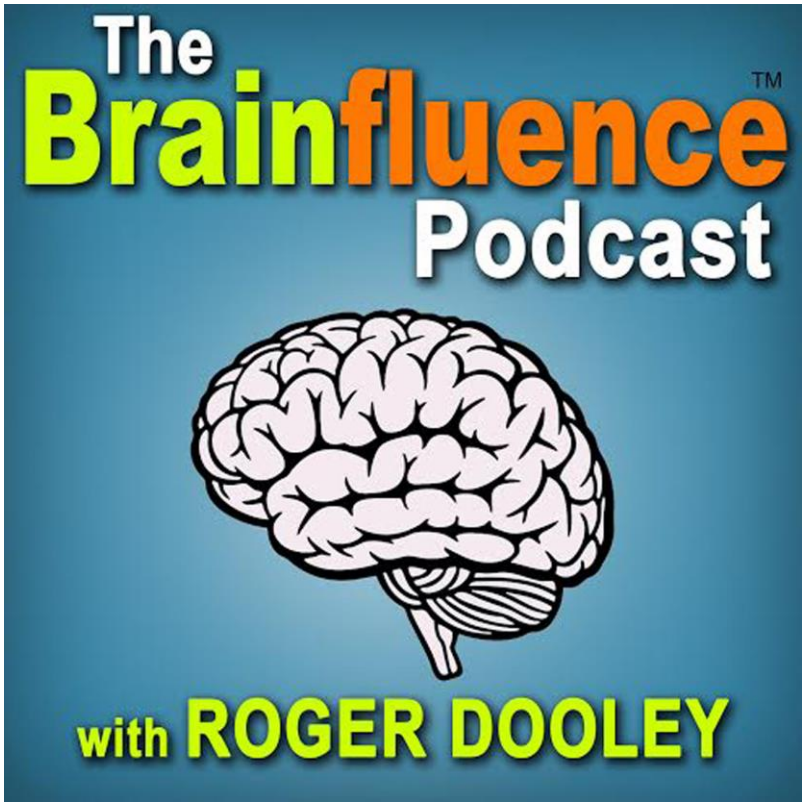
Ep #64: The Science of Why with Dr. David Forbes



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With Your Host

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: Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast. I'm Roger Dooley and our guest this week is Dr. David Forbes. David is the founder of Forbes Consulting, now a division of Copernicus Marketing, a unit of Dentsu Aegis. He created the MindSight® Emotional Assessment Technologies, a suite of applied neuropsychological methods for understanding consumer emotion and motivation. He's won the Advertising Research Foundation, also known as ARF, Great Mind Award for that work. Now, David has a brand-new book out: The Science of Why: Decoding Human Motivation and Transforming Marketing Strategy. Welcome to the show, David.

David: Thank you very much. Thanks for having me.

Roger: Great. Well, David, it's great to have you on. This must be a really busy time for you. You've got a book launch and also a new corporate parent to be announced with just maybe a little more than a month ago, right? Of the acquisition of Forbes Consulting?

David: That's absolutely right. I've been spending quite a bit of time on airplanes.

Roger: No doubt. No doubt. Where's the location that your division sort of reports into?

David: Well, we are actually connected to the Copernicus Office that is in Boston. We're also the part of the family of Copernicus, which includes an office in Norwalk. Last week and this week, I've been traveling heavily to New York where the Dentsu Aegis offices are and meeting with any number of our sister companies with whom we expect to work going forward.

Roger: Well, that's great. You know, David, you've been running your own show for thirty years and that's I guess something I can

identify with too. How does being a part of a big company feel to you? Is it kind of strange?

David: Well, it's different. I would say the surprises are mostly pleasant ones. I'm finding thus far that the folks in the various divisions of Dentsu Aegis are smart, excited, interested in talking about what other people are doing and interested in thinking about working together. A lot of my motive, quite frankly, in merging my company with Dentsu Aegis was to gain bandwidth and access to a bigger play space frankly for me. I'm pleased about all of that. I think that there's a much more collaborative than hierarchical sort of management philosophy, so I'm not really rioting under the whip of a boss and any executive.

Roger: Right. Well you know, I think in the advertising and marketing space there's probably a greater recognition of the value of talent and creativity and so on, than there is in perhaps some other industries where, if two banks announce a merger, there tends to be a winner and loser and a lot of big changes and consolidation and so on. I see in a lot of these acquisitions and mergers in the advertising and more creative space, it's a lot gentler process. They actually do look for synergies to try and expand the scope of what the talented folks are doing.

David: Yeah, I think it's very much the case at Dentsu Aegis; that folks are looking for that horizon inside which is going to make everybody's scope a little higher. I've been very pleased with the interactions I've had thus far. Pretty much top of the top with other agencies, media groups, and creative groups in the Dentsu Aegis family. All of whom are, they're excited about measuring emotions or excited about the role of emotion in marketing today. They're excited about the MindSight® tool and what we could probably do for them using that tool.

Roger: Just a couple of days ago, we learned that Nielsen was buying Innerscope Research, or actually completed the acquisition of Innerscope Research. What do you think this means for the neuromarketing or consumer neuroscience industry? Is every big agency going to be either building or buying a consumer neuroscience business, do you think?

David: It seems that way. I know this is Nielsen's second swipe really of getting in that big ... They bought NeuroFocus, as you know.

Roger: Right, sure.

David: That's some time ago. I think the Innerscope approach is kind of an aggregating approach. They've got a variety of different ways of measuring emotional energies that they sort of bring together in a particular engagement. I think that's kind of interesting. We actually, some time ago, had a conversation with them. It didn't seem like it was quite the fit. We, I think, have a tool that sort of likes to stand on its own more than be together with galvanic skin response and EEG.

Roger: Right. I think that sort of unified approach, or even sort of multi-pronged approach is increasingly common. Just a few weeks ago we spoke to Elissa Moses from Ipsos and they also use I think maybe four or five different technologies, in addition to traditional market research methods to try and build a total picture. Also, I would say it sort of depends on what questions you're trying to answer. If you're trying to compare two specific ads to see which has better audience engagement or emotional response, that might demand one tool; where, if you're trying to uncover deeper brand attitudes, that might demand a very different sort of approach.

David: No, I think that's fair, and I think a lot of the tools that are in the market today do a fairly good job of giving the sense of the magnitude of emotional response. I think that what we're after with MindSight® is to go beyond the magnitude; to try to talk about the various kinds of emotional energy that are being invoked, so that we can talk about whether those energies align with the aspirations of the client to have an emotional impact. It's not just how much but what kind.

Roger: Right. Well, maybe that's a good segue, David, into the MindSight® process. I know we've spoken about this in the past and I've always kind of admired it for its apparent simplicity. It doesn't take sticking folks in an fMRI machine, but seems like it can yield some fairly profound results. For our listeners, many

of whom probably aren't familiar with it. Can you describe how the MindSight® process works?

David: Sure. The foundation of MindSight®, there are two key pillars on which the tool is built. One is a series of studies done by neuroscientists that focus on what happens in somebody's brain when you see a picture, or an image of any kind, for that matter, and what those studies pretty much create a sense of surroundings that, while it takes one-tenth of a second or maybe a bit more time to recognize what it is you're looking at, the ensuing five or six or seven hundred milliseconds after recognition is all focused around the emotional processing of the image.

Before then, at around eight or nine hundred milliseconds, you start to see activity in the frontal lobes and you're going to make inferences that intellectual processing, rational processing, is beginning. MindSight® is a rapid exposure, rapid response, image-driven technique, which constraints people to respond in what we call that emotional discovery window time period between zero and eight hundred milliseconds. That gives us a chance to sneak in under the radar, rational editing, if you will, by giving responses to people before they have the chance to do that kind of stuff.

That's one piece. The second piece, that is, when you're using images to talk to people and have a dialog with the consumer's brain, if you will, and you're trying to constrain the responses to being a sub-one second timeframe, you have to know ahead of time what those pictures mean because people won't have time to talk. There's a theory, which the book is about, and we'll talk about that in a bit, which stipulates that there are really nine different kinds of motivational energy that have evolved over time to allow people to take care of themselves and the world and interact and socialize and everything. Each of those nine kinds of energy became a focus for us, identifying and validating images that evoke the feelings of those nine motivational forces create for people.

We have a library of images, whose emotional value, if you will, we know ahead of time, and we flash those images to people

as a part of us. What we call a sentence completion task, so I might say to you, "Gee, Roger, let's do the following sentence completion task. I love living in Texas because it makes me feel like ...," then I would flash these images with the instruction. Each image will evoke a feeling in you; if that's one of the feelings that you get from living in Texas that you like, then touch your phone, hit your spacebar, whatever. It's a technology-agnostic tool and that's the nut of it if you will. It's a dialog with emotional brain that happens very fast, so you can't have rational interference, and it's based on a library of images, which are validated to evoke these nine kinds of motivational energies.

Roger: Right. David, to follow up on your Texas example, they say you were engaged by the Texas State Department of Tourism or maybe the Business Development Agency, assuming there is one, what sort of images would you be contrasting to try and figure out what people's attitudes are toward Texas?

David: Sure. The libraries, Roger, are standardized, validated libraries. We have different libraries for different cultural markets, so we have a Chinese library and a South American library and a Southern and Northern European library and so forth, but the images themselves essentially remain the same from project to project because it's not their content that is an issue, really, in terms of people say, "Oh, that's an interesting picture. That looks like West Texas." It's more of the issue of the instantaneous, sub-one second emotional feeling you get when you see the photo before you really even spent a lot of time thinking about, "Gee, it looks like it's wet in Texas at the moment."

We would use the same images. The priming sentence, which we use to set up the exercise, might then be, "A vacation in Texas is wonderful. Probably lead you feeling more blank," and then these images would ensue, and we'd get an impression of what people's emotional expectations were about a Texas vacation.

Roger: Right. Basically, these are the same images for the State of Texas or fragrance or Coca-Cola or whatever?

David: Yeah. Pretty much. One caveat to that is that we found experimentally over time that there are certain kinds of images which I guess I could say they take a neurological shortcuts, so that if I had a picture of the State of Texas in my library, or if I had something that was typically Texan, there's a way of saying, "Oh, this is about Texas. Oh, look, Texas," and so you'll get a certain ... If we have a client who's in the ice cream business, none of the images would have ice cream in it.

Roger: Right. Okay. Yeah, that makes sense because there would be that existing association with the particular entity that you're trying to test, as opposed to with the emotion.

David: That's right.

Roger: Okay. Well, let's talk about your new book, The Science of Why. It uses the three by three matrix to identify nine human motivations. What's the origin of this breakdown?

David: The origin of the breakdown is a lengthy process of reviewing the literature on motivation that's been written over the course of the past decade and even really going back to the past century, and looking at the various motivational concepts that were brought together by various ... That's everyone, from Maslow to Erickson to William James, and so on. They're pretty much, in the course of an article that we published in a review of general psych in 2011; we show how you can really subsume about a hundred and six theories written about motivation into this nine, just three by three matrix.

I haven't, in the course of this work, invented new motives; they have names, like identity and security and mastery and achievement and all concepts you're familiar with. The accomplishment, I think, is creating this kind of periodic table-like matrix, in which the positions of the motives in the matrix are themselves meaningful, and the result is a portrait of motivation that you can, once you examine it, recognize as comprehensive because it covers all the possibilities.

Roger: I know this is tough because we're not using a visual medium here, but can you describe the two axes really quickly, David,

just to explain how they fit together and maybe give an example of one of the cells on the matrix?

David: Absolutely.

Roger: If we can, we'll put a graphic showing this on the show notes page, so folks who want to dig in to it a little bit more deeply can follow along, because trying to verbally describe a three by three matrix can be a little bit tough.

David: That's fair. Well, I will always remember and add that I was on the radio about the advantages of advertising on the radio and the announcer proceeded to describe, "Imagine a mountain of ice cream five hundred feet tall and a cherry twelve feet wide." Obviously, things that could happen in your imagination described orally, as opposed to something if you put a picture up. With that said, imagine a matrix, I guess it doesn't have to be a hundred feet tall, in which the columns pertain to...

Roger: Well, exaggeration makes things more memorable, so perhaps it should be a hundred foot tall matrix.

David: Exactly. If it's a hundred foot tall matrix, then we'll talk about the left-most column that is thirty feet wide by a hundred feet tall. It has three motives in it. The columns pertain to are defined by where the motivational energy is focused. What are you trying to make happen? What is it you're up to? What is this motive driving you to seek?

The first column contains the three motives that have to do with the energies we direct toward thinking and feeling better about ourselves. That includes the motive of security and feeling safe and secure, both physically, as well as psychologically; the motive of identity, which pertains to feeling we're distinct and have an identity that's all our own; and the motive of mastery, which has to do with the sense that we're excellent and achieved in sort of respects, of our activities or our personality.

The center column has to do with motives that drive us toward activities in the material world. Everything, from the book you're working on to the stone fence you're building to the road trip that you're taking; getting things done in the world of objects.

The motives in there are empowerment and engagement and achievement.

Finally, the right-most column are the motives that pertain to social relations and social interactions. There again the motivations are belonging or connecting up with people; nurturance, or the giving and getting, of loving and liking, and all that good social energy; and esteem, which is attaining a status in one's social groups.

That said, rows, which run across those columns, have to do with what kind of fulfillment are we looking for. What will make you feel like you've got what you were aiming at with respect to yourself or the material world or the social world. The top row have to do with motives that are striving to create and enhance expectation going forward, or enhance opportunities for things to happen in the future. The middle row has to do with the motives that are directed toward enhancing your experience of the moment. The bottom row has to do with motives that are all directed toward having a kind of retrospective, evaluative point of view on the choices you've been making and the things you've been doing, such that you feel like the outcomes of your lifestyle choices, or the outcomes of your motivated behavior, are good ones.

That, in a nutshell, is what we've got. We've got three columns, which pertain to where the motives are aimed, and three rows, which pertain to what sort of outcome in particular you're looking for in that space.

Roger: David, I often talk about non-conscious versus conscious motivators, with conscious motivators being things like features and benefits and price, specifications; all those things that marketers like to focus on, talking about their product and themselves and their capabilities, and an unconscious motivators that is really potentially inclusive of a lot of different things, from Cialdini’s 6 principles to sensory marketing to mating cues from evolutionary psychology and so on.

Looking at your matrix of emotional motivators, how does this break down between conscious and non-conscious? Is there a

breakdown, or can each element have both conscious and non-conscious factors? Explain how that works.

David: Sure, Roger. Well, I think that distinction between the conscious and the unconscious is really a distinction between plans and goals versus sort of drives and urges, if you will. I might, for example, have an underlying urge to feel more secure. Let's make it so I believe in more physically secure, so that I'm perhaps somebody who feels a little nervous about my house, perhaps. I may not experience that as a conscious level of upset, but I may then go about formulating various plans about replacing locks or we can get an alarm system that I might conceive of to myself as just getting my house in order.

That will, if I accomplish those plans and reach those conscious goals, then help to create a feeling of fulfillment from my underlying drive for security, which is making me be compelled to take these actions because of a sense of nervousness; about the lack of … Or I might feel, for example, that I really want to see if I can get myself into the community acting, the thespian group in my community, because I'm thinking that it'd be interesting to have some more stuff to do, and just something to do in my spare time, and I might well formulate a plan to meet the people who are appropriate to be associated with that. Hence to engage in the kinds of conscious behaviors that will allow me to befriend and maybe impress those people, such that I might get an audition for a coming play of some sort.

Underneath that, though, the energy which would cause me to choose that might well be a drive for mastery; to feel like that getting good at something that I always wanted to get good at. Or drive for esteem, if you like. I might well gain a little stature in my community or stand out and gain a certain kind of positive regard for people for a performance that I might execute at some point in the future.

In some ways, they are a kind of a two-sided picture to any given piece of behavior. Typically, there's a conscious element to it, which involves that goals that one is pursuing consciously, the planned one has as to how those goals are going to be reached. Underneath there is an unconscious sort of emotional

gas, if you will, which is driving the whole thing. If you wanted to take an automotive metaphor, I suppose; the emotional energies are being part of the motivational drives are kind of the gasoline and the horsepower, and the steering wheel and the map are really the conscious plans and goals.

Roger: Okay. Well, assuming a marketer buys into your matrix and says, "Okay, this makes a huge amount of sense to me." How do they then figure out which of those motivations are going to be most appropriate or most effective for marketing their product or their brand? I'm assuming that it would be a bad idea to try to do all nine in any given campaign. I would assume that you would need to focus on one or two.

David: That's fair. That's absolutely fair. Any advertiser will tell you that one dominant element in a message or at most one and a half or two is all you can ever expect anyone to process. Remember, emotional focus or perhaps at most, again, two might be all that you can expect to be able to focus on, in terms of creating an emotional impact or an emotional takeaway by a consumer who saw your product or heard or read more of you or your message.

Basically, psychological research needs to be the starting point, just because people won't just necessarily step up and tell you. We talked about two kinds of barriers of emotional learning. There's a can't say barrier, where people can't talk about certain emotions and motivations because they're truly unconscious and they can't get access to them. Then there's a won't say barrier, where the fact, what many of these emotional motivations are primitive and they're selfish or grasping or greedy, or what have you, in nature, or they feel unacceptable to the conscious mind, means that people won't talk about them, even if you ask.

Undertaking to do consumer research, which, in one way or another, gets you deeper into the consumer's psyche; we have a tool to do that. I think there are other ways that are striving to do that. There's certainly a first part; you've got to figure out what is making your consumer tick, and then start to understand how to harvest that energy and work with it and

what kinds of messaging will evoke it. Then folks who are very much into business that you counsel people to be in on all of your inner dialogues about neuromarketing, frankly.

Roger: Right. Say I've got a wearable fitness device, for example. There's certainly enough of those in the market. I want to introduce it and hopefully hit some consumer hot buttons. What would I do to ... Would you say, "Okay, well, clearly, for a fitness device, these two emotions are going to be the most important," or is there another process for determining how it should be positioned? Because I assume actually that different fitness devices could choose different paths to appeal to consumers. One could be perhaps extremely health-oriented, others might appeal more toward appearance and more of a sexual-appeal type thing. Get fit and you'll be hot, versus get fit and you'll be really healthy and strong. Is there a process?

David: Sure enough. That's a great example, Roger. You're right in the examples that you've created; it's in your own sense of what might be true. There are two things that probably should be in the back of one's mind when you're trying to decide what sort of motivational marketing you're going to create for your product. One is what is the dominant motivation in your marketplace?

Because the reality is you'll find, if we just take that example, there will indeed be people who might seek a wearable fitness device because they're hoping to become sleeker, more appealing, and, if you will, hotter. They are there. There are also people who probably feel like they need to start attending to fitness and they have a need for security because they're worried about how they're holding up, and so maybe reaching the back half of midlife, or what have you.

Then there are people, and this is very clearly an element in what I've seen in the products that are out now; there's belonging connection kind of things, where people very much enjoy the notion that you could join with the community of folks, compare your stores, who's walking the most ... Who's part of the healthiest and so forth. That sort of energy becomes a dominant energy, even when the end goal, maybe fitness or physical appeal for another reason.

I guess decide on the group you're trying to reach, and ideally, obviously, that's a large group. Hopefully, as in positioning in general, pick a space that you can stand for and own, or at least be dominant in, that's different from what the other guys are doing, if there's a space that's a sufficient size that has that possibility for being proprietary.

Roger: David, you mentioned Starbucks. That's a brand I've written about quite a bit over the years, and they're usually a pretty savvy practitioner of unconscious or non-conscious marketing. What motivators do they use?

David: Well, interestingly, we did a piece of worker, which I've reported a couple of times in conferences, that was focused on Dunkin' Donuts and looking at various channels there and one of the things -we've noticed was true about the most successful channels, was that they were doing something which is unique to that particular branch of Dunkin' Donuts but is generally true with Starbucks, which is they were calling people by name, they were writing people's names on cups, so that everyone could be called by name, and they were building, at least nominally, literally nominally, personal connection with the customers, one-by-one, as they came to the line.

In our work over the years, we've certainly come to understand that one of the things that's true about people, especially early in the morning, when a lot of that business is conducted, is that there's an almost sort of primitive psychological rebirth when one awakens, and you're sort of putting yourself back together. Having someone reach out to you and call you by name and giving you a sense that you're being taken care of, so I guess I'm landing on belonging or connectedness and nurturance or care-taking, two big social motives, as the dominant forces that Starbucks is using.

I think that's a very good choice for them, especially in the day part, in which a lot of their business is conducted, where people are looking to gentle themselves back into a state of consciousness and then go on about their business or their day.

Roger: It's sort of a social validation type of appeal that they're connecting and often, of course, even the barista may, if you go there often enough, she may recognize you and know your name before she even asks to write it. You're getting multiple inputs there; first when you're greeted, then when they tell you that your coffee is ready and so on.

David: That's right, and I think they are ... I think Starbucks employees are counseled to undertake to do that as much as possible. To learn the names of customers and to learn their orders, and to go even above and beyond the sort of nominal connection of asking your name and writing it on the cup so that someone else can call it out, to actually, socially, become acquainted with your customers because of the value that has ... Obviously, I think in this world of mass marketing and anonymity, we're probably all looking for that where we can find it. I think it's especially salient in that morning coffee day part, which a lot of this business gets done. Or, if nothing else, in which a brand in which you might well then return to later in the day is probably selected.

Roger: Interesting stuff. We're almost out of time, but let me ask you about a study that you described in the book about fragrance; marketing a fragrance and looking at a couple of different concepts for marketing it. One with more of a seduction theme, one that has a sophistication theme. Can you quickly walk through that process of how you approached that study?

David: Sure. This is a client who was very cognizant of the fact that fragrance benefits are primarily emotional in nature.

Roger: Yeah. I used fragrance as an example of one industry that never sells features and benefits. You've never seen a fragrance ad talk about the fact that they're more powerful or longer-lasting or less expensive or something than the competition. It's totally emotional.

David: You're absolutely right. Because of that, and because olfaction, the sense of smell, is not intimately connected with the speech areas, people can't, they don't have a very eloquent vocabulary for talking about their experiences with this sense. Moreover,

obviously, our client was looking to have an emotional impact, recognizing that an emotional appeal was the mainstay of their business success. They needed a way to detect at the level of the concept fragrances that will likely to become successful in the market.

They obviously recognized that then delivering a fragrance which actually created the emotional experience that they were promising with their concept is going to be a big part of their successful business process. In fact, working with them on using emotional tools to directly give feedback about the experience of smelling a fragrance, but the part, the study that's in my book is really just trying to, we're trying to help them to understand what sort of concepts describing what sorts of promises of wearing a fragrance will have the most appeal to consumers … What degree do the emotional promises come through clearly, to what degree do emotional promises create a sort of singular positive emotional takeaway, without creating a lot of corresponding emotional resistance?

That's the approach we take to testing all concepts, where instead of weighing the emotional pull of the concept against any emotional resistance that might be created at the same time. I know there's profiles of energies that I show in the book are really profiles of both of those sides of the equation. Of the push and the pull, if you will, and the concepts are evaluated, in terms of the net positive energy, the net pull, of the concept, as well as ... This is where I think MindSight® approach motivational marketing can be very powerful, which kinds of pull this particular fragrance is creating and how does that then dictate further elements of advertising, execution, or details of the packaging, configuration, and so on, such that every element in the package and the promise and the advertising aligns and sings in harmony a promise of a singular and powerful emotional benefit.

Roger: Okay. Let me remind our listeners that we're talking with David Forbes, author of the new book The Science of Why: Decoding Human Motivation and Transforming Marketing Strategy. If you want to really dig in to what drives people to develop brand

preferences, this book is what I'd call a deep dive. David, how can our listeners find your stuff online?

David: Well, they can read more about the book at www.scienceofwhy.com, and they can also follow us on Twitter @forbesresearch.

Roger: Great. Okay, well, we will have links to those and the other resources we discussed during the show on the show notes page at rogerdooley.com/podcast. You'll also find a text version of our conversation there. David, thanks for being on the show and best of luck with the new book and also your new business arrangement.

David: Thanks very much, Roger.

Roger: Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to bringing success, please visit us at RogerDooley.com

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