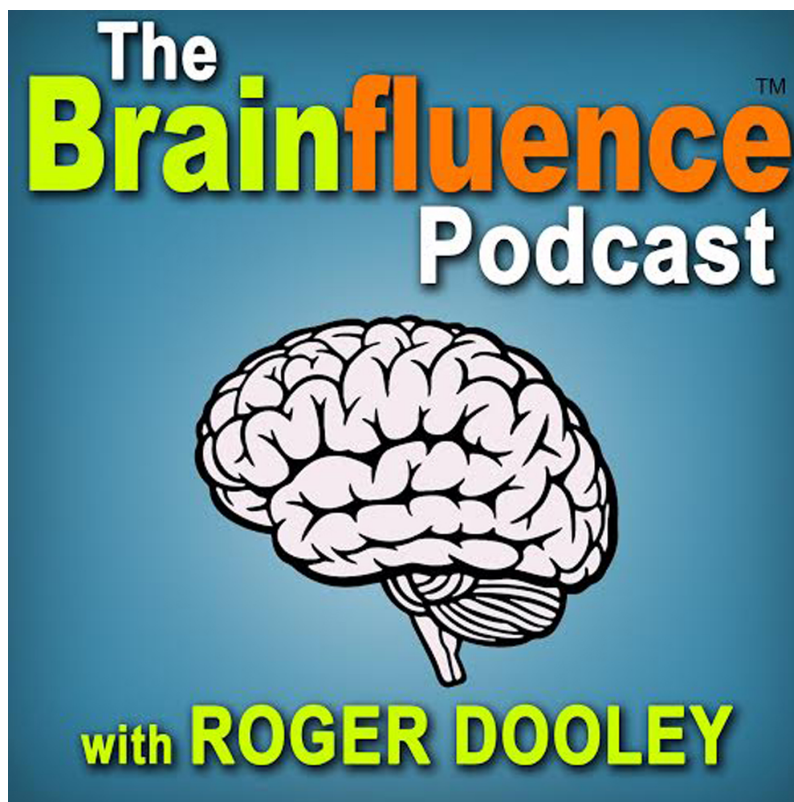


Datastory: Nancy Duarte Turns Data into Action

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Full Episode Transcript

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Roger Dooley

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

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Welcome to Brainfluence, where author and international keynote speaker Roger Dooley has weekly conversations with thought leaders and world class experts. Every episode shows you how to improve your business with advice based on science or data.

Roger's new book, *Friction*, is published by McGraw Hill and is now available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and bookstores everywhere. Dr Robert Cialdini described the book as, "Blinding insight," and Nobel winner Dr. Richard Claimer said, "Reading Friction will arm any manager with a mental can of WD40."

To learn more, go to [RogerDooley.com/Friction](https://www.RogerDooley.com/Friction), or just visit the book seller of your choice.

Now, here's Roger.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to Brainfluence. I am, as you may have guessed, Roger Dooley.

Today, communicating ideas in an effective and persuasive way is a skill we all need. Fortunately, one of the world's leading experts on that exact topic is joining us on the show today. Nancy Duarte has been featured in Fortune, Forbes, Fast Company, WIRED, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Time, and CNN. She's a persuasion expert who cracked the code on how to build story patterns into business communications, and she's written five bestselling books. In 2017, she was number one on the list of the world's top 30 communication professionals. Nancy's new book is DataStory: Explain Data and Inspire Action Through Story. Nancy, welcome. It's great to have you back on the show again.

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Nancy Duarte: Thanks for having me, Roger.

Roger Dooley: Great. So Nancy, I doubt if anybody has a better handle on the state of business communication and presentations today. I'm curious, do you see the art of presentation evolving? I mean, if you compare an effective keynote speech or maybe product introduction today to one from five years ago, would you see major differences or really not so much?

Nancy Duarte: I am. The criteria that the audiences are putting on the presenter to do a good job is unprecedented. You never would have guessed 10 years ago that a company like TED, who just broadcasts presentations, would win a Peabody Award. And what that's done is it's made it so every geeky scientist or every person who has a story to tell, but they didn't think they had to be any good at it, it's really raised the bar for everyone because now we know even the geekiest scientists can do a great, great talk if they put the time into it and cared enough. And so we're seeing that.

I mean, obviously people are getting up and walking out of talks at large conferences, and they will choose a different one. They'll just get up and leave and go to one that someone's tweeted is more interesting, and they just don't have the time to sit through an hours of blathering. The nature of it's changed to a lot of our clients now... Because we work with a lot of the top execs at high-performing brands, and they're becoming more like curators than presenters, so they are designing a program and then bringing subject matter experts and guests up. And they're curating more like a session,

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almost like a TED session would. So there's just a lot of things that are changing.

And internal meetings are changing too, so a lot less about presenting during an internal meeting. People are sending slide docs ahead as read aheads so that the meeting time with everyone in the room is used for conversation instead of blathering at a dense deck. So I'm super pleased. I think we've played a small role in transforming that. But yeah, there's all kinds of things happening and shifting.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, I agree about the low level of tolerance for bad presentations. I'm based in Austin where we have South by Southwest of course, great conference, and it's really interesting because there's so much going on at any given moment. You may have a panel, and there will be 10 or 15 other panels going on at the exact same time. And I've seen rooms empty out if a presenter was bad or if they were basically promoting their own stuff as opposed to giving good information to the audience. You could have a room that was standing room only in the first minute. 20 minutes in, there'll be just a handful of people left.

Nancy Duarte: Yeah. How embarrassing. I don't know why the presenter right then doesn't just stop and say, "Okay, okay, I think I missed it. Can we just go to a Q and A?" I think everyone would love that, but they just keep going.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. Well, yeah, I think, yeah, once the train's rolling, it's hard to stop. But yeah, I agree that mass migration out of the room is an indicator that maybe something's wrong. Of course, maybe they figured those people weren't really

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interested, and it's the really interested few who are still in the seats, the ones they wanted to communicate with to begin with perhaps. I'm curious too, as we're talking about the state of presentations today, what do you think about use of animation, tools like Prezi that create a lot of motion? I mean, our brains are attracted by movement, but is there a risk of too much, or how do you see people using those tools, if at all?

Nancy Duarte: Yeah, I think that's a great question because I do get really sick during a Prezi because what's interesting about Prezi particularly is that the landscape is moving and not the camera. So it's weird, and that's what I think makes people dizzy. If it was the camera moving around space and time, that's more how we're used to seeing things happen, camera meaning the viewer's vantage point.

I think even motion has to be thought through strategically because it communicates how things enter the screen, how they leave the screen, what kind of kinetic activity they're doing, animation or the transitions are doing, all create meaning. And I think even at my own shop sometimes they put a beautiful fade on everything, and I'm like, "Well, if you put a beautiful fade on everything, when something needs to snap and you need to see the difference between two shapes on two slides, you can't make out the difference because it faded instead of being really, really identifiable."

And it's for years in movies, the protagonist always enters in from the left and the antagonist usually enters the scene from the right. There's just classic things that happen where something that's easy is left or right. Something that's harder is more right to left. And there's

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just classic things that people don't necessarily understand why sometimes things are animated the way they are or how that by doing certain attributes to an element on a slide gives it its own personality and character and meaning that might be unintended.

Sometimes, I think I overthink this stuff, but I don't think I do because wow, I've had it where something was so animated that the speaker was done talking, and they had to wait, sit there and wait, for their animation to finish just, so they could go to the next topic. So I do definitely feel that a lot of times, it's over done. And you have to time your speech really well. If you're going to have these beautiful animations, you have to have rehearsed it as a presenter and really understand the timing and stuff.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. I tend to make very light use of animation. I use a lot of slides. I might use 150, even 200 slides in a keynote but basically all static slides. Except once in a while, I'll stick in an animation where it seems meaningful, like in one experiment where when primed differently, the subject sat closer together, doing a little animation where two people in chairs pull a little bit closer to each other underscores the point. But it's not just an artistic effect. It's actually supporting the data point as opposed to just a cool fade or a transition with little checkerboards or something.

Nancy Duarte: Yeah. What's interesting in DataStory, which I know we'll get to that, I do talk about the right way to animate a chart because if you were to put an entire chart up there, it's almost like you blew the ending. There's no surprise to how it ended. They process the ending right when they see the chart. And sometimes, you could actually build

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suspense and surprise by just showing one bar chart or one line segment at a time, at a time, at a time. And then when they see that final bar chart go up and high, they're like, "Yeah." You can get applause for it. But if you show it all at once, they're just like, "Yeah, we hit our numbers. Yay." I mean, it's just such a different emotional quest to show data over time when it's appropriate versus show it all at once.

Roger Dooley: Right, that is such a great suggestion, Nancy. I hope our listeners are making note of that. I think that takeaway is probably worth listening to the entire podcast because I have rarely seen a presenter do a chart that is a partial reveal of some kind and then builds to a climax. It's always flip the slide and the chart's up there, and they start, "Well, and you can see it's low here, and by the end, look, it's high over here." Not much drama. So that's a great tip.

Oh, hey, let me ask you one other question, then we're get onto your new book. But I'm curious about remote communication these days. Now, you have so much communications being done to an audience that is dispersed around the country or even around the world. So a CEO might be giving a keynote or doing a product intro, but major portion of the audience is sitting in front of a little screen in their home or office. Do you do things differently under that circumstance as opposed to say a TED talk where you're doing primarily for a live and filmed audience?

Nancy Duarte: Yeah, it's interesting. Sometimes, the online audience is much larger than anybody in the room. I went over to HP and did a talk, and they were like, "500 people'll be there."

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And I walked in, and the room was set up for about 300. And there were three people there in the audience, and there was 1,100 online, and so way, way more than I expected. And so at some point, it becomes camera work. You're really looking at the camera, and you need to be able to have your heart warm, use eye contact, and look at the camera when there's a large remote audience.

The other thing that's interesting when the audience is remote is your number one competitor to your message is their inbox. And so you have to be more interesting than their inbox because they would rather just be clicking through and deleting email and doing all kinds of stuff and barely listening to you. So if you have a really important message, it's really good to do what I was saying earlier in our conversation, which is to mix up the voices. So you're pretty astute to understand that when something moves, it catches the brain's attention, and the same happens with the voice. It's a novelty impact. The minute something novel happens, we engage the brain.

So if you do have a large remote audience and it's a very important message, having it be a conversation where the person's interviewed works very, very well. Having multiple people come up and say messages, have that change up, but also the messages being really tight and short and crisp, really helps so they listen. And the other thing I do when I have a remote meeting is I'll squeal, "Isn't this slide great? Oh, my gosh. Look at this model," right? Because then, they're at least minimizing their email and going back to look.

Roger Dooley: Good point, "Oh, what's was she talking about? I better check that out." I can't imagine showing up for a speech

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to 500 people, and there being three people in the room. That would be a surprise.

Nancy Duarte: The same thing happened at Google. There were 70 little tiny pictures of people projected on the wall, and then I was sitting at a little tiny table. It's just interesting how it's changing so quickly.

Roger Dooley: Well, great. Glad we covered that. But I do want to get to the ideas in your new book DataStory, Nancy. I think one premise our listeners will agree with, since many of them are into scientific research and in particular persuasion and how to persuade, is that data is not particularly persuasive. We've seen that in political campaigns where somebody's got all the data but a simple message trumps that. We've seen it with this whole anti-vax thing where there is so much data showing that vaccines don't cause autism. But a couple of heartfelt stories about children with issues seems more important to our brains than all of that data. So was there a moment when you had a complicated set of data to explain and realized that making a story out of it would work, or was this an evolution over time?

Nancy Duarte: That's a good question. So there's different times when data plays a role. Data is either uncovering a problem or bringing to light an opportunity. Every business has these. Every department has this moment where, "Hey, let's go look at the data and see what it says." It's like reading the tea leaves a bit. And you can find immediately, sometimes immediately, the problem or the opportunity, but then you enter into what's called a communication problem. It moves from being a data problem because you found the problem or opportunity, and then it moves

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into being a communication situation. And that's where storytelling really comes into place.

I have some case studies in the book that are fantastic. Scott Harrison's been in every one of my books. He's the CEO of charity: water. And he did a whole presentation about how many people have been served clean water, and he used a lot of suspense and surprise. And the other thing that great storytellers with data do is they humanize the characters in the data. So in this particular case, every time Scott talks about money, he translates in his head how much clean water that money brought to people. So he doesn't say it was \$10 million. He'll say, "That's another blah amounts of hundreds of thousands of people now that have clean water." So he's constantly bringing it empathetically back to the hero of the data, which are the people who are desperate need of clean water. And so there's all kinds of ways to transform data into a story from humanizing the people in it to just how you use story as a framing device when you're just making a recommendation.

So we had this happen here. My shop, it wasn't even by me, I was just in a staff meeting this last month, and one of my directors was talking about how we're performing, and he was showing quarter over quarter, quarter over quarter, and he set it up, and it was really low. Our quarter of a quarter number was really, really low. And you could hear everyone go, "Aw," because our bonuses are tied to the profit number. And then he said, "But if everyone in client services does their invoicing they're supposed to get done," and then it went up above the line 20% higher year over year. Everyone applauded. And so he did two things, right? He created suspense. He could

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have showed the whole, but he created suspense, had everyone applaud. And now everyone in client services left that meeting, and they ran and did their invoicing because they didn't want to be busted without getting their invoicing done. So that's a miniature version of a data story.

But there's a really emotional one in the book about how data is solving a problem from people who die of seizures related to epilepsy. So there's really beautiful ways when you have a cause, or even if you have a sales team you're trying to motivate, there's really beautiful ways to tell a data story.

Roger Dooley: Right, and turning data into something measurable is one of the points you make when you were just talking about the people helped instead of millions of dollars. It reminds me of that charity that lets you buy a cow for a village where it's... \$200 is a cow. I don't know what the exact amount is, but \$200 doesn't really mean much. You're trying to visualize. Well, you know what it means to you sort of, but what does that mean in some small village in Ghana or something? But when you translate that into, "Oh, this is a cow. Then, okay I get that."

And of course unfortunately, there is some fine print that says, "No actual cows are furnished," or something like that. But it does give you a way to relate in the same way you talk about, how do you describe a dimension, a length of something in feet or miles or whatever. And by putting it in terms that people can understand and visualize, suddenly that number becomes a lot more meaningful.

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Nancy Duarte: That was a fun section to write because if you have data and you can convey it in a way that becomes relatable, they can get their head around it. Because we work at... The scale of our numbers today is so massive. And if you can get somebody to understand the gravity or the opportunity of those numbers, it can really change how they understand what you're trying to communicate. And I put a bunch of examples, oddly, I didn't even know this was coming, but PowerPoint is adding an artificial intelligence that if you put any number in PowerPoint like 30,000, it'll give you a bunch of options for a bunch of things that equal to 30,000 like, "That's the size of Pikes Peak twice," or whatever. It'll give you actual, the common measurement and other ways to connect to...

So many people say, "Oh, that's as far as it is to the Moon and back 22 times." Well, none of us had been to the Moon. I mean, a handful of 100 people have been to the Moon, but I have no idea how far away the moon is. So we need to bring it back down to Earth and really say, "If you were to walk for four days, that's how big that is." Or you have to actually say it with relatable terms, so they get their head around it.

Roger Dooley: Nancy, we've been talking about CEOs and TED talks and such, but you make one point early that these skills are not just for senior executives. Why is communication and storytelling so important at every level?

Nancy Duarte: Yeah, I think that's a great question. Everyone now is using data to get their job done. I think 67% of jobs now are data enabled, and so that means that everyone from the CEO all the way down to whoever is... Even my receptionist has to deal with some form of tiny bits of

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data. But the thing that's interesting is, like I said, most data is in service of making a decision. That means your individual contributors, your managers, your directors, your executives are all using data, whether it's a small situational thing like, "How many of my customers are paying me in 30 days," right, that's a situational query of data, all the way through to, "Oh, my gosh. What's our 10 year plan based on this, and how do my people need to behave today so my future data looks the right way?" That's how executives deal with data. So up and down the organization, everyone is dealing with data at a different scale.

And so what DataStory does is it makes it so there's a common language and a common framework for decision making around data. And so I took thousands of slides from our... We have the honor and privilege of working with the highest performing brands in the world. And so I took a subset of 2,000 slides that just had data on it, and I looked at what was the chart they used, what was the parts of speech they used, and were there any patterns. And that was one of the most fascinating parts of that whole exercise was the verbs. And you think about using a verb associated with data, what they're doing is they're saying, "Because this chart says this, therefore we need to go take this action." And so often, we completely forget that choosing words like verbs is crafting language.

And so there was this whole really beautiful, insightful few pages around what is the action people need to take because of this finding, and this framework helps you run decisions up and down the chain in a clearer way to aid the speed of decision making. Because I actually think data stalls decision making. I know at my own exec team,

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I used to be able to be like, "Well, the market's saying this and this and that, so I think we need to head that direction." And they'd be like, "Sure, Nancy. We'll go that direction." And now it's like, "Well, is there data? Can we find data to prove that's the right direction?" And it just sometimes slows us down. And so we just have to be really careful and conscientious about when we do use data to communicate what words we choose around it.

Roger Dooley: Right. Well, data by itself often is a little bit ambiguous. I mean, sometimes you may look at a set of data and say, "Wow, okay. It's absolutely clear what we have to do here." But other times, it needs to be interpreted. You need to understand reasons why. But you're talking about verbs. And one part of the book that I really liked Nancy was your rather lengthy list of very specific verbs that people can use that are performance oriented. You talk about process and performance, and in general, performance is a much more important and how to choose your words and even rephrase the same statement in a way that's more performance-oriented rather than process-oriented.

Nancy Duarte: Yeah, it's interesting because I like the word performance verb because whenever I call them strategic verbs, people who are underlings of executives think strategic, the word strategy or strategic, is just cliché. It was funny. And so there are, when I categorize, interestingly I took all the verbs off the slides, and I categorized them into four sections, and I sent them to one of my internal content people. And she's like, "Oh, whoa. No, I think this is simpler than that." And she figured out it was really two types of verbs. And to your point, it was a performance verb and a process verb. A performance verb is

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something that can be watched as a KPI. So it usually has bigger purposes, whereas a process verb is binary. You either did it, or you didn't do it, and the process verbs are in service of reaching a level of performance. So it was interesting.

So it's like if you think about the verb to run and if you thought of that as a performance verb, well, there's what I would call sub verbs you need to do to be able to run. That's like, you got to pump your arms. You got to breathe in your lungs. You got to pump your legs. So there's a smaller micro verbs that go into this effort of to run, and that's what a performance verb is. A performance verb has a bunch of other micro verbs under it, process verbs under it, so that you can accomplish your performance verb. Please tell me that just made sense.

Roger Dooley: Right. What are a few examples of performance verbs, Nancy?

Nancy Duarte: Yeah, I think that's a great question. So if you were to look at a process verb, you may have a process verb that's like, "We need to create a new flavor." That to me is a process. Creating a flavor is a process. Go create a flavor. But you could change that to be quite a bit of a better strategic performance verb by saying, "We're going to disrupt the market through flavor innovation." Creating a new flavor might just be one activity. You might also have to do something like build out a whole new lab. You might have to do a whole bunch of other things to go big with disrupting the market through flavor innovation versus let's go create one new flavor. And so that's an example.

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Roger Dooley: Something that I always tell marketers to do is use both nonconscious and conscious appeals, or you might also say logical and emotional arguments. And you make pretty much the same point with your data stories that a good story has both of those elements, so logic and emotion. And how would that work as you're crafting a story?

Nancy Duarte: Yeah, I get a lot, people are like, "Oh, the data, it speaks for itself. No, it speaks for itself." I'm like, "Yeah, you know what? It does." You can interpret it at its finest, at its factual level, and that is the analytical appeal, and argumentation is a form of communication that's also relatively fact-based. And what this book does is it takes classic facts and argumentation and combines it with persuasion because in reality, the data speaks for itself, and a lot of other people can interpret it.

But AI can do that. We're getting to a place where artificial intelligence now can observe data. It could observe charts, and it can say, "Oh, Q3 over Q3, Jimmy Bob sales are down." It can do that. It could analyze the data for you. Artificial intelligence can do it. What artificial intelligence can't do is say, "What do I need to do about Jimmy Bob's low sales?" It won't be able to do that because that takes human intuition. And so that's why it's really important that we understand yeah, there's facts and argumentation. That's classic, analytical, but you also have to use intuition to understand the action that's going to be taken. And that's why you have to couple it with persuasion.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. And I think partially it goes back to the classic line too. I forget if it was David Ogilvy or somebody who

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originally said that the customer buys with emotion and then explains with or justifies it with reason. And you have to have both components because even if somebody's swayed by the emotion, they need that rational stuff either to convince them that, "Okay, this is the right course," or to explain why it's the right course if they need to. So you can never just rely on one or the other.

We talked about charts a little bit earlier, Nancy, but one thing that I thought was great in the book was how you have to choose a chart that people can grasp very quickly. I don't know how many times I've been in either presentation or somebody is sent information and there's a chart that has so much stuff on it or it's presented in such a way that it's not immediately intuitive as to what's going on. And you have to study it for a while saying, "Oh, okay. This is what the vertical axis means, and this gap here means something else." And at that point, the chart has lost its power. What chart formats do you recommend that people can really grasp in an instant?

Nancy Duarte: Yeah, I appreciate that. When I dug into my clients' charts, I was expecting to make the mother of all chart choosers. I thought, "Oh, my gosh. If I could really connect every single chart type to the specific kinds of ways you should use that chart to communicate, it would be such a win." And then I walked away super disappointed because out of all 2,000 charts, all of them were only three chart types, and that was a bar, a line, and a pie or waterfall, parts of a whole. I was so disappointed because I thought I would have something more profound.

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And then when I stepped back I thought, "That is profound," because every single time these high performing brands chose to communicate broadly, they only used one of those three charts because they're so commonly known and easily understandable. The minute you go outside of some of those, you're in niche territory. You're talking about a chart that's maybe relevant to a narrow industry and isn't as well understood by a broad audience.

And so yeah, that's what we found is that it's pretty finite. And when you're communicating data, you need people to understand it quickly. So you might make complicated charts and complicated spreadsheets and complicated data sets to get to your finding, but when you go to convey the action people need to take, you need that finding to be super clear, super skimmable, just completely identifiable, and clear.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, I think of those spider web charts that sometimes you may see brands evaluated on like, "These are 12 brand attributes, and this is how brand A scores and brand B scores." And so you've got these overlapping graphs that look like they are skewed lines on a orb-weaver spider web. And that, as you say for analysis, that can be useful because you can dig in and say, "Okay, wow. They're really different on this attribute or that attribute." But just throw that in front of somebody and expect them to understand it, and unless they work with them all the time, it's going to be pretty darn confusing.

Nancy Duarte: Yeah. Yep. And there are complex charts that people use every day that are curing cancer or really complicated

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engineering charts. And if you're talking to your engineering peers, those charts are like shorthand. They are easily understood only to those who live and breathe them. So I'm not saying don't use those. I'm just saying when you need to communicate to a broad audience or you need to communicate up, you need to really use the very, very common ones where it's a visual shorthand for everyone.

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). We've got so many good tips here that I'm going to wrap it up and say that today, we are speaking with the renowned communication expert Nancy Duarte, author of the new book *DataStory: Explain Data and Inspire Action Through Story*. Nancy, where can people find you and your ideas?

Nancy Duarte: Wow. Thank you so much. Duarte.com, D-U-A-R-T-E is our website. I'm up on Twitter, @nancyduarte, and I do connect to everyone on LinkedIn who connects to me.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, we will link to those places, to Nancy's books, and to any other resources we mentioned on the show notes page at rogerdooley.com/podcast, and we'll have a text version of our conversation there too. Nancy, thanks for being on the show. Great to have you back.

Nancy Duarte: Well, thank you so much.

Thank you for tuning into this episode of Brainfluence. To find more episodes like this one, and to access all of Roger's online writing and resources, the best starting point is RogerDooley.com.

And remember, Roger's new book, *Friction*, is now available at Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and book sellers everywhere. Bestselling author Dan Pink calls it, "An important read," and Wharton Professor Dr. Joana Berger said, "You'll understand Friction's power and how to harness it."

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