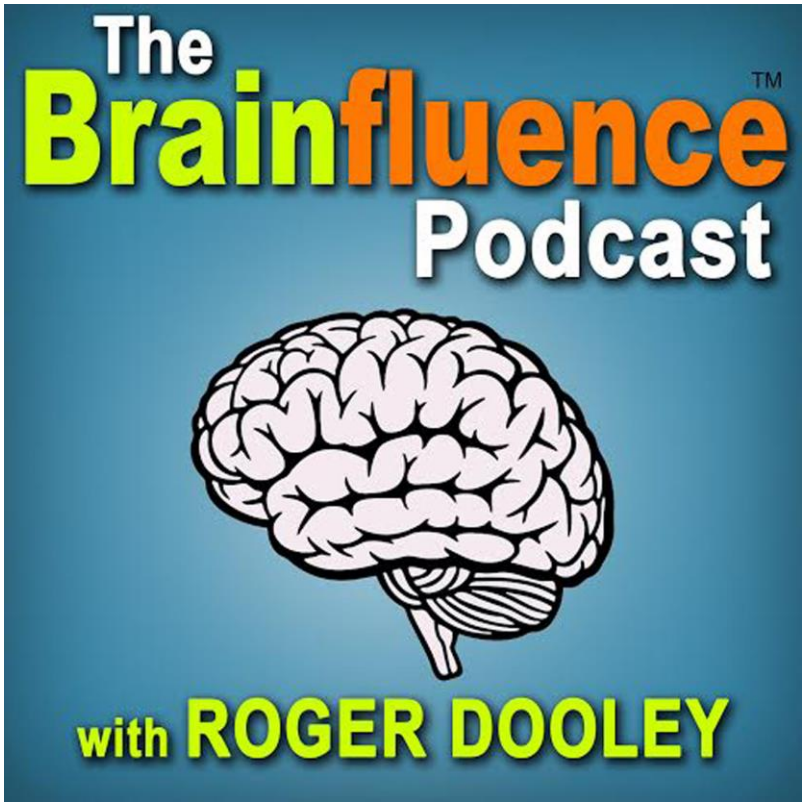
Ep #118: Social Proof – The Right and Wrong Ways to Use it



Full Episode Transcript

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.

Welcome to the *Brainfluence* podcast I'm Roger Dooley and this week is the fourth of July holiday in the U.S. and we have a little short of podcast to go with the shorter week it will just be me no amazing guest today.

Before we get going, I want to remind you about a free resource that you can access. It is my workbook for the Persuasion Slide. Now, you may have already downloaded the Kindle book, the Persuasion Slide and there's a campaign and it goes with it that what's you serve work through the combination of conscious and unconscious factors, in your own persuasion process and you can get that at rogerdooley.com/ps as in Persuasion Slide and you don't even need the Kindle book to use it, it's pretty self-explanatory and you can access the past blog post and podcast on the topic.

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Now, this week I want to talk about social proof and it's a topic that you are probably very familiar with if you are all familiar with persuasion psychology. And I'm guessing you are interested on those topics. So stay tuned in today and we're going to cover some perhaps lesser known aspects of social proof. But for starters, the concept of social proof is quite simple. It's one of Robert Cialdini needs Six Principles of Influence and it

basically says that if you see other people doing something you are more likely to be persuaded to do that thing yourself.

I don't know that anybody keeps these statistics but I would guess that social proof is the most commonly used one of Cialdini's Six Principles that we spy digital markers. You see it constantly. Some people say that thousands of unsold or this blog has 40 thousand subscribers all those are very common forms of social proof. And the reason you see social proof used so often is because it almost always work on it's not always but we can look at that a bit later. Most of the time it does really persuade people that whatever you are offering is perhaps better than without a social proof.

One of the interesting things is that people do not acknowledge that their influence by social proof. And a class example that is describe by Robert Cialdini in his most recent book, *The Small Big*, and that he describes his series of experiment involving sending letters about energy saving to consumers of electrical energy or electricity. They tried a variety of persuasive approaches on these letters they told people that it would be good for the environment and save the planet. In other letters, they said they would save money and then in one set of letters they said that you're neighbors are doing this you're neighbors are saving energy this week and when they ask people which kind of messaging would be most persuasive the neighbors letter was dead last.

People thought they were much more likely to be persuaded by the money they save or by saving the planet and so on. But when they actually ran the experiment and use these letters in different groups of consumers, the most effective one was that involves social proof, in essence of showing people that their neighbors are of saving energy.

In fact, one interesting outgrowth of this research is a company called O Power that helps utilities totally convince their customers to use less energy by collecting data about usage by individual and neighborhood and so on, and then, by trading persuasive communications based on that data and

speaking of neighbors. That's one of the things that made those communications even more persuasive.

The fact that it wasn't just a more generic message saying that citizens or our consumers across the state employ this energy saving behaviors instead it made it a little bit more personal by saying neighbor's and there's a good lesson on that whenever you can use social proof that somehow relates more to the individual that you are targeting, the more effective it will be. It's always better to characterize them by, perhaps, by geography, by profession, by gender, by any aspect that makes it seem a little bit more personal and again a little bit more like them.

Another classic experiment demonstrated this, it is one you've probably encountered at some point in your persuasion psychology reading which is the hotel towels study. There's actually been several variations on this study and hotels of course have interest in saving money and saving the environment and invasively getting people to not use of many towels.

One way to do that is by encouraging people to recycle them in other word's not have them changed out every day but if rather have the staff just fold them back up and let them dry out. So in this case, the expert manners look at several different kinds of messaging and it's a little bit similar to the energy conservations study. They tried saving the environment as one kind of messaging perhaps saving money is another. But what they found more effective was using a form of social proof by saying that a certain percentage of guests recycled their towels and messaging was even more effective when they changed it to say that same percentage. For example, of the guests in this room, even that's a sort of tenuous connection other people, the people who would stay in this room previously made that messaging a little bit more effective. And so whenever you can do that and your messaging somehow related to the individual on their own characteristics.

Now, there are various kinds of social proof. And one way of breaking it down is action versus preference. In other words, if you're selling a product,

you can say how many people bought the product or you could say how many people prefer the product. If you're trying to drive views of a video for example, you can say how many people viewed it or how many people liked it and they seem very similar. And you might almost think that the preferable one would be the action because clearly, buying something is a more powerful statement than saying you prefer it or like it or something kind of softer like that.

In any case, these group of researchers actually tested that by, showing people in an AB format those same forms of social proof and to see which would drive use of a video or more orders of a product and what they found was a little bit surprising. They found that the preference-based social proof was more effective in other words people are more likely to view a video if they saw it had a million likes versus a million views.

Now, it's hard to say exactly why this works, but it's possible that the like and preferred wording is a little bit more emotionally engaging than those action words. Even though it's sort of a softer statement, it might just grab the emotion of the viewer a little bit more. So one possible try expressing your social proof in terms of a more emotional word than involves preference rather than just a simple word that just say number of subscribers or something like that and in some cases you can use real statistics say likes versus views on something but in other cases you may be better just alter your wording a little bit to make it sound a little bit more like a preference and still be of course on the a right side of the honesty equation.

Now, I mentioned that social proof does not always work and if you talk to conversion experts, people who run commercial optimization companies and see thousands of thousands of test, they will tell you that social proof almost always works. But just about everyone can provide some counter examples of where they added social proof to a landing page or an offer of some kind and for whatever reason it actually depressed response a little bit. And that could be your variety of reasons for that. One could be that it's

just not very impressive at least compare to what the viewer. The user was expecting so if your new app has had 8 thousand downloads, that may seem like a big number to you but perhaps the people who you wanted to download it think that's sound like a really small number and they would expect to have millions of downloads. That could be one reason why social proof didn't work.

In other cases, it's simply distracting and also in some cases in specific product categories it may not be that much of applause, for instance in luxury products, the social proof is really something that's desirable, because often with luxury products, people expect to be owning a one of a kind thing or is not a one of a kind at least something that they won't see very often. So the last thing that somebody selling watches that costs tens of thousands of dollars would want to do, stated they sold hundreds of thousands or even five hundred of them.

They want people to think that they will own this product and be one of the select few that actually qualify at the same thing if you're selling expensive cars or perhaps expensive designer luggage and so on. So when you're looking at using social proof, first be sure that it's right for your product, and in almost every case it will be, and then, also, if you are able to, particularly if you are operating in the digital world, you should always test rather than just assuming that showing how many orders you have had or how many people liked your product and so on, will automatically work for you. Do it as an AB test just to confirm that in your situation it's actually providing the lift you need.

So I'm gonna wrap it up here and I'll remind you if you do get value out of my podcast whether it's the occasional shorts or a little one like this or my longer ones with guests, please take a moment and drop by iTunes and leave a review.

Of course, you're always welcome to go to the show notes page at rogerdooley.com/podcast and leave any comments there in the show notes page where you'll also find any of the resources that I talked about that

during of course this and even a transcript that would be a text version of. In this case, my little solo of podcast right there on the show notes page you can read it their or you can download it in PDF form, also feel free to connect with me at Twitter or you can find me at @rogerdooley and also visit my neuromarketing blog which you could find at neurosciencemarketing.com/blog.

I hope you enjoy this short little podcast and will see you next week with a longer one.

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.