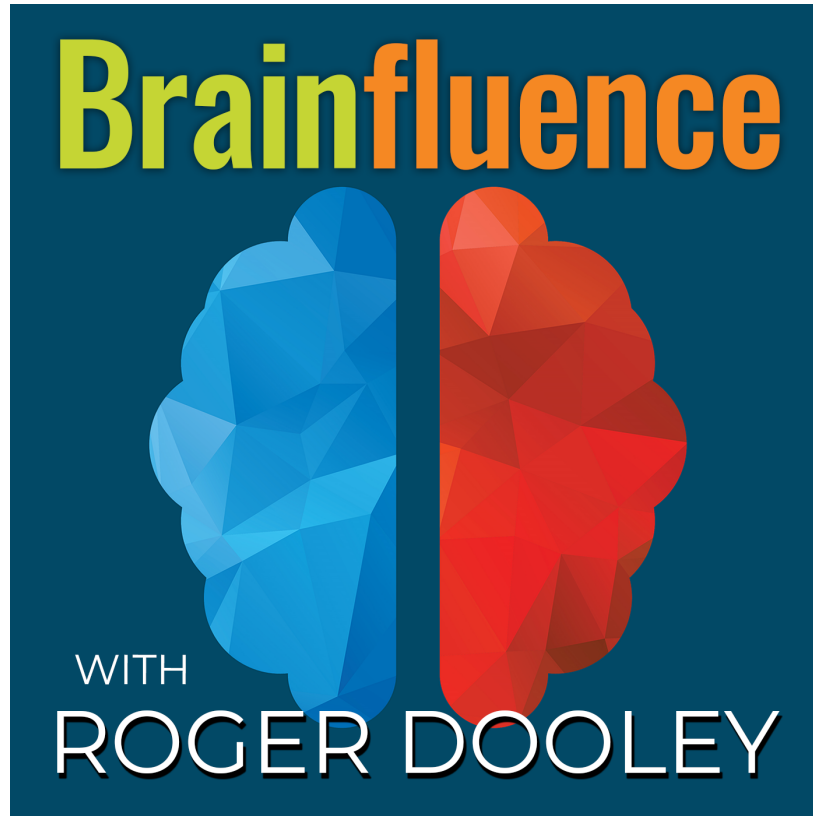


Unleash Your Primal Brain with Tim Ash

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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'm Roger Dooley. Joining me today is Tim Ash. You may know him as the author of Landing Page Optimization, perhaps the most thorough and authoritative guide to conversion optimization, or as the organizer of the Conversion Conference series and other digital marketing events, or as the co-founder of conversion optimization firm, SiteTuners. But today we've got Tim Ash 2.0 here to discuss the ideas in his new book, Unleash Your Primal Brain, Demystifying how we think and why we act. Tim, welcome to the show.

Tim Ash: Thank you, Roger. Glad to be here. Yeah. And I remember when you were keynoting our conference not that long ago. It's great to have known you over the years in the industry.

Roger Dooley: Well, yeah, and actually I have to give you credit for part of my own evolution, maybe sort of a play on the theme of

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the book here, but... and that is because when I was at that conference, one of my fellow keynoters was none other than BJ Fogg, who was there in his purple magician's robe.

That was my first exposure, at least firsthand to his thinking and his Fogg behavior model. And that really influenced my development going forward because I really saw how that explained, to me at least, so much about how behavior change worked. And ultimately became the basis in part for my persuasion slide framework and led to my current book, Friction, because that to me was the most important element in persuasion slide and in fact, if you talk to BJ Fogg, he will say, "Don't focus on motivating people to do stuff, focus on making it easier, increasing ability," is what he would say, but-

Tim Ash: Yeah, his model is for an action to occur you need three things to happen at the same time, you need the motivation, the ability, and a trigger, and all those have to come together for the action to take place, and it's brilliant in its simplicity. I mean, I think it applies to so many things if you're a marketer.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, and in motivation tends to be expensive. I guarantee you'll get more orders on your site if you normally charge for shipping and give away shipping for free. Or if you give people a 25% off coupon on their order, you'll sell more, but there is a price associated with that or a cost associated with that. So yeah, his thinking is really powerful, and that's part of that is why I ended up creating my Friction book, because to me I found as I researched it, I was initially thinking mainly of the effect on sales and customer experience. But as I dug into it, as

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perhaps it happened to you with your new Primal Brain book, the more you dig into something, it expands into new territory and-

Tim Ash: Yep, down the rabbit hole.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, definitely. So anyway, in my little intro, I talked about what you've been doing. Why don't you bring us up to speed on what you're doing these days?

Tim Ash: Sure. As you mentioned, I was the CEO and founder of SiteTuners and the Conversion Conference, which is an international conference series on improving website effectiveness. Now it's called Digital Growth Unleashed and still going on in Europe and the U.S. but I actually stepped out of an active role at SiteTuners in the agency, and I really want to focus on the evangelism and keynote speaking. I've been doing that as you know, badges behind me, for a while now. So I was focusing on international keynote speaking right before the pandemic curtain came down. So I had events in Russia, Italy, Brazil, Argentina, canceled just in the last few months alone, but it did give me the opportunity to write the book, which is my other passion project.

Roger Dooley: Right. And it's really a fascinating book. It's based largely on evolutionary psychology, and I'm a believer in evolutionary psychology, not because there's so much in the way of evidence or statistical evidence behind it, but because it explains so much so effectively. And I'm curious, what's your take on evolutionary psychology? I mean, obviously you buy into it, do the critics of it have any valid points?

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Tim Ash: I don't know. I don't want to get into these nuanced arguments about the critics criticizing stuff, but to me, I'm sorry, but it's just like, it's fricking obvious in the sense that the brain didn't just appear wholesale, the human brain and start to work and it evolved. And early life on Earth, we share things with the most primitive forms of life at the chemical level, and reptiles, mammals, apes, and then our bizarre, unique recent evolution. So you have to trace that whole evolutionary arc to understand where we picked up a lot of our behaviors and a lot of the ways that we think.

And that's the prism through which you need to view it, the brain evolved to help us survive. And here's the pressures under which it evolved, and here's where we ended up. So to me, without that, you can't understand the business of persuasion and marketing. You can't understand leadership, personal relationship, communication, storytelling, personal development. I mean, all of it is based on evolutionary psychology, so that I don't know how you would invalidate that if we are the product of the path we took to get here.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. And that reminds me, we were talking about BJ Fogg, when he came out with his Fogg behavior model, he did not have a mass of experimental evidence to back that up. The way most psychology papers are, "Well, yeah, we did a hundred subjects on this and two hundred subjects on that. And over a course of three years, we finally came up with this framework." But it, as you say, is in one sense obvious, in other words, once you see it, you say, "Well, this makes total sense." And then also I think firms like yours have proven those facts in there to be true time and time again. I mean-

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Tim Ash: Oh yeah.

Roger Dooley: BJ didn't have to run a bunch of experiments because every conversion optimizer on the planet was basically demonstrating that his stuff was true.

Tim Ash: That's right, exactly right. We had SiteTuners, we've created 1.2 billion in documented value for our clients from the Nestle's and Google's of the world on down. So I know it works, probably most of that value is using these evergreen tactics or strategies rather. So if you're a marketer and you don't understand how the brain works and what you're trying to influence the tactics don't really matter. It's not about green button, orange button split testing. It's about, "What's the motivation and what does our brain care about in terms of survival?" So I know it works because, so we made our clients a lot of money and continue to at SiteTuners, but I wanted to get the word out more broadly.

My problem is that you have, like you say, behavioral economists, you have neuroimaging guys, you have habit change people, public policy, understanding mindfulness and personal development. And all these people are like the proverbial blind men feeling different parts of the elephant. And I just want to shine a big spotlight and say, "Here's the elephant, here's how we got here." And so it's not really these desperate, disparate rather tactics that we should be using, it's understanding the broader why behind evolutionary psychology.

Roger Dooley: Right. And less people think that this is a really inaccessible tome that explains human behavior. I can say that it is not, it's a very readable book. It's not

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extremely long, I think the time estimate was 174 minutes or something to read it on the back cover.

Tim Ash: You can see how thick it is. I mean, it's a six by nine book and it's not super thick or anything like that. I really cut out all the fluff. And I did it in a very readable style because I knew I was going to make the audio book, which I've recorded narrated myself, and there are going to be translations. So there's no graphs, no footnotes. I'm not citing the same old studies that everybody sites and rehashes. This is a really fast paced journey through evolution and told with some exciting anecdotes as well.

Roger Dooley: And it's really a basic guide to the operating system of... I think if you look at what you're talking about from the brain standpoint, you get people coming at it from different angles, but this is sort of, "Okay, here is the basic operating system. And now use from that what you need." If you want to talk about habits, here are parts, if you want to talk about learning, here are other parts and so on.

Tim Ash: Yeah, yeah, exactly right. Yeah. I mean, I look at it as having three broad audiences. There's the business audience, so everything from leadership, the marketing sales persuasion, that world. Then there's personal relationships, if you want to understand organizations and cultures and tribes and gender differences and what motivates us. And then there's personal development, if you want to understand how to have a good life, you really need to understand how the brain really works. Instead of assuming that, "Oh, we're just logical little robots all trying to optimize our own existence here." That's not reality.

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Roger Dooley: Right. Unfortunately, there's still a lot of decision-making that seems to be based on that approach, as opposed to how our brains really work. So how did the book evolve? Did you start off focused on one area and did it expand? I gave you the origin story for Friction. Did this expand as you went? Or did you actually start off with this vision in place and just fill in the blank?

Tim Ash: Yeah. Well, you know what? This is a story that's 35 years or so in the making. When I was at University of California, San Diego, I was there for undergrad and graduate school. My work was in cognitive science and computer engineering, put those together. My graduate work was in neural networks or how to teach computers by example, instead of programming them, what you now call AI or machine learning. So I did, I studied the brain, always interested in it and then applied it to marketing and running my own digital agencies. Now come full circle, where I really want everyone to understand this, not just for a few clients to benefit financially from understanding how the brain works.

So I guess you'd say it, it needed to have given birth to, that was a weird construction, but hope you understand, it needed to get it out. It needed to get born. And I just want to be kind of like Carl Sagan of the brain, there's that cosmos series back in the day. And he'd say, "Billions and billions of stars," and Carl Sagan was the guy that made astrophysics popular. If you can make that fun, I think I can make the human brain fun too.

Roger Dooley: Right. And you do a good job of that, Tim. We think of the brain as something that evolved continuously over time, that from simpler brains, more complex brains, but one

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factoid in the book that I didn't know about was that brains appeared and then apparently disappeared in our evolutionary history. Explain that one.

Tim Ash: Yeah. Well, yeah. So brains are really designed for the complexity of moving in real time through the environment, plants don't have brains, but even the smallest insects do, because if you have to make decisions in real time, you need some decision-making ability. But there are certain times that certain creatures used to have a brain, but because it takes so much energy to maintain one, they kind of devolve the way. There are certain marine animals, sponges and such, that actually there's evidence that they had brains and then became brainless because-

Roger Dooley: Right, became more plant-like basically because they didn't have a lot of decisions to make.

Tim Ash: Yeah. And it's an energy balance, you can think of for people that we have three major systems in our body. We have digestion, which takes a lot of energy, voluntary motion, moving our bodies voluntarily, and the brain. And the brain in people is super energy intensive. It takes about 25% of our resting calories to power of our brain. That's about three times as much as even our closest great ape cousins, so it better be doing something useful if it's burning 25% of your energy.

Roger Dooley: Right. And yeah, one of Kahneman's insights, which I know you're very familiar with, was system one and system two thinking, where system one is a lot easier for our brains to handle. It doesn't involve that grinding away calculation that making logical, rational analysis and

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weighing pluses and minuses and doing that. That's why we'd like to make emotional decisions, quick decisions, rule-based decisions, things that are pretty energy efficient. You wouldn't go to the supermarket, you'd be frozen forever if you tried to make every decision in system tube. It's really for just one or two items.

Tim Ash: Yeah. I'll go even further. I will say that if there is indisputable evidence that we literally can't decide without an emotional component. In other words, if you want to call it the logical part of the brain will present us with options, but which one to pick? We're paralyzed. Then when you actually damage those parts of the brain that connect the two, people can't decide literally. So there's no such thing as an unemotional decision. That's total bullshit.

Roger Dooley: Right? Well, I had Antonio Damasio on the show a while back, and he makes a key point that emotions are not a bug. They're a feature that... they actually serve us very well. Even though we always imply that emotional decisions are bad and probably incorrect, that emotions get in the way of progress and rational thinking and so on. But in fact, they are really an important, very important part of our thinking process. And they're there for a reason.

Tim Ash: Absolutely, and the quote unquote logical part of the brain is also not there to solve math problems. It's not what's seven times 14? Okay. That part of the brain can function. It's very difficult for it to do so, but as soon as you're not doing some kind of computational task like that, it defaults to social reasoning. That's the other thing people misunderstand. The reason our big brain got so big is to

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figure out the relationships in our tribe, in our group. And we are the most social of all mammals, it's about 100 to 200 close relationships that we can have. So we're modeling things like, "Oh, Roger, if my son goes out with your daughter, and then you hire him as an intern, what kind of fallout will that be on our relationship?" I mean, the main part of the brain, the modern part is there to model the complexity and updating those social standing in our tribe, to modeling other people's behavior, that allows us to cooperate better.

Roger Dooley: Which brings us to today, when we were both talking about going to conferences, where we would interact with people and meet people, meet people in our industry, meet people, old friends, new friends, find exciting, interesting people. Like I discovered BJ Fogg at that and said, "Wow, this guy has really got some great ideas." Now everything is virtual. And hopefully it won't stay that way for too long. But I'm curious, the book was largely created pre pandemic. What have you observed about human behavior since then? And what advice do you have?

Tim Ash: Great question. So actually the book was created during the pandemic and it was because all of my keynote speaking opportunities fell apart for the foreseeable future that I had the time to focus on writing it. So I actually wrote it this spring, during the pandemic. But to answer your question, like I said, we have a high need to be social. I have a whole part of the book, several chapters called Hyper Social. The worst thing you can do to human beings, mammals in general, but us to even a greater degree is isolate us. And so what you're seeing right now is this mental health crisis, domestic abuse is up, suicide

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is up, depression among young people, 18 to 24, a quarter of those people right now are depressed clinically. I think, so these are things that happen when you isolate people. And it's very hard. I mean, whatever you think of the politics of gathering in large groups at the moment, it goes against our nature to not do that. And to get that social support.

Roger Dooley: Well, people seem to be shocked that college students are returning to campus and actually socializing. They're going out to parties and such, it's like who could have possibly predicted that?

Tim Ash: Thank you, Captain Obvious. Yeah, I mean of course.

Roger Dooley: I really think that some people, getting back to your key theme here, there were university administrators who felt that if they simply presented the facts about transmission and infection and risks and so on, that they could then expect students to behave in the way they wanted them to. And of course, that really... lots of voices said, "No, that's never going to happen." And those voices happened to be right. But I think that's perhaps a metaphor for the bigger picture, where we expect that in general people will behave logically. Particularly if we give them the facts, whether it's deciding on a political candidate or a party or deciding what brand to buy at the store. When in fact, that really isn't the way it works.

Tim Ash: No, no, and people don't behave logically or even in their own best interests, I would say. So one of the keys is that understanding that our big evolutionary advantage was not adapting the each ecological niche we're in because we took over the whole planet. It was one big bet on

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spreading culture, in an order to spread culture efficiently, a lot of things had to happen. And one of the keys is that we need to basically mimic and ape and transmit information to our tribe unaltered.

In other words, if I just tell you something, whether it's right, wrong, or indifferent, you have to copy it faithfully to pass it onto the next person. If you don't do that, then the tribe doesn't have cohesion and our group advantage of surviving based on our cultural knowledge goes away. And so what that means is that, especially in times of uncertainty, people fall back on their learned cultural patterns, on their tribal knowledge, instead of believing what their own eyes and direct experience actually tell them. So that's again, not a bug. It's a feature of human beings. We evolved for culture spread and being faithful to our tribal culture is what we do in times of uncertainty.

Roger Dooley: Right. I guess that leads into the power of story that you mentioned in your book, because that's one key way culture and information is transmitted in a relatively faithful fashion. You don't give people a list of five things to remember, if you incorporate that as part of a compelling story, people will remember it.

Tim Ash: So I have a whole chapter in storytelling. There's just so much in the book. I'm sorry, I'm jumping around a little, but-

Roger Dooley: That's good. No, we're trying to... we've got a limited time here, Tim. Let's communicate as much as we can some valuable information for our audience and putting this all in the form of stories, perhaps. Make it more memorable.

Tim Ash: Absolutely. I wish we could, but yeah, not enough time to.

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Roger Dooley: Next time.

Tim Ash: But one of the stories I want to tell you is that there's two reasons for stories to exist, if you think about it. So one of them is to spread cultural knowledge, and again that's critical. That stories reinforce values, belief systems. For example, if I were to tell you the story of the matador, who definitely sidesteps and sticks his sword between the shoulder blades of the bull in the arena. If I'm telling that story to someone that's in Spain, they're thinking, "Oh, the impeccable warrior, the tradition, the culture, all of this personal bravery stuff." And if I tell that to someone, PETA and the ethical treatment of animals, they'll think, "Okay, that's barbaric and we're subsidizing the torture of animals," right? So the same story, the same objective truth is experienced through very different prisms, depending on our background cultural package and what we bring to it.

So one main function of stories is to enforce tribal cohesion, and to make sure that there's fidelity to how we behave inside of our own tribe. Okay? The other important function of story is to simulate reality. So if you go to the movies and you see someone taking a leap off of a cliff, and they survived the fall and dive into the lake, well, you don't want to try that too many times. The first time you try it, you might die, but vicariously experience something in the form of a story allows you to essentially get secondhand experience. So the other function of story is simulation, so we can try dangerous stuff or try situations that we're not likely to encounter and get training for life, but without having to pay the price.

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Roger Dooley: Now story was one of my first neuro-marketing things, because there was this great research that showed that you could just about control somebody's brain with a story. I think I used that in my talk at your early conversion conference, where they put subjects in two different fMRI machines and found that when one person started telling a story, the other person's brain synchronized with theirs in just a matter of seconds.

Tim Ash: That's right, that's right. And it's important to have the same cultural background, otherwise you're going to interpret things very differently, but you can literally get areas of the brain to sync up at the meaning level. Not the words or sounds, it can even be translated to a different language, but the meaning that they take away from it is the same, assuming that they're part of the same cultural tribe. Absolutely.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. Tim, did you have any surprises when you were researching the book? I mean, obviously you've been working in the space and a lot of this was just recording what you already knew and maybe documenting it to make sure you had it right. But as you're doing the research, do you find anything that said, "Wow, hey, I didn't know that. That's really interesting."

Tim Ash: Oh God, there's so many nuggets in the book. I can't even start to list them. But one of the things on a personal level that was very powerful was how important sleep is. A lot of people talk about, "Well, diet, exercise, and sleep," and sleep is a distant third. No sleep is the prerequisite for all life. It's daily life support. There's no animal on the planet, insect or animal, that doesn't have some form of sleep. And there's a lot of detailed nuances

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there, but basically if you're not getting seven to nine hours of sleep on a regular basis, you're literally killing yourself. In fact, I just saw an article yesterday that said those amyloid proteins that build up in the brain of Alzheimer's patients, that happens when you don't have regular sleep. So if you want to get Alzheimer's earlier, don't sleep. Okay? Sleep is just so critical. That's the bottom line.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. Everything coming out from research in the last few years has emphasized that, but not everybody's quite internalized that. But I've personally been working on my own sleep habits because I had years ago been of the school that, "Well, hey, if I can save an hour a day by sleeping less, that's time saved." But then the research started coming out and saying, "Okay, that's not really the right way to do it."

Tim Ash: Yeah. What happens is you get more paranoid because you can't judge people's emotional affect accurately, you get less creative, you can't memorize information, and you forget all the physical training. If you're training physical skills that you learned the day before, if you don't get adequate sleep. You can't cheat sleep.

Roger Dooley: What habits have you changed? Have you worked on your sleep? Or are there some other habits that you've changed or behaviors that you've changed as you researched the book and said, "Wow. Hey, this is something I need to do."

Tim Ash: Yeah. I've been much more conscious of culture spreads. So again, there's lots of things that need to happen for culture to happen. And one of those is you have to be

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willing to learn, and I consider myself a lifelong learner. But again, if you're going to have that chain of information spread in transmission, you have to be equally willing to teach.

And so the payoff of mentoring and the prestige that we get from that is something that I'm keenly aware of. Paying it forward of teaching others, to create that transmission. I think that's a huge motivator for people, often more than even money or overt success is the prestige of mentoring others. So, that's something I'm keenly aware of and I try to actively do. And actually, my book is one of my attempts to do that.

Roger Dooley: There was some research a while back that I saw on the human need for mentoring, to be a mentor, that as you reach a certain stage in your life, there is almost an evolutionary compulsion to be a mentor, to teach people stuff.

Tim Ash: Yeah. Not almost, it's absolutely compulsion. Think about this, we're the only mammal that lives decades beyond our reproductive years. That's so we can transmit culture and knowledge. Most of the animals, if you don't reproduce, die. You're useless, right? We actually are there to teach the younger ones.

Roger Dooley: Right. I think that valuing the wisdom of elders is increasingly important to me as, I guess-

Tim Ash: As we get to be elders.

Roger Dooley: That's right. But anyway, I want to be respectful of your time, tell our listeners and viewers how they can find you and your ideas.

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Tim Ash: Absolutely. Well, that's easy enough. If you want to know about my public speaking or internet consulting, I still do quite a bit of that, just go to TimAsh.com and all the information about the book. Again, it's available in ebook, audio book, and you get autograph copies from me right now, pre-release in the U.S. is available at PrimalBrain.com. So just TimAsh.com and PrimalBrain.com, and you'll get all the info you need.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, we will link to those places and to any other resources we spoke about on the show notes page at RogerDooley.com podcast, and we will have the audio video and text versions of our conversation there too. Tim, thanks for being on the show. Good to catch up.

Tim Ash: Roger, it's always a pleasure. I wish we had more time.

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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