Ep #10: Psychology of Usability Design with Chris Nodder
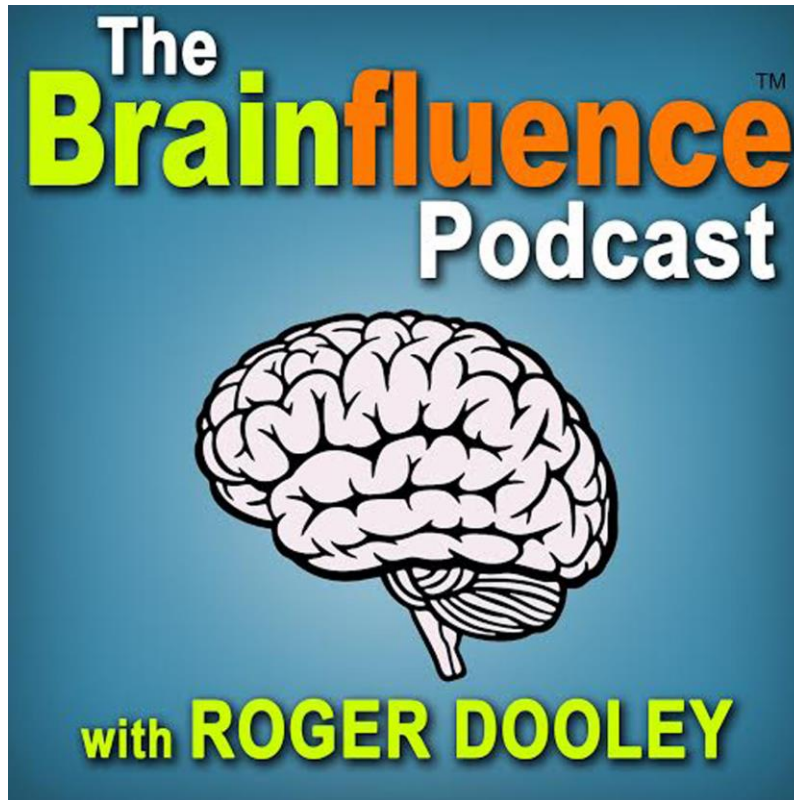

Full Episode Transcript

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The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

Ep #10: Psychology of Usability Design with Chris Nodder

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: Welcome to the Brainfluence podcast. This is Roger Dooley and today with me I have Chris Nodder. Chris' newest book has a really great title, Evil by Design: Interaction Design to Lead Us into Temptation. It was published Wiley who also published my book Brainfluence.

Chris and I met at this year's self-by-self west Wiley Author party and after speaking with Chris for a little while, I knew that our readers and listeners would really want to hear what he has to say. I've had the chance to look at the book since then and it's pretty amazing.

Chris is a usability expert who spend 18 years in the field with companies like Nielsen Norman Group, who probably many of you folks in the user experience are very familiar with, and Microsoft, probably one or two of people have heard of. Now he has his own firm which has a very usable name, Chris Nodder Consulting. No confusion there as to what's going on.

Chris has degrees in both psychology and human computer interaction so he's well-qualified to speak to these subjects. Chris, is there anything you want to add to that first? Any key points that I missed?

Chris Nodder: You've given me such a wonderful introduction. You make me sound halfway intelligent. I'm very impressed. Thank you.

Roger Dooley: Right. I wouldn't want to find out that suddenly you've taken over Google or something since we last ...

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Chris Nodder: Not yet.

Roger Dooley: Okay. That was next. I wasn't supposed to mention that one. In any case, Chris, one of the limitations of the audio podcast format is that I can't show my listeners your book, which is really a gorgeous production. It has this black cover and a little graphic. It shows a mouse with double horns and an evil look on its face, which is a great graphic.

In the inside, view illustrations are really lavish. There's a lot of color screen shots and other imagery that really shows what's going on. First of all Chris, congrats on a really good-looking book. That is a really nice achievement and I applaud both you and Wiley for that production.

Chris Nodder: Thank you. Yeah, it was an interesting design decision to go with this format. Definitely I wouldn't quite call it coffee table but the idea is that I wanted people to be able pick this book up off the shelf and see something that they could take away immediately. Lots of visual examples of the things that we're talking about in the book and something which gave Wiley a bit of a heart attack was very long descriptions under each of the visual elements.

Each of the little pictures in the book has quite a long caption underneath it. They wanted to just go with the typical traditional figure one, figure two kind of thing. I wanted people to be able to pick this up and just get an idea. How many people actually read the whole book in the bookshelf? They can. Being able to pick it up and just get a quick idea from one of the pictures was the concept behind this. The four-color printing really does help.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. That's great. I find that long caption concept interesting because often times I look at a picture and I spend a minute hunting through the text to find out the reference to figure 42 so I can find out what's supposed to be happening in there. Obviously, a great explanatory caption is a big plus for the reader. Good for the graze or two, as you say.

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Chris Nodder: Just doing my bit to help the usability of book purchasing because ultimately who's that going to help most? Me.

Roger Dooley: Definitely. For starters, Chris, what do you mean by evil designs? That's a strange starting point. How did you end up with that as the beginning for telling your readers how they might be able to design their websites?

Chris Nodder: Here's the thing, if I wrote a book called Slightly Naughty by Design, who would buy it? I needed something that was a catchy title that was going to pull people in and the truth is, there is a lot of design that's done out there for evil reasons. One thing to bear in mind is a lot of the design which you might think is evil is probably accidental.

By couching the whole book in terms of the evil design philosophy, it allowed me to have some fun with the humorous element of the book, but it also allowed me to point out to people how they are being taken for a ride by the people who are purposely creating evil designs.

Of course, the way the book is written may suggest to people that they should be being evil but that isn't my purpose with it. The purpose is to help people see where these designs are being used in evil ways but also to point out that they can equally well be used for positive outcomes rather than for evil purposes.

Roger Dooley: Right. That's interesting because you an appeal to two segments that way. You can appeal to the consumerists segment who is out there trying to show how evil business can be in the ways they try and manipulate you and at the same time by the marketing community who can say, oh hey, here's some cool ideas I can use, but hopefully not in a truly evil manner.

Chris Nodder: Well you know, I'd like to think of a continuum of design from evil through let's say commercial and then motivational or charitable design. If you do a truly evil design, you might well calm people into giving

you their money for a short period of time, but once you get found out it really doesn't do you much good.

For a longer term benefit, I found it if you create a design which is at least commercial, by which I mean gives your customers an equal amount of payback as you get or better still something which is motivational where you're doing it to motivate your customers with more payback for them than necessary for you, or through to charitable which is where neither you nor the customer is really the recipient but you're creating something that gets your customers or the users of product to do something which benefits other people.

If you to one of those three, commercial, motivational or charitable, you're more likely to get longer term success than you are with just using the evil approach to a design.

Roger Dooley: Right. Our fellow Wiley colleague, Brian Solis, has spent a lot of time talking about how in today's era of business has to be so transparent that you really can't do anything underhand and you simply won't survive because of social media and the ability for consumers to get so much information from sources other than the company itself. The old fashioned just keep fooling them with advertising just doesn't work anymore.

Chris Nodder: Yeah, Brian's right. There's so many ways for people to find out more about your business and even if you apply all of the techniques to try and pull people in and convince them, there's so many other sources of information that can use that this evil approach won't do you that much good for that much time. Yes, some people would get drawn in but as soon as they get upset they have so many ways of broadcasting their displeasure, you'll going to be in trouble pretty quickly.

Roger Dooley: Did the title make anybody uncomfortable? Any of your early readers? I can see people were comparing it to something like wealth

building tips from bank robbers or sales techniques used by successful conman. Is this right?

Chris Nodder: I think there was a marginal concern when I first pitched this to a couple of different publishers, but maybe I said something about Wiley that they jumped straight on it. I don't know, but to be honest, as soon as you go straight beyond the cover and look inside the book you'd find that there's a lot more there than just the evil perspective. Plus, I mean, one thing is it almost confirms people's presuppositions that there is a lot of evil design out.

    Again, like you were saying, if you're one of the consumerists out there this really does give you the evidence you need to demonstrate that yes, there are companies out there doing these things for evil. Yes, it has evil in the title but that doesn't mean that people are going to necessarily shun in because of that word.

Roger Dooley: That's a good thing. Obviously, it's a great read and I wouldn't want anybody to skip it for that reason. Let's get into some of the content that you write about. One thing that I talk about a lot is how our brains always try and take the easy way out. In some cases, that means making emotions in an easy emotional intuitive.

    Instead of a more logical reason process that makes our brains work hard and in one of your chapters you allude to this and talk about trying and get your visitor to follow the path of least resistance. How does a web designer do that? How do you design your interface to guide people down that path of least resistance?

Chris Nodder: This is one of my favorite patterns. People are going to think that I had actually talked with you beforehand to work at which things we should talk about. I'm just so glad you brought this one up. This is just such a wonderful example from the design world of how you can draw people along to your proposed solution. There are several things you can do from a design perspective on a website to help people follow the path

that you want them to rather than noticing any of those little annoyances such as terms and conditions or the price of the product even.

The way to do that is to make sure that people's eyes are drawn to where you want them to be. The ways of doing this involve things like moving any mandatory disclosures away from this path of least resistance which tends to be from the top left of a page down to the bottom right of a page.

I say it tends to because people in my profession design realize that nothing ever goes exactly how you want it to, but by and large people are going to scan across at the top of the page and then they're going to scan down the side of the page doing little dots into the page with their eyes. As they move further down the page they're moving more from a top left or bottom right perspective so you can at least follow areas in the bottom left and the top right.

If you put your information in those areas that you don't want people to see and if you make it blend relatively into the background maybe less vibrant tones, plus if you give people a nice big target to click on then in the bottom right hand corner like a nice green button or a nice bright button. Amazon seems to be going with an orange quite a lot for that.

It allows you to keep people away from the areas that you don't want them to be in. With the text as well you can do things like giving people a call to action and make them move forwards rather than actually reading more. Again, rather than making a button just say something like submit or next. If you put the call to action on the button it increases people's propensity to just move through rather than reading all the details on the page.

Another thing you can do is put things underneath your action button if you want to really make it hard for people to see things, then make the action button that lets people do whatever it is, move on and buy it, above any of the disclosures that you feel obliged that you have to make. That

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way, they've done the thing before they even get done to the part of the page where all those actions are.

Roger Dooley: The action button ends up being a stopper in that case where there's no need to look farther. People will use whatever it is. You had a great illustration in there from freecreditreport.com that had what sounds like a nightmare scenario for any kind of commercial business where they were forced by the FDC to put this statement that they weren't the real official source for free credit reports and apparently even provide a link to the other site right in their homepage which sounds like an absolute disaster, but they found a way around that. I can't show people a picture in this podcast but could you describe how they did it?

Chris Nodder: Sure. Let's just bear in mind they did bring this upon themselves by using techniques that people may say span somewhere on the evil side of the commercial part of this continuum I was talking about. They've got this lovely box on their homepage which points out very clearly that they are not the true government free credit report agency and that really there is this other website. They even put the URL on the page for the government website.

It's so wonderfully, it's so masterfully done it's just below a very large banner picture and further across the right hand side of where this little announcement is. There's a very bright button that's the call to action drawing you through. Then they've made maybe 25% gray background area with maybe 50% gray text on top of it.

The URL that they've been forced to put on the put on the page by the government is actually not linked. It's just the text, www URL, without having a link. They've done all they can to make that area slide into the background and really not attract people's eyes at all whereas there are very many other colorful elements on the page that draw people through this line of least resistance, this part of least resistance to get them move on with Free Credit Report's chosen activity.

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Roger Dooley: Hopefully, most of our listeners won't have FDC consent decrease and whatnot but they have to abide and put some warnings on. A lot of sites do end up having to put some stuff on either for either legal reasons or perhaps it's even a product description that isn't seen by most of the users but they need to put there just so that those visitors who need that information can find it and by putting that in a relatively inconspicuous place and not in a high contrast design, they can avoid distracting the big flow of the users.

        Even disclaimers and warnings don't always have that big of an effect. Marc Linster writes about the effect of cigarette pack warnings, sometimes even with hideous photos or very bold scary texts about the diseases that are caused. His testing showed that people became accustomed to this and they become a cue for craving tobacco which is a bizarre twist of event.

Chris Nodder: Yes. That Pavlovian response, that is weird. You don't even have to go to those lines. In the book I note several things to take these mandatory things off of the desire line. If you've got information that you don't need to share with everybody, it's fine to put it into a secondary page even, just having a link off to it. If it's something that has to be a manager disclosure there's so many options you have for making it so it doesn't appear quite so bold on the page.

Roger Dooley: To change gears, I've created and managed online communities for years and I've always been struck by how differently people behave online than they would in real life. Unfortunately, usually it's not an improvement over real life. One thing that your book introduced me to is John Suler's Principles of Online Disinhibition which is a great little title in and of itself. Without getting too far into the weeds, can you explain what Stewart's talking about and how it might affect the people who are putting up websites?

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Chris Nodder: So Suler's got this amazing web describing something that we've probably all experienced at some point which is that individual who's writing back in all caps with a very strong opinion on a thing that you don't even know why they've got so uptight about it in the first place.

Basically, the principles that he's talking about stem from this idea of people not having the same cues available to them when they're online that they would in real life so that they feel disinhibited in comparison to how they would if they were sitting face to face with the person that they're talking with in this online community.

Some of the things that create that effect are the fact that we have lower bandwidth. There's less of an opportunity to find out exactly what somebody means by the nuances in their phrasing. You may well have come across this situation yourself when you've written something that you felt was pretty innocuous to somebody and then immediately they fire some missive back at you that makes you feel like you've just insulted them and their grandparents forever more.

The way that this happens online is because we just don't have as much bandwidth to deal with this kind of conversation. Even face to face to video doesn't give you quite the same amount of control as you would if you were face to face with somebody and sing all that little elements with that body language, their facial expressions, their tone of voice and all those kinds of things.

The end result is that people end up being more anonymous online and their anonymity allows them to then take actions that they may not take if they were face to face with the individual that they were talking with.

Roger Dooley: Right. I think this is something that's common sense to anybody who's ever moderated a forum that has seen in action a million times that people who are probably pretty nice people in real life can really become obnoxious online and, as you say, you layer on those other factors.

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I suppose that one thing if you do have some kind of a visitor participation feature on your site using a social media login or something like that that would remove a little bit of the anonymity might help a little bit in inhibiting some of the more egregious behavior.

Chris Nodder: Yeah, there are several things you can do. If somebody's using a log in that they've used in other places it means that there's more of a history around that log in and so there isn't a complete anonymity that they would otherwise feel that they have. Although to be honest, Google tried that recently with YouTube and there are some people out there who just love trolling. You won't stop them from trolling, they will continue to do it and regardless of the fact that they're actually using a real name which can be linked back to them, they're doing it just because that's what they do and the threat using their real name won't stop them.

For most other people there's a fine line. You can have people using their Twitter handle or their Facebook login, all those kinds of things, but sometimes you don't want to do that because you want to have a level of anonymity. For instance, you might have a forum that's discussing something where people might feel uncomfortable using their true details.

The one thing that Stewart points out in this situation is you can still have a level of anonymity called pseudo anonymity where instead of somebody being completely anonymous they share the same online screen name and the same avatar between sessions. That way you can build up a relationship with this individual without actually knowing who they really are because they're the same person from session to session.

That way that person has an opportunity to build up their own personality online even if that's not their actual true to life personality. That pseudo anonymity gives you the opportunity to have some of the completely disambiguation themselves but also not being completely anonymous and able to get away with whatever they feel they want to get away with.

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Roger Dooley: Right. That's definitely true of the typical forum community because people do keep their identities and particularly after they have time invested in that where they've built up hundreds or thousands of posts under that name, they're increasingly reluctant to risk that by obnoxious behavior. The flip side is that if people aren't anonymous they can still be jerks. Even in person some people are still obnoxious jerks. Some people are just that way.

Chris Nodder: Yeah. There are techniques for dealing with them online as well. Disemvoweling is my favorite term. I'm not sure if you're familiar with that.

Roger Dooley: No. Tell me about that.

Chris Nodder: The idea of taking out every vowel from that individuals comments. You haven't removed them from the forum but you've just made it incredibly difficult to read what they have to say. If you still really care to read the trolls comment you can make out what they mean but removing every vowel from every word that they've written means that they have been disemvoweled and so it's harder to read their comments.

     They can't complain that they're being banned, they can't complain that they're being ignored. Their comment is still there but it's a punishment for somebody who you feel may respond well to that kind of punishment for their behaviors and may be could still be a useful forum member. It's not quite as bad as banning them but it still allows you to give them some pores for thought.

Roger Dooley: That's a fascinating. As long as I've been using and moderating and ministering forums I haven't heard of that particular punishment and I'm not going to get in some of the other diabolical things that I've worked within the past, but disemvoweling is great. I really like that. It definitely decreases the fluency of their posts, if nothing else.

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Chris Nodder: Yes. It's such a lovely name. I almost want to disemvowel somebody sometimes.

Roger Dooley: Maybe we can do that in the transcript of this podcast. See what kind of feedback we get. One of the topics that we both covered in our books is the idea of price anchoring. Why don't you talk a little bit about that, Chris, and how e-commerce sites can use that to great effect?

Chris Nodder: Anchoring. Anchoring is the idea of making people value the price that you put on an item more by giving them other prices to anchor that price against. If somebody is very well aware of the price that they should be paying for something, anchoring doesn't work quite so well, but for something where maybe the value of the service or the product you're offering is slightly more ambiguous, it's something you can do to help people understand the value that you're giving. The idea is that you anchor the price that you want to charge for something by telling people some other prices in the same realm.

An example I gave in the book is actually one that works for something people think they know how much they should be paying for but which varies quite considerably and outside of their control, and that is the gas prices. Petrol prices for people in the UK. You probably have an anchor price in mind for how much you think you should paying for gasoline when you go to fill your car up, but that price changes overtime.

If I had said or maybe, I don't know, eight years ago that I was offering you gasoline for the low, low price of $3 a gallon, you'd call me crazy because back then the price was probably in the $2 range. Now, in today's market in June 2014, if I said I was offering you gas for the low, low price of $3 a gallon, you'd be lining up to buy my gasoline.

Anchoring does not necessarily have any anchor in reality. It's just an anchor relative to other prices. If you really want to get people to more for your product you just have to show them some anchor prices that suggest that your product actually is not the most expensive out there.

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Roger Dooley: I've seen a lot of software sites that have some kind of perhaps it's like an online software service type thing and they've got the free plan, the basic plan, the pro plan, and now they have the platinum plan that costs about five times as much. I assume that in a lot of cases nobody really buys that platinum plan but it just makes the others look a lot more attractive and reasonable.

Chris Nodder: I'm guessing that platinum plan is absolutely there for being an anchor for the other plans and of course you've got your free plan. The other thing that they're doing there is by having the free plan they're getting you in the door and often the anchoring also works on the features that are available.

    If you've shown people that they can have a certain number of features with the free plan and they get all these hundreds of features with the platinum plan but they only miss a couple of those features if they go with the premium plan rather than the platinum plan, then it's much more likely that people are going to choose that premium plan over the other ones. It's a lovely technique. Anchoring is so easy to use. It's so hard to get it right but it's so easy to use when you do get it right.

Roger Dooley: What do you think about Amazon, Chris? They seem to violate a lot of the persuasion principles that we talked about. They are absolutely the antiphysis, paradox of choice where any search is going to yield hundreds or thousands of results or just page after page.

    Anchoring doesn't really work because they're presented in random order where you might have an expensive product next to a cheap one next to a medium priced one or a bunch of cheap ones at the beginning and all kinds of stuff. Their pages are enormous and just overloaded with stuff. You can scroll and scroll and scroll, which in any typical landing page design that's not what you're looking for, but they're very successful. What do you think they're doing right?

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Chris Nodder: Maybe they don't need to use anchoring. What's interesting is within any one product often if there are several vendors you still get this comparison where there are different prices from the different vendors which makes you wonder whether there is an anchoring effect applied there. You'll often see vendors charging a lower amount for their product but then sneaking in the shipping and handling fees. That again is a way of using anchoring.

Amazon has anchored the price by saying this is the price of the product. Another vendor comes in and says I will charge you much less for this product, but don't look too closely because off the desire line I've also added in this shipping and handling charge.

There is still the element of anchoring there, but just to be clear, there are other techniques out there other than anchoring that allow you to still make a lot of money from individuals. Amazon doesn't even necessarily have to use many of those techniques because they've built up this concept of them being the provider of these products.

People are often choosing Amazon just as their first approach. They've become members of the prime delivery club, so why would they not use Amazon because they're getting free shipping every time. They've just built up this reputation as being the place people go so they don't need to use so many of these techniques.

To be clear, although the book's called Evil by Design, just being honest about things often is a great way of allowing people to make a good choice, feel good about making that choice and come back because they appreciate your honesty. If Amazon just creates the marketplace and then creates honest descriptions for their goods, maybe that's sufficient for them in their position to corner the market.

Roger Dooley: One thing you mentioned in prime program, that essentially eliminates almost all the friction in the buying process. I know any number of times I've looked at a product on another website, perhaps I

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get a promotional email or some other way, found the product and I get to their shopping cart, I get to their order page and there's form fields to fill out. I got to come up with my credit card number that I don't have memorized of course.

I get to that point and I said what if Amazon's got it and just pop over there and typically they've got it at roughly the same price. If you're shopping there it's so simple just to see okay, I can have it for free by Tuesday if I just click this little button here and bingo. That's it. They don't have abandoned shopping carts in their prime program because it bypasses the whole shopping cart processes.

Chris Nodder: Even if you did abandon they've still got it saved because they've captured all the information about what you were looking and then they'll recommend it to you later on. It's funny, isn't it? We used to do comparison shopping by going into a physical brick and mortar store and then buying on Amazon. Now what we're doing instead is we're going to other online stores doing our comparison shopping and then going and buying it on Amazon anyway.

You're right about the lack of friction. They've done very well to pull people through from initially seeing a product to actually having it arrive on their doorstep for the low, low price of prime membership. I'm very impressed with their approach to this.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. Wait 'till their drums are flying. It'll be really exciting. Talk about eliminating friction. Order and an hour later it'll be in your driveway. That's something we look forward to. We're just about out of time here, Chris, and so what I'm going to do is remind our audience that we've been talking to Chris Nodder, author of Evil by Design: Interaction Design to Lead us into Temptation. Scary selling title but it's a great book from the awesome publishing house of Wiley. Chris, how can our listeners find your stuff online and if they want to connect with you?

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Chris Nodder: The best way of finding out more about the book and getting in touch with me if you'd like to is to go to my website evilbydesign.info. Not a .com, it's a .info. Evilbydesign.info. You'll find all the information about the book. There's a lot of stuff out there from the book as well including a free chapter in PDF format and then in the HTML version there's just a great introduction to most of the design patents that are contained within the book.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, thanks Chris. This has been the Brainfluence podcast and I'm Roger Dooley. Thanks for listening.

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.

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