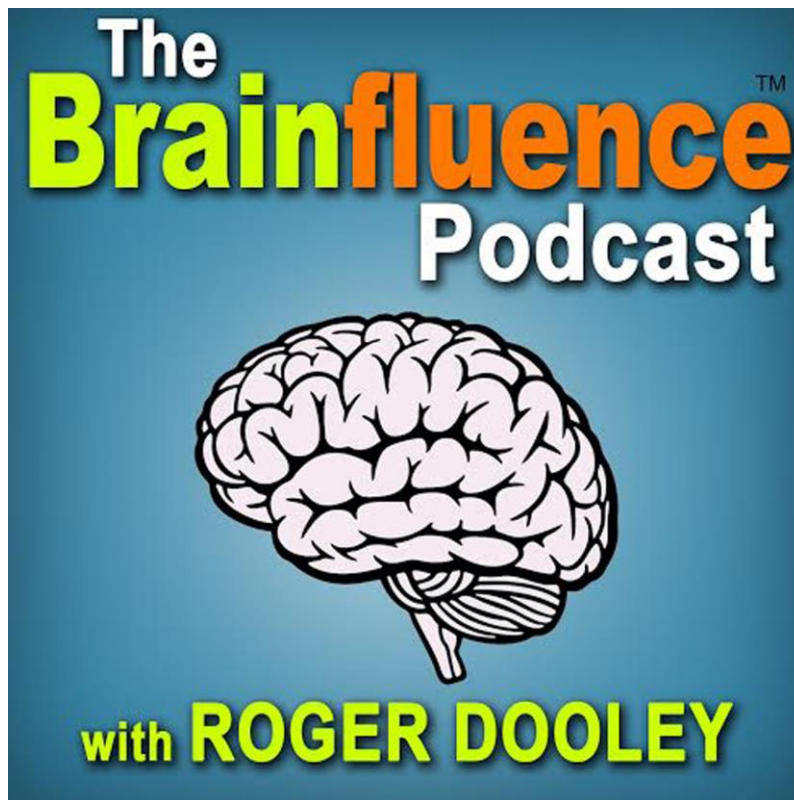


Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation  
with Gini Dietrich



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**Roger Dooley**

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## **Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation** **with Gini Dietrich**

Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: This is the Brainfluence Podcast, and I am Roger Dooley. Today with us, we have Gini Dietrich. She's the founder and CEO of Arment Dietrich, a marketing communications firm based in Chicago. She also operates a site by the name of Spin Sucks and has a brand new book out with the same name Spin Sucks Communication and Reputation Management in the Digital Age. Did that about cover, or what else do you have going? What does the Spin Sucks website do exactly?

G: That about covers it. Spin Sucks is a blog for PR and marketing pros. The vision of it is to change the perception of the PR industry because we are known as spin doctors, or liars, or PR flex; and I think that probably politics and Hollywood give us a very bad name. In fact, most of us are not unethical creatures, and so that's the idea is to change that perception.

Roger Dooley: I'm detecting a theme with the Spin Sucks here in both the book and the website name. Why is spin bad? I guess if I were a business owner and I needed some help, I would want somebody who's a real spin doctor who could change that perception using great psychology and tools of that sort.

G: I think that's probably the biggest issue with it is that we are seen as people who come out and spin the truth, or try to mold the public's opinion based on untruth and falsity. Rather especially in today's digital age, we really want to think about how do we do it with transparency and ethics, and really being open in arms about the kinds of things that we do because we all make mistakes. There're products and services that we all have that

## Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich

people won't like, and it's in how we respond to those kinds of things that really makes a difference today.

Roger Dooley: Just to employ devil's advocate a little, Gini. Doesn't spin still have a role? You can go all the way back to Bernays with some of his great examples; but even in modern day, we have things like wordsmiths like Frank Luntz dubbing the inheritance tax, the death tax which really positioned it totally different way and made a far more difficult thing for politicians to support. Is there still some role? I consider that a good example of spin. Is there still a role for spin?

G: Yeah, and I wouldn't consider that spin. I would consider that repositioning or looking at something from a different lens. I think spin has the connotation of lying or making things up in order to fit your agenda, so I wouldn't consider that spin.

Roger Dooley: Okay; so no wag with the dog, but it's okay. In reading your book, Gini, I was a little bit surprised because I felt like I was reading a book not about PR, but about content marketing and community management. How accurate a perception is that?

G: It's interesting because somebody else asked me why I didn't use the term "PR" or "Public Relations" in the book. I think the industry and our jobs have evolved so much in the last just four or five years that it's really less about public relations which most people see as publicity or media relations, and more about communication both from the perspective of internal audiences and external. Now, we have the opportunity to work directly with customers which we didn't have before. We've become customer service reps, we've become communicators, we've become strategists, we've become marketers, we've become sales people, and we've become advertisers.

Roger Dooley: I was really fascinated by the emphasis on content as opposed to banging out a press release or two, but actually creating a

## Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich

valuable content which is the same message of course. The people who come out from even these days say out of the search engine world, they've become content marketers. It seems like everything is coming down to content these days.

G: Google looks at content, fresh consistent new content as the number one driver of organic search today, so you need that in terms of ... from an SEO perspective. Also, there's a big trend toward brand journalism or telling your story in new and interesting ways. Spin Sucks is a great example of that, it's an agency blog. I have a PR firm, and it's not seen as an agency blog because it's seen as an industry blog because we're so focused on giving our peers in the industry the tools that they need to do their jobs today.

Roger Dooley: Do you see a problem with an explosion of content? It just seems that there's so much going on, and I see so much actually really good quality content being turned out now. "Turned" is not even a bad word because a lot of these stuff is really very well-crafted. I look at it from few prospects. I guess there's like the big brand type stuff, but also ideal with the conversion space where people work on optimizing their sites to convert better in to leads, or orders, or whatever. It seems like just about every conversion expert these days has a blog and a kind of content they're all putting out is really phenomenal stuff.

One post could be turned into an eBook in some cases. I'm wondering the bar keeps getting higher and higher. What's business to do when it comes to creating content where they sit down and say, "We got to do a blog," and this is what they're up against?

G: I think there is a content exhaustion I guess I would call it. People are getting really tired of content this and content that, and having to share it, and reading it, and commenting, and all those kinds of things. What we always advise is keep the content really informational and educational. It's not self-serving. It's the kinds of things that people want that are going to

## Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich

help them make the decision and push them through the marketing funnel into a conversion. When you do those kinds of things, I think you stay ahead of the trend.

It's when people say, "Oh, we have to have a blog;" so they just start turning crap out. It's less about that, and more about where do you add real value and what is the industry. The industry that you're in, what is it missing?

Roger Dooley: I think there's a classic example of the local pool company who started blogging about pool problems and getting very successful in attracting new clients that way because they simply provided helpful content. What happens when every local pool company starts blogging about pool problems? They can't all succeed, so I think something is going to have to change the ... The strategy is going to emerge that it separates some content creators from others.

G: Yeah, I think so too. I think that's why you also see a big shift toward hiring journalists. PR agencies in particular were hiring journalists in the late '90s and early 2000's to bring that expertise in house mostly because PR professionals didn't understand how to pitch media. I think now, it's less about that and more about the really compelling ways to write in ethical and journalist using ethics in journalism standards to do it versus the typical crafted messaging and specific form that PR pros are accustomed to telling.

Roger Dooley: You actually talked about fiction, don't you?

G: I do.

Roger Dooley: Now, that's a surprise considering the title Spin Sucks. Okay. We want to get away. We want to tell the truth. We want to be honest. Suddenly, you read fiction. Look at fiction. Tell us what you mean by that?

## Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich

G: I'm a big believer in reading fiction because it helps you tell a story in a compelling way, not because I think you should make up characters and all those kinds of things. One of the things that I talked about in the book is how to take the story elements of a fiction, or a novel, and employ that into your storytelling. You have an antagonist, you have a protagonist, you have some sort of something big that happens. In the examples I used in the book are like with City National which is a bank out of LA. They had a great story to tell in the beginning because they helped support Frank Sinatra when his son was kidnapped.

The bank from a local perspective has that rich historical story, so they took that, and they said, "How do we build upon that especially now that we're building outside of LA?" They do what like I would call an American Idol contest, but it's internal. They say, "Okay. We are going to let you nominate your peers based on how they're helping the community. We helped Frank Sinatra put up the ransom when his son was kidnapped. Now, how are you helping your community?" People get to vote on the things that their peers are doing, and they have this American Idol kind of contest.

It creates that they have a protagonist and an antagonist that from the perspective of the communities out there, and they need help. This employee comes in and saves the day, so they're the hero, and they have this compelling story. They do it from a very interesting way that allows them to tell their story without saying, "We're a bank, and we provide financing, and we have the lowest interest rates." They do it in a really interesting way.

Roger Dooley: I particularly find the antagonist idea important. I've written about finding an enemy for your company, and I think Apple is perhaps the classic example of that particularly in the early days where they were able to portray the PC and PC users as unattractive, unappealing enemy whether it was the drones in 1984 commercial or the Lemmings in the year after commercial, and so on. It really continued even

[The Brainfluence Podcast](#) with Roger Dooley



## Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich

when they had the “I’m a PC, I’m a Mac” ads. It was a lot more genteel than Lemmings perhaps, but still very effective in drawing a difference and letting their own supporters focus on the enemy.

G: Some other companies that do this really well that’s a great example, 37 Signals which is headquartered in Chicago does the same kind of thing where they said, “Okay. We have Basecamp which is project management software. We are focused on the small businesses. All of you big businesses that offer project management software for big companies that small businesses can’t afford, you’re our enemy.” It’s finding that competitor that may not be a direct competitor, but doing it in a way that says, “Here’s the enemy, here’s the company that we’re going up against, and here’s what we do better than they do.”

Roger Dooley: that’s great. ATC is another good example where they portray themselves as, “We’re here to help to you to stand up against demand and those big companies.” They are hundreds of millions of dollars themselves.

G: Yeah. It’s a great example. Yeah. You’re right.

Roger Dooley: We’re one of you little guys. Shifting over to community and whether it’s your own community on your own website or in social media, I’m curious. One of the toughest parts that I’ve seen community managers have to deal with is dealing with negative information. There’s always this tension between wanting to reply, wanting to just let ally and hope that it doesn’t get any traction or deleting it, and so on. Talk a little bit, Gini, about how ... the best way to engage with or not engage with detractors when they post something negative about you.

G: People typically post something negative because they’ve not been able to get an answer in other forms. Maybe they’ve called customer service and not got any answer they wanted, maybe they asked for a supervisor and didn’t get it, maybe they sent an email. People typically go

## Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich

different more private routes first before they post on the social networks. When they've posted on the social network something negative or critical, it's because they are frustrated, and they haven't been able to get the answer that they want.

A really great example of this that just happened recently is GM just had to recall a lot of their cars. Because of that, their call center was overburdened, and they couldn't get people responding quickly enough one on one over the phone, and so they employed. They added to their social team. I think they ended up with about 50 people on their social team made up of marketers, and communicators, and advertisers from across the company and across their agencies. They asked them to start responding to people on the social networks.

Because people were getting those responses on the social networks, it became less of a crisis or fire drill that it would have been if nobody had been responding to it. People really just want to be heard, and they want to get answer. When you find the people that are just out there griping to gripe and there's no real reason for it, that's when you can ignore those people. Typically, we call them "trolls", but you always want to publically state that you're there to help and ask that person to direct message you a phone number or an email address where you can get in contact. Take that conversation offline.

Usually, what happens is if the person gets the help that they need, they go back to the social network where they've posted and are complimentary of the way things happen. It's very rare that somebody will get the help that they need and not take that last step. What you'll also find is some people just want to gripe. As soon as you ask ... are helpful and ask for them to send their information, they go away. They didn't really need anything to begin with. You can gage the different levels of complaints and criticisms that way.



## Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich

Roger Dooley: What about actually removing comments because I've seen some situations where it's not simply a customer service problem? Something more like say a design change where a person or perhaps a particular group doesn't like the new product design. They just start relentlessly critical about it, and there may not be an immediate solution for their issues, but at the same time, they really won't stop. Is there a point when you hit the "Delete" button, or do you just ... you're trying to avoid that at all cost because obviously there'd been situations where comments were deleted, and that caused a much bigger problem than the original comments?

G: I would always recommend not deleting comments. You always want to have a policy that's published on the websites that's linked to from your social networks that talks about what kinds of things are appropriate and not. Now, if they're saying anything that's slander survival, if they ... For us, we have a social media policy that you can't swear. If you're swearing, we won't delete you, but we'll edit you. Those kinds of things. If you have that policy and you're very clear about what that is, then if it gets to the point where they are doing things that could be slanderous or liable, then you could delete it.

I've only personally deleted comments twice. Once was when somebody kept coming at us, and I finally said, "Look, we've answered your complaint. We understand that you don't like the response; but if you continue to copy and paste your response to the top of the list, we're going to delete you and ban you." He just kept copying and pasting, and so we finally deleted and banned him. The other time was a former employee that went all over the social networks and talked about how horrible we were because it was February 1<sup>st</sup> and she hadn't received her W2s from us yet that are supposed to be in by January 31<sup>st</sup>.

By the way, February 1<sup>st</sup> was a Saturday. She was all over our social networks and finally I said, "Look, if you can't do this professionally and we

## Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich

can't handle this offline, then I'm going to delete you;" and I did. Those are the only two times in eight years that I ever had to do that.

Roger Dooley: That's good. Probably good model for most community managers. Gini, talk a little bit about how companies can give away their secret sauce so to speak and actually not fail, but thrive?

G: My favorite example of this and people say to me all the time, "Well, I don't want to go out there on the social networks because people will be critical, and we can't talk about what we do because the competitors will steal it." My favorite example and I used this in the book is McDonald's Canada. One of their chefs actually made the secret sauce on video, and the video went all over the place. Now, you have the secret sauce recipe to the Big Mac. About six months later, Wendy's came out with a burger that was a Big Mac.

It had this Big Mac special secret sauce to all these patties, the special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a sesame seed bun. The only reason I know that is because of the jingle when I was growing up in the '80s, but it was the same exact burger, and it flopped because it wasn't the Big Mac. Even though they had the recipe in the exact same burger that McDonald's had, they didn't make it as well. Maybe the bun wasn't as toasty or the griddle wasn't as greasier. Whatever it happens to be, they didn't make it as well, and they ended up taking it off the menu.

The point there is that you can give out your secret sauce recipe. Nobody is going to do it as well as you do. Nobody is going to have the same process, the same team. None of it is the same, so the real secret sauce is in how you execute, not what the recipe is.

Roger Dooley: I suppose the other possibility is that Wendy's customers go to Wendy's because they don't want a Big Mac. If they wanted a Big Mac to eat on, go to McDonald's at the first place.

## Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich

G: Correct. Right. Fair.

Roger Dooley: I talked to a lot of bloggers. Once you reach certain authority levels of blogger, you get a lot of pictures in your email. Why is there so much bad PR effort going out? I really welcome somebody who has a great suggestion that is really familiar with my blog and say, “Hey. This is something that’s right up your alley.” That’s wonderful when somebody does that, but unfortunately that almost never happens.

Instead, I get stuff that is ... I’m not even sure why I get some of it, but perhaps because occasionally I use the word “neuroscience” and start getting pictures about brain diseases and just really totally off topic things, and with a very earnest letter saying, “Hey. This will be a great interest to your readers and so on.” No, it wouldn’t. Have you ever even looked at it? Why is that? Despite the transformation of the PR industry, it seems like there’s still a lot of bad effort going on.

G: I think there’s a couple of reasons for it. The first is that many of the large agencies give the media relations job to the young professionals. What they do is they say, “Okay. We have to pitch 200 reporters this week for this client, so here’s your list and go for it.” It’s really easy to take a list, write a news release, hit “Send”, and it goes to 200 journalists or in bloggers without even thinking about it. Now, if I had to go through in five days and pitch 200 journalists and bloggers very specifically and targeted, and review their blogs, and read their articles, there’s no way you could get through that list. I think that’s the number one reason.

I think the number two reason is that the tools that we have available make it way too easy to spam. I’m a huge fan of decision; but the good old days, you had big green bacons books that you had to pull off the shelf, and you had to photocopy the pages that you wanted, so that your colleagues could use the books next, and then you would go through, and you would call those journalists. You would order their magazines and newspapers, and you would read them, and then you would call them again and say, “Based

## Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich

on the article you wrote last May, I think this is a good fit for you and here's why."

You would think it would be easier because now we have the web and we can do all that stuff by going into Google versus having to wait two months for a magazine to show up, but we don't do it. We go in decision, and we create a list, and we just hit "Send", and we send it to all these people. Like you, I've been getting stuff for taxes for the last two weeks. I don't write anything about taxes, but I'm on their Chicago list. I think people are ... It's an easy way to say check it off the task list and say, "Yup, I did that."

Roger Dooley: I guess so, and I assumed that would be the case; but it just seems like there'd be a greater ROI from investing a little bit more up front and actually connecting with maybe five or ten people who ... Perhaps, a few of them will actually get it and cover the topic instead of just hitting the "Delete" button in their email. Anyway, I'm not a huge student of PR, but I ran across this article. I guess it was a week ago now about publicity being free. It's from the Financial Times, so a well-respected journal by Emma Jacobs. I suspect that you and probably a lot of folks in the industry have seen that. What's your take on her take on the industry?

G: She highlighted a few things in the article. She talked about three very high profile business executives, entrepreneurs who do their own PR. Warren Buffet is one, Elon Musk is another, and Jon Moulton who's a private equity veteran in Britain is the third that she uses. All three of them have said they've opted to do their own PR because they are charismatic, they are energetic, they have the right relationships. They can just pick up the phone and call a friend versus having to hire a PR professional who has those relationships for them.

The thing that bothers me the most about the article is a couple of things. Number one, PR is not just media relations. They're focused solely on the fact that public relations professionals can only do media relations and their only value is in having those relationships with the journalists that

## Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich

entrepreneurs seem to think that they have or in some cases do. Maybe they went to school with them or whatever. The other thing that bothers me is I own a business. I'm an entrepreneur. I've been growing this business for the last nine years.

I absolutely 100% can enter bills, pay bills, look at my own financials, pull a PNL, pull a balance sheet, look at all that on a moment's notice, but it's not a good use of my time because it's not my strength. Yeah, I can do it. It's also going to take me about ten times longer than it does my CFO. My CFO is going to come to me and say, "Here are some things that I think you should be paying attention to." Those are the kinds of things I would have missed because it's not my forte. Yes, absolutely 100% most entrepreneurs probably have the relationships they need to get stories placed on about their businesses.

They are the most passionate about their business, they're the most passionate about what they're doing, they can talk about things that they have in their head that they may not have translated to a PR agency or their PR team; but is it the best use of their time? Just because you can change the oil in your car, it doesn't mean that you necessarily should.

Roger Dooley: That's a good point. I think too it's difficult example. I would ... You are real. I must go. We probably get all of our phone calls returned, and we could call up the editor of the New York Times, and get a callback in five minutes; but in fact, that's not the typical business person. It's like saying, "Well, you should design your products like Apple does or something, and then you'd be successful like they are." It's not. A lot easier to say than to actually pull it off. Gini, you closed with the discussion of the future of PR in your book. Why don't you share your thoughts on where this area is going?

G: I have a really good friend named Jeannie Walters who owns a business called 360Connex. She and I probably spend a good evening a month just talking about, over line of course, just talking about customer

## Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich

experiences versus PR and where that intersects. Where I see the two intersecting is PR has always been about relationships with your stakeholders. It's about the relationship with the influencers, it's about the relationship with your investors, it's about your relationship with your employees, and now it's also about your relationship with customers.

While we're not customer service people, professionals, we have that in many cases that first relationship that with the company, in between the company and the customer. Because of that, we are now able to design the custom experience. We're looking at things that from a communications perspective that help people understand what it is that the business does, how we're responding to critics and negative things, how we're building brand ambassadors and brand loyalists; and then the customer experience people like Jeannie are coming in and helping the communicators figure out how to design that experience, so that it always matches everything that's being said.

I think that's where it's going. It's a much bigger thing than communications. It's more about the customer. The customer controls the brand, the customer is in charge; so how do we put our arms around that and really go forward with it?

Roger Dooley: Great insights. I think we're just about out of time here. What I'd like to do is again remind our listeners about your book which is brand new, and it is "Spin Sucks Communication and Reputation Management in the Digital Age". Also, can you let our listeners know where they can find your stuff online, Gini, and how they can connect with you?

G: Easiest place is SpinSucks.com. Everything is there. You've got videos, and social networks, and where to buy the book, and everything is there; so SpinSucks.com.

Roger Dooley: Great. Thanks very much for being on today, Gini.



## **Ep #5: Developing an Impactful Online Reputation with Gini Dietrich**

G: Thank you, Roger.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at [RogerDooley.com](http://RogerDooley.com).