The Persuasion Engine: AI-Powered Neuromarketing and Behavioral Science

Brainfluence with Roger Dooley • Episode 423 • Full Transcript

Roger Dooley [00:00:00]:
Welcome to Brainfluence. I'm Roger Dooley. Today I want to share a few ideas from my new book, The Persuasion Engine, which Wiley just released. Don't worry, this isn't a book summary and it's not a commercial. What I want to talk about is a shift that I think every marketer, business owner, and leader should be paying attention to right now. And here's the thing about this shift: it is not your customer.

Roger Dooley [00:00:28]:
Your customers still make decisions the way they always have. Partly conscious, partly unconscious, partly rational, and mostly emotional. They still abandon shopping carts over things that seem trivial to you but feel risky to them. They still respond to social proof and scarcity and clarity and trust. And they still react badly when a company sends them something that's legally accurate but completely tone deaf. So the customer hasn't really changed. But the shift I'm talking about is actually made up of three major shifts, all happening at the same time. These shifts combine to create what I call Neuromarketing 2.0.

Roger Dooley [00:01:06]:
First, the tools for understanding customers have become dramatically cheaper. Second, decades of behavioral science are now inside AI models you can talk to. Third, AI turned out to be surprisingly good at predicting how humans will feel about messages and policies, even though it obviously can't feel anything itself. For years, the most sophisticated tools for understanding customer behavior were available mostly to big companies. If you were a global brand, you could hire a neuromarketing firm, run eye tracking studies, bring in behavioral science consultants, maybe even set up your own internal nudge unit. If you were a small business, a non-profit, a startup, or even a small operation inside a bigger company, your options were a lot more limited. You could read books. You could follow smart people online.

Roger Dooley [00:01:48]:
You could try to remember what Cialdini said about social proof or what Kahneman said about fast and slow thinking. And all of that is useful. But there's a difference between knowing that behavioral science matters and being able to apply it to the landing page that isn't converting when you're on deadline for fixing it. That has been the bottleneck. The problem wasn't that persuasion psychology didn't work. The problem was access. Access to tools, access to expertise, and access to someone who could look at your message and say, here's how a real human is likely to respond to this. That access used to be scarce.

Roger Dooley [00:02:21]:
Today it's becoming abundant. And that changes everything. Not because AI magically knows what your customers want. Not because cheap tools are as good as the best lab studies. But I'm sure you can

identify with this: for most everyday marketing decisions, the alternative to these new tools isn't some kind of gold standard research project. The alternative is usually guessing, or worse, a meeting where the loudest person wins or the boss just decides.

Roger Dooley [00:02:47]:
And as we all know, that's not exactly science. So let me walk through three ways this bottleneck is disappearing. I'll go quickly through the first one, because for most of us, the bigger opportunities are in the second and third. First: today, cheap tools deliver real insights. Classic neuromarketing was fascinating, but for most marketers, it just wasn't practical. If you wanted to do eye tracking, you needed a lab, special gear, recruited subjects, trained people to run the study, and enough budget to justify all of it. Biometric data, facial coding, same problem: specialized equipment, specialized expertise, real money.

Roger Dooley [00:03:24]:
These tools weren't useless, far from it. They could reveal things customers couldn't tell you themselves, which is really the whole point. People don't always know why they prefer one design or one offer over another. They'll give you an explanation, but the explanation might be incomplete or just wrong. That's where something like eye tracking comes in. It doesn't tell you everything, but it answers one very basic question: what did people actually see? And marketers underestimate how important that question is.

Roger Dooley [00:03:52]:
You can have the perfect call to action, the ideal trust symbol, a powerful benefit right there on the page. But if people don't see it, it doesn't exist. Here's what changed. Eye tracking can now run on a webcam or a phone camera. AI eye tracking prediction tools can estimate where people are likely to look on a page or an ad or a package with a high degree of accuracy. And they can do this instantly, for less than the cost of a coffee. Some platforms analyze facial expressions through a standard webcam. Wearables and smartphones are opening up new ways to capture biometric signals outside a lab.

Roger Dooley [00:04:26]:
Are these tools perfect? No. Would I use a cheap AI attention tool as the sole basis for a multi-million dollar campaign? Probably not. But would I use one to compare three homepage designs before arguing about them in a meeting? Absolutely. Would I use one to check whether people are actually seeing the button, the price, the offer? Every time. Because again, the alternative usually isn't a six figure research study. The alternative is somebody saying, I like the blue one. And maybe the blue one is fine, but we're making a choice with no data. A tool doesn't have to be perfect to be useful. It just has to be better than guessing.

Roger Dooley [00:05:04]:
Okay, that's the first shift: eliminating the bottleneck, tools getting cheaper. But the second and even bigger shift is that expertise is becoming more accessible. And this is where AI gets really interesting. Think for a moment about the body of persuasion literature. A marketer who wants to understand

behavioral science can absolutely read the classics. And honestly, they should read at least some of them. Cialdini's Influence is a classic for a reason.

Roger Dooley [00:05:28]:
Kahneman's Thinking, Fast and Slow is one of the most important books ever written about how humans decide. But those two books alone are over a thousand pages. And those are just two of them. Ariely, Thaler, Berger, Sutherland, Shotton, Harhut, even my books, now you have months of homework. And even if a busy marketer does read some of those books, how much will they remember six months later? More importantly, how much will they remember when they're on deadline trying to fix a landing page or write a compelling email subject line? That's the practical problem. We don't need persuasion knowledge in the abstract. We need it at the moment it will make a difference.

Roger Dooley [00:06:07]:
That's what AI changes. Used well, AI can become a kind of on-demand behavioral science assistant. Not a replacement for real expertise, not an infallible authority, but a very useful second brain. You can hand it a landing page and ask where the friction is, where the motivation is weak, where you're relying too much on rational argument and missing the emotional hook. You can ask it to evaluate a message using Cialdini's principles, or check it for loss aversion, anchoring, defaults, cognitive load. You can ask it to generate five versions of a headline, each using a different behavioral principle. And then, this is the important part, ask it to explain why each version might work.

Roger Dooley [00:06:44]:
That explanation is often more valuable than the copy itself, because now you're not just getting text, you're getting a way to think. You're improving your own skill. Now imagine being able to put Cialdini, Kahneman, and B.J. Fogg in a room together to look at your landing page. Throw in a conversion expert like my friends Peep Laja or Brian Massey. This isn't a metaphor. With leading AI models, you can do this in 30 seconds.

Roger Dooley [00:07:09]:
Let me make this concrete with the smallest possible example. Let's say you have a button that says Submit. That's a very common button label. It might be the default label in your own template. It's also not very motivating. Submit sounds like something you do on a tax form. So you ask AI, give me 10 alternatives that reduce perceived effort and increase motivation without sounding hypey. And you might get things like: get my estimate, see my options, start my free analysis, show me the plan.

Roger Dooley [00:07:37]:
Some of those will be wrong for your situation. Some will be too promotional, some won't fit your brand. But suddenly you're thinking about that button from the customer's perspective. What does the customer get? How much effort does this imply? Does it feel risky? Or does it feel like the next easy step? That's behavioral science applied to a tiny bit of copy. And marketing is full of tiny pieces of copy. The world doesn't need more generic AI text. We've got plenty of that. What we need is psychologically smarter communication.

Roger Dooley [00:08:06]:
And AI can help with that, especially when you ask it to critique before you create. That's a key distinction. So let me say it again: critique before you create. Most people use AI by saying, write me an email. Sometimes that works. More often it produces something grammatical and bland. A better approach is to say, here's my draft.

Roger Dooley [00:08:27]:
Analyze it from the customer's point of view. Where will they feel confused, skeptical, pressured, bored, or annoyed? That question changes everything. Now, AI isn't just a writing machine. It's a perspective machine. And perspective is one of the hardest things for marketers to hold onto, because we know too much. We know the product, we know the offer, we know the constraints, why the policy changed, why the form has those fields, why shipping is slower this month. The customer knows none of that. The customer only experiences what's in front of them.

Roger Dooley [00:08:57]:
And if what's in front of them feels confusing or cold or unfair, your internal logic doesn't matter. This brings us to the third and most surprising shift: AI-driven empathy. I know AI empathy sounds a little strange, maybe even ridiculous. But here's something that surprised even me when I was researching the book. AI models consistently score higher than average humans on standardized emotional intelligence tests. Blind evaluators rate AI-written responses as more empathetic and understanding than responses written by real people. AI doesn't have feelings.

Roger Dooley [00:09:30]:
It doesn't care about your customers. It doesn't wake up in the morning hoping to write a more emotionally intelligent return policy. But that doesn't mean AI can't help you identify how a message is going to land. In fact, this may be the single most useful application for AI in business communication, because companies are often terrible at empathy. Not because people inside the company are bad people. Usually they aren't. The problem is that most customer communication gets written from the company's point of view. Operations weighs in. Legal weighs in.

Roger Dooley [00:10:01]:
Finance weighs in. By the time the message goes out, it's accurate, it's approved, it's compliant. And it's completely devoid of human warmth. You've seen this kind of message a thousand times. We regret any inconvenience. The customer hears: we know you're upset, but we're not really taking responsibility. Due to circumstances beyond our control. The customer hears: not our fault.

Roger Dooley [00:10:22]:
We appreciate your understanding. The customer hears: you don't actually have a choice, but we'd like you to be pleasant about it. A message can be factually correct and emotionally disastrous. This is where AI gets surprisingly helpful. You give it the context and the message and you ask things like: what emotions is this likely to create in the reader? Where does it sound defensive? Where does it use corporate language instead of human language? What will an angry customer quote from this on social

media? What I call the viral risk question. That last question is powerful because if there's one sentence in your customer communication that's likely to become the screenshot people share, you want to know that before you send it, not after. You can also flip it.

Roger Dooley [00:11:08]:
How can we keep the same facts but make this sound more empathetic? How could we acknowledge the customer's frustration without over-apologizing or creating legal risk? How can we make the next step clearer and easier? That's not manipulation or trickery. That's just better communication. And most organizations badly need it. Picture a situation that happens all the time. A company has to announce a policy change customers won't like. Fees are going up. A loyalty benefit is being reduced. Something that used to be included will now cost extra. Inside the company,

Roger Dooley [00:11:41]:
the logic is probably sound. Costs really did go up. The old policy really wasn't sustainable. The team really did try to avoid this. But customers aren't in your planning meetings. They're reading the email, and what they want to know is very simple. What happened? How does this affect me? Do you understand why I'm annoyed? What are you going to do to make this easier? Do I still trust you? Most corporate messages answer the first question, maybe the second. They fail on the rest. And that failure is expensive.

Roger Dooley [00:12:12]:
It creates anger. It spikes support calls. It damages loyalty. It hands competitors an opening. It turns a manageable problem into a trust problem. AI can help you catch that. Not because it has feelings, but because it can analyze patterns in language and predict how different audiences might react. It can notice the gap between what your company intended and what your customer is actually going to experience.

Roger Dooley [00:12:36]:
And it costs almost nothing. That is a really big deal. In the past, if you wanted that kind of feedback, you needed a communications consultant or crisis PR person, or a really perceptive colleague who has both the skill and the time. Now, for many messages, you can get a useful critique in 30 seconds. Not perfect, but useful. And the gap between not perfect and nothing is a big one. There's one more piece I want to mention because it ties everything together.

Roger Dooley [00:13:03]:
A lot of persuasion isn't about pushing harder, it's about reducing resistance. This was a central idea in my book Friction, and it carries straight into this AI conversation. Marketers tend to think persuasion means adding more: more benefits, more urgency, more claims, more influence triggers. Sometimes that's right. But often the better move is to remove the thing that's causing hesitation in the first place. Confusion. Uncertainty. Distrust.

Roger Dooley [00:13:28]:

Effort. The fear of making a mistake. The feeling that the company doesn't understand me. AI is really good at helping you find these resistance points. You can ask it what objections a skeptical customer might have. You can ask what's unclear, what feels risky, what would make someone stop before clicking. Those questions are useful for sales copy, sure, but they apply to almost everything. A donation page, a renewal notice, an onboarding flow, a pitch deck, a customer apology. The same human brain is on the other end, and that brain has limited attention, avoids effort, scans before it reads, is sensitive to fairness, and really hates uncertainty.

Roger Dooley [00:14:07]:
This is where behavioral science and empathy come together. Persuasion isn't just about getting someone to say yes. It's about understanding why they might say no, or do nothing, or get angry, or lose trust, and then designing the experience so the right action feels easier, clearer, safer, and more aligned with what they already care about. And in B2B, this is even more true. The book has a framework built around what sales expert Matt Dixon calls FOMU: fear of messing up. Corporate buyers usually aren't paralyzed by missing out. They're paralyzed by the career risk of picking the wrong vendor. AI is genuinely useful for finding the FOMU triggers in your copy that you can't see.

Roger Dooley [00:14:48]:
To wrap up, let me give you something concrete to try. Not as homework, just an experiment for the next time you have a message that actually matters. Take a customer email, or a landing page, or a policy announcement, or a fundraising appeal. Something where the reaction matters. Paste it into the AI tool of your choice and give it the context. That part matters. Don't just say make this better. Say something like, this is going to customers who expected one thing and are now being told something less favorable.

Roger Dooley [00:15:16]:
Or, this is a landing page for skeptical first-time buyers. And of course, even more context about your customers and the situation is even better. Then ask three questions. First, what emotion is this likely to create in the reader? Second, where does it create friction, confusion, distrust, or resistance? Third, how can it be rewritten to be clearer, more persuasive, and more empathetic without exaggerating or hiding the truth? That last phrase matters: without exaggerating or hiding the truth. Good persuasion is not deception. Good persuasion helps people understand value, reduce uncertainty, make better decisions with less effort. Sometimes the AI response will be mediocre. Sometimes it'll be flat out wrong.

Roger Dooley [00:16:00]:
Sometimes it'll suggest language that sounds too polished or too apologetic. That's fine. You're not looking for a final answer. You're looking for a better perspective. Even one useful observation can change the message. Maybe AI points out that you never actually apologized. Maybe it notices that the most important benefit is buried in the fourth paragraph. Maybe it flags that your tone is cheerful when the customer is likely to be annoyed.

Roger Dooley [00:16:24]:

And any one of these could save you from a bad reaction, or improve conversion, or preserve trust you didn't realize you were damaging. That's the persuasion engine in action. Not magic, not mind control, not hype. Just better tools applied to real human behavior. I want to leave you with this. For a long time, the advantage in marketing was budget. Who could afford the research? Who could hire the experts? Who could bring in the consultants? That advantage is not going to disappear completely. Big companies will always have more resources.

Roger Dooley [00:16:55]:
But a new advantage is emerging. And it's a different kind of advantage. It's the ability to ask better questions, to test more often, to use behavioral science in everyday work instead of just on big projects, to see a message from the customer's emotional point of view before you send it. The winners won't be the marketers who outsource their thinking to AI. The winners will be the marketers who use AI to think better. The persuasion bottleneck is going away. And the future doesn't belong only to the companies with the biggest budgets. It belongs to the marketers who understand people, ask better questions, use these new tools wisely, and never forget there's a real human being on the other side of every click, every purchase, every complaint, every reply.

Roger Dooley [00:17:39]:
That's the opportunity. And honestly, I think it's a very big one. If any of this resonated with you, there's a lot more in The Persuasion Engine, including specific frameworks, prompts, and examples for putting all of this into practice. But even if you never read the book, try what I suggested. Take one message that matters. Run it through that three question audit. See what you find. I would genuinely love to hear what you find out. I'm Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley [00:18:05]:
Thanks for tuning in.