

# Immersion with Paul Zak

## Brainfluence

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**Intro** [00:00:00]: Welcome to Brainfluence, where author and international keynote speaker Roger Dooley shares powerful but practical ideas from world class experts and sometimes a few of his own. To learn more about Roger's books, Brainfluence and Friction, and to find links to his latest articles and videos, the best place to start is Rogerdooley.com. Roger's keynotes will keep your audience entertained and engaged. At the same time, he will change the way they think about customer and employee experience. To check availability for an in person or virtual keynote or workshop, visit rogerdooley.com.

**Roger Dooley** [00:00:38]:

Welcome to Brainfluence. I'm Roger Dooley. If I told you today's guest is Dr. Love talking about a new book subtitled the Science of the Extraordinary and the Source of Happiness, you'd probably think I had inadvertently booked a new age guru with radical new self help ideas. But before you reach for your device controls, let me explain. Paul Zak has been called Dr. Love because of his groundbreaking research on oxytocin, the hormone of human trust. And he's here to discuss the research in his new book Immersion, which is full of actionable business insights. Our video audience can see that he is not wearing a tie dye shirt with gold chains. In fact, Paul's previous book, Trust Factor, is the one I most often recommend to business colleagues and clients focused on improving organization performance. Welcome back, Paul.

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**Paul Zak** [00:01:22]:

Thanks so much, Roger.

**Roger Dooley** [00:01:23]:

Paul, your new book is mostly built on insights from your relatively new company called Immersion that uses smartwatches and fitness devices to measure activity that you then turn into actionable business data. Now, my interest in this topic goes back to 2015, when Apple first introduced their watch. Around that time, I introduced a slide in most of my presentations that was titled The Future of Neuromarketing, and it had a picture of the Apple watch because I felt that sooner or later these devices would be tools for neuromarketers. And so I'm pleased that you are bringing that to pass. But at the same time, I've got a late model Samsung Smartwatch, a very nice device, works pretty well as far as I can see, for tracking exercise and such, giving me good heart rate measurements and distance and so on. But at the same time, I can also do sleep measurements on it, but there it's not so good. I can be sometimes working quietly, my desk, or even sitting, playing a rather immersive game like Call of Duty. And later on I'll look and see that it's logged me as having slept during that period. And it's kind of annoying that it can't figure out that I'm actually working or typing or even slaughtering digital enemies. And I'm curious, if Samsung, this giant consumer electronics company, has difficulty figuring out when I'm sleeping, how is it that you guys can drive insights from those same devices?

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**Paul Zak [00:02:52]:**

It's a really good question, so let's take it slowly. So in my academic lab, we started asking a question which was if we gave people a message or an experience, would they take an action? A costly action. Donate to charity. Email your congressperson. Post on social media. So, as you know, we always start with looking at changes in neurochemicals. And we thought oxytocin might be part of this story. And so we would do these blood draws before and after and then pay people because we're torturing them. And some people responded, some people didn't. And then as we started publishing this research, we were approached by DARPA, which is the Defense Department's research arm. And they say, hey, we would like to be more effective communicators or train soldiers to be more effective communicators to reduce conflict, right? As opposed to be putting a gun to your head, hey, where are the bad guys? Could I tell you a story? Could I create an environment? And so, frankly, we had millions of dollars of taxpayer money, and we started measuring areas in the brain that had high densities of these signals that we saw in blood, these neurochemical signals, as where the receptors lived and measured about 140 signals simultaneously, both in the brain and the peripheral nervous system. And for the military, we had to have something that was deployable, right? So fMRI wasn't going to work. We did a lot of high density EEG work, but EEG is really, really sensitive. And so eventually we did a mapping from the brain to the peripheral nervous system. So we found is that the cranial nerves, which is like the output file of the brain, that's a nice network effect

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we're measuring at the level of the brain itself. Those are disaggregated signals. And so once we found these key signals, in particular for Dopamine binding to the prefrontal cortex, which is associated with attention, and with oxytocin release, which is associated with I call emotional resonance, I'm going to use one bad word. One of our subscribers called that they give a shit measure. But emotionally, I have to give a shit about this. I have to actually care about it to motivate me to take an action. So again, the military wanted a prediction engine, and that's what we built. It turned out these cranial nerves innervate your heart and your gut. Now, they have very subtle effects and the downstream effects of Dopamine oxytocin. So the effects we're picking up from the smartwatch again, it's a dumb device. It's smart.

Algorithms in the cloud are these third and fourth order effects on the very subtle changes in the rhythms of the heart. So having said all that, we eventually, I guess, 2018, late 2017, built a platform so that we could democratize neuroscience. Take this core measure, which I've called immersion, which I believe captures the value that the brain assigns to an experience with social content. And the more immersion you are in that experience, the more the brain goes, oh, this is really important to me. And then that sticks in the brain. So, as you know, Roger highly emotional experiences are saving the brain in a very particular way. So I think of this as a little nagging. Your sweet mother in your brain. Roger, Roger, Roger. Remember this thing that we just saw? And I think that's why we're able to take these electrical signals that we then have convolved mathematically to maximize predictive accuracy. So immersion does not exist in nature. We've done unnatural things to natural data to maximize prediction. So we can predict things

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like sales pumps from advertising and purchases from people in stores with the 85 plus percent accuracy. So happy to talk about some of those applications. And so the punchline is that we want to not have you talk to me. I'm a weirdo. You know me, right? Weird PhD people. And neuroscience traditionally was too expensive, too slow, and really not optimized to predict outcomes, but just to predict what the brain was doing. So we did the opposite. We're like, okay, let's start with prediction and just work backwards and see if we can identify the signals that tell us what people will do, not what they feel, not what they intend.

**Roger Dooley** [00:06:51]:

Well, in Trust Factor Paul, you found, I think, correct me if I'm wrong, but that what people said about, say, trust levels in their company matched up with the oxytocin levels measured in their blood. And overall, that was a predictor of company performance, with the higher oxytocin levels corresponding with high performing companies. But I think the difference in the new book, Immersion and the New Technology, is that you're highlighting that what people say does not match up with what you're measuring. And what you're measuring is, are their true unconscious beliefs. Right?

**Paul Zak** [00:07:23]:

Exactly. So I think we know we have asked we in the marketing world have asked the wrong question. We asked the liking question. So I think

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in the marketing world, the liking question is asking people to relate their unconscious emotional experiences. So you sent me a nice note, I think, yesterday that you like this line in the book that asking your brain, because it creates language about your unconscious emotional state is like asking your liver how much it enjoyed your lunch. Those are just different things, right? So just because the brain creates language doesn't mean we have insights into our unconscious states. So as a result, we have made very poor decisions. I mean, I live outside La. 80% of Hollywood movies have lost money for the last 80 last 30 years. How is that even possible? Like, how have we not evolved to have because we're still asking that. Oh, write down on the card, were you sad and the dog died at the end of the movie. Right? So I think that's where technology comes in. And you're certainly a fan of neuromarketing. We have to have a technology to capture that unconscious emotional experience. The problem with traditional neuromarketing is that you're trying to shoehorn an explanation into an existing piece of hardware like EEG or fMRI. Well, therefore, this area of the prefrontal cortex was 2% more active for ad A than Ad B, therefore, where things all go crazy, right? So, again, what we've tried to do is, again, with great respect for the US taxpayers, and this is still being used by US military, I just say, to train soldiers. So this has been deployed for quite a while, to actually use these insights to predict outcomes, market outcomes. So there's this new term of art that's coming in the scientific literature called brainous predictor, or sometimes neuro forecasting, which is measuring benedictivity from a moderate number of people, 35, 40, 50 people, to predict aggregate outcomes. So that's the space that we're in.

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**Roger Dooley** [00:09:19]:

I think neuromarketers have always tried to make the point that people can't tell you what they really want or what they really believe or what they're going to buy at some point in the future based on something they're looking at right now. And of course, movies are a great example. It's like, how can a business that's there to make a profit for shareholders and employs thousands of people spend \$150,000,000 on a movie and have it be a dud? It seems like that should be impossible today, but sadly, it's not. And I hope that maybe one result of your technology and others is that we don't have those duds. Because I've always said myself that people expect neuromarketing to develop these super ads. Like, wow, we're going to be able to create the world's most persuasive ad if we have these techniques and if we use them properly. I've always made the point, but no, that's not going to happen. But, you know, all those ads that really irritate the customers or don't move the needle at all in terms of brand preference, if you can eliminate those, that'll be a huge accomplishment.

**Paul Zak** [00:10:22]:

Yeah, and the flip is also finding who the superfans are for this ad, for this brand. So I'll give you a quick example from the movie industry. So one of the major movie studios uses our technology to optimize their trailers, theatrical trailers, three minute trailers. And so listeners may know that movie distributors make most of their money from theatrical

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releases in the first two weeks and then they make less money every week after that. So they need to get butts and chairs right away. And so they have companies that just make trailers. They put all these roughs and I got to go to the studio and watch this, which is kind of fun, to go to a big movie studio. And they had people watch them and measured immersion and then took the top two and began to edit those. Because we have data second by second. Particularly what we found is that because immersion correlates with recall of information and branding weeks later, not only do you want to have higher immersion for your trailer, but you want to have the call to action at an immersion peak, if possible. Right. So oftentimes you see an ad or a thaler at the end, they do branding or call to action. Why at the end? So two things. One is, if it's going to be at the end, you got to make sure there's an emotional peak there, right? So most of the variation in immersion is due to this emotional resonance. It's oxytocin driven. Do I really care about this thing? And or do a couple of calls to actions or a couple branding moments. So we've seen some really interesting advertisers do that using our tech. So once this movie studio began to optimize these thaler by measuring second by second and editing, they were able to really know not only that this is a better trailer before they put it out and otherwise you're kind of in the guests of Verify World they also found that some of the trailers they tested had subgroups of the population. They did not expect that. Loved it. So, for example, one of the thaler I saw them test was a comedy starring African American females. You can kind of guess the demographic. Women, African Americans we found, or what they found measuring immersion was that there was a subset of superfans. So super high immersion who

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were white, middle aged males. Okay, that's really valuable intel. Right? So if you're targeting the main population, say, females or African Americans, then you also may want to do some targeting for this smaller kind of long tail demographic. Who knew? But that's a data question, right? It's not like so sometimes we see ads that on average are not great, but there's a subset of the population that just dig it. So put them in a channel where these guys can find that, right?

**Roger Dooley** [00:13:01]:

Like the guy screaming about a mattress sale. Maybe there's somewhere there's somebody who likes those ads, if only we could find him. While you make the points, you're talking about these movie trailers. You think that would be something that would be so fully optimized by now. I mean, that's been an art form for years. Whereas you say there are companies that do nothing but that. But there's still room for improvement. You mentioned that in the book that Amazon might have saved themselves a whole bunch of money with their originally 92nd ad. Can you explain that? Super bowl.

**Paul Zak** [00:13:29]:

Right. So in the 2018 Super Bowl, they had an ad called Alexa Loses Her Voice, which is famous stars filling in for Alexa, who has a cold or whatever, and it's a 92nd ad. That Super Bowl. The ad cost was \$5.3 million to air it for each 30 seconds. They spent 16 million on this ad? Sorry, just to air the ad. I mean, at least double that for Anthony

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Hopkins and Cardi B and all these famous people who are on it. So they spend a ton of money. And what we see is that the pattern recurs. So as many listeners know, the brain likes new but not too new, so it wants some novelty, but if it's too weird, then I just can't kind of process it. But this pattern just recurred. Someone asked a question to Alexa and then a star that, you know, answers in kind of a funny way, but that recurs like, five times in this ad, and by 2nd 30, the brain's already seen it twice and everything else just dies. So again, that was a failure or wasted money for lack of measurement. If you had stopped at the first two, you want to go, oh, this is hilarious. I should maybe get myself one of these devices from Amazon, but they just ran it too long. It's almost like Saturday Night Live, if you ever watch that. I feel like some of those sketches, they just have to fill time. And like, that should have been a nice three minute sketch and not a seven minute sketch like, I got it. It was funny. And now it's just like, let's stop. So one takeaway for listeners is that almost always shorter is more immersive than longer, right? And it seems kind of odd, but because the brain is so energy dependent, takes so much energy to run the brain, immersion is metabolically costly. And so it just kind of wants to return. The brain wants to return to baseline. So hit me hard, hit me fast, give me a call to action. So you can think of immersion as, like, tension in the brain, like tension in a story. So I have a lot of tension. Give me a way to get rid of that tension by doing something. So I'm shocked at how many ads go from TV right to YouTube. I was watching one yesterday for a very expensive perfume starring Charlie Steron. Beautiful ad, well done. It was 60 seconds, should have been 30. If I look at the immersion data, and even for the 62nd ad, no hyperlink. Buy now. Oh, my God. What

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are you thinking? You just created all this tension. Beautiful. Charlie Steron. Beautiful filming. It's been a lot of money and you place on YouTube and just, what, hope people will do something? Have you seen the humans? We have a short attention span for can't we do it? Buy this damn thing now. So how hard is it to hire one dude to put in a hyperlink at the end of that ad? It's nuts to me. So, I mean, little things. So in that ad for Charlotte sorry, I'm on a rant now. But that ad for Charlie Seron, there was an immersion peak right around second between 2nd 25 and second 30. We get offline. Roger, I'll send it to you. It is like, so compellingly emotional. It's just gorgeous. She's coming out of the water. She's wet. I'm like, oh, my God, I'll buy anything from this woman and then other little storylines, and then immersion just drops down. I mean, oh, my gosh, these people are so creative, they're so wonderful, and they just need a tool to measure when to stop.

**Roger Dooley [00:16:55]:**

Paul most of us aren't preparing expensive TV ads. Let's talk about websites a little bit. Do you use your technology or can your technology be used on more common digital marketing tools like websites or web ads or that sort of thing? I'm curious, too. When I visited immersion's homepage, there's a bearded guy with what looks like a little new Year's Eve horn blowout thing sticking out of his mouth. I'm curious whether this was extensively tested or somebody thought it would be cool.

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**Paul Zak [00:17:28]:**

We eat our own dog food. So we actually tested our site extensively and it's evolved a lot. Roger the last five years, yeah. So the interesting thing about kind of user experience testing is everyone's going to view that website differently. So the nice thing about having a wearable technology that's portable is you can pair this with a camera or with eye tracking glasses and look at which parts of those are immersion. So I've been on a rant. I'm on a rant with you. I don't know why, because I like you. Roger we're so obsessed with attention. Clicks, seconds, looking. I can look at something and be confused, be angry. We don't know. Visual tension does not tell me if this thing is valuable to me. So that's what we tried to build, this metric, immersion that captures neurologic value. But pairing the eye tracking, where I'm fixating with how much I actually get value from that, again, tells me how to modify that website and also lead me to that call to action. Right. So certainly a/b testing is great. Put the make the button blue, make the button red. See who clicks. But clicking is only one measure of moving me through that, say, that sales funnel. I really want to know, like, oh, this is the most interesting thing to me. So we don't get that. And here's a super cool thing that's weirdly mind blowing in live experiences, because immersion captures social value, immersion is contagious. So we've had a number of subscribers using our platform in the luxury retail space, and measuring immersion from sales associates can predict which customers buy with 85 plus percent accuracy. And there's a linear relationship between immersion during that shopping experience and

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how much money people spend. So we're having a great time. And you had that experience like I have too, where you go into store, maybe you're looking and you have such a nice time with this person, and they show you this nice stuff, and you walk out like, oh, my God, I just spent \$200. I didn't really need anything. So, again, to me, that's the value add of still having humans involved in this is that if we can, through luck, through measurement, somehow create an amazing social experience, it's so valuable to the brain that we want to just live there for a longer period of time. And the last part of that is, sorry, you ask such good questions, I want to answer them fully, is that in addition, immersion creates a desire to repeat this experience. So once you've been to the Four Seasons or you've been to the Mercedes dealer and you're treated so well and you're so happy, like, okay, I want to come back and do this thing again. And so that's what immersive experiences do.

**Roger Dooley** [00:20:15]:

Well, you talk about immersion. Last time we talked about another metric, which was psychological safety. You may also mention in the book frustration. Is that like a third line on your chart or is that something you deduce from the other ones? And what is frustration by your definition? I mean, we've all had experiences where we're frustrated, but what does that mean for you folks?

**Paul Zak** [00:20:37]:

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Right, so, again, I'm in the measurement business, so frustration in my definition is a neurologic state in which you're attentive, but you're emotionally disconnected from the experience. So I'm here, I'm just not digging what's going on. And so those are troughs. When I look at this immersion data, which is almost always kind of a sine wave, so if I see big flat troughs, people are just tuned out. So try to get rid of those.

**Roger Dooley** [00:21:04]:

Yeah, I think it kind of correlates to my own ideas about friction, because friction tends to be where people are confused or frustrated because they're clicking something and it's not doing what they expect it to or something. They're faced with a form that they have to fill out that looks like kind of a pain to fill out. And so I suspect that there's something there where although there you might get an emotional spike too, I would guess. If suddenly you say, gee, okay, I'd like more information, and you click the button for more information and you see a form that's got 20 fields, suddenly there's going to be a reaction to that, but it's not going to be a good one. How do you sort that out, do you think?

**Paul Zak** [00:21:43]:

Right, so then you're going to see this reduction in psychological safety. Like, I just don't want to be here. Right. So immersion, again, is capturing sort of the positive value. So we call this emotional resonance, but essentially, again, it's this how much I really care about

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this experience. So there's a moderate correlation between psychological safety and immersion. So if I'm not comfortable in this environment, low psychological safety, I'm taking bandwidth away from being able to be immersed in the experience. So friction certainly does it, and I love your book. When I have that friction, I'm just frustrated. I don't want to move forward. I just want to get out of this environment. I don't want to have you sell me anything or watch an ad or enjoy a movie and so we think about what movie theaters do, which is you put humans together. So first of all, we almost always, again, see higher immersion when people do things in a group versus individually. For example, employees and training. We have a lot of clients that use our platform, like Accenture has been very public about this to measure and optimize the training they provide their employees. So employees in a group, more immersion than you watching that same thing at home, remotely. So in a movie theater, you're in a group, shoulder to shoulder with some other humans, number one. Now, we create readiness. We bring the lights down, right? So that tells us, okay, and you're supposed to turn off your screens, get prepared for this environment. So that's getting that emotional safety created in this environment. So I think that's a key takeaway that you touched on Roger, which is I'm not going to be immersion unless you can give me the space, the readiness to actually spend the bandwidth, spend the metabolic energy to be a really immersion experience, and then you can crank it up with multisensory experiences. In a theater. The sounds are typically louder than we would hear, say at home. Occasionally you have smells, you have popcorn, all these kind of multisensory

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experiences that tell us that, oh, this is my memory of something that's going to be pleasant. So we're really prepared to enjoy the movie.

**Roger Dooley** [00:23:46]:

By the way, just jumping back to your website for a second. I noticed that the traditional submit button on yours says brains. So I assume that kind of engaged people, and maybe they would click that more often than they would click submit, which was kind of cute because it isn't even sort of an action word. It's a noun. But I found that to be quite interesting. We both speak at conferences, Paul, and I guess we probably both received those things from organizers, event organizers. Hey, your talk was rated 8.7 out of ten. And if we're lucky, maybe it was the best one, according to our audience, or the second best or something. And that's based on asking people, did you like these presentations? Rate this presentation on a scale of one to ten, which of course is going back to that, relying on people's own feedback. Now, certainly there's some value in that. If I really enjoyed a presentation or if I thought it was the worst one ever, that information is going to be of some value. But the idea of actually measuring people's response throughout that presentation could provide a lot of actionable information. And I guess I'm curious. Clearly, you could get maybe a small number of people in the audience to download the app or whatever and wire themselves up, so to speak, with their smart devices or one that you give them. But do you have any experience with mass adoption levels where the event organizer might say, okay, everybody

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in the audience, if you'd like to participate in this experiment, here's what you have to do, and if so, what kind of uptake that got?

**Paul Zak [00:25:18]:**

Yes, I would say measurement, not experiments. We're not running experiments anymore. We're providing a measurement technology. So pre COVID one of our larger subscribers was merit, I think, the country's largest events organizer, and they would just have a bucket of fitness sensors like this and say, hey, we want to see how good this thing is. So if you're up for measurement, grab a wearable. And again, that wearable just shoots data to the cloud. So yeah, she can watch in real time. I think the problem with the liking question is most people, I mean, not me because I'm a Martian, but most humans are actually really nice and so they don't want to say, oh my God, that keynote speaker was the worst. I mean, I think you're right. In the extremes we sort of know horrible, we know, and great, but number two and number three speaker, were they 8.27.1? I mean, compared to what? Compared to how much I love my kids. Actually, forget my kids. They talk back to me. Get rid of my dog, who's perfect? My dog's a ten every day, right? The dog is perfect. So there's just no anchor for that. So we've had that accenture uses our technology extensively for training, and I think all five of the big professional services organizations now use our tech both in there for training, but also organizational transformation practices and a variety of uses. So it's been a really weird journey and we've known each other, roger, gosh a decade or longer to go from, hey, could we actually be better at influencing

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people to take an action to 8 hours of measurement to assess how to begin to optimize these in person, and now hybrid experiences, which can be quite different. I think the hybrid world really pushed us to measuring things like team meetings and training, which all went online for quite a while, and I think it's going to stick that way. And lastly, I think one of the most interesting applications, if I may, just this week, we had a paper I think today had a paper accepted at a neuroscience journal showing that we can actually predict in vulnerable populations predict mood and energy levels with 98% accuracy, doing eight to ten hour continuous at 1 second frequency collection of neurologic data with our platform, which is really great. So we have more companies in the content moderation space. We're in talks now, talking to first responders, cops, firemen, military people who are under a lot of stress and who are not trained maybe by personality and by training to say, hey, you know what, you take me offline. I'm overwhelmed. I just can't do this anymore. So I think by having a technology that captures the value and how effectively sorry, the value social experiences and how effectively we can interact with each other. We both keep people healthy, healthy, but also create really effective teams. And so, as you mentioned, a lot of my earlier work was on high performance teams, and so this is touching that as well. So, again, I didn't anticipate that. Roger just I'm being totally honest with you that once we had a platform and people go, hey, you know what I want to measure to see if sales associates can predict two buys. Okay, let's try that. I want to measure emotional wellness in people retirement homes. Okay, let's try that. So I think it's really exciting to have a tool that people can use

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all kinds of ways without me having to push to people and say, hey, you should do this with our tool.

**Roger Dooley** [00:28:38]:

Paul, I want to close on perhaps the most controversial topic in your book, and I know that our audience is going to be very divided on this, our dog.

**Paul Zak** [00:28:47]:

The wonderful thing about being a super nerd with a lab is that I get to kind of be the skunkworks for our company. So, as you know from the book, I decided, I don't know, out of boredom or curiosity or both, to put one of these wearables on my dog and see if I could get data. In fact, I could. And then we've done a couple of experiments in my lab, and we did a nice people can find online a nice film for the BBC on whether dogs or cats are better pets. And you know the answer. It's got to be dogs. Having said that, cats still attach to us, just not as much as dogs. So I do think this is the killer app that no one's picked up on. How much would people pay to know what your dog loves? Forget the humans. Forget selling stuff to people. Like I said earlier, I'm in love with my dog. I'm sorry to say that it's embarrassing, but I have the perfect dog that just will do anything for me. And I think I'd pay \$5 a month and know what he loves.

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## Immersion with Paul Zak Brainfluence

Resources: <https://www.rogerdooley.com/immersion-paul-zak/>

**Roger Dooley** [00:29:50]:

Wow. There is a whole new market that could be opened up. Although some of you might not really enjoy some of the things that he thinks are cool, like sniffing around what other dogs have left behind and such, which seems to be a big interest of mine. But anyway, this conversation really devolved Paul. We should maybe wrap up How Can People Find You and learn more about the immersion product and also your new book, strangely enough, titled Immersion.

**Paul Zak** [00:30:18]:

Shocking! It's easy to find me at [getimmersion.com](http://getimmersion.com), Immersion with an I. The book can be found on Amazon, and you can get a free trial on there. So if I think the most important we kind of use one more bad word. The most important word in science is the word bullsh\*t. So call us out, put a video up there, put a piece of content, we'll test it for free, and you actually can see the neurologic data from people's brains. Roger, doing real time neuroscience was hard. It took me years and years to figure out how to do this. And now to be able to see Brain activity as it comes out of the brain, oh, my gosh. It's so exciting. I just love it. So anyway, I think people will have fun playing with that tool as well. Thank you, Roger. You're the best.

**Outro** [00:31:02]:

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