

Audacious with Mark Schaefer

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Roger Dooley [00:00:05]:

Welcome to Brainfluence. I'm Roger Dooley. Today's guest has been here before, maybe more times than any other guest. When we talk about thought leaders, my friend **Mark Schaefer** is the prototype. Every couple of years he writes a new book. It's always insightful and focused on a major strategy. Each topic is relevant to the current situation marketers face. Mark's new book, Audacious is an example of that.

Roger Dooley [00:00:29]:

He shows marketers how they can survive and thrive in the onslaught of AI driven marketing. And since we last spoke, Mark has become a lecturer at the Haslam School of Business at the University of Tennessee, my B school alma mater. So welcome to the show, Mark.

Mark Schaefer [00:00:45]:

Oh, it's great to see you again, Roger. Thanks for thinking of me and having me here.

Roger Dooley [00:00:51]:

Well, always a pleasure. These conversations are such fun. We should do more often. We shouldn't wait until you have a new book to do. I agree, but you are very prolific, certainly more prolific than I am. I'm curious before we get into the details of Audacious, Mark, do you have a process for books? Do you set a schedule? I know I talked to one very famous author who says, yep, every two years I do a new book so I can get a new round of speaking gigs. But, but I know yours follows a little bit of schedule like that, but is it really on schedule or is this more of, you know, you wait until inspiration strikes and go for it?

Mark Schaefer [00:01:30]:

Well, if you look at my publishing history, it would look like I have a schedule because I have written a book about every two years. But the way I write a book is I have to find a problem that is just sort of troubling the world, the marketing world. And then I immerse myself in it and think about it and I think, well, if I can find a solution to that problem, that would be a really good book. And it takes a while for it to lock in because writing a book is a big sacrifice. It's a big commitment. So I don't have a plan, I don't have a strategy to write books every few years. The, the I, it has to follow from the commitment, it has to follow from the idea because I never want to let people down. I don't want to write a book just to write a book.

Mark Schaefer [00:02:31]:

It's, you know, my, my books are, I, I think just very practical and helpful and that's what I'm known for. And I, and that's what I want to, I want, want to continue with that strategy.

Roger Dooley [00:02:43]:

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Makes a lot of sense. And I wish I could emulate it, at least with a little bit greater frequency. But anyway, Mark, you know, AI is to some degree is the enemy here in the book. And certainly there, you know, if years ago we talked about the explosion of content and how there was so much bad content being created. And of course now AI has just amplified that even more. But AI can still be a very useful tool. I'm curious, if I looked over your shoulder in a. On a typical day, Mark, how would I see you using AI specifically for.

Mark Schaefer [00:03:19]:

The, for the book? I mean, I did write the book. The book, or it's my words. But it did help me in a unique way. After the book was finished, I uploaded the book to ChatGPT and to Claude and I said, read the book, what is missing? And I'll be darned if both LLMs didn't come back with exactly the same answer. They said, you need a chapter on measurement. And in my original outline for the book, I had a chapter on measurement and decided to skip it because I was tired and it was too hard. But I went back and actually wrote a new chapter on a day to day basis. I spend most of my time alone.

Mark Schaefer [00:04:06]:

I have an office in the woods in, in Knoxville. And so, you know, chatgpt and to some extent Claude and Perplexity, it's a constant companion. It'll help me brainstorm, it'll help me refine ideas, it'll help me poke holes in ideas and, and strategies. It'll help sort of fuel my curiosity. Yeah, so I use it really almost every hour of the day in some way.

Roger Dooley [00:04:44]:

Do you have a preference? We mentioned both ChatGPT and Claude, which are kind of similar models, but do you have a preference between the two?

Mark Schaefer [00:04:52]:

Well, for research I use Perplexity. And the reason is that Perplexity gives you the actual links, it gives you the actual references. And so as a, as a, you know, as an author, as a speaker, as a teacher, I want to make sure that the thing isn't hallucinating. You know, when I was writing the book, I went to ChatGPT and I said I needed some case studies, right? And I said, well, I'm looking for case studies of companies that did XYZ, but the companies have to be like under \$100 million. So it came up with this list of case studies. I started reading these case studies. I thought, you know, I've never heard of some of these companies. And I asked the question to ChatGPT, I said, did you lie to me? And it said, yes, I did.

Roger Dooley [00:05:46]:

Well, didn't lie about that.

Mark Schaefer [00:05:48]:

So when it comes to.

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Roger Dooley [00:05:49]:

But I bet, I bet they were amazing case studies, Mark. They said they sounded just perfect for exactly what you asked for. And you know, the problem with these models is I think they try to please too much.

Mark Schaefer [00:06:02]:

They do. So I use perplexity for research. You know, I use ChatGPT. I find it really good for analysis, especially if you have the data. I use Claude sometimes. Well, actually, if I need something in writing, I always use Claude. I would, I would say, you know, I've done tests where I was like, I get just stuck on a paragraph or something and, and I'll write something and I'll just say, this isn't coming out right and I hate it. And I'll put the paragraph in a chatgpt and I'll put the paragraph into Claude and I'll say, make this clearer.

Mark Schaefer [00:06:41]:

And, and Claude wins 98% of the time. So in terms of like creativity and writing, I prefer Claude. So those, those are the three I use the most.

Roger Dooley [00:06:51]:

Right. I, I tend to prefer Claude too, for its emotional intelligence, if you will. It seems to better understand human emotions. I know I had a, an extremely poorly written, insensitive letter from executives to some of their customers. I mean, it was something that you or I would have looked at that said, oh, I can't believe they're going to actually send this to their customers. And I asked both ChatGPT and Claude to evaluate it and predict how customers would react. And Claude was much more on point where, yes, these customers are, you know, the brand's most loyal and highest spending customers. They are going to be very irritated by this.

Roger Dooley [00:07:35]:

It's gonna, they're gonna call the brand's loyalty question and so on and so on. But in any case, onto your book, you know, it's rather audacious to title a book audacious. How would you describe the core concept of the book, Marc?

Mark Schaefer [00:07:50]:

Well, I'm a very practical person. I mean, I, you know, I grew up in B2B marketing, I guess. You know, I grew up in a blue collar family. And if you think about the, the issue and, and it's more than a problem. The, the, the idea of AI in our world, in our lives, it's really an existential issue. And so what is the role of, of marketers in an AI world? And it's something that you can't really sugarcoat, at least. I'm not going to sugarcoat it. I'm not going to say everything's going to be okay, just Take another class.

Mark Schaefer [00:08:37]:

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The realist, the real idea is that you cannot take another class to be smarter than AI. You cannot get another degree to be smarter than AI and to thrive and survive. You can't outsmart it, but you can out human it. And that's been a theme of some of my other books. So what does that mean? It means that just being merely competent doesn't cut it. Being competent is ignorable. Being competent is average. I mean, AI can do that already.

Mark Schaefer [00:09:13]:

So you've got to wake up and you've got to look at your world. And I have some research in the book that shows most of the marketing and advertising world is boring. Most of the marketing and advertising world is vulnerable. And if you're boring because the law says you have to be boring, well then, okay. But if you're boring because you're afraid or you're boring because that's what's easy to get through the legal department, that's where I think it's time for a wake up call. And that's the main theme of the book, is that we've got to push ourselves into new ways. We've got to ignite the uniquely human fireworks at this time to stand out above the blah. Because, you know, AI is certainly contributing to the blah.

Roger Dooley [00:10:04]:

Well, you begin the book with a story about an amazing drone show in my hometown of Austin. That was at that point such a novelty that people actually left restaurant tables where they were dining to go out and watch this advertisement, basically, which is a pretty amazing feat if you can get people to stop eating and go look at your ad. But I would guess that at that point there are a lot of small brands, small companies, local businesses that say, well, okay, yeah, I get that that's a real attention getter, but that takes a big budget, you know, and in some of the other stories from that same agency that you described. But you know, they're, they sort of really sort of big bang things that get people's attention in a major way. But what, what options are open to smaller brands and companies?

Mark Schaefer [00:10:57]:

Well, I'm glad you, you talked about that story because that was really the genesis of the book. You know, it's. We live in this world where every person listening to us today wants to be seen, wants to be heard, wants to, wants to be discovered. And it's harder and harder and harder. And I've spent my career at least the last 12 years studying this. How do we become the signal against the noise? And then here's this example of a drone show where People are leaving their, their hot food to go see an ad. Not just see it, but record it and share it on social media with the world. And I thought, could I do that? Could I create an ad that was so great people would leave a restaurant to do it? And the answer is no.

Mark Schaefer [00:11:47]:

So I started to think about, well, is there a lesson here? Is there something, Is there a scalable process that any business could use? And that's where I came up with this framework for the book. Of course, I spent time with Giant Spoon, but I spent time with dozens of other people who are among the creative

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geniuses of the world. And what I found that they were doing is that they were disrupting the story, they were disrupting where the story is told, or they were disrupting the storyteller. Now that's a pretty simple framework that's kind of accessible, that if you evaluate where you are today, where you are with your marketing, where your competitors are, and you look at, okay, well, if we break it up into these categories, you know, is there a way that we can twist it and turn it in a way nobody's ever seen before that would earn us attention in a new way? That's really what I mean by, you know, by audacious.

Roger Dooley [00:12:54]:

One of the things that you recommend among there are a lot of suggestions, but is creating either a place or something that can be easily shared by people on social media, people who may not even be your customers, but where people see this thing and they say, oh, hey, wow, that's really cool. Let me take a picture of it or let me do a selfie with it or something. What are some examples that you can think of either from the book or elsewhere that you know, even. Because that's something that any size brand could. Do you have any examples, Mark?

Mark Schaefer [00:13:26]:

Oh, there's there, there. There's so many. And I think that's one of the interesting things that unifies a lot of these ideas is that it's, it's not a stunt, you know, it's. It's a system, right? It's a well thought out system of, of connecting with people and then making it easy to share the content. But so let me give you two. One from the book and one not from the book. A couple years ago, I walked into this barbecue restaurant in Virginia and wasn't a very big restaurant, but right in the middle of the restaurant was a 15 foot fiberglass pig in a tie dye T shirt. So I asked the owner, I said, well, what's the story with the pig? He said, that is my entire marketing program.

Mark Schaefer [00:14:15]:

He said, I spent fifteen hundred dollars on that fiberglass pig. And everybody who comes in the restaurant loves to take a picture with the pig. Now he has to deliver great food, great service at a reasonable price. They have to have clean restrooms and safe parking. If you deliver the goods, then the pig is a prompt to remind people to talk about this with their friends. And that is the best kind of marketing you could have, because it's. It's. It's completely disconnected from AI it's authentic, it's human, and that's what people believe now with the book.

Mark Schaefer [00:15:00]:

So I'm. I'm pretty proud of the cover of the book. The cover of the book is a QR code. And so I was really challenged. You know, the book is called Audacious. So, damn it, I better have a book that's audacious.

Mark Schaefer [00:15:17]:

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And, you know, I don't consider myself the most audacious person in the world, but, you know, I needed to come up with something that would make people want to talk about the book itself. So the cover of the book is entirely a QR code. And if you hold up your smartphone to the QR code, it activates this augmented reality experience. We fed the book into AI and then we fed some samples of art into AI to say, do it like this. And so the book cover changes endlessly, and it interprets stories from the book as abstract art and turns that into a cover. So it's sort of mesmerizing, but also it illustrates the point where I've disrupted the story. I've disrupted where a story is told. I'm disrupting who's telling the story.

Mark Schaefer [00:16:20]:

I mean, the story in this case is being told by the cover of a book. So it's fun. Hopefully, it's something that will get people's attention and something that they'll talk about. But we'll see. It's an experiment.

Roger Dooley [00:16:35]:

Right? And throughout the book, Marc, you've got QR codes where people can get different experiences and so on from the. Just sprinkled throughout the book. So that it reminds me, some years ago, our mutual friend Scott Stratton wrote a book, QR Codes Kill Kittens, and about all the ridiculous ways that brands try to use QR codes.

Mark Schaefer [00:17:00]:

I think he wrote that before the pandemic.

Roger Dooley [00:17:03]:

Oh, yes. Yes. It was at that point.

Mark Schaefer [00:17:07]:

Yeah, the pandemic.

Roger Dooley [00:17:08]:

Know what they were?

Mark Schaefer [00:17:09]:

Yeah, Pandemic changed the world for QR codes.

Roger Dooley [00:17:12]:

Yeah, it was amusing because people didn't know what they were. But also brands didn't know what to do with them. They put them on the front door of their store so that as you approach the front door, it would slide out of the way or put it on a, an airplane banner that there's no way you could possibly zoom in on it. And so I just, but it was a funny book. It wasn't really all that serious, but it is funny how

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things have changed in the intervening years. And you actually cite some ways that brands can use QR codes to get some extra attention, right?

Mark Schaefer [00:17:46]:

Well, I mean, I think what I was doing here was I really felt like I had a small window of time where I could be the first to do something like this because the technology exists where QR codes are now an everyday occurrence, maybe even a preferred way to communicate and get information in some ways. So QR codes are common and they're useful. And then you've also got AI, and AI can do things in a different way. And now if we can connect those things, we create a book and a book cover that's never been seen before. And I had a sense of urgency about this because the technology was not easy to create. It was rather nerve wracking, to be honest. But, but we got it to work and it works really well. But you know, it's, it's, it's the, it's the first.

Mark Schaefer [00:18:44]:

And so we just combine things in, in a new way. And, and some people say, well, this is sort of an anti AI book because it talks about how humanity can transcend a lot of these things. Except when I have a whole chapter talking about, here's how we can use AI to be more audacious. And this is one of the ways where we live in an era of magic, just magic. And you know, if you're creative, you can be more creative. And if you're inventive, you could be more inventive. And if you're, if you love writing, you could be a better writer by using some of these tools. And so that was the opportunity I had by combining these existing technologies to create something new.

Roger Dooley [00:19:33]:

You know, Mark, when a marketer tells me, oh, there's so many competitors and they're all selling at such low prices, I give them two words. Liquid death.

Mark Schaefer [00:19:48]:

Right?

Roger Dooley [00:19:50]:

You include the liquid death story in your book, but I'll let you explain how they manage to survive in what you might say is a fairly crowded marketplace.

Mark Schaefer [00:19:59]:

One of the first lessons I learned in business school was never associate your brand with death. And you know, here we have the fastest growing Beverage in America, Liquid Death. And it's a great example of some of the principles of the book around Audacious and, And they looked at what is the story of water. Water is about. It's boring. It's just boring. It's, you know, it's. It's.

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Mark Schaefer [00:20:28]:

Everything is in a clear bottle. Everything is, you know, wholesome and it's bland. And there's no story. There's. There's no real point of differentiation. Everybody has a name like Rainbow Springs or something. So they said, well, what would. What if we started with wrong? What would be the most wrong thing we could do? Well, you know, they call it Death.

Mark Schaefer [00:20:52]:

Liquid Death. Their mascot is this character called Murder man that wields this ax and decapitates people. I encourage you to go on to YouTube and look at some of their advertisements and. Which, you know, they're not G rated. They're not even. They're probably not even PG rated. They're. They're just really out there.

Mark Schaefer [00:21:22]:

And, and what they're. What they're doing is they're. They're leveraging this idea of. Of anxiety. So one of my favorite books, and I know you, you love this book too, is Is Contagious by Jonah Berger. And Jonah talks about one of the key ideas to creating something as viral is creating an intense emotional connection. Something like happiness, something like awe. Or it could be something like anxiety and fear.

Mark Schaefer [00:21:55]:

Well, as marketers, we completely ignore the anxiety and fear part, and we live most of our lives as marketers in Vanilla Valley. Boring, boring, boring. And what Liquid Death is and a few other brands are starting to do now is they're saying, what if we make people a little uncomfortable? They're going to remember that, too. They're going to talk about that as well. And so that's why it's a great case study for the book, because it's disrupting the story in a very memorable and inventive way.

Roger Dooley [00:22:29]:

Yeah, I really love it. They're so. I mean, it's so unexpected that it sort of jars you. You know, you see it on the shelf. And once it's Liquid Death, you think it's going to some, like, incredible caffeinated energy drink full of mushrooms or something. And it's water.

Mark Schaefer [00:22:45]:

Yeah, Even. Even their ads say, don't be afraid. It's just water.

Roger Dooley [00:22:50]:

It's. It's wild. So, Mark, you do something that I haven't seen any other author do. As you read through the chapters in the book. Chapter 16 is titled the most important chapter in the book. Now that's really,

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I guess, one way to draw readers attention to that chapter. What is so important about that chapter and why did you single it out?

Mark Schaefer [00:23:12]:

Well, I was being transparent. So again, you know, my books are, I think, just very practical. And as you go through this book and you have all these, you know, people with all these great ideas and all these inspiring, practical tips, I can imagine a person sort of slumping in their chair thinking, yeah, but what about me? You know, I work for this company. They're not going to let me do this kind of thing. And so that chapter is about culture and courage because none of this is really possible without a culture that sort of dismisses fear. I think fear is, is, is kind of the, the, the source of most boring is we're boring because we're afraid. We don't want to piss someone off. We don't want to rock the boat.

Mark Schaefer [00:24:13]:

It's easy to get it approved through legal. So we're going to do it this way because we've always done it this way. Or maybe it's just, I don't, you know, I don't want to lose my job. I just, you know, I'm afraid to try something new now. There might be practical reasons to be boring. You know, if the law says if you do something, you know, you're gonna, you know, be put in jail, well, then, you know, don't get put, be put in jail. But if you're boring because you're afraid, then this chapter is for you. And it talks about, you know, just some.

Mark Schaefer [00:24:49]:

I got to meet just some amazing people. And one of them is Bianca Guimares. She is one of the co founders of probably the hottest advertising agency in the world right now. It's a company called Mischief in New York. And she came from the traditional advertising world and she said the biggest problem in marketing and advertising is fear. And so we are devoted to creating a company that will work without fear. We're not going to be afraid. We're not going to run on fear.

Mark Schaefer [00:25:24]:

We're not going to be afraid of our customers. You know, we're going to start with strategy and you know, we're going to be, you know, we're going to be a little crazy. So, you know, she's a great role model, I think, for how she has had just a tremendous amount of initiative and courage to sort of work against the system and become a superstar in the world of advertising.

Roger Dooley [00:25:47]:

Yeah, you also use the phrase maybe in that chapter, scare your boss, which is, I think, a great message. Not even Just in marketing, but in general, I mean, too often, you know, people in organizations tend to be kind of reserved, conservative. Boss is going to reject this. And of course, bosses are notoriously conservative. I mean, they probably got where they are by being, you know, not being wildly innovative

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but rather getting things done. And yeah, you know, it's, but it's me. That's a great message for anybody who's working in an organization. You know, don't be afraid to scare your boss a little bit.

Mark Schaefer [00:26:28]:

Yeah, I mean I, I basically built my whole career on that where, you know, you're right, bosses might be, you know, conservative, they might be slow to change, but they also don't want to get fired, they don't want to fall behind the competition. And so I mean, my system, as I look back almost really at my entire career is to disrupt the system is to scare my boss and say, look, the world is moving this way and here and, but let's do this pilot. You know, we're going to do a six week pilot or a three month pilot. It's going to be a little bit of money. And today it's easier than ever to do that because we have AI, we have the Internet. You can try things for almost no money and no risk today. So this, this idea of, you know, moving your career forward on pilots is easier than ever and works really well.

Roger Dooley [00:27:36]:

One last question, Mark. You know, one of my favorite books of yours is Known to Me. It is the definitive book on personal branding. How would you translate the ideas in Audacious to building your personal brand?

Mark Schaefer [00:27:51]:

That is a wonderful question. I'll tell you a little secret that I think there is a connection between Personal Brand and the Audacious book. And I didn't go there because it just would have made the book too big. But there definitely are connections. And I'm playing around with the idea of my next project being another edition of Known. Known is creeping up on 10 years. I've learned a lot about personal branding since then. And it kind of goes like this, is that the more you're known, the more trust you're given.

Mark Schaefer [00:28:41]:

And you also have this luxury of choice. So let me give you a very specific example. So I got to visit, you know, Giant Spoon. It was one of my first, one of my first stops on my Audacious tour, trying to learn how people are doing these things. And, and I, and I asked the, the president of Giant Spoon, Mark Simons, I said, how do you get companies to buy into this stuff? And they work. They've worked with Some very conservative companies. They work with George. They worked with Hewlett Packard.

Mark Schaefer [00:29:20]:

He said, well, he said, a record of success gives you a much wider berth to propose something that's a little crazy because you have this track record. You're known and you're trusted. And whether you're a company or an agency or an individual, I think there is that, that, that connection. And I think there's another connection, again, that I didn't. I decided not to draw it out in the book because it just would

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have been too much. But, you know, the theme of the book is, is what is the role of. Of humanity in this AI world? And another role is the personal brand, because we're still going to. To.

Mark Schaefer [00:30:08]:

We're going to need a person to turn to. When ChatGPT came out, I interviewed Shelly Palmer. Shelley is a great tech analyst in New York. And I said, shelly, what do you think about this? He said, well, I'm terrified. He said, I just asked it to write a blog post in my voice, and it did a perfect job in three seconds. He said, I've been blogging every day for 15 years. He said, I'm 80% replaced. Now, that does seem terrifying.

Mark Schaefer [00:30:41]:

But let's consider what is the 20%? What's the 20% that isn't going to be replaced? It's his personal brand. Shelley is known, he's beloved, he's trusted. He has nothing to worry about. No matter what happens in this world, people will always read his blog. They will always see his speeches, they will always read his books because they love him and they trust him. And this, this connection of the personal brand to the AI world, I think is. Is an important one that I didn't get into a lot in this book, but it's, it's a, it's a great point that you bring up.

Roger Dooley [00:31:20]:

Well, I'll look forward to that next book. Marc. Marc, how can our audience find you and your ideas online was very easy.

Mark Schaefer [00:31:30]:

You don't have to remember my name, and even spelling Shaefer can be a challenge, but you just have to remember "businesses grow." If you can remember businesses grow, that's my website. And you can find my blog, my podcast, you know, all my books. The book we talked about today was Audacious How Humans Win in AI Marketing World. And you can find all my, all my social media connections there. And I love to stay in touch with you and hear from you.

Roger Dooley [00:31:57]:

Fantastic. Mark, thanks so much for being on the show. It's always a pleasure.

Mark Schaefer [00:32:01]:

Thank you, Roger.

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