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ThinkTV's latest research belongs to the past, not the future



By David Angell | 5 March 2021

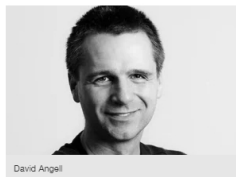


David Angell, business director, TrinityP3.

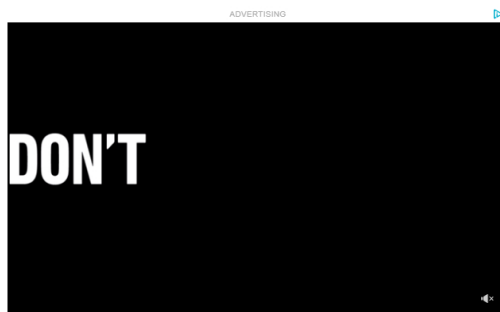
I was reminded last week of a ground-breaking PR strategy. Masterminded by the US PR firm Hill & Knowlton in the 1950s, it led to the creation of TIRC – the Tobacco Industry Research Committee.

Funded by the tobacco industry and run largely by a mix of tobacco industry and PR executives, the TIRC existed to provide "independent" research that refuted the dangers to Americans of smoking cigarettes.

A press release announcing the appointment of its first chairman (a retired CEO of the tobacco firm Brown & Williamson) read in part:



David Angell



It is an obligation of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee at this time to remind the public of these essential points:

1. There is no conclusive scientific proof of a link between smoking and cancer.
2. Medical research points to many possible causes of cancer.
3. The millions of people who derive pleasure and satisfaction from smoking can be reassured that every scientific means will be used to get all the facts as soon as possible.*

Over many years, physicians, scientists and academics were paid to produce "independent" research to support this agenda.

I thought of TIRC when I read about the latest research from ThinkTV's "The Payback" series, showing – quelle surprise! – that TV was more effective than any other channel in delivery of long term sales, and only a very marginal second to Search in delivery of short term sales.

"The research has been undertaken by Monash University Department of Marketing head, Professor Peter Danaher," the press release solemnly informed us, "with GroupM and WPP-owned marketing effectiveness consultancy, Gain Theory".

The release went on to state that "The starting point for the research was to reinforce TV is good at delivering demand in the longer term...The research then looked at the short term ROI".

Let me say immediately that I am in no way doubting the veracity of the actual research or the integrity of those involved. So admittedly, my TIRC analogy is a bit off (although I genuinely was reminded of TIRC when I saw the ThinkTV release). In fact, I am a fan of TV as an effective communication medium, as far as that goes.

I'm not enough of a TV bigwig to have been invited to the Future of TV Advertising event in Sydney, where the study was unveiled.

But I'd put money that at least one and probably more of the audience were outwardly smiling, whilst inwardly thinking – really? Is the combination of a body that exists to promote the interests of TV, partnered with a research agency owned by the biggest buyer of TV in the country, complete with a pre-ordained proof point, really the best way to convince people of the findings, with no suspicion or cynicism?

And who exactly does the research seek to convince, anyway? And of what? Spend more on TV than on other channels because it's better? Spend proportionately more on TV to achieve short term sales, thereby increasing dollar share of voice?

Are we looking to the future here, or the past?

I get that the study was robust. I understand that market mix modelling was used. And the threat of "digital advertising". And that not all advertisers are experts. But as a purpose and a set of findings, it's just so...binary, so stale. So defensive. The whole premise feels like it belongs in the past – ironic in a Future of TV Advertising conference.

Short term versus long terms sales? "There is this perception that television is only really good for long term," said Professor Danaher. "I want to dispel that myth and do it compellingly... and show TV can work well in the short term, as well."

Let's pause on this. Anyone in the last 30 years who has employed DRTV would surely deserve both the reputation and the necessity of denailing the "myth". As would anyone who

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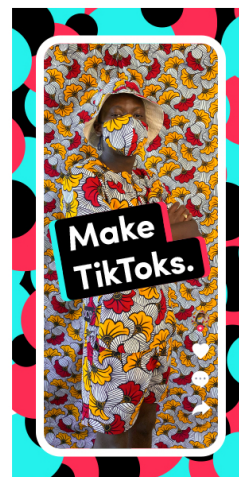
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capture both the perception and the necessity of capturing the right. As most agencies who has used a media mix model to consider weight and flighting of TV and its effect on weekly adstock decay and baseline sales. Or a small business advertising on TV sub-regionally to direct to their local store or service. Or any retailer who has ever run a 15" cut-down, or an ad that has 'sale now on, must end soon' in the copy, weighted between Wednesday and Friday to pick up on weekend store traffic. These things have been around for decades.

It's 2021. There are so many other more interesting avenues for a piece of research about television to explore. Perhaps covering topics which aren't always about "TV is better than the rest" – rather, about the evolving role of television in today's society and how advertisers can best work with it.

Suggestions? I don't know, I haven't had the time to give it enough thought. But off the top of my head – how about a study focused on the cultural appeal and importance of Australian network programming on the TV consumer and how well this is holding out in the Netflix generation?

Or a study about the best ways to achieve messaging cut-through on TV to combat ad-skipping?

Or an exploration of TV's complex and changing relationships with different consumer groups, or a focus on a particular age group? Or a study that looks at TV content and advertising in context of BLM, #metoo, gender politics, COVID?

If I sound frustrated, it's because I am. So much work must have gone into this piece of research by people way smarter than me, but at the end of the day, what influence is it likely to have?

It's great that we have industry bodies like ThinkTV. And I'm aware that 'The Payback' series is not the only work it does. But if the balance of output moved a bit from defensively waging an old-fashioned share of dollar or 'TV versus the rest' war in favour of a more holistic approach, its influence and the interest level would surely increase.

**Source: Inventing Conflicts of Interest: A History of Tobacco Industry Tactics, 2012, Allan M Brandt PhD*

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