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'Mad Men' industry pushed to declare harassment policies



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Chief marketing officers of big Australian brands are being asked to think about how their [advertising](#) agency partners handle harassment, bullying and assault in an effort to stop agencies from silencing staff and to change an industry that is struggling to shed its *Mad Men* image.

TrinityP3, which describes itself as an independent strategic marketing management consulting company that works with companies such as Optus, financial services group Aussie, and dairy company Bega, asks advertising agencies trying to win an advertising account to sign a statutory declaration to define their status on complaints of workplace, bullying, [harassment](#) and assault.



Australia's advertising industry has been trying to shake the 'Mad Men' image but has struggled to find ways to actively combat issues of harassment, bullying and assault in the industry. AP

"Marketers are the custodians of the brands they manage. Increasingly, the people and companies associated with their brands and organisations pose a potential risk to the reputation of their brands," said TrinityP3 founder and chief executive Darren Woolley.

"Therefore, in a world demanding greater transparency and accountability, marketers must be informed and aware of the potential risks when choosing those organisations they partner with."

Although the statutory declaration is not mandatory for the ad agencies to sign, TrinityP3 will tell businesses looking for new ad partners which agencies have signed the document.

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The document asks agencies to declare whether they are aware of any current or unresolved complaints of bullying, harassment and assault in the workplace with either past or present employees.

It also asks agencies to declare whether they have current or historical confidentiality deeds or other legal instruments to prevent past or present employments from reporting incidents of bullying, harassment and assault in the workplace.

Agencies will also be asked to declare whether they have an active employee assistance program (EAP) as well an independent complaint reporting process, such as Rep Safe or a similar service, in place.

Harassment complaints are up 25 per cent as Australia emerges from the coronavirus pandemic, [according to sex discrimination commissioner Kate Jenkins](#), who has warned employers to get their houses in order as more people return to the workplace.

A report released last year by ShEqual, an initiative led by Women's Health Victoria, found policies in place to respond to sexual harassment in advertising agency workplaces were tokenistic and superficial and found women were more likely to fear or experience negative consequences of speaking up, while some men felt it was not their place to do so.

Mr Woolley suggests Australia's advertising industry has been largely immune from the MeToo movement, and stories are whispered about rather than spoken about openly because of fears about career consequences for victims and concerns around defamation action.

"These acts often go undetected because rather than being discussed openly and transparently, they are instead the topic of rumour and gossip. Yet the material impact this has on the victims of this behaviour, the implications and the consequences, are significant and often life-changing," he said.

"It's clear that industry worst-practice had, in part, enabled gagging the victims with deeds of confidentiality and other legal instruments, leaving them continually victimised, while protecting the perpetrators and their enablers."

Mr Woolley acknowledged his business' solution to the issue was "imperfect", but wanted to provide as much information to businesses working with TrinityP3 to select an advertising partner.

"TrinityP3 has a key role in advising our clients on the agencies they choose to work with. We are trusted to provide insights and knowledge in recommending the best fit agencies for their needs. But there is also the requirement that we inform them on the possible risks and challenges that come with that selection process," he said.

Mr Woolley said he approached the industry bodies - the Media Federation of Australia, the Advertising Council of Australia, and the Independent Media Agencies of Australia - in March to push for them to lead on the issue.

He said those bodies pointed to agencies' use of EAPs as a solution which Mr Woolley said does not address the issues adequately, describing those services as "like an emergency department".

"They can provide generalist support for a wide range of urgent issues but do not replace the need for your GP or specialist to address the cause of provide long-term care and recovery or work to help prevent the situation in the first place," he said.

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Mr Woolley wants the industry to have more understanding of how prevalent issues of bullying, harassment and assault are, arguing visibility is important to push the need for real change and to measure the success of programs designed to combat these issues.

"The risk of an EAP is that it allows the employer to tick the duty of care box without doing anything that might force cultural change in our industry or get in the way of business," he said.

"Again, we find ourselves trapped in collective inertia and by an industry-wide culture of silence. TrinityP3 chooses no longer to be complicit."

Miranda Ward is a journalist covering media and marketing for The Australian Financial Review based in the Sydney office. Connect with Miranda on [Twitter](#). Email Miranda at miward@afrr.com

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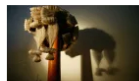
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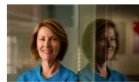
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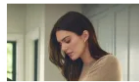
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