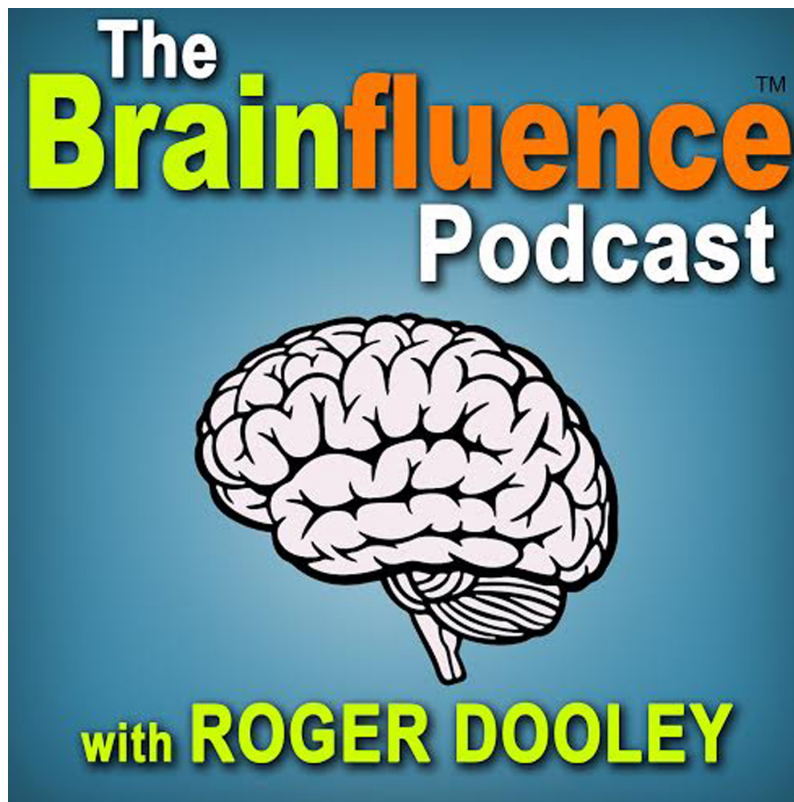


Top 10 Science-Based Headshot Hacks

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Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host



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. This is your host, Roger Dooley. Today on most of the planet, we're experiencing a unique situation. Because of the pandemic, travel is very limited, our offices are mostly empty and it looks like this will be the case for a while longer. The Consumer Electronics Show just announced that they were canceling their January, 2021 show. And Google has said that their people will be working from home for the next 12 months. If you connect these and many other data points, it's very clear that we will be interacting virtually for many months to come. This means having an excellent virtual presence is essential. People won't be seeing you, they'll be seeing electronic images of you. So I've decided to rebroadcast an earlier episode in which I described my top 10 headshot hacks, every one is based on research. You may not be able to use every one or one, two but

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even one or two might add a little sparkle to your virtual presence.

And you don't have to take notes, I compiled an illustrated PDF with these tips that you can download for free. Just go to [rogerdooley.com/headshot](https://www.rogerdooley.com/headshot). You can use these tips in multiple ways. If you're getting a new photo taken, run down the list to see which makes sense for your photographer. If you're picking a photo from a group of existing photos, see which checkoff at least a few of these boxes. And if you were a professional or retouching a photo with Photoshop or some similar tool, you can probably do a subtle tweak or two based on these tips. I even took a printed copy of these tips to the pro that did my last headshot setting. A good photographer will no doubt know some of these already but I'd guess most will still learn something new. Grab the illustrated tip list at [rogerdooley.com/headshot](https://www.rogerdooley.com/headshot). Now on with the show.

Welcome to the Brainfluence podcast. I'm Roger Dooley. Today, we've got a rare solo podcast, just me. I don't do many of these because a key reason when I create these podcasts is I really enjoy talking to smart people and then bringing their actionable ideas to you folks to share them. But if you do enjoy this podcast or have enjoyed a few of my other solo podcasts, feel free to let me know that by leaving me a comment on the show notes page [@rogerdooley.com/podcast](https://www.rogerdooley.com/podcast) or ping me on social media. And of course, this is a good time as any to leave a request for your reviews. If you enjoy these podcasts solo or otherwise, please, please leave a review at iTunes or Stitcher or at the player of your choice. It really helps us get found and I'll really appreciate it.

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Now, anyone who's involved in sales or leadership knows how important first impressions are. In science underscores, what all of us know through practical experience and that is specifically that first impressions are really important in how people perceive you, that they are long lasting and they're surprisingly hard to change once they're formed. Even when people are presented with evidence that contradicts the first impression or there's something about that first impression, that's still sticks. So today we're going to focus on your profile image. This could be a social media profile, it could be something to be used on your website or your company's website in a press release or anything else.

Now, if you look around the web, you will see a huge variation in what people use for their profile photos. You'll see some people who are very stern looking and unsmiling, others who are smiling and still others who appear to be in the middle of a huge caferd. You'll see people who are engaged in different activities or perhaps looking very businesslike, some who are very casual looking, some might be holding a glass of wine or perhaps some object that represents what it is that they do for a living. There's just lots of different things that people do.

But you might ask, which is actually what works, which of these are the best approach. Now, as with most things in life, there is no single best approach that always works but we're going to look at a bunch of tips based on science, things that researchers have found all through actual testing affect how people perceive those photos of people that they see. And at this point, I'll throw out a little bit of caution which typically applies not just to photos but

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to any kind of research and applying that to business. First of all, these effects may be modest in some cases, it may be a second order compared to other aspects of the photo or what's in the photo and sometimes even the research can be a little bit contradictory, an effect might help in one area perhaps but hurt in another.

Well, we're going to talk about smiling and that can positively influence certain aspects of how people see you but perhaps that same smile could reduce some other positive attributes. And a couple of other quick notes, for one, most of these tips had been covered in a post that I wrote at my Neuromarketing blog. And there you'll find not just the tips but you'll see some actual illustrations of these effects or perhaps from the research papers and you'll see links to the research itself if you want to dig deeper. So I'll put a link in the show notes page [@rogerdooley.com/podcast](https://www.rogerdooley.com/podcast) that will lead you to the Neuromarketing post where you can both see the illustrations and also dig deeper if you really want to.

Also, some of this information is kind of lengthy. So I've created a quick little checklist that you can use if you're getting ready to have your profile photo taken at a photographer or having somebody shoot your picture for you and you can download that. And I also include a link to that on the show notes page [@rogerdooley.com/podcast](https://www.rogerdooley.com/podcast). So with all that housekeeping out of the way, let's see what science says about what your profile photo should look like.

Now, the first tip deals with whether you should have a photo that shows the left side or the right side of your face. And the answers to this actually somewhat predates

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what we consider to be modern science. For centuries, artists have been somewhat biased toward one side when they painted portraits. And scientists have since analyzed and some studies have found that as many as 78% of portraits show the left side of the subject's face. Now you might wonder why that is. And this is true by the way for artists like Leonardo da Vinci, the Mona Lisa skews toward the left side of her face a little bit and many, many other artists tend to emphasize that left side, particularly for female subjects but actually for both genders.

And so modern experiments have born this out too. There was a one test at Wake Forest University that showed people who were exposed to a photo showing the left or right side of subject spaces not only expressed a preference on average for the left side photos but also when the researchers measured pupil dilation, which is one way of measuring the arousal of the viewers, they also found, again, that pupils dilate a little bit more on average when viewing the left side photos. And so what's going on, why does that left side preference exists?

Scientists think that there might be a couple of reasons. First of all, our faces are not perfectly symmetrical but the reason that they speculate that we have this sort of left side bias is because of the way our brains are wired. Most people's left side of their body is controlled by the right half of their brain which tends to be a little bit more based on emotion than the left side of the brain. And so they guess that perhaps the left side of your face shows a little bit more emotion than the right side. Now, typically in my experience, what portrait photographers do is they will shoot some left side photos, right side photos, some straight head photos and so on and see which one looks

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best. And you may find that one particular angle simply looks best for your face or for other features.

And if that's the case, I would go with that. But if you're really on the fence between a left or right side photo and they both look pretty good or about the same, choose the left one because chances are people who are looking at it will find it a little bit more attractive than the other one. Our next tip has to do with the pupils in your photo, that is the pupils in your eyes. I think it was Shakespeare that said, windows are the eyes to the soul. And there's an element of truth in that because our pupils will voluntarily dilate or contract usually based on the amount of light coming in but also depending on other factors like arousal.

And when our researchers had people evaluate photos of people where in some way cases, the pupils have been digitally modified to make them bigger, they found that after they analyzed a bunch of subjects looking at the same photos with different people sizes, they found that when the subject in the photos pupils were a little bit larger they were viewed as being more trustworthy. And that's a thing that's certainly good for all of us. So there's a couple of things you can do to make your pupils a little bit bigger. First of all, bright lights tend to contract the pupils. So if your photographer can use lighting that does not cause your pupils to reduce the pinpoints, that's a good thing. And also just like those researchers did, you could, I suppose, have the pupils in the photos Photoshopped to subtly increase their size.

And while we're on the subject of eyes, there's something else called the limbal ring. And if you don't know what that

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is, don't be embarrassed. I didn't know what it was when I first heard of the term. The limbal ring is the dark area in your iris. That's the sort of center of your eye that butts up against the white of your eye. So if you look at a photo of an eye, you'll see obviously the white and then the circle in the middle that represents the iris. And they'll be a dark people in the middle of that but at the border of the iris and the white, there'll be a dark ring, that's the limbal ring. Now in one experiment, scientists took photos of people and digitally modified the thickness of the limbal ring and then asked other subjects to evaluate how attractive these people were. And what they found was that on average, the photos that had the slightly thicker limbal rings, a more prominent limbal ring were viewed as being more attractive.

And the scientists speculate that this is sort of a marker for youth. Typically, younger people have thicker rings. So that might be an indication that this person is a little bit younger, healthier, more robust and so on. Now, you cannot change the size of your limbal ring, it pretty much is what it is. So other than wearing really unusual, hard to find contacts, the only way you can change your limbal ring is using a tool like Photoshop.

Another really common question that comes up is whether you should smile. And if you do, should it be a big smile or a little smile? There is science on this topic but it's a little bit more complicated. There's not a single good answer to this. Brian Knutson of Stanford who has done some great research, he and George Loewenstein did the early study that showed that high prices actually activate those areas associated with the pain in our brain

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and did a study on smiling and looked at two different variables and how people are perceived.

One was affiliation which might be viewed in more simple terms as friendliness and the other was dominance, how dominant a particular individual might be perceived. And in that same study he used four different facial expressions, one represented happiness. So the faces were predominantly happy, another set of faces showed anger and disgust, others were neutral expressions and finally he had some sort of sad expressions in the mix. What he found was that the photos where people were angry or disgusted looking were viewed as being high in dominance. So these people were viewed as being relatively dominant individuals, perhaps because they were expressing this strong emotion but also were viewed as being low in friendliness.

Now the happy group, those photos where the people were expressing happiness were just about as high in dominance but were also much, much higher in affiliation. And it seems like the expressions that you'd want to avoid in your photo, one would be neutral. People who were viewed as being neutral or not seen as particularly dominant or seen as being particularly friendly either and people who were viewed as being sad were actually viewed as being significantly less dominant. They were negative on the dominant scale and also were pretty much neutral as far as happiness or friendliness goes. So avoid a very neutral expression or definitely avoid a sad expression. Although most of us wouldn't choose a sad expression for a profile photo anyway.

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And what I got out of that research was that in most cases, it's going to be best to use a friendly smiling photo. There may be certain situations, perhaps if you are say, a litigation attorney or some other position where both dominance and strength is important but you don't want to necessarily convey that sense of friendliness that a rather angry stern expression might work but for most of us go with a smile. And another separate study showed that a small smile increase the trustworthiness of photos. In other words, when people are asked about how trustworthy an individual might be when the photo was presented with a small smile, that was the most trustworthy condition, a neutral expression was less trustworthy and sort of an angry downturn mouth, a scowl was viewed as least trustworthy.

And along with that, they also found that slightly surprised eyebrows, in other words, if your eyebrows were turned up just a little bit, maximize the feeling of trust. And the benefits of smiling don't stop there. Yet another study found that a small smile increase the perception of intelligence on the part of the viewer. So it would seem like smiling is pretty much the way to go for almost any situation but as usual there are exceptions. And one exception is if you are a male and you are using a photo perhaps say, on a dating site where it's specifically important to be perceived of as attractive and perhaps sexually attractive for male subjects being viewed by female viewers, a happy expression was surprisingly perhaps the least attractive of several other options.

However, for females being viewed by males, a happy expression was the most attractive. So women can smile with confidence whether it's a business portrait or

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something that's going to be used on a dating site but for men or perhaps for that dating side portrait, you want to use a little bit less happy of an expression. Another question that comes up often in photo shoots is, where should the subject be looking? And there's an answer for that too. Scientists in the UK and Australia ran a study where they had people evaluate photos of the same person looking either straight at the camera or with eyes slightly averted to one side or the other. And what they found was that a direct gaze was the most attractive. So again, in general, unless you're going for some kind of special effect, looking directly at the camera will be seen as being more attractive.

It seems to me too, this is not a scientific conclusion but I might be viewed as being a little more trustworthy and honest as well. Now the next tip is probably the strangest one in this particular group and that is the effect of alcohol. For some reason, scientists decided to run a test where they had subjects evaluate photos of people under one of three conditions. And these three conditions were either no alcohol or having had one drink or having had several drinks or the equivalent thereof. And what the scientists found, which really I found quite shocking was that the most attractive condition was the one drink condition. In other words, the people who had had one drink were viewed as more attractive than their same photos when they had either zero drinks or more than one drink.

And scientist speculate that perhaps that very modest amount of alcohol had a couple of effects. It might relax them a little bit, perhaps make them a little bit more emotionally expressive and it also might cause a slight

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flushing in their face, giving them a little bit rather more healthy appearance. And it could really evaluate what the reason was, although they did hasten to point out that the effect occurred with just one drink and after that, the effects on the evaluation of the photos were negative. Presumably, people's faces got a little bit more slack and did not really convey the impression that you'd want to convey.

But although I've never seen a photographer recommend this, this study would suggest that perhaps having one small alcoholic beverage before your photo shoot might make you just a little bit more attractive. But while we're on the topic of alcohol, there is one caution. One thing that I see very frequently on the web is that in their profile photos, people will want to portray themselves as being sort of a happy, fun, loving individual and so there'll be holding a glass of wine or perhaps some other beverage that's clearly alcoholic in nature. And there are studies that show that has a negative effect on the perceived intelligence of the person where in other words, the scientists had people view photos of a person, either with alcohol in the picture or without.

And when there was alcohol in the picture, the perceived intelligence of that person was lower. And those scientists speculate that perhaps alcohol is associated with cognitive impairment and the mere presence of an alcoholic beverage in the photo somehow transmitted this cognitive impairment effect to the person shown in the photo. So if you do want to have that profile photo with a glass of wine, use it on your Facebook page perhaps but not on your LinkedIn page.

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Now, the last tip that I want to talk about is also perhaps quite strange and that is a mimicking effect. If you want your readers or viewers to experience a particular emotion, you can include your photo with that emotion clearly expressed and it can produce that emotion in the viewer. Scientists in Sweden ran a test where they found that even very brief exposures to an image of a person who was expressing an emotion say, anger or happiness caused very brief changes in the facial expression of the viewer in the same way. In other words, the viewers unconsciously and very briefly mimicked the expression that they were seeing. And there's also research going all the way back to Dr. Paul Ekman, showing that if your facial muscles are in a particular position, even involuntarily or some sort of artificially created position, you will tend to form that same emotion.

So for instance, if you are a politician trying to get a message across or perhaps a marketer who wants your customers to feel angry about something associated with the appropriate message, you could include your photo with an angry look on your face and that would amplify the emotional impact that you're trying to create. So those are all the tips we have for today. And I'd encourage you to visit the show notes page [@rogerdooley.com/podcast](https://www.rogerdooley.com/podcast) because we will have there, first of all, a transcript of this podcast if you want a version that you can read in PDF format or save for later or there'll be a link to the original blog post at my Neuromarketing blog and also a link to the quick download checklist so that if you want to scan these before you have your picture taken, they'll be there in a really simple brief format.

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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."

For more information or for links to Amazon and other sellers, go to [RogerDooley.com/Friction](https://www.RogerDooley.com/Friction).

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