeks and looking for a lift in sale. And these are opt in panels that Nielsen has been doing it for some time.

They recently did this analysis of over 500 campaigns that had both television and a digital component. What they found is that overall, about half of the sales performance can be contributed to the actual creative itself, in other words, what was the message, how was that message being delivered?

What's really interesting, Roger, is that they broke out the high sales performers, the medium sales performers and the low sales performers. When you look at the high performers, that percentage that the creative is contributing to sales jumps way up. So for television, it goes to 80 percent. For online, it actually goes to 90 percent. So what that's telling us is that for ads to be successful, they really need to engage and that what that

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ad is actually doing is incredibly important and perhaps more important than are you targeting, are you reaching the right audience. That's point number one.

Point number two, having said that, there are some real lessons about the small screen versus the big screen. What I often say based on now multiple studies is that online, shorter is better, brand early, often in big. So what do I mean by that? Well, as a pre rule where skipping is a big factor, brevity is key and we're seeing that trend towards shorter and shorter as. Brand early and often, well if you're going to be skipping and your branding is occurring at the end of the ad, people in large measure may never get to it. And then finally brand big. What we see from a number of our studies is that the logo and the way we brand on a small screen needs to be larger as a percentage of that screen merely because of the size of the screen and the ability of people to actually see it.

So these are just a couple of examples of how we've helped our clients and how we've used different technologies to help them compress ads from larger to shorter so that they can work in multiple environments.

Roger Dooley: Now speaking of and compression, you've got some interesting data on that about how shorter ads can work as well as longer ads and sometimes even better which is, in certain ways, kind of counterintuitive, you think, well, longer ad is going to convey more information, more emotion, whatever. I've found that data really interesting. Why don't you explain how that works and when shorter might be better.

Carl Marci: Sure. We were really excited earlier this year to receive a patent on a set of algorithms that allow us to take the

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EEG signals for an ad, say a 30 second ad and then hone in on and automatically pick out the most engaging moments and then compress that ad to relatively half the length. So imagine a 30 going down to a 15. We then took a large number of these and retested them. 96 percent of them, of the compressed ads performed as well or better than the original, which is really extraordinary. I think while on the surface it's counterintuitive, if you think about it, what this technology allows us to do is really hone in on the most engaging moments.

Now we still need an advertising agency to come in and smooth it out and make some important creative choices. But with this technology, we're able to direct agencies with some guidance and with the advertisers input to really get two ads almost for the price of one. So there's the efficiency of taking a 30 down to a 15 and having both of those work well. There's the performance aspect which I just described that shorter ad is going to perform almost as well, if not equally as well. And then there's the flexibility of being able to take those shorter ads as I was describing earlier and put those in a digital environment.

Roger Dooley: It's almost like the movie trailer approach of taking the most impactful scenes from compressing them into a couple of minutes of an advertisement. There are times when you see the trailer and you say, okay, well that was really cool, I probably don't have to see the movie now. But it's not a totally different approach, is it?

Carl Marci: That's right. I think at a high level it, it shares some of the same examples where if you think about a full length feature movie often between an hour and a half, sometimes more than two hours, that's an awful lot of content that you have to compress down to three or four

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minutes and then down to 60 seconds and 30 seconds and 15 seconds. And so, having a technology that allows creative people to make those decisions I think is extremely valuable.

Roger Dooley: Have you tried the same approach for movie trailers?

Carl Marci: We've been in and out of Hollywood over the years and we've had similar success. You mentioned actually the experience of watching a trailer and feeling like you've seen the whole movie. One of the things we found when we looked at a large number of trailers and we were able to tie some of the consumer neuroscience measures to opening box office weekend sales, was that the trailers that left people on a cliffhanger and didn't actually give away the whole story ended up driving sales a whole lot better than the ones you described where you feel like you've seen the whole movie.

Roger Dooley: Right, yeah. So if it's a one joke comedy and you've seen the joke, it's like, okay, how many times do you need to see it? But, it's like writing headlines where headline that intrigues the reader is more likely to get clicked on than one that sort of summarizes the article.

Carl Marci: Exactly.

Roger Dooley: Although that gets abused as well where people write clickbait headlines that are designed only to intrigue and convey nothing, but that's another story. A lot of our listeners I'm sure do digital ads and we've been hearing about banner blindness since probably like two days after the first banner ad aired and people started to adapt to them. Is there something that makes an ad pop when it's

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off from the periphery or maybe it doesn't need to be in the periphery?

Carl Marci: Well, I think when you look at some of the research we've done over the years on banner ads, one of the things we find pretty consistently is that context matters. So the environment in which it's in is that a premium environment or is it an environment where there's a lot of clutter matters. The mindset of the viewer going into that environment. Are they in a hurry to hone in on a particular task or are they browsing matters. And then you get into some of the features that probably you're thinking about when you ask the question, right? Color, motion, use of faces and animals and then the copy, does it pull you in? All these things come together in a fairly sophisticated ways that really matter. But I think the one that people forget is that the context is really important to how people consume things.

Roger Dooley: I think that some really, I mean, they're obviously a bunch of junk sites out there, Carl, but there are some sites that really aspire to be respected sources of information but in their drive to monetize, they just keep adding more ads and more ads and it creates a terrible user experience for one. And also I think it totally dilutes the effectiveness of those same ads. You wonder if they went to a much cleaner format where the ad was somehow well integrated, they wouldn't sell as many, but they could probably get a much higher price for those because they actually work.

Carl Marci: There's a great quote I often use about internet advertising relative to say television advertising. And that is the plumbing got ahead of the poetry. Meaning we had the networks and we had the ability to share information

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and we were doing that before the ad model and ad units came along whereas with television, this idea of sponsorship and the relationship between content and advertising really co-evolved. So there's a social contract when we watch broadcast TV in most television, which is look, in exchange for relatively inexpensive entertainment, I'm going to watch some advertising.

We all remember, at least some of us do when there were very few, if no ads online. And now as you just mentioned, they really are everywhere. I think this is what we're all trying to figure out and I think the websites that get it right will succeed and those who don't won't.

Roger Dooley: One phrase, Carl, I ran across in one of your presentations was attention vampires. I thought that's something that would be interesting to our audience. Can you explain what attention vampires are?

Carl Marci: Sure. An attention vampire is something that on an unconscious level draws the attention of the viewer away from some key piece of information. So one of the most common ways we see this is at the end of a video ad and it's time for the brand or the call to action or some other really important piece of information comes on the screen and you still have the cute puppy dog or you still have the actors playing out and everyone's watching their faces in that action and they're not paying attention to the brand or the call to action. That's one example of how these play out.

Other examples you mentioned clickbait, those are really attention vampires for users who were out trying to do some other task and they get pulled into some website by virtue of a sexualized image or a tagline or some other

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way that marketers have figured out how to grab your attention. That's an attention vampire. It's pulling you or distracting you or disrupting you from a primary task.

Roger Dooley: An example of that isn't quite as bad as some of those content ads that have really bizarre imagery, but LinkedIn will put an ad over in the margin with your own photo in it because they've got it from your profile and it's pretty hard not to see what they're saying about you over there. I think the real takeaway about attention vampires is if you have something that you want people to see, whether it's your logo, your message, your call to action, you don't want people and puppies or anything that would be distracting the viewer, because even if they're not consciously looking at it their focus will be divided.

Carl Marci: That's right. That's exactly right.

Roger Dooley: One last topic, Carl. Let's look at in store retail. What kind of insights have you gained about packaging and the waste stuff is displayed because I think that's something that it affects all of us both as consumers but there's certainly a lot of still in today, despite e-commerce, there's a huge amount of retail going out and often that's not really optimized.

Carl Marci: Absolutely, and I think three quick comments I'll make. I think the first one, just as we were saying with the digital world, context matters, right? So there's one thing to test a package in isolation, it's another thing to test it inside of a shelf set and an environment that will reflect the way it will look in the real world. And so that's point number one. And inside of that point, one of the most common things we see particularly is people are overwhelmed with information is trying to do too much with a package, right?

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Those little buttons or trying to put too much information or cluttering up the logo and the branding, which is so important is something that we work with our clients all the time to strike that balance.

I think the second point is that point of sale material, whether it's signage or promotional material is really equally, if not more important than the package itself. And so, understanding how you can guide people visually toward a particular product or area of the shelf is key.

I think third, understanding that the package doesn't work in isolation but that it ties into the marketing outside of the store. And also ties to people's often experience in the home when they use that product. So I like the framework of a sort of pretail, retail, and post-tail environment and the pretail outside of the store environment, marketing communications or building the brand, building associations with that brand, product or service. In the retail environment, part of the packager's job is to trigger those brand associations and those emotional connections made outside of the store. And then finally in the post-tail world, to the extent that that package lives on on your shelf at home, it continues to do work for you in terms of building brand associations. So really understanding that entire journey or purchase journey and decision tree I think is critical.

Roger Dooley: Any last predictions for what consumer neuroscience will look like in a few years, Carl?

Carl Marci: Well, I think consumer neuroscience will continue to evolve in the same way that the advertising landscape is evolving. It will try to adjust, it will use insights from consumers that are deeper than just merely asking

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questions and closer than big data to really try to help marketers navigate all the changes that are occurring. Look, at the end of the day, the brain will always matter, emotions will always matter, having engaging content and advertising will always matter and I think these tools are powerfully suited because the old ways just aren't enough and as a complement and guide for advertisers moving forward is really where the future is at.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, let me remind our listeners today, we are speaking with Dr. Carl Marci, chief neuroscientist at Nielsen Consumer Neuroscience. Carl, how can people find you and your work online?

Carl Marci: Sure. Just a quick search for Nielsen Consumer Neuroscience, you'll find our page where we've got links to case studies, materials that we've put out into the world and really, a variety of resources that I think people could find useful.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, we will link there and to any other resources we talked about on the show notes page at [rogerdooley.com/podcast](http://www.rogerdooley.com/podcast). Carl, it's been great to have you back on the show, but let's not wait so long to do it next time.

Carl Marci: Always a pleasure to talk with you, Roger.

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 <http://www.RogerDooley.com>.

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