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With Your Host



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. Every guest here is special but this week's is even more special than most. Let's backtrack a few years. There's a first time for everybody and when it was my first time I knew I wanted to be with someone who wasn't just superficially attractive but was also smart and experienced. So for my very first podcast ... You knew that's what we were talking about, right? I asked Nathalie Nahai, sometimes known as The Web Psychologist, to break me in. Nathalie has been my co-panelist at South by Southwest and is one of the foremost authorities in the world on applying psychology to web's design. Her bestselling book, Webs of Influence: The Psychology of Online Persuasion, is coming out in a new and expanded edition now. So after three years of absence Nathalie is back. Welcome, Nathalie.

Nathalie: Thank you very much for that fabulous introduction.

Roger: Yeah. I should know better than to get into a contest of double entendres with you. I'm clearly outmatched.

Nathalie: Oh, I wouldn't say that. I think you've been honing those very fine skills of yours.

Roger: It's really great to have you back, Nathalie. A couple of days ago I recorded a session with Nir Eyal, and he was guest number two, so right after you last time. So this is really kind of a throwback week. Now that I think about it I'm not sure why we waited this long. We could probably find stuff to talk about every week. Nir started a podcast too, by the way, so maybe we should get on a group call once a month or something.

Nathalie: That sounds like it could be a very interesting, very fun conversation.

Roger: Yeah. Nathalie, I pulled my original copy of Webs of Influence off the shelf and blew the dust off it. It's got lots of sticky tabs marking things I found interesting. That's sort of how I measure a good book, if at the end of it I got all these little scraps of paper sticking out of it all over the place. I knew there was a lot of good content in there. You know, if I get to the end and it's got just one or two of those then it probably wasn't all that useful. But fortunately yours is really loaded.

Nathalie: Thank you.

Roger: It's been five years-

Nathalie: I know.

Roger: ... since the first edition came out, and three years since our last chat. In all that time what do you think has changed in the digital persuasion space? Is the average marketer getting better? Are websites smarter about using psychology or is there still really a long way to go?

Nathalie: That's such a good question. Well, I think since you and I, because your book Brainfluence came out before mine by about ... I think it was about six months. When we were first on the scenes of being active, vocal proponents of applying the behavioral sciences in the marketing and web design space, I think there wasn't very much discussion about it. People didn't really know how to place it. I think in the last five years it's become so mainstream now that you're dealing with very widely read publications such as The Guardian and Motherboard. By us writing about some of the more, perhaps invasive practices of personalization, when you look at psychometric targeting and all that sort of stuff.

I think it's changed a huge amount in the time since you and I published our first books, and I think people have become a lot more aware at some level of persuasion techniques. One of the things that I think this

has made space for actually is the discussion of the role of ethics within the application of these techniques, which is something that I know Nir also speaks quite a lot about, and in our talks we frequently touch on because it's a real cornerstone for the ethical and good use of these techniques that we all espouse.

Yeah, so the ethical side of things is now more to the fore. I think there's been a lot more research around personality-based personalization. Also things like social platforms, since everyone knows what they are now, we can just dig into the much more interesting mechanics of it because you're not having to introduce the concepts at a much more basic level. So a lot has changed. What would you say you think has changed the most?

Roger: Well, you know, I think that the ethical discussion has come to the fore too, although it's changed a little bit, because I came into the behavior space sort of out of neuro-marketing, and looking at use of various kinds of brain scanning, brainwave measurement technologies, biometric technologies, and so on to understand consumer behavior. That created its own set of sort of weird, ethical issues, and also a lot of fear about mind control and marketers using really unethical tactics to get people to buy stuff that they didn't want or need. I think actually that's been muted now. I think that in the neuro-marketing space that field has gotten a little bit more academic credibility.

Some of the fears of creating super ads that take over consumer's brains has been muted. So that's improved, but I think the point that you bring up, and you mentioned Nir too, the idea that our technology can really be habit forming in a bad way is true because we all see that in certain ways when we get sucked into social media or email or those tools that we have to use but we end up sometimes destroying our productivity with them. Also then the sort of more serious addictions that a small percentage of people encounter when they're dealing with social websites or games or other types of online activity. It is an ongoing issue. One thing I think has changed too, and certainly the awareness has grown ... You're seeing more press coverage, but I think that one way that businesses and web

designers have perhaps gotten a little bit better at things is the increased use of conversion optimization and AB testing.

For years you turn something over to a designer and the designer chose the fonts, chose the colors, chose the imagery and how it all went on the page. You kind of had to rely on their expertise, and that may have been good or it may have been bad. But even if you disagreed you didn't necessarily have a good reason other than, "Gee, I don't like that font or I think it's a little bit hard to read." Today instead of arguing about stuff and sort of fighting with the designer you can say, "Well, great. Let's test this font versus that font or this headline versus that headline and settle it that way." So it's a more evidence-based scientific approach. You think that's true?

Nathalie: Yeah, I absolutely think that's true. I think also it's interesting because it gives people the freedom to contribute perhaps a little bit more democratically almost. There's a lot of training and expertise that goes into becoming a really skilled designer, but I think there's also an element of being kind of like, holding on too tightly to those reigns, which can lead to poorer results online. When you open things up to the scrutiny of testing, to AB tests et cetera, then it means that anyone who's on a team who's had personal experience with a particular interface for instance, might be able to contribute an idea and say, "Okay, well I know that the designers think that we should do it this way, but what if we tried Z, Y and Z?"

I think also the other thing that's been really interesting is that rather than spend weeks and weeks and weeks in creating personas and user testing, which I know some people and some companies still do, there seems to me to have been an attitude even in the last few months actually of people just deciding to get things out there, get prototypes out there, and start getting real data and real test results off of a fairly good but not brilliant prototype, to be able to adjust to that which is where I think a lot of the work that we do comes in. Which is if you can give someone a head start, a higher baseline with more context as to how and why people make decisions and how to for instance use the principle of fluency to choose

some initial fonts that are sans serif, that are easier to read et cetera, then if you build that into a prototype you can build faster, test faster, and get it out much more quickly whether that's a website or a produce.

Roger: That makes a lot of sense, Nathalie. You know, one of the things I liked about the first edition of Webs of Influence was that it was a very visual book. It had a lot of graphics and color, almost infographic style in places, used a lot of screen shots and so on. That's carried over into the new version. But I'm wondering if in going through the old screen shots and such whether you found that things have changed in certain ways, whether you could connect any dots there or not?

Nathalie: Yeah, sure. I think one of the things that I noticed in my revision of the first book, first of all, so much of it I had to ax because a lot changes in five years, and everyone's come up to speed on certain areas. I think one of the things that I noticed was that in the exploration of web design and designing for attention on websites there was a heck of a lot of use of motion, which wasn't available to us or to designers in quite the same way five years ago. For instance, I give an example in the book of the contrast principle for Bellroy, which is a company that does leather wallets. They do these slim line wallets. On the page there's a slider and you can see a really fat wallet versus one of their wallets. You can open, I suppose or move the slider from left to right to see how their compares, the more stuff you put in it.

It's a beautiful example of something which is interactive, which gets someone really engaged with the site, which is visual, which had a contrast AB principle so it's easier for your brain to grasp what's actually happening, what the difference is. It's something that's actually fairly simple for designers to make use of now. The other thing of course, when it comes to specific ... It's a website, so when it comes to the design is that you're getting a huge amount of websites using full screen videos.

Of course, when you're using motion, motion is inherently distracting. So what some people are finding quite rightly if they test it is that using very motion sensitive videos in the background so there's a lot of motion that's

quite distracting, actually lowers conversion rates in a lot of instances, because people are being drawn into places that don't include a call to action. Yeah. So there are certain things I speak about in the book that I couldn't screen capture into the book because obviously it's a 2D print. But those are some of the most interesting changes.

Roger: That technology will change soon, I'm sure.

Nathalie: Oh, of course. Yeah. I mean, that's the bit that keeps changing every two years. Right? Yeah.

Roger: We still have sliders with us. What do you think about sliders, the-

Nathalie: The little carousel-type thing?

Roger: ... software that changes your image every few seconds and gives you something else to click on?

Nathalie: As far as I can tell based off of the research that I've seen, they're not particularly good at increasing conversion rates because people get distracted by the slider. There's a lot more information which heightens the cognitive load and the mental effort, so I think you'd have to have a really good, robust indication that that's actually doing what you want it to do when you're using it. As far as I can tell by and large, probably best avoided.

Roger: Yeah. That's the same data that I've seen. I think they're appealing because they seem to offer ... Well, everybody wants a piece of the home page and they offer a way of giving multiple people that piece of the home page, but not necessarily extending a link to the page by five screens. On the other hand though, if you've ever seen something interesting and then just as you tried to click on it have it move onto the next thing, that can be quite annoying too. Of course, if they aren't the real call to action then you've got that visual distraction as well.

Nathalie: Yeah. I think what's interesting is that people are ... Well, we always talk about this. Every conversation you have with anyone who's in this field will say, but attention is so fragmented that you really have to make sure that it's as easy as possible for people to understand where to look and what they're looking at. The more confusion and clutter that you add into that mess the worse it becomes.

Roger: We got into a line by line comparison, but you've got some new insights about personality, right, in the new version?

Nathalie: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. In the old one I was looking at the research of a biological anthropologist named Helen Fisher. In this current edition, the new edition since the last one, there's been a huge amount of research that's looked at the Big Five personality traits, which is essentially the golden standard that's used across academic research. Essentially what I've done in the new version is to explain what the Big Five is. Essentially it's one of the most established personality tests within the behavioral sciences, and originally it included something around like, four and a half thousand traits which were later reduced to 35, and then further analyzed into five main categories.

So I talk about those different categories, and then have structured ... God, I had to sift through so much research for that and I ended up having to get someone to help me because it's so extraordinarily extensive. Then I go to talk about how to use each trait in any kind of marketing that you might do. For instance, if you have high openness, which people who are typically very creative, curious, they've got strong imagination, they are generally fairly original and unconventional, if you're dealing with people like that their online behaviors will change from those who are low in openness. For instance, they might change their profile picture more frequently on Facebook or post often on intellectual topics, for instance.

If you know that some of your audience is in that category you can frame your message using words such as innovation, intelligence, sophistication, et cetera. It tends to work very well with people of that specific trait. I've given you kind of like a quick zoom in on one specific trait,

but I go on and do that for all five and then talk about some of the dark traits associated with trolling, which is in a later section of the book around social media.

Roger: So Nathalie, how would a marketer know though which personality types to appeal to? Is it that their product would appeal to predominantly one kind of personality or do they have the ability to target people individually based on some sort of big data information?

Nathalie: Well, you could certainly do it via big data if you're looking at for instance, linguistic analysis. You can also use ... There's several tools I mention in the book which I can mention here. If you're looking at targeting people who already have specific traits, for instance say you're a company that does similar types of experiences to Red Bull. They do sort of these mad ... I can't remember what they call it where you basically create a cart and then you fling it off a cliff into a pool and that's seen as sport. So people who are high and open as a extroversion. Say you're a company that's doing extreme adventures, for instance, and you know that it's going to appeal to people who are openers, high extroversion.

You could then decide who to target, for instance, if you used a platform such as Cambridge University's applymagicsauce.com, which is a white label product that actually predicts people's traits from their digital footprint on Facebook. Now, of course there are other platforms as well. One that's run by a friend of mine, hogan-x.com, also looks at a much wider variety of social profiles and then draws information from there. You can also just see which types of Google ads people click on if you do personality trait specific ads with personality trait specific landing pages. So there's all manner of ways that you can split test this kind of thing, either on a shoestring or on a much grander level. Yeah.

Roger: Perhaps even on your own website you could have different links or use that slider, put that slider to good use and have one for each personality type. When they click one that appears to be particularly relevant for that personality type then you take them to a landing page that would then have messaging geared to that.

Nathalie: Yeah. I mean, I think there's all sorts of things that you can do. The thing to say also is that when you're looking at personality these are not so much types as traits. All five traits are on a spectrum and we're all a mix of each of these. However, what is interesting is that typically, well often the five traits are actually inter-correlated into two high order factors. So plasticity, which is extroversion and openness, so kind of the Red Bull, kind of crazy events market. Then the other method trait is stability, which comprises emotional stability, agreeableness and conscientiousness.

If you know that you have these two general types, these two general kind of cohorts, then it may be that you can see a much more distinct difference between one set of users that might like to interact with your product in a particular way and another set who might like to interact in a different kind of way. Yeah. I don't know. It's something that's interesting enough that if you're able to test it you should test it. Because every bit of information that you can help to foster a good relationship with your customers is going to be beneficial in the long run as long as it's done ethically and consensually.

Roger: Right. Just to underscore your point about testing Nathalie, it's something that I try and incorporate into every discussion I have about how we should market. When you hear an expert say, "Well, this is going to work with this kind of customer," or, "This will work better for you," really that should be considered a hypothesis for testing not gospel. Unfortunately even really smart people don't always know what's going to work in every situation, and the fact that something worked really well for somebody else, it may not work for you at all.

Nathalie: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. I think one of the things that I found really interesting in researching this book was that when you're actually applying these principles, and there are various ways in which you can do this, you have to watch out not to over-step the mark. I don't know if you've ever had the experience where you've seen a particular ad and it's behaviorally targeted and it's been a really good fit. Say, for instance, you're looking at a particular kind of fridge. You've been thinking about it. You've been

researching it. Then you see adverts for the particular kind of fridge, you get money off. Then you think, "Okay, great. I'm going to get it." That's a nice fit, a good match. That's fine because it can actually improve purchase intention and actually convert.

But if you take this approach too far you can end up with essentially what's called psychological reactants, which is the rather unpleasant emotional state that you might experience in response to something that you feel is threatening your freedom and autonomy. If you feel like you are being stalked, for instance by getting a really badly judged advert from a brand that you don't know or that you've not engaged with and they're sending you stuff which is personalized, which I've had direct experience of and I cite in the book, it can end up having the opposite effect. You could end up feeling like you're being surveyed and that your privacy has been compromised. That can create really negative associations with a brand. You actually have to be quite delicate in how you choose to engage with people in this way.

Roger: Right. Well, that makes sense. The classic example is Target when they managed to determine when some of their female customers were pregnant by their purchasing behavior and began sending them highly targeted mailers which was rather embarrassing in at least one case. A young woman had not informed her parents yet and they wondered why she was getting these ads for pregnancy products or pregnancy-related products. That would be an example where you're going too far. The way Target resolved that was by continuing to use that information perhaps, but in a much more subtle way so that included in an advertisement, but included other products. It would have some particularly relevant products and it wouldn't have that creepy effect to it.

Nathalie: Yeah, quite right. Again, exactly as you say. It's all about testing. It also depends on the gender and the culture. For instance, typically what you'll find is that female cohorts are much less willing to give up personally identifying information such as addresses or real names, et cetera because there's so much more trollings that you have typically if

you're female. There's a lot more abuse that one can expect to encounter online, and so you end up with these gender differences that seem to spread across different territories, across different cultures. Then also there are cultural differences as to how much formality or informality is permissible within marketing messages, et cetera, and then how much familiarity a brand might be able to have with its customers. There's all these sort of layers or contexts that you have to consider when you're testing these things that will vary from group to group.

Roger: Good. Let's move onto something else that we've talked about. That is dopamine loops.

Nathalie: Oh, yeah.

Roger: What are dopamine loops and why should marketers care about them?

Nathalie: Dopamine essentially was first identified back in the '50s by two Swedish researchers, and it's a neurochemical, so it's a chemical in the brain that tends to boost our arousal levels and is critical in getting us to seek out pleasure and reward, and it does all sorts of other things. It's also interactive in our mood, attention, et cetera. Anyway, so basically what can often happen is that if we're feeling a little bit down or a bit lonely, often it's the dopamine system which drives us to seek out pleasure. What often may happen if you're feeling a bit frustrated or whatever, you're bored waiting for a friend, is that your brain will want some kind of neurochemical reward. Online where gratification is completely immediate but it's also pretty unsatisfying and it's unpredictable, so how much gratification can you really get from a re-Tweet or a like or certain number of followers or comments on Instagram, for instance.

What often ends up happening is that the reward itself is so small that you end up engaging more frequently in seeking of that reward, and that becomes a reward in and of itself. Instead of just being satisfied with a like, which you're not going to be anyway because it's too tiny, you end up chasing this high by engaging that behavior again and again and again like

on the infinite scroll on Twitter, so that by the time you look up half an hour has gone by and you've not got any work done, et cetera. Typically platforms will try to trigger this sort of behavior, that kind of looped dopamine seeking behavior, by making it super easy to log into the app or to work with the app, by giving you a trigger which is a notification of some kind, and to give you incentives. So all of the quantification of how many followers you have, of how liked you are, whether your content is popular or not. All of these things are designed specifically to get you coming back for more.

Roger: Yeah. You're channeling our friend Nir there, I think, with his hook model.

Nathalie: He's written a whole book about it.

Roger: Yeah, yeah. Up to a point it's a good thing because it helps people engage with apps and web communities and so on that can be productive and helpful and fun and so on. It's just when it reaches the point where people are wasting their time there or are the small number, not many, become truly addicted. But probably wasting time is fairly common. I think we're probably all victims of that where we just jump onto Instagram to see what our latest post did and then end up sucked in for 15 minutes looking at other stuff. Yeah.

Nathalie: I think we're all victims of that in some level. I mean, there's a nice aspect to it which is the fact that it does give us a bit of excitement, and it's nice to be excited and to have that sense of arousal, basically a little pick me up. I think the danger comes when that becomes a reflex which is an unthinking reflex, which most often it is. At least the point for most of us that hopefully we raise ourselves, or we put ourselves into a particular frame of mind where we raise the question of, "Okay, is this serving me now?" Maybe you give yourself 15 minutes or maybe you give yourself half an hour. I think the difficulty comes when we don't raise the question whether it's serving you or not and then you end up kind of just doing it unthinkingly and it starts to be detrimental to other aspects of your

life. That line will change for each person which is why I think it's quite a tricky area to really investigate.

Roger: Yeah. Nathalie, what about mobile? Obviously mobile is huge these days. That's not news to any of our listeners. But I'm wondering from a sort of psychology of design how that plays out in your opinion. In some cases a mobile version of a website is just sort of a shrunken down version of it. In other cases it's quite different, or perhaps it's in an application. How do people interact differently with mobile in your opinion? How do designers plan for that psychology?

Nathalie: I think the most striking thing which is fairly obvious I suppose when you say it, but it's something which is worth mentioning nonetheless, is the fact that you have a lot less visual real estate to play with on handheld devices. If you're thinking about de-cluttering any kind of marketing content or your website you have to do that times 10 on a much smaller screen. So that's obviously a key point. I think the other thing also is that people do seem to persist in engaging in complex tasks even if it's on their phone. That's just because of the portability of it. Yeah, so there's that aspect.

Looking at some of the activities that people engage in the most, a recent Google report I looked at found that about 30% of our smart phone searches tend to be related to things like location, so top queries around where to buy things or find things or stores that are open. They tend to be more related to our immediate physical vicinity. Then a third of those searches again end up in purchase, so there's a really interesting root there from searching for something which is in your physical local vicinity to actually purchasing something in the real world, or if you can get a better deal getting it online. I'd say that there is an immediacy with which we can design experiences online. So if people want something quickly, making sure that you rank in local searches for particular products is going to be really key, especially when people are accessing you wandering out and about, which sounds really, really simple but you'd be surprised how many people don't actually do that.

Roger: Yeah, definitely true. Even, I find, if I'm writing an email for not just a one-on-one email but an email that might go out to multiple subscribers or something, I'm starting to think more and more about, "Okay. On a desktop this looks like a relatively short email, but if you're viewing it on a mobile screen you may have to scroll three or four screens just to get through this relatively short email." I'm more conscious of that and still probably not doing a great job of condensing as much as I could. At least, I guess, some awareness is a start at least.

Yeah. I think also the other thing is that it's a funny one Nathalie: because again, it's so context specific. You'll often find that people do a lot of reading on their phones. So if you've created an email which is available in sort of fairly plain text or with all the images stripped out, people often ... I certainly do this. I know other people who do this. We'll often pocket it for later and then read the text version of it. You can actually split test to see if people will read the whole thing through and then still continue to write longer emails if the engagement is good. I think a lot of people are consuming information in a written format on their phones, on their commute, et cetera. I suppose the question really is when are people reading these sorts of materials? Usually it's on a commute. What time is that going to be? Then maybe segmenting it through geo-location so that it goes out to specific users at specific places so that if they are reading on their commute they've got the time to actually get through all the content. Yeah.

Roger: Good stuff. One last question. Looking toward the future, Nathalie, we've got stuff like AI and voice interaction coming along. It seems like the way we're going to be interacting with today what we'd call websites, in the future those interactions may be totally different. We may be interacting primarily with say, a nearly human assistant for example, and never actually see some of the stuff that we talk so much about now and the design principles and so on. How do you see this playing out? I realize that nobody knows for sure, but what do you think is going to change over the next few years?

Nathalie: It's a lot of the audio interfaces, especially with things like Alexa, et cetera. We're creating scenarios in which people don't actually have to interact, like you say, with a screen. It's invisible. The interface is not a physical interface in any kind of shape or form. Having had interviews with people where they've described the impact of this kind of technology in their lives, it's extraordinary how often people will talk about the way that it's given their quality of time back to themselves. Rather than having to look at a screen and disconnect from other people, by giving a simple audio command they get the job done much more quickly.

They can do their tasks much more quickly, much like having a PA that just sitting there in the corner. So people are actually spending more time doing the things that they love. Now, I know this is quite a utopian vision of that sort of interaction, but there is something to be said for lifting ourselves out of our screen-based solitude, or this kind of hyper-connectivity with other people, where we're not connecting in the physical world. I wonder how audio interfaces will change the ways in which we relate to one another. Kind of like in that film that you see, the one called Her where everyone's walking around with an OS in their ear.

Roger: I think it will probably vary a lot by what you're trying to do. If you're trying to book an airline reservation you could probably accomplish that by telling Alexa or Google Assistant or Siri or whoever to do it. They might not be quite there yet. On the other hand if you're going to buy a shirt or a blouse you would probably not entrust that to Alexa. You might want to actually see what it looks like.

Nathalie: Yeah, right.

Roger: Then you're going to be interacting in that more visual world. But certain tasks, like even now I used to go to weather.com a lot to find out what the weather forecast was. Now, if I'm at my desktop I'll just type it into Google and Google will deliver that information to me without all the advertising load and so on that supports weather.com, or I can just tell Alexa or ask Siri and I get that information verbally, again with no advertising content attached, which of course creates some interesting

monetization issues for the places that provide this data because at some point they've got to figure out how to make money.

Nathalie: I think the idea of smart appliances, even though it seems to be a little bit overdone, and who really needs a smart castle at this point ... Well, I know some people will like it because it's quite fun, but in terms of practical need it's not really up there. I think that will be a really interesting space to see just quite how physical our virtual world has become and how integrated into our day to day lives in a way that is almost more seamless than the way in which we use our screens.

Roger: Yeah. Well, now let's pause there now that we've got this great look of what lies ahead. I'll remind our listeners that we're speaking with Nathalie Nahai, author of Webs of Influence: The Psychology of Online Persuasion, now being released an updated and expanded version. Nathalie, where can people find you and your content online?

Nathalie: Thank you for asking. You can go onto amazon.com or amazon.co.uk, or any of the Amazons, and just type in Webs of Influence and it will come up. If you want to download a free chapter, the one on personality which I find really fun, it's quite a big chapter completely new and updated, you can go to nathalienahai.com and I'm giving it away if you want to sign up to the newsletter. You can also unsubscribe afterwards if you don't find it interesting. It only comes out once a month. Yeah, so you can check it out there, or also find me on Twitter. I'm a very avid Tweeter.

Roger: Right, and you are @NathalieNahai there too.

Nathalie: Yeah.

Roger: For our listeners I should point out that there is a silent H in

Nathalie.

Nathalie: Oh, yeah.

Roger: It's N-A-T-H-A-L-I-E N-A-H-A-I.

Nathalie: That's right.

Roger: That might be perplexing to some people but it is silent and it also makes you somewhat more unique than all the rest of the Natalies out there, not that you aren't sufficiently unique anyway. Nathalie, thanks so much for being on the show. It's been great to have you back.

Nathalie: Such a pleasure. Thank you for inviting me. I really enjoyed it.

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.