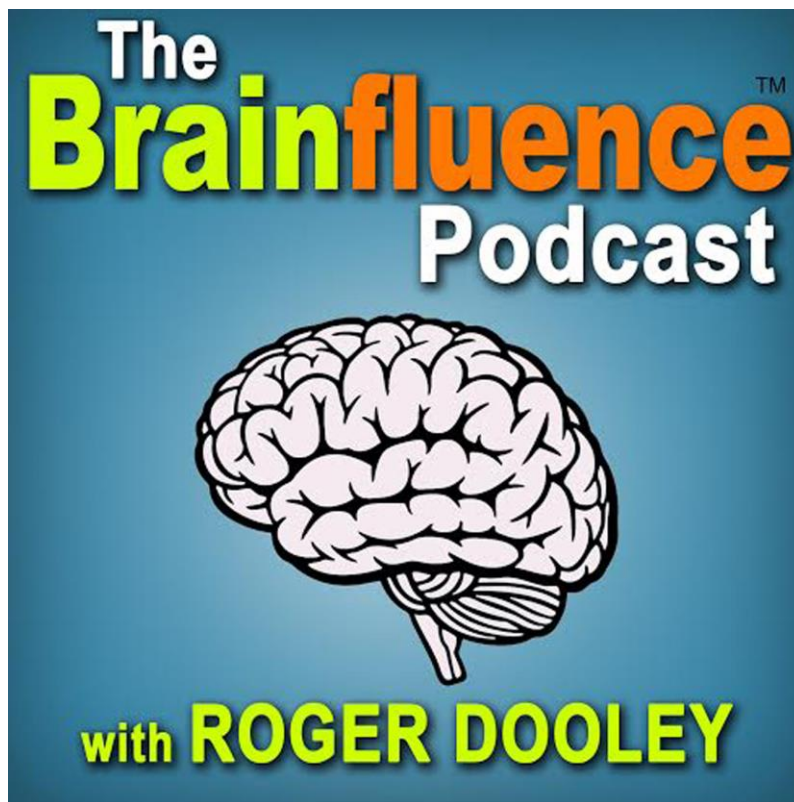


Ep. #113: How You Can Change Behavior with Memorable Content with Carmen Simon



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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 am Roger Dooley. My guest this week is a cognitive scientist. She holds doctorates in both instructional technology and cognitive psychology. She's the cofounder of Rexi Media, a presentation, design, and training company that has helped America's most visible brands craft memorable messages by focusing on how the brain works. Her new book is *Impossible to Ignore: Creating Memorable Content to Influence Decisions*. Welcome to the show, Carmen Simon.

Carmen Simon: Thank you so much for having me, Roger.

Roger Dooley: I know our audience is going to enjoy hearing from you, Carmen, because your techniques are all based on science and research. To get to the very basics of how people remember things, you link it to the brain's reward system. Is the brain always asking, "What's in it for me?" Hence, is it more likely to forget stuff where it doesn't see a reward?

Carmen Simon: Constantly. All we do every day, every single moment, every single second, we are looking to receive rewards or avoid punishment. When that happens then we tend to repeat those actions over and over because the result feels so juicy.

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Roger Dooley: You talk about three pathways or three ways to get into people's memory. What are those?

Carmen Simon: You look in the book, the *Impossible to Ignore* book that I have just released, I look at it as three paths to decision making. I consider memory to be at the root of all decision making that we do. Those three paths go like this: Whenever the brain decides what happens next and what to do next, it will base that decision in three ways.

One is reflexive or one might even call it Pavlovian. The brain automatically and reflexively decides what to do next. For instance, it reacts very quickly to sweet tastes, to bitter tastes. It reacts to certain odors. It reacts to temperature. It reacts to altruism, beauty, the ability to control our environment. So there are certain decisions that we make innately. The memory is already a given. It's there. We come with it.

A second path towards choice is habitual, as I'm sure you know from your own experiences. Once you engage in something that proves to be rewarding, you tend to repeat it. While habits are conscious at first, they become subconscious afterwards, very much like reflexes. So they require very little energy. Taking the same route to work is one such example.

The third path towards decision making is more strategic, it's goal-oriented. So it is possible for the brain to change its mind in light of new information. So if on the same habitual route to work you now see a construction sign, it is possible to avoid that area and take a new route. I'm curious to know, from your

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experiences, what are some habits that you tend to repeat?

Roger Dooley: I think one of the most interesting areas for exploration is how applications, either say mobile applications or websites and so on, become habit-forming because that's something that really many marketers strive for. Indeed it is those sites that actually sort of engage the reward system and ultimately go from sort of a manipulated reward process to a habit that is really successful.

Carmen Simon: Yeah, you're using a very strong word. There is a fine line between influencing someone's memory and manipulating someone's memory. It is possible to do both and we have to be cautious. The difference between the two being that if you have an ethical goal in mind as you place memories in people's minds, then you're doing the right thing.

Also if you're placing in people's minds memories that will serve them well later, then you're also doing the right thing. Otherwise, if those conditions are not met, then yeah, we're engaging more into the manipulative side of things.

Roger Dooley: Right. That was probably a poor choice of words because manipulation has a negative connotation. But I guess I was referring more to the sort of external trigger situation versus an internal trigger where initially an application might send you an email notification that somebody has replied. Then you would respond to that and use it again.

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But eventually, it becomes a habit where perhaps you're feeling an emotional state and you're bored. So you say, "Okay, I'm bored. I'm going to go look at Instagram." Or, "I'm hungry, so I'll look at Yelp." My friend Nir Eyal has explored that a lot. It's really fascinating and it's really that difference in habit formation that sets apart the winners from the losers.

Carmen Simon: Having the three concepts in mind, the reflexes, habits, and goals that the brain uses in choice making, it's very useful to anyone who creates a message or to any marketer because the mistake that a lot of people make is that we tend to write or create content from the standpoint of appealing to people's goals, which requires thinking, versus appealing more to their reflexes and habits, which requires fewer cognitive resources.

That's important to differentiate between the two, strategic versus automatic decisions, because at the end of a long day for instance, you're giving a message to the brain. It depends on how much cognitive resources it still has in order to make decisions. When those resources are depleted, then we tend to decide what to do next based on a reflex or on a habit.

For instance, I'm always impressed by messages or advertisements that builds or hooks into existing habits. I remember there was one for a firm that was selling certified pre-owned vehicles, specializing in Porsche. Their tagline was...

Roger Dooley: That sounds so much better than "used cars."

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Carmen Simon: It gets even better. The tagline was, “Used is such a harsh word. We prefer previously obsessed over.” Notice how very quickly they’re building off of some habits that we have and some words that we recognized immediately such as “used”—it is a used car—and “previously.” It’s phrased and builds an expectation, like previously owned. But they changed that into previously obsessed over.

A message like that works because for most of us it is so recognizable and so familiar that the brain doesn’t have to think as much. Because giving the brain the choice to think or not to think, we’d rather choose the path of least resistance.

Roger Dooley: There’s probably also a little bit of a surprise factor there which is good for the brain where when you start hearing the word “previously” in a used car context, you know what’s coming next, “previously owned,” because that’s what every other advertisement uses. Instead of getting previously owned, you get the previous obsessed over, that would startle the person’s brain a little bit and make them pay attention.

Carmen Simon: For sure. I have just completed a study where I was asking a simple question. You know, sometimes simple questions are not the easiest to answer. I wanted to know if as you analyze a lot of SlideShares, is it possible to start predicting what stays on people’s minds longer.

I advocate that memory is at the root of all decision making. Therefore in order for people to like your SlideShare or to share it with somebody else or to comment on it or embed it, you would have to be on that

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person's mind for long enough in order to get some action.

I identified, as you will see in the book as well, 15 variables that we can use in order to control or impact other people's memory. I wanted to see which of these variables were predictive of staying on people's minds long enough for them to act in your favor. Out of the 15 variables, surprise, which is what you're talking about was by far one of the most consistent in terms of predicting that you're going to get more likes, more shares, more comments, more embeds.

The intriguing factor about that was that the SlideShares that were included in my study didn't have an element of surprise on every single slide. So let's just say that on average a SlideShare might have between 10 to 50 slides. It was only about ten percent of the slides needed to have that factor in order to generate some action. In other words, consider using surprise in your marketing materials or presentations like caviar not marmalade.

Roger Dooley: That's really a fascinating piece of research that you did because when people go to conferences they may sit through 10, 15, or more presentations in the course of a day. I think every speaker is faced with a challenge of, "How do I get at least some of the audience to remember my key points?" Other than surprise, what are some other things that a speaker could do or somebody who's preparing a presentation even for viewing online?

Carmen Simon: In addition to surprise, we have 14 other variables that we can use. One of the ones that intuitively we recognize and we agree with, yet we underuse it, is

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repetition. Repetition, obviously the mother of memory, is something that we accept but when it comes to using it, I'm noticing that we shy away from it. Let's just say that somebody presents at a conference and they have maybe an hour-long presentation. They might have 30, 40 slides to go along with that.

Observe next time that you're in a context like that how often a presenter decides to repeat their main, important message. You will be surprised at how little repetition there is. My suspicion is that we constantly want to impress our audiences with novelty. We want to fill in every single minute with something new and with abundance of information. It's a shame because if we just dared to sacrifice a little bit of that novelty in favor of repetition, then you have more chances to impact memory.

Roger Dooley: So for example, in many of my presentations, near the beginning I cite that there's four trillion dollars' worth of merchandise left in abandoned ecommerce shopping carts every year, or at least last year. Then subsequently in the presentation at least once, sometimes twice, I do sort of a callback to that. Is that the sort of thing you're talking about?

Carmen Simon: Yeah, absolutely. So you can repeat statistics or surprising facts very much like this in order to refresh attention and that helps. What works even better is to make sure that you repeat the main message that you want them to say when you're no longer in the room. So if that's your stat and that's what you want them to associate with you, with Roger's presentation, and that's

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the most important message, then repetition works in your favor.

I'm noticing that, one, people don't have a clear idea of what they want to put in other people's minds. So if we aspire at memorable messages, we have to be clear about what those messages are. If it's blurry to you, it will be blurry to them.

Then, two, insist on that message exactly in the same format at least three or four times, if not more. The longer the presentation goes, the more you have to engage in repetition and making sure that you stay consistent. Sometimes people start paraphrasing themselves. Sometimes they start saying things in different ways. Often that's a sign of lack of preparation as well because we choose different words when we haven't prepared those words to begin with.

Roger Dooley: Right. So one of the really key points when I'm speaking is usually—and I use Gerald Zaltman's number for this—but 95 percent of our decision-making processes are nonconscious. I'll usually introduce that really early in the presentation, explains this is why we're talking about this stuff. But then I'll refer to it in the middle once or twice and then at the end, the close, goes straight back to that almost. That's the sort of thing that you're talking about.

That hopefully by the end of it, people remember, "Okay, a lot of our thinking processes and decision-making processes are nonconscious." Which for folks who have studied this for a while isn't really too shocking but for general audiences often there's still a few people in the

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world who think that everything they do is rational and logical.

Carmen Simon: We have to be careful with that statistic because obviously just like anything, it depends on the context. We know from science that the brain decides in those three ways: the reflexive, the habitual, and the goal-oriented. What you're referring to is when it comes to reflexes and habits, indeed, we make those decisions in a subconscious kind of way.

Depending on the context, you may decide to put more effort in your decision or not. For instance, if you buy toothpaste, then yes, 95 percent of the time that you'll go to the grocery store and buy the toothpaste it will be a subconscious process.

Roger Dooley: Right, unless you're obsessed about dental hygiene or something. But no, I agree. I think it depends an awful lot on what you're talking about. I'm sure Zaltman wasn't just referring to purchase decisions but just more general getting through life, getting through the day decisions. Whether to put one foot in front of the other and so on.

One of the things that you talk about as most common kind of memory failure, Carmen, is forgetting to execute on a future intention. By that, that's a slightly complex statement, but you mean the sort of thing that I know I do all the time. I need to send somebody an email today and I make a mental note of that, which is really kind of a poor term because it's not a real note and it's not very effective because then I get to tomorrow and realize that I forgot to send that email.

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So I mean I try and compensate with to-do lists and Post-it notes and whatnot which helps a lot. But why is this kind of failure so common and what does it tell us about memory overall?

Carmen Simon: The new model that they adopted in the book that sits at the foundation of decision making is this model called a Perspective Memory Model. What I mean by that is that the brain forgets to act sometimes on future intentions. We are so consumed by forgetting the past and worrying that we forget the past that we forget that the bulk of memory problems that we have is really forgetting the future.

So if you're reflecting on your own situation like you just did, last week I guarantee that about 60 to 80 percent of the memory issues that you went through were not forgetting the past, they were forgetting to act on an intention like sending an email, like picking up your dry cleaning, buying something for someone. Because of that, then we have to translate that into a business setup and say let's not worry about getting our customers and our audiences to remember what happened in the past. Let's worry more about them remembering us in the future where decisions happen.

So from that regard, then we say, okay, you can share some information right now at point A, whether it be a blog or a conference or a campaign that you created. Then you have to ask—people will make decisions in your favor hopefully at point B. That point B will happen maybe two minutes from now, maybe two hours from now, two weeks from now, two months from now, at some point in the future.

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So then we continue asking what will people need at point B in order to be determined to ask on what you asked, what you wanted them to do. Whether it's to read your blog, whether it's to attend your presentation, whether it's to share with somebody else, or buy your product, or hire you, or promote you. There are three things that typically happen in people's contexts at point B that they will need in order to act on that intention.

One is a cue or a trigger of something that they're supposed to do. The other is they will be searching their memory as to what to do. The third is the decision to execute. So if you're talking about picking up your dry cleaning, you may be driving around and suddenly you see the cue, you see "cleaners," the name of the shop. Then you search your memory thinking, "Was I supposed to do anything? Oh yeah, I was supposed to stop by." Then you pull into the parking lot, then you execute.

The mistake that most communicators make these days is that they don't engage in this point of the communication. They are so consumed with point A and doing a good job there but they forget that really the decision happens sometime in the future, and that's what we need to be concerned with.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, you have a good example of those reusable grocery bags in the book which is another memory failure that I will admit to in public here where I can't count the number of times that I've walked into the supermarket realizing that I left the reusable grocery bags back in the car. That's kind of an example where the messaging can change, right?

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Carmen Simon: It can change in the sense of as a marketer if I'm creating some communication and I'll say to people, "Save the environment, bring a bag into the store." That's all I said at point A and then hoping that they will remember and act on it at point B. The way that we can improve that is imagine if at point B I got out of my car and I would see in the parking lot a giant sign that said, "Bring your bag into the store." So that's a cue.

If I know that that's happening and many grocery stores are now starting to place those signs there, then at point A I should already introduce that kind of messaging. Instead of saying, by the time when you get to the grocery store you will see this message, so be prepared for it. See how I'm priming the brain already with what it's likely to see at point B. Quite often what I'm noticing is that there is a discrepancy between what we show them at point A and what indeed the environment or their internal triggers are doing at point B.

Roger Dooley: So if you were trying to create that association showing somebody pulling into a parking spot perhaps.

Carmen Simon: Yes.

Roger Dooley: And opening their trunk and getting the bag out would be the way to do it.

Carmen Simon: Exactly.

Roger Dooley: Of course eventually I guess if you can trigger enough then it becomes habitual and it's not really a problem. But I think I forget often enough that it hasn't really become a habit.

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In a business context, how would you do that if you're trying to get somebody to buy your product or do something of that nature? How could you change your messaging to make that happen?

Carmen Simon: Study intensely what happens in people's contexts so that you can base the messages on those details. So like for instance, I just saw an ad that is still on my mind. In these days it's a luxury to stay on people's minds days later after you expose them to your information is huge. This ad showed a beer bottle. It was an ad for beer. An ad created with a humanitarian kind of way in a sense of reminding people not to drink and drive.

Imagine you're giving people beer at point A but they're supposed to not drink and drive at point B. So those two messages have to be somewhat similar and somewhat related. So at point A what they're showing us is the cap of the beer that has a car on top of it. So you imagine that the minute that you use a bottle opener, by default when you're opening the bottle, you're messing with a car. You're bending it out of shape, literally.

When you take the cap off and you look on the inside it says, "Don't drink and drive." So you see how they're already creating that association as to what may happen to you at point B if you don't follow that message.

Roger Dooley: That's a great example. You talk about the difference between a topic and a reward. By that I mean this is something where you change your messaging so instead of just discussing a topic you turn the title or the headline or whatever into somehow a reward message. I think this is probably something that wouldn't surprise a lot of copywriters and bloggers and so on who are really

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geared toward creating headlines that will get clicks and so on.

But you give an example of a rather non-engaging topic like processing nonretirement distributions that would probably not elicit a lot of interest even if it was somehow important. I mean if retirement was impending and I was concerned about that, that still doesn't really engage me. How could you turn that into reward?

Carmen Simon: As you gauge your audience and if you're a good marketer, if you're a good presenter, if you're a good blogger, you're already in your people's space so you somewhat know what it is that they would find rewarding. So starting with that kind of knowledge, it's definitely helpful.

From that regard, then instead of simply stating a topic which we have the tendency to do, step back and wonder, "Can I state this through the lens of what's valuable and what's rewarding?" So asking, is this a question of topic versus is this a question of value will get you there.

I'm noticing these days that sometimes people tend to focus on rewards in a very specific way. You may promise somebody, "Here are three ways that you can reach your retirement sooner." That's rewarding. Or people stay more subtle.

I remember a Harley-Davidson ad where the tagline was: "Somewhere on an airplane a man is trying to rip open a small bag of peanuts." The ad was showing this beautiful countryside and the person on the motorcycle just cruising along. The sun is about to set and

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everything is just a combination of lush green plus the nice pinks and reds that you have from the sunset. Just a beautiful environment to be in. They were using this contrast.

You could be on this motorcycle ride enjoying the beautiful countryside or you could just take a plane instead and enjoy your little small bag of peanuts. The reward was placed in more subtle ways. One advantage that you get out of that subtly is that now the brain has to work just a little bit harder to get that message but since the result of it is enjoyable, then the brain is willing to expend that extra cognitive energy. So consider it giving your audience the joy of getting it, not always making it so obvious.

Roger Dooley: Right, a bit of an aha phenomenon.

Carmen Simon: Yes.

Roger Dooley: So, Carmen, what is the forgetting curve?

Carmen Simon: The forgetting curve is a theory and a formula that has stood the test of time in science for almost 100 years now. I enjoy reminding people of it because it's...

Roger Dooley: They keep forgetting.

[Laughter]

Carmen Simon: They keep forgetting for decades. It states this: When your audience's brains are attending to your information without the intent to remember, the brain will forget fast at first and slower later. Meaning that after about two days it will forget about 90 percent of what you shared and that forgetting curve has an exponential shape. So

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that steep forgetting happens very quickly in those first initial days. After that, it tapers off.

So a small metaphorical 10 percent, let's call it that, tends to stay there for a long period of time. With that in mind, when you create information or you create communication or you create presentations, blogs, marketing campaigns, regardless of the artifact that you're into, consider this. In two days, people will forget the bulk of it, let's just call it 90 percent. Are you in charge of the small 10 percent that stays there?

I refer to these numbers as metaphorical because especially in business contexts it's almost impossible to place a strict statistic on how much people take away. So we look at those numbers more as metaphorical numbers. We have to distinguish that from the mess that you may have heard where people only remember 10 percent of what they see, 20 percent of what they hear, 30 percent of what they see and hear, those kinds of things. That's bogus. There is no study out there that shows that conveniently progressive statistics.

Roger Dooley: Since that's true, what you really want to do is be sure that you are creating the right memories. In other words, the ones that are most important for your business purpose because you also talk about random memories. That people may not remember the 10 percent that's most important. They may just remember some random assortment of 10 percent.

Carmen Simon: Exactly. So we don't know whether if you're not in charge and you're not taking the memory concept deliberately or seriously, then what can happen is a small percentage will stay in your audience's minds for a

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long time but they may be in control of that and you may not. So for example, you're giving me that example of the trillions of bits of information that you said earlier.

Roger Dooley: The dollars left in shopping carts in ecommerce websites.

Carmen Simon: Exactly. So imagine that in two days from now people will still remember that but maybe that was just a trivia in your overall presentation and that wasn't the most important thing. Then in two days if you were to survey members of your audience and that's the only thing that they said back then you might be disappointed.

So for any marketer or communicator out there, the advice that I have is to be sure that you are in control of what they take away and you don't leave that to chance. Why is that important? Because ultimately the brain decides based on what it remembers, not on what it forgets.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, you also talk about gist and verbatim memories. You can describe those but is one or the other more important for marketers or speakers? Or does it just depend on the context?

Carmen Simon: It's good to make the distinction first of all. When you're investigating your own messages and you're asking, "What is it really that I want to put on people's minds?" When you answer that question for yourself, there are two types of memory traces that the brain creates whenever it's exposed to information.

It creates a verbatim trace which means you're remembering exactly the words as they were said. For

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example, if somebody taught you all the capitals of all the countries in the world and you were able to recite them back, that would be verbatim memory. It's the exact representation of what you learned.

The other type of memory is a gist memory, meaning that you retain a familiar notion of what was presented. The percentage that you want to put in people's minds of the two is definitely up to you. Sometimes for instance I'll work with CEOs and we create their keynotes. I'll ask the same question, "What is it you want to place in people's minds?"

Sometimes people don't really care about specific words that they want the audience to repeat afterwards. They just want the audience to leave with a feeling that the company is going in the right direction or the feeling that the CEO brings enough credibility and consistency to make sure that they stay on a financially viable path. Those kinds of things. They go mostly for gist.

Whereas if you talk to some other people, they're so particular about certain phrases that they will be disappointed if those phrases didn't live in that exact format. So totally up to you. No right or wrong answer but the advantage of gist is that it tends to stay in our memories for a longer period of time versus verbatim which takes a lot of repetition to get to.

Roger Dooley: Okay, so if you were trying to create messaging, I suppose something like a brand tagline would be something we're you'd want verbatim memory. But typically, I think brands would employ some verbal tricks too to help it stick. Things like alliteration or rhyme or perhaps some sort of play on words that would help it be

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more memorable. Where in other cases, what they're trying to do is simply come away with the key aspect of our product is its high performance or our unique technology. They're not really expecting that.

But in both cases probably repetition of the concept is required. It's just that in some cases you'd want the repetition to be extremely consistent for verbatim where you might use say a variety of examples and ways of expressing it if you're looking more for a gist-type memory.

Carmen Simon: Exactly. Imagine like a message from GEICO, the 15 minutes will save you 15 percent or more on your car insurance. It's 15 minutes and it's 15 percent. Imagine if somebody turned around, they said, "Oh yeah, that GEICO commercial where if you call in for like 17 minutes it will save you 24 percent."

[Laughter]

That wouldn't work, would it?

Roger Dooley: No, and they've really hammered that home through repetition too. I mean they've got a couple things going for them because they repeat the 15 which is kind of memorable and people associate 15 minutes with being a quarter of an hour which is sort of a more memorable time than 13 or 17. So they've done that one pretty well.

You have an interesting example of a university that wanted to avoid binge drinking on the part of its students which is probably something that most universities try and do at least in the U.S. where it's often a problem.

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They used some really classic Cialdini messaging. They said that 65 percent of the students who party have three drinks or fewer. That's really straight out of the Six Principles playbook with social proof. It's probably effective more or less but you had some other ways of creating an even more enhanced message. What were those?

Carmen Simon: Going on the same line of point A and point B messaging, it's one thing to capture attention and use surprise at point A, which is what those campaigns that you're quoting were doing. So you're telling people three drinks or fewer are optimal but it's so easy to forget those. Like you walk on campus and then you see those messages and that's fine.

But when do you really need to remember those? You need to remember those at point B when you're actually drinking. You can imagine after the second or third drink memory is definitely impacted. So what can you do at point B in order to refresh that memory?

Some campaigns that were even more effective were bars that were starting to put different ice cubes of different colors, mainly red and blue, inside people's drinks to be reminiscent then to trigger the memory of a cop car. You see when you're impacting people at point B when it really counts, then you're not relying just simply on people bringing memories to their minds on their own. You're helping them out.

Roger Dooley: Right. That really is great because it's drawing a visual cue that I'm sure that people who have seen red and blue flashing lights can't help but associate that with a police car. Again, at least in the U.S. where that's

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exactly what they all use. It definitely gets your attention if you're driving and you see it. Even if it's some other type of a sign or tow truck or something, it immediately snaps you to attention. So that's a great example.

We're just about out of time. Let me remind our listeners that we're speaking with Carmen Simon, author of the new book *Impossible to Ignore: Creating Memorable Content to Influence Decisions*. Carmen, how can our listeners find you and your content online?

Carmen Simon: The Twitter handle is @areyoumemorable. Our website is reximedia.com. Rexi comes from the Latin verb to direct or to guide. So whenever you're getting close to any of these science-based principles that promises that you too will be able to direct or guide your messages towards people's memories and to influence action.

Roger Dooley: Great. For the @areyoumemorable Twitter handle, Carmen, is that letter R, letter U or is it A-R-E?

Carmen Simon: It's A-R-E.

Roger Dooley: Y-O-U?

Carmen Simon: Yes.

Roger Dooley: Okay, @areyoumemorable, great. We will link to all of those along with Carmen's book and any other resources we mentioned in the course of the podcast and we'll have a text version of our conversation there too. Carmen, thanks for being on the show.

Carmen Simon: Thank you, Roger. Thank you so much 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.