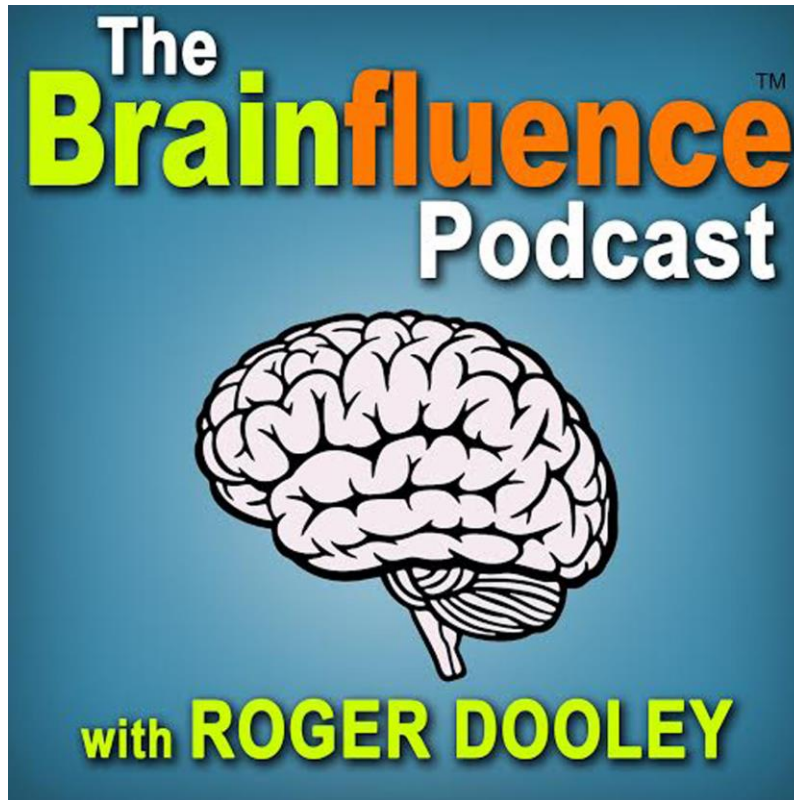


Ep #53: Captivology with Ben Parr



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Roger Dooley

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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. I'm Roger Dooley, and today's guest is Ben Parr. Ben is the co-founder of DominateFund, an early-stage venture fund. Ben was formerly co-editor and editor at large of Mashable, a columnist, and CNET commentator. His new book is *Captivology: The Science of Capturing People's Attention*. This is really a book that I think will fascinate our podcast listeners, because it is science based, it is not purely opinion based. We're going to let Ben explain a little bit about that. Welcome to the show, Ben.

Ben Parr: Thank you for having me.

Roger Dooley: Great. One thing that caught my attention about the cover of the book, there's some unusual typography on it. The name of the book is *Captivology: The Science of Capturing People's Attention*. The one word that is all in caps is science. I'm assuming that wasn't an oversight, that that was intentional.

Ben Parr: It was intentional. I really wanted to emphasize that *Captivology* isn't a marketing book. It isn't a PR book. It's a science book at the core. It goes through the actual science and the psychology of attention. I went through over a thousand research studies and I interviewed dozens of researchers and leading experts in the subject to really understand it, and then how you apply that in daily life.

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Roger Dooley: Your effort really shows in the book, Ben. I'd add for our listeners too that all of the research is documented. There's a great set of footnotes at the back, so when you find something that you want to explore a little bit more deeply you can do that. The tools are there. Great. For starters, the book is about attention. How do you pick attention as a topic, and how is attention different today than it might have been a few years ago?

Ben Parr: I believe that attention is the fundamental currency of the modern economy. I kind of came to this conclusion after my years at Mashable and my years since working as a venture capitalist working with startups. Because nothing gets done without attention first, or over the long term. Musicians need to attention of fans and agents. Entrepreneurs need to attention of users. Parents need to attention of their kids. It's fundamental, but our understanding of it has been limited, or at the very least, all the amazing information that's been uncovered over the last century hasn't been exposed to the public. That was kind of the impetus for why I picked that topic and why that topic fascinated me. I just went through the research and it just became more and more fascinating. It's just one of those things where with attention you're able to do almost anything. It's a thing where I want people to be able to grab attention for their projects and their passions and their ideas, and for whatever they might be doing, whether it's local or international.

Roger Dooley: You make the point that attention is a lot different today because of technology. I think even obviously for people in business things have changed because you have social media tools and constant distractions and what not, but even you mentioned getting the attention of a child. These days, more likely than not, if you've got a ten year

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old you want to get the attention of, their nose is an iPad or cellphone or some kind of electronic device because they're so engaging compared to what they used to have to deal with, which might have been simply television, which is pretty engaging in its own right when it came along, or the things like parents and books.

Ben Parr:

It leads back to the question you asked before which I didn't fully address, which was how attention has changed over the last maybe century or so. What I really actually think is that it's not as much as the systems that we have for paying attention have changed. It's that that world around us has changed so much. As hunter-gatherers we were always constantly looking at moving our attention around because it was survival. We had to look for oh, is that rustling leaves food or a saber-toothed tiger about to attack us.

Those same mechanisms exist in us today, but we don't have those same threats. The dopamine system is replaced by new novel information. In the modern case, that's smartphone notifications and email notifications and texts. Those activate the same kind of system. They replace the saber-toothed tiger and the food. With that kind of system in place, obviously then you start thinking why are kids so interested in iPads and seemingly more distracted.

The reality is just that everybody is more, because more than 90% of the world's information has been created in the last three years. I was going through the stats. I wrote about how in 1986 we were exposed to approximately about 40, 47 newspapers worth of information. By 2006 that number had grown to about 176. Last year it was about seven full DVDs worth of information we're exposed

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to daily. We have the same systems to deal with an exponential amount of information. Of course we're going to be more distracted. Of course it's going to be harder to get attention.

Roger Dooley: I think too that that technology itself is just geared toward interrupting you. You've got little notifications going on. You've got haptic feedback. You've got things like little jewel icons that shout "Ooh, you've got two new notifications here," and all these things really I guess play right into our brain's systems that are looking for change. What's changed in the environment? Getting back to the child example, compared to, say, a set of blocks, it can be really very interesting and engaging but they just sit there. They aren't constantly providing new information to you.

Ben Parr: It is a whole different world. What I try to make the point of is this is the world we live in. The technology's always constantly changing our world, and people have complained over years. There's actually articles that are complaining about how shorter glossy magazine articles are going to ruin our kids. These changes are things that take time for us to adapt, and we're scared of change. The end result is that yes, it's harder to capture attention, so yes, you have to use new techniques to both capture attention and defend your own attention. I think the biggest difference between now and maybe 50 years ago is that we have all of this psychological knowledge of how the brain works that we've never had before. We have such a deeper understanding of how the human psyche works, that we can use that to our advantage to help ourselves.

Roger Dooley: Right, or perhaps from a more negative standpoint, how to hijack people's attentions. I just got back from the Habit

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Conference in San Francisco, put on Nir Eyal, who wrote the book *Hooked*. It was really interesting because there's definitely a dark side to this. Something that many of the speakers mentioned at least in passing is the need to use this knowledge for good, because we've got these new tools that really allow us to create products that are exponentially more habit forming than some products in the past. We have to be sure that we're not wasting that or using that in some kind of negative way. The ideal situation of course is to use it for good, although, tell that to the entrepreneur who's got the next viral app that they want to get going.

Ben Parr: The thing about it is when I discuss it in the book is that you can use some short-term techniques, growth hacking or whatever you call it. I don't even use that phrase in the book because it doesn't work over the long term. I talk a lot in the book about long attention and how it's the quality products that capture the long attention over the long term you can get attention for a mediocre product or something not good, but over time people realize that and drop off because you can't keep them there. More important than getting their initial attention is keeping people there, and that's the power of long attention. That's the kind of power that Nir talks about.

Roger Dooley: Right. That actually ties into my more general interest in neuromarketing ethics and marketing and sales ethics. Because again, you can do short-term things that can produce results but if you're not really serving that customer in the long term, then you're going to fail. That leads us into my next question, which you divide attention to three kinds: immediate, short, and long. Why don't you explain those, Ben?

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Ben Parr:

In my mode, as you just said, there are three stages of attention. We go through all of these three stages in order in order to determine which things we should pay attention to and keep in our memory. One thing to note is that memory and attention are intrinsically linked. The things that you remember are the things that you paid attention to.

The first stage is immediate attention. Immediate attention is our automatic reaction to certain stimuli. It is our defense mechanism against danger, like if someone shoots a gun in the air or a car's coming right at you or there's some kind of terrible smell, you automatically react. You do that because it protects us. Imagine if we had to think about it. If we had to think about a car coming at us, we'd all be dead. We'd be a dead human species. That immediate attention is that first line of defense.

Then we switch over to short attention. That's when we go from unconscious to conscious attention. We start focusing on a song, a show, a speaker, like that short kind of burst. That really is controlled by a system called working memory, which is a short-term memory system which really influences which things get stored in short-term memory and which things go to long-term memory, and which things don't.

The final stage is long attention. This is one that I talk a little bit more about than maybe most researchers, which is our long-term interest and our long-term fascination with something. To me it's the difference between listening to a Beyonce song on the radio and becoming a lifelong fan and going to all her concerts. It's the difference between buying your first iPhone and standing in line for the next Apple Watch. This long attention is the

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kind of thing that happens over months, years, centuries. It's the things that we go back to over and over again because they've won us over, whether it's through the psychological triggers or something else, but they've won us over. It's kind of that three-stage progression that we go through constantly to figure out what's worth our time and attention.

Roger Dooley: One quote in the book that I absolutely love. In fact, if I did pull quotes in the book, this one would definitely merit it I think is: "The truth is that most viral moments are years in the making." That gets into the difference in attention I would guess where a viral moment for a user who's sharing something or seeing something may be very immediate, but actually it's based on a combination of much longer factors. What did you mean by that?

Ben Parr: I described it a little bit in the book how Angry Birds, which seemed like an overnight sensation, was actually the 47th or 48th game produced by Rovio, the studio that made Angry Birds. You have to think about they learned from 47 or 48 straight failures, and somehow made it to like number 49 and was able to launch a phenomenon called Angry Birds. That didn't happen overnight. A lot of these kind of success stories we hear about don't really happen over night. What really happens is people build their audience and they build their expertise and they build their knowledge over time. Those factors play in when you actually put something out to the public.

What happens more often than not when you think about these overnight sensations, is a lot of them aren't able to keep the momentum. I had this discussion about there's been companies called Highlight and Secret that have been in the tech industry that were popular, but lost steam

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after a short amount of time for whatever reason. I don't believe in overnight successes. I believe that when you see those there's inherent reasons, there's things that they did beforehand, things that they learned, triggers that they're utilizing that capture attention not just in the short term but over the long term. It's not you just launch it and it happens.

Roger Dooley: Right. I guess probably the best example of that might be Meerkat, which seems to have gone from incredible burst to a peak, to a pretty dramatic drop in the space of a couple weeks in South By Southwest.

Ben Parr: Meerkat's an interesting one. I actually did know the founder pretty well. The two things are one, the media loves to go on the extremes and sensationalize because that's what sells. It's the emotional resonance. There's other scientific reasons for this. The other thing is they have a ton of time and money to go and figure out exactly what they're going to do and how they're going to do it. I don't think we need to be pressing the panic button on them yet, but that said, yes, when tech industry jumps on a product, that is never really an indicator of whether or not a product will be successful. The actual best indicator is typically teenagers.

Roger Dooley: Interesting. I had been completely unaware of Meerkat until Nir Eyal did a live one as we were driving to South by Southwest. That was my introduction. It was of course, as you probably observed there, because we had a chance to say hello there so I know you were there, it was certainly all the talk of the show. It will be interesting to see how that plays out, especially with the competition from the Twitter-owned property, Periscope.

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You also talk about seven captivation triggers. Why don't we explore some of those and how those can be used hopefully in a productive way to capture people's attention?

Ben Parr:

The core of the book, as you just mentioned, are these seven captivation triggers. I dedicate a chapter to each. These are psychological triggers that capture attention across all three stages of attention. They're pretty fundamental to human nature. They consistently came up regardless of culture, regardless of industry. They were just consistent kind of psychological themes that I found. Going over them, I'll give the quick seven and we can talk about them, or whatever you would like to do: automaticity, framing, disruption, reputation, reward, mystery, and acknowledgement. Each of them has a different effect on us. How automaticity, which is this discussion of how certain colors and certain sounds and symbols have automatic use in our sensory memory and how we react, and how, for example, if you're a hitchhiker on the side of the road, the best colors to wear is probably red because of the romantic associations we have with red. In fact, there was a study that found this, especially for women who wore the color red. Drivers would pull over the most often.

Versus maybe a longer form of attention like mysteries and how we have a compulsion for completion, and how we continue to pay attention to mysteries and to cliffhangers that don't have resolution because we need to complete that cycle and we don't like that uncertainty that's left there, so we need to complete that uncertainty gap.

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Roger Dooley: I guess it would be appropriate to choose the right trigger for a particular situation. Looking at your hitchhiker example, the red clothing for a female is sort of an obvious one, and a mysterious look might not be that effective for a hitchhiker. You probably don't want to pick up somebody who has their face shielded with a big hood or something, even though under to circumstances it might trigger curiosity and a need to find out more. In that particular situation, it would not be a good thing.

Ben Parr: No, absolutely.

Roger Dooley: I had an email this morning. When somebody subscribes to my blog I always ask what's your biggest marketing problem. The most common questions are always "I don't have the resources to get done what I need to get done," which is I think probably true in most organizations. Even big ones never have quite the resources that they want. In this case it was from a developer of an app which is I guess is an altruistic app. It was designed to help autistic kids communicate. They were trying to figure out how to gain traction and get attention in a market that already has several larger players. Even though they felt that their product was superior and effective, they did not have the exposure that these larger competitors did. In that kind of situation, particularly since you're well familiar with the app market, Ben, what would you suggest to somebody like that? How would they try and get the attention of potential users?

Ben Parr: That's an interesting one, because if you're starting out in a market with that kind of thing, the focus here is getting that initial attention. It's about getting short attention, so there's certain triggers that which much better for short attention. I think of things like the disruption trigger, which

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is one of the more powerful of the captivation triggers, which is essentially that we pay attention to the people and things that violate our expectations. It's a defense mechanism actually, because we have to determine whether this thing that's out of place is a threat or a positive development.

Now in the case of advertising or marketing, or just trying to break it out, it's the sort of thing that may get you press coverage. It's the sort of thing that gets users to turn their heads, because that's the first thing you have to really do to get people to look and listen. I talk a little bit about the book of what makes for a great disruption. It really comes down to something that's really simple, something that's really significant and matching with your brand, and something that really surprises people. The surprise is probably the most important part. It has to really surprise them. It has to be unexpected in a way.

Patagonia, which is one I wrote about, did a good job of this a few years ago when they had this campaign called "Don't Buy This Jacket." Patagonia, being a clothing brand, telling people "Don't buy our clothing," that makes no sense at all. When you look deeper than they were explaining that they would repair your clothes if they could. The reason they were telling you not to buy their jackets was because they didn't want you to buy stuff unnecessarily because they are pro-environment. Funny enough, telling people not to buy their jackets doubled their sales.

Roger Dooley: That makes for a great headline, that's for sure. That in itself is an attention-getter. I think that marketers for years have focused on headlines as being the key to success, and imagery too, but typically you've got to either have a

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killer headline or a killer image or something to get people to look at either your print ad or your website or your billboard, or whatever it is. How would folks use a reputation trigger?

Ben Parr: Reputation trigger is that we pay attention and directed deference towards repeatable sources, specifically experts, the authority figures, and the crowd. First there's a lot of research behind that especially, where it just shows that we turn off our brains almost when we're listening to experts. We really just experts among all other types of spokespeople for companies and brands.

There are kind of two ways to really harness that if you're trying to capture attention. One is to utilize outside experts to provide credibility for whatever you're doing. This is why, for example, when startups are raising venture money, having someone like a Marc Cuban or Mark Andreessen really helps, because you have an outside expert providing that stamp of approval. Same thing with would journalists see that.

It's also establishing your own credibility and your own expertise. I'm surprised that people don't try hard enough to really establish themselves as experts in their area, because when you do that it becomes the difference between you sending out resumes to look for jobs and jobs looking for you. It's really about that establishment of expertise or utilizing an outside expert to really establish credibility.

Roger Dooley: Right. I guess that goes back to Cialdini, too, where he called authority one of his six principles of persuasion. I hearken back to that same thing, that people pay attention to experts, to celebrities in some cases who may

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not really be experts but have some of that expert veneer, and so on.

Ben Parr: Celebrities are an interesting case for two reasons. One, they can be considered experts, but specifically, experts in culture and in what's cool. Celebrities are a whole different level of attention because of the communities they build around them. I talk about it a little bit in the acknowledgement chapter. It really comes down to there's an identity associated with being a fan of some of these celebrities. It says something about you whether or not you're a fan of Sheryl Sandberg versus Justin Bieber versus Little Wayne versus pick your celebrity. It does say something about you and the community you belong to.

Roger Dooley: I guess the acknowledgement trigger is one of the less obvious ones, at least just from the name. Explain how that works and how that can be used either by large or small organizations.

Ben Parr: With organizations?

Roger Dooley: With businesses, with brands. In other words, does acknowledgement scale, I guess is what I'm asking. Clearly on a small scale, if there's interaction and so on, then that's great and no doubt effective, but can larger companies scale that?

Ben Parr: It reminds me of, and I wrote a little bit about this, I had wine with Gary Vaynerchuk, who is a dear friend, the founder of Wine Library and Vayner Media. We had this discussion about what he called scaling the un-scalable, which is scaling relationships. There's this scientific phenomenon known as the parasocial relationship. It's the reason why we can feel like we have a two-way

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relationship with a celebrity or brand when it's really a one-way relationship.

I remember my former boss works for a celebrity now. What happened once was this celebrity came out in favor of Obamacare. A bunch of her fans just started posting things like "I thought I knew you. You've betrayed me." That's the kind of language you give to ... That's when your closest friend ... That's like the Hamlet level. You're like, "How can you say that?" but we have this deep of a relationship and we can feel that because of the parasocial relationship. You build a parasocial relationship with your audience by showing them that you care, that you acknowledge them, that you validate them.

Taylor Swift does this, for example, by giving gifts and showing she cares to just a few fans. Last Christmas she was on YouTube wrapping gifts for a few of her fans that she was looking at. She's like, "I'm going to send them gifts." She probably did ten, a dozen maybe, but that went completely viral. Entire fan base went nuts because she didn't have to give a gift to each and every single one of them. She just needed to show she cared enough to give a gift to them. Her fans know she cares about them. They don't need to actually get the specific gift in order to know and feel that. That's the real power of acknowledgement and scaling the parasocial relationship.

Roger Dooley: That's interesting, because I think that's something that a big brand might fear, for example, if United Airlines said, "We're going to do something special for a small number of customers and really publicize it." They might say, "Gee, this is simply going to make all the customers that didn't get that benefit envious and make them hate us." In fact, what you're suggesting is that if it's done skillfully, it

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can make even the people who didn't get the reward feel like they were part of it.

Ben Parr: Absolutely. Most people, one, realize that there's no way you can give something to everybody, but two, it's just showing your audience that you care. It can be a gift or it can be even just a letter, a letter that says, "We really appreciate you being a customer," Or something just a little bit that just shows that you care. It's the same kind of reason why Kickstarter works so well, because it's not just you're buying something, which is pretty much what Kickstarter is. It's that you feel like you have contributed in some additional way, that you are part of starting this thing, that you have done something a little bit more, and you're acknowledged by the rewards you get back. It's that kind of power that's the difference between a middling brand that doesn't make it to the next generation and the future Googles, the future Apples, the future Patagonias.

Roger Dooley: Where do you see attention going in the future? I guess probably 20 years ago and he would have predicted what the attention landscape would look like today. Then you didn't have mobile devices that were constantly yammering at you for various reasons. Will we reach a breaking point and we will suddenly find that we're going to shut stuff down so that we're able to focus better? Or do you see it as just sort of getting to be an ever more crowded field of devices and brands and other people and so on trying to get your attention?

Ben Parr: I predict a future hooked into the matrix. No, I like to tell people that what I think is we're at a transition point in attention and our history. We've never had this kind of exponential scale with content and information ever. We

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are struggling to adapt to it right now. It's moving faster than we are, but we will eventually catch up because we always do. We will learn how to better manage it, and it will be through a combination of more technological or personal filters, or better habits. There's other ways, but I do think we'll be able to manage it.

There's going to always be this creation of more and more content, but I think there will be a point where people are like, "We don't have to consume all that content." Society will adapt, as it always has.

Roger Dooley: Great. Ben, we're just about out of time. Let me remind our audience that we've been speaking with Ben Parr, and his new book is *Captivology*, The Science of Capturing People's Attention. I highly recommend it. It's a business book but it's very science-based. If you like my book or some of the other science-oriented books out there, I know that you're going to really like this one. Ben, thanks for much for being part of the show. How can people find you online and connect with you?

Ben Parr: They can find me on benparr.com or [@benparr](https://twitter.com/benparr) on basically every social network that exists. If they're interested in the book, it's captivology.com, or search *Captivology* on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, local bookstore, everywhere.

Roger Dooley: Great, we'll link to all these, both your sites and the book, on the show notes page, which will be found at rogerdooley.com/podcast. Ben, thanks so much for being on the show.

Ben Parr: Thank you for having me.

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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.