

OPINION

The illusion of 'free': Why the measurement funding crisis is a century in the making

TrinityP3's Darren Woolley responds to Henry Innis' [recent piece for Mumbrella](#) on how "gravity bends to the payer" by arguing multiple failures led the industry to this position, and that the industry and industry bodies need to confront a wider uncomfortable truth.

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Beware of the lure of "free" - you're paying at some point

Henry Innis's [warning last week](#) about the "spectre of non-disclosed payments" in marketing mix modelling (MMM) sent a necessary shockwave through the wider marketing and media industry.

He rightly identified that measurement is currently standing exactly where the media rebate scandal stood a decade ago. His breakdown of how co-funding, inventory funding, and R&D funding is quietly warping independent measurement is both accurate and urgent. Innis is spot on that the toxic combination of exclusivity and non-disclosure removes a brand's ability to challenge the very numbers used to justify entire budgets to the board.

[READ: Gravity bends to the payer: How to keep the measurement industry transparent](#)

But as we back his call for industry bodies like the AANA and IAB to urgently step in and mandate transparency, we have to confront an uncomfortable truth. This is not just a modern measurement hazard. It is a symptom of a much deeper, systemic weakness that has plagued advertising since its inception.

The reality is that advertising – and the marketing fraternity more broadly – has always been addicted to the illusion of "free."

For over a century, the advertising supply chain has preferred to hide its true margins in the back end while offering front-end services for what appears to be "no cost" to the marketer. This playbook is deeply entrenched, operating out in the open across generations of media evolution:

- **The commission era:** Media commissions were the original undisclosed co-funding mechanism. In the early days, agencies threw in creative content as an "added value" service, seamlessly covering their internal operational costs via backend media percentages.
- **The tech lock-in:** We saw this exact same mechanism play out during the print and production eras. Suppliers frequently offered marketers access to "free" digital asset management (DAM) platforms to win their core print business. It appeared to be a brilliant cost-saving win for the brand, until the marketer tried to migrate or access their own assets, only to face extraordinary, hidden backend costs to retrieve what they already owned.
- **Modern evolution:** Today, this dynamic has simply evolved into verification services, principal trading, and performance measurement. The pitch remains unchanged: let us bundle this tool into the ecosystem for you; it won't cost your direct budget a cent.

Why do brands continually fall into this trap? It comes down to a severe structural flaw on the client side: the rapidly decreasing

severe acceleration from the client side, the rapidly decreasing tenure of the modern CMO.

When a marketing director's lifespan at a company is increasingly compressed into just two or three years, their strategic incentives often tilt violently toward the immediate term. They are forced to focus on surviving the next few quarters rather than fixing long-term structural conflicts. This survival mode creates a strong appetite for opaque, bundled financial arrangements for three distinct reasons:

- **The budget crunch:** When procurement and boards squeeze marketing departments, any critical service that can be made to look "free" on paper is an instant win for a cash-strapped department.
- **The value dilemma:** Marketers historically struggle to prove the internal, operational value of paying out-of-pocket for independent measurement or verification. Convincing a cynical CFO to sign off on a heavy, standalone expense is an uphill battle; letting a media partner or agency absorb the cost makes the budgetary friction disappear.
- **Administrative inertia:** Onboarding a new independent vendor into a rigid corporate financial system involves layers of legal, security, and procurement red tape. Accepting an opaque, bundled deal through an existing supplier bypasses the system entirely. Some marketers even openly argue that it is simply easier this way than setting up a new vendor in their financial platform.

On the other side of the ledger, agencies and suppliers are trapped in a fierce race to the bottom on visible fees. Procurement departments have progressively squeezed transparent agency retainers and tech margins to the point of unprofitability for many agencies.

To survive, agencies have realised that by solving a marketer's short-term financial and administrative pain – offering tools, measurement, and tech at "no cost" – they can quietly entangle and ensnare their clients in longer-term, opaque relationships. This allows the supply side to secure long-term revenue streams and protect non-transparent margins away from the prying eyes of client procurement.



Darren Woolley: "The reality is that advertising – and the marketing fraternity more broadly – has always been addicted to the illusion of 'free'"

As Henry notes in his piece, this is rarely a grand conspiracy or overt, malicious fraud. Instead, it is a classic case of mutual complicity driven by a short-term reduction in friction.

The marketer gets immediate budget relief, avoids corporate red tape, and satisfies their immediate KPIs. The agency secures its financial future and protects its margins through the back door. Neither side is acting with overt malice; they are simply responding rationally to the broken incentives of their respective environments.

It is an easy compromise to justify at the moment, but the long-term cost to the business is devastating. It points the vendor's structural incentives away from the client, removes the market's only defense against a distorted number, and ultimately launders honest mistakes into unchallengeable board inputs.

Henry's proposed framework gives the industry a clear, actionable starting point. He calls on two of our main industry bodies – AANA and IAB – to step in and mandate three critical structural guardrails:

- **Mandatory, transparent disclosure:** Commercial agreements must be clearly displayed on the face of the work, rather than buried deep in contracts a CMO never sees.
- **Published, templated agreements:** The industry needs standardised templates for vendor-to-seller relationships so deviations can be instantly spotted by the market.
- **Procurement integration:** All payments, commercial relationships, and R&D funding must be written into procurement terms right at the point of purchase.

Furthermore, Mutinex's decision to stop taking direct co-funding entirely, insisting instead that any media seller support must flow directly to the advertiser, is a commendable line in the sand. Why would any of their competitors follow? If they do, it forces a

holding on their computers forever. If they do, it forces a structural reset where the vendor answers solely to the client who buys the model.

However, implementing this across the board will not be an easy problem to solve. We are not just fighting a modern measurement trend; we are fighting a century-old industry habit of choosing comfortable, opaque compromises over transparent value.

To truly solve this, marketers must find the corporate courage to break their addiction to “free” services and proactively fund independent validation out of their own budgets. Agencies and suppliers, conversely, must stop using short-term financial band-aids as a Trojan horse for long-term client entanglement.

As the industry stands at this crossroads, we can either watch history repeat itself, or as Innis puts it, turn the lights on while the room is still mostly clean. For the sake of marketing’s credibility at the board table, let’s hope we choose to turn them on.

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