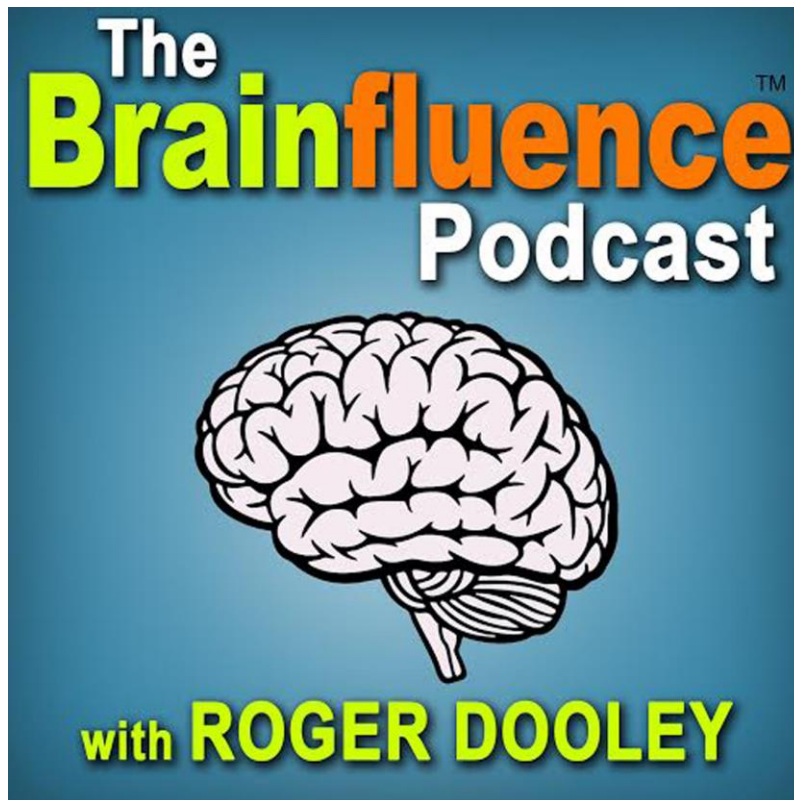# Ep #13: Conversion Optimization with Chris Goward

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Roger Dooley

The Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley

Ep #13: Conversion Optimization with Chris Goward

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: Welcome to the Brain Influence podcast, this is Roger Dooley. Today with us we have Chris Goward. He is the founder and CEO of Wider Funnel, a conversion optimization agency up in Vancouver, Canada. He has worked with firms like Google, ASP, e-bay and many other large and small firms. He's also the author of what I think is one of the definitive books on conversion optimization, You Should Test That; Conversion Optimization for More Leads, Sales and Profit, or The Art and Science of Optimized Marketing. In case you didn't write all that down, we will have the link to that in our show notes.

          Chris, please welcome to the show, did I miss anything important in the introduction?

Chris: Well, that sounds really great, Roger, thank you very much. Thanks for the invitation, really looking forward to it.

Roger: We're really glad to have you here; I always enjoy our conversations and conferences. We seem to hit many of the same ones, so it's really great to have you here on the podcast. Let me first congratulate you on one of the best book titles that I have seen since Steve Kroug's Don't Make Me Think. Your title, the first part says it all with you should test that and I think that for those of our listeners who don't have $20 to buy the book, if they just repeat that mantra over and over again they'll probably be doing a better job with their website than they are today.

          Did your publisher give you any pushback on that or did they like it? Was it their idea or yours?

Chris: We went back and forth quite a bit on the title. Ultimately I came up with that one sleepless night and it just stuck. I would love to have a book as awesome as Kroug's, that's the benchmark I

was aiming for but … He has done an inspirational job with the content that he's produced, that's for sure.

Roger: Yeah, he wrote that book and the title that is so simple you almost don't have to buy the book although I would recommend that people do buy your book and Steve's book because both deal with somehow the same issues but in a very different fashion and from a different view point.

While we're on the book title Chris, what's the dual subtitle? Could you and your publisher not agree and finally split the difference or is this a sort of AB test? I like the fact that there is two buttons on the cover illustration implying an AB test but how did you end up with the dual subtitle?

Chris: Yeah. It ended up being an AB test idea. I think the publisher wanted to get conversion optimization in there and I really wanted to talk about optimized marketing. I thought why don't we just make it an AB test on the cover? And it worked out in terms of the concept anyway.

Roger: That's very cool. Enough about the publishing details, Chris, can you explain the jaw philosophy of the book and explain to us a little bit what it includes? Because although you might guess from the main title that it's a book just about setting up tests, there is really a lot more in it than that.

Chris: Yeah. It's a really mixed approach to the book. I wanted to have a conceptual manifesto about why companies need to take a more scientific approach to their marketing and really thinking with the end in mind about what are the ultimate goals of your website and your marketing and your conversion optimization. But also put in a lot of hands on tactics and frameworks and case studies and nuts bolts so people can go and apply right now. It's got a little bit of both, it's not one of those books where you read the foreword and you've pretty much got the concept like a typical business book where you read the first chapter and it's good, you're done.

There is a lot of meat in there too and it's pretty much everything I knew up until a year ago but it's not as much as setting up tests, it's more about how to think strategically about your business answering important questions by using the seemingly simple concept of AB testing. A lot of people think AB testing is just a very basic thing, it is. Conceptually it's very simple but the answers that it can give you are so powerful if those questions are asked the right way. That's really what it's all about.

Roger: Mmh, I know the last conference where I heard you speak you talked about the end of the website redesign process and replacing that with an iterative testing process. I've worked with a lot of large organizations and small companies too and they go through this grand redesign every two years or four years or sometimes even longer than that when the site is really getting to look like something from the previous decade. They go through this and they have lots of meetings with folks in the room and people have different opinions on what it should look like. How would you redesign that process?

Chris: It's true; I've been talking about that quite a bit lately. It's one of the biggest problems I find with companies today and an ad equating process, the whole website redesign thing. That's epic throw the baby with the bathwater approach. Part of the experience comes from the old days when I started in the ad agencies and I saw what a terrible job most agencies were doing for their clients online at the time trying to recreate a TV experience with flash, websites and those kinds of things.

Ten years later not much has changed, there is still agencies out there producing terrible customer experiences by trying to create big idea concepts. That's how Wider Funnel started, was to create something different about how … thinking about how to measure the improvement that we could make on a continuous basis. I think that website redesign is the next thing that's going to fall because there are so many risks in redesigning a website and doing the traditional flip the switch method of switching over to the new design.

Companies are creating thousands and thousands of changes when they do this flip the switch method and they have no idea what impact each of those individual change is having on their end result their results really are their conversion rate and their revenue or their lead generation or whatever their goal is for their business. They're changing their headlines, their imagery, their counter action, their information, all this stuff all at once without any insight into what's happening there.

Roger: Right, and probably dynamic impacts on SEO in many cases too. I know that's not your primary thing but if you talk about website redesign that is one of the riskiest points from an SEO standpoint, it's when suddenly a whole new site is rolled out and realize that "Oh, gee the URLs we thought were the same but they're not," or, "We've changed the headlines structure in some way and the title structure," and suddenly things aren't what they used to be.

I think a site like Amazon, Chris, I can't tell you when Amazon redesigned their site last, I have no clue. It seems like it hasn't changed in ten or fifteen years although I'm sure it has quite a bit.

Chris: Yeah, and they're one of the leading examples of a company that really takes this scientific marketing approach in everything they do. All of the major initiatives they've produced since the beginning actually I'm just reading the Steve Jobs Biography like … sorry, not Steve Jobs, Jack Piezos, I just read Steve Jobs, it was the last one; Jack Piezos where he is talking about one of the ideals he had for the company right from the beginning when he decided to AB test using different geographies and to this day they don't redesign their website and yet they're constantly AB testing new design approaches as well as functionality and features and recommendation engines and all those different things. They never implement anything without testing it.

Roger: Mmh. Well, I think that most companies could do a lot worse than to follow Amazon's lead and the spectacular success and growth. Despite the fact that if you gave an ad agency a typical

Amazon product page and said, "Gee, can you do anything with this?" they would say, "Wow, that's the ugliest page I've ever seen. We can definitely make that look a lot better," I doubt very much that they'll perform as well as what Amazon has.

Chris: Great, exactly, that's exactly the case. The truth is what Amazon does isn't necessarily right for every business either. We've run tests, all we do is run tests for our clients, and we've taken ideas from Amazon and Zappos and all of these other leading companies and tried them on different websites. In some cases they work, other cases they absolutely don't because context is so important and each target audience is different in how they respond.

The things that work better are all a function of all of the different factors from your target audience and the context and your value proposition and positioning. All these things impact every aspect of the business.

Roger: I think if you were a small website selling a luxury product and you made a product page that looked like Amazon's you'll probably get very little respect because it would look somewhat unstyled and amateurish and so on. I recall seeing a test not too long ago where simply changing a font with an elegant font improved a lift on the luxury product site. Now that same font might make it less fluent and perform worse on another sight but in that particular case it fit the image of the product and what the customer was expecting to see and improved results.

Chris: Right, exactly.

Roger: I'm sure that most of our listeners know what conversion is but you could explain a couple of different conversion objectives. Then also, something that you talked about a little bit micro conversions and I don't know if the first person I saw describe that or come up with that rumor was Avinash Koshek. I don't know if that is accurate or if he borrowed it from someplace else but talk about the difference between the bigger conversion that most people look at, like, "My website converts up to 3.2% or

whatever in micro conversions," and also your distinctions and even the different kinds of micro conversions.

Chris: Right. Avinash's blog is fantastic, it's probably the first place I came across the concept of micro conversion years ago as well. The concept is that, at high level, whether analytics as a practice has a different goal than conversion optimization, and in lead analytics you really want to dig into every possible type of conversion or action to understand how your prospects and customers and visitors are using the website. How are they finding information? Where are they not finding information? Where are they bouncing and exiting and running into barriers? What can you potentially learn from all these different actions?

Tracking down to the micro level from calling the micro conversions is really important there. If you can track how many people click on your videos and then tie that to how many people convert or how many people add to con versus checking out, or go to view your about us page and then end up filling your lead in form. Those are interesting insights or potential insights that can lead to hypothesis that can then feed into your conversion optimization strategy.

But for conversion optimization it's very important not to be distracted by too many goals and too many non revenue driving micro conversions. For conversion optimization, I define conversion optimization as the process of testing and improving your ultimate website goals through a structured process. AB testing is a critical part of that. By the way, I don't believe it's possible to do optimization without AB testing. Some people think you can just go and get some, try and get some so called best practices improvements. I just don't think that's optimization, I think that's wishful thinking or something.

Roger: I know one of the things you do Chris is when you're talking you usually talk of examples of AB test and ask the audience who typically is composed of experienced web developers, conversion experts and so on, which one works and worked best in the actual testing. How often do people get that right?

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Chris: Really? What's interesting is the crowd is always disagreed. In most cases they disagree. It seems to be the ones they agree on are the ones that don't win because I pick examples of course partially to make a point and say, listen; according to best practices everyone knows variation A should win, except it doesn't. In this context it doesn't work. There are so many of those examples and those are my favorite tests because it's so fun to disprove everyone's best practices preconceptions.

Roger: Yeah. I think that it really illustrates why having somebody, even a smart knowledgeable person just give you their opinion and make a decision based on that is not going to work most of the time. Obviously somebody who has experience in conversion optimization can take a look at a page and spot some low hanging through to call the action that is almost visible and that sort of thing.

           Those kinds of things can be cleared up relatively quickly but once you get down past that to the finer points of what kind of imagery do you use or colors or to include a testimonial or three testimonials or no testimonial, then the only way to solve that kind of problem is testing.

Chris: Yeah, and I totally agree with you. The interesting part is that a lot of experts like for example designers who have been raised in a traditional aesthetic design believe very strongly in designing principles and yet so many of the design principles have been around for so many years that you have to ask yourself where do they come from. Because the ability to test that scale is really such a recent phenomena, it wasn't available before. Where did all of these principles and so called best practices come from? They had to be some sort of intuition or gut feeling and yet without validating that they actually work its more risk than I would want to take in my business.

           That's what we're aiming for, is to improve or disprove all of the things and look for patterns more importantly in how people respond to these things.

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Roger: One of those design best practices that came to mind as you were saying that was the Golden Ray Show and the perfect rectangle but I figured that's all on point. In 62 or something with the Hi Ray Show that designers idolized it going back to the path in Athens and it's carried through and in many more common approved designs. Have you ever had a chance to test that? I'm curious whether you've ever actually put that to the test because if you ask any designer about that they'll say, oh yeah that's if you can build that into your page or your design it's definitely the way to go.

Chris: Well, there are a lot of opinions about how that can be implemented. I can certainly show examples where implementing that ratio alone will not improve results and yet there may be a hypothetical design that does in some way, incorporate that that will actually perform much better. Because there is a lot of interpretation, it's just a ratio; it's not a specified trade …

Roger: Yeah, it could be merely a graphic element on the page has the appropriate ratio as opposed to the entire content area helping it or something else. There was actually a neuroscience study that showed that designs incorporating that seemed to light up people's brains in a different way. But then again, that doesn't actually mean it's going to convert, it just means that somehow a brain is responding to a design in a particular way.

Chris: Well, and that's a good distinction to make. There are a lot of things that are beautiful aesthetically and can light up certain parts of the brain for sure but don't compel us to want to buy something or to act or to inquire, they just perhaps made us happy and that's a good thing. But that doesn't keep the light up in the business.

Roger: No, no. Having so much fun staring at a beautiful page that they forgot to click the buy button.

Chris: Exactly.

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Roger: Because I imagine you see a lot of bad websites, at least before you get your hands on them, what are some of the most common conversion killers that you run into?

Chris: To encapsulate the main principles of the conversion killers into some of the frameworks that we use every day and, of course, the most well-known, we're going to talk about the leap model and where we really talk about the six factors that we see everyday hurting conversion rates. Without blabbering it too much essentially there is the value proposition is, the actual offer that the company makes. A lot of times people just don't present the value proposition clearly so that's a clarity point. How clear are the images and the copy writing and the actual value proposition presentation?

I'll give you an example; often we'll go to a home page or a learning page and we'll see all of this marketing copy that's been written on this page. Someone has taken a lot of time to write all this stuff, it's got all the best practices of marketing copy writing, all the benefit copy and all of that stuff but it's really fluffy. It's a lot of marketing jargon and things that people just … maybe it's too wordy.

Get down to the very bottom of the page and inevitably there will be one paragraph there at the very bottom of the page where it seems like the marketer has run out of things to say and they just finally say what they mean. That paragraph at the bottom often is the most beautiful thing. We just take that, put it at the top of the page, sometimes just make it the headline and that alone will boost conversion rates like crazy because it's actually a really good summary of the value proposition summarized from 800 words down to like 50.

Clarity is so important. Then there is also the other factors like relevance, anxiety, distraction, urgency, all of those things are impacting conversion rates in differing degrees on different websites.

Roger: Mmh. I'm curious, I'm going to imagine that most of the sites you work with have some very specific conversion objectives

like increase sales dollars or leads. Do you ever work with sites that have softer objectives like increasing user engagement, getting more page views, more repeat visits? Have you done anything that seems to work well on those situations?

Chris: To be honest most of our clients are really working at hard objectives like you say, revenue generating qualified leads or total revenue per visitor, although there are some that as you say are looking for different kinds of objectives. Usually they're publishers. They're looking for page views because they're selling ad space or they're looking for secondary revenue, from spin off revenue that comes from increased traffic and visitor attention.

A lot of times that will come down to the quality of the content but also there are tactics and ways you can trigger people to find related content and move further in the follow. But really most of the conversion optimization work is with companies that are revenue driven where their website is critical to driving direct revenue to the business.

Roger: Like I've seen recently that Huffington Post for each of its posts or at least the post that expects to be more popular or exposed to a lot of audience, test four different headlines and have them select the one that gets the most clicks. To me that's a certainly very cover strategy because I don't hang out there but occasionally I click on a link that takes me to the Huffington Post and inevitably when I read one article there, there is always something in the side bar that catches my attention that I have to click and I always end up reading maybe two or three or four items instead of just the article that I clicked on.

In fact most content sites tend to see a pretty high balance rate of people coming in from the search engine or link on another site. They don't look at that content, maybe even finish it but they'll bounce from there, they won't go exploring the sites. To me that content discovery piece is so important but often gets whirled with little attention on the sites, even those that can benefit from higher levels of engagement.

Chris: Absolutely. Now that we're talking about it some more, it comes to mind that we have run a lot of tests on that goal exactly with tourism in British Columbia where they've actually done research to show the impact of consuming more content on their hellobc.com website has on inspiring more traveling more travel to the tropics. A lot of times we're testing for direct diet requests downloads or things that are really measurable on an incremental binary basis. But in some cases we're trying to get people to consume more content. That interestingly is very similar in retail merchandizing.

We can often take a lot of the principles that we're using with e-commerce catalogue retailers and move them over to the information site where we really are trying to merchandize content; make it more appealing, attractive, easy to scan and find the kind of information you'd like, headlines that have trigger points and action and intrigue using the psychological tributes as well.

We did a test on thank you pages for them that dramatically increased the number of people that after requesting a guide they went back into the website to read more articles. A bunch of those kinds of tests have been really interesting in how to merchandize intrigue really and entertainment.

Roger: I would think that a travel site like that might really benefit from people seeing more content because or perhaps somebody arrived on a page about hiking because one person in the party was a hiker or they both were or whatever, and found that to be interesting and then might also see though, 'Hey, look there is fishing here too, there is fine dining,' or whatever secondary interests might exist and by the time somebody explores maybe five or ten pages now they've got a whole list of the potential activities they could engage in. In particular if members of the party have different priorities or interests, maybe now there is something for everybody. That makes a lot of sense.

Something that I'm seeing now too, Chris, is that word press is becoming the dominant publishing platform for just about every kind of sites up perhaps for the really enormous sites. Even in

those, I blog at Forbes and their contributor section is word press based despite the fact that it's got a thousand plus authors and really not high levels of traffic every day. The diversity of plug ins for testing, for doing all kinds of cool stuff discover exposing related content really exploding so now you can, if you want to do AB test there is plug ins for that. You really don't have to understand the code.

In fact one thing that I think our listeners might be interested in Chris, is how the testing typically works these days at a website. Imagine if you went back a few years, you would have had to somehow create alternate versions of an HTML page and then have a server somehow divide the traffic between the pages and then make sure the results which today is not the case. How do you typically do testing? For somebody who might be doing it on a do it yourself basis, how would they do that?

Chris: It's true that technology has improved greatly to the point where AB testing is very easy to do now and depending on the context there are different solutions for it. There is a whole bunch of tools that you can get that will implement AB testing on a website regardless of the platform. It's through the magic of the thing called Java Script because every website can run Java Script.

Essentially a testing tool simply needs to revive your one Java Script tag that you can put on your website. We'll use that method for most of our clients where we'll take a tool that's just an off the shelf AB testing tool and take their Java Script snippet and all our client needs to do is to put that snippet site wide in a certain area in their template so it just automatically appears throughout their website. That's really the only html they'll have to do it.

From there we have total control run approved tests and through the testing tool itself and not even touch the website. You can go drag things around or whatever and create variations straight within the testing tool.

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Roger: That's huge, I know that. I work with big companies at times and in a lot of cases the ability to make changes to websites is very, very restricted, it can require multiple layers of approval. It has to go through quality control process, going to perhaps to a QA server first before going it goes into production and so on so a really simple test could take weeks to actually put in place but once you've got that Java Script snippet you can work directly with the people from that company and swap stuff out without ever having to involve the IT department or the whole QC process and so on.

Chris: Right. Marketers have a whole lot more control now because of that. They can go and rapidly iterate new ideas and find out what works with tactical decisions, as you say, without having to go through the laborious process of testing and staging servers and doing things that way. We still want to make sure that things are queued properly especially if we're touching functionality and make sure we're not breaking anything especially for easy tests then it's really easy for them to get life more quickly.

           We'll use an iterative spring approach, a lean approach so that we can run weekly test launches and even daily sometimes, to get really quick feedback from different areas of the website.

Roger: Mmh. How about smaller websites that still have conversion objectives; they're trying to build their mailing list or something of that nature. If they're working with a site that gets only a handful of conversions a day normally , how would you recommend testing and how long would a test have to run in that scenario?

Chris: Yeah. There is rarely a website that's too small to run AB tests. If a site has limited traffic they're going to have to take a little bit of a different approach and can't isolate everything to try and get as many insights from their tests. Small sites need to test more dramatically. They need to test more dramatic, different approaches to get the big idea insights from tests and run fewer variations maybe only to utmost three variations and don't even

think of multi varied testing where you've got tonnes of different iterations going at the same time.

There is no downside to having a test running on the website so even if you only get a few hundred or a few thousand monthly visitors running some tests on key areas that drive revenue for the business and that test cognitively different approaches, and by that I mean different approach, it doesn't necessarily mean moving a lot of pixels around but making a significantly different impact in a person's perception of the value proposition. We'll give you insights and get faster results than testing more minor tweaks to copy or buttons or those kinds of things.

Test more dramatically, test fewer variations, be comfortable allowing tests running longer; three principles that small businesses can use to still get improvements that are proven.

Roger: Mmh, that all makes sense. One last topic, what about mobile? Mobile is really huge these days; it represents a totally different UI certainly than desktops. Is there anything unique or different about testing in a mobile environment?

Chris: Yeah, mobile is really exciting. We've certainly been doing a lot of mobile testing emphasizing over the last couple of years. We've seen a lot of our clients growing in their mobile traffic by 40% or 50% per year and it's not slowing down. The good news is that mobile, the principles of mobile conceptualization are the same just as they are in anything. Mobile is just one aspect of the new changes that are happening in devices.

With wearables coming out now essentially the different device sizes and contexts are infinite. You've got Apple coming out with a watch and Google coming out with glasses and there are cars coming out that don't need drivers so they're just basically internet screens the whole way through your commute.

Roger: Prior to that you had Facebook's oculus rift and virtual reality so you have it pretty much once again from the tiny little screen maybe in front of your eyeball to an entire environment.

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Chris: Yeah. But we don't have to relearn the principles of scientific marketing every time a new device comes out. What we will have to redo is testing the UX approaches and the different how to message in different contexts. That's the key with all these wearables. I've done wearables and I've done mobile, a lot of people when they think about mobile they'll think about phones but I think phones are just the first step in all of the mobile … mobile really means it's moving, so all these wearables are moving devices.

          But what we need to find out are the different ways that will best treat the different contexts that a person is in, in their mobile environment because it's very different in terms of the distraction that they're facing all around them, the context of the environment, the people that they're talking to, even the goals that they have might be different. You may want to think about different optimization goals versus maybe an online purchase might change to be an online remind me later when I get back home, for now, or sign up for the newsletter or add this to my wish list kind of thing. That might be …

Roger: Even call a phone number; that's one thing that I've heard lately. It's that mobile conversion often takes place over the phone simply because it's such a pain. if you actually you want to buy something then to complete an order form if you're not a logged in customer then that point is a lot easier to tap the phone number and complete the transaction that way.

Chris: Absolutely. I think mobile is a really exciting area for those companies that have the mobile traffic all ready to test because nobody knows right now what the best experiences are in mobile because we just haven't had enough time to evolve yet. The people that are testing right now in mobile to find the right, these new innovative user experience frameworks are really going to make the impacts and we're excited to be a part of that and see how it evolves.

Roger: Okay, Chris we're just out of time. Let me remind our audience that I've been speaking with Chris Goward. He is the founder and CEO of Wider Funnel and he is the author of a really great

book on conversion optimization. It's big, it's deep, it's well illustrated and its title is *You Should Test That, Conversion Optimization for More Leads, Sales and Profits, Or The Art and Science of Optimized Marketing*, which also gains points for being one of the longest titles I've ever seen. But it is really a good book and will live up to the entire link through the title and beyond.

Chris if any of the audience wants to connect with you or learn more about your stuff, where will they find you?

Chris: To your point about the small business owners that may be listening or the larger businesses as well, there is always a lot of information on our blog as well, all the latest stuff that we're finding and learning at widerfunnel.com/blog. They can subscribe there and we'll be sharing, not too often but whenever we come up with some good ideas that we feel are worth sharing we'll share them there.

At Wider Funnel we also have over 30 case studies so if you want to learn on your own and find out how it works go to widerfunnel.com/proof and there is a whole bunch of case studies and white papers and stuff like that that will get people up to speed.

Roger: Great, thanks so much for being a guest Chris. This has been the Brain Influence Podcast; I'm Roger Dooley, thanks for listening. We'll see you next week.

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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