Does History Repeat itself: The Second Coming of Television Interaction

Over the past few years there has been a lot of conversation regarding interactivity with television. Often, the conversation in the press or at conferences questions the willingness of television audiences to interact with TV programs. Maybe it's just that I'm getting older and have seen the evolution of many questioned technologies become commonplace and taken for granted. For younger folks who don't remember a time before YouTube, Facebook and Google, it was not that long ago that people were questioning the use of the Internet as an everyday tool.

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In the late 80s and early 90s the Internet was thought of as a great device for Government and University research. Computer professionals (a much better term than computer geeks), and Military R&D folks were the primary users. The thought of 'common folks' using the Internet was clouded with the same questions as to who would use the new technology, and why?

Today I hear the same arguments over using smart devices, smart phones and tablets to interact with our television programming. The same questions are asked over and over: Who is going to use a smart device while watching TV? And, why would anyone want to actually interact with the television? I don't understand the question! The idea of interacting with your television is not a new notion. In fact, we have been interacting with our televisions for almost as long as they have been in our homes, although we never really considered this interaction to be interactive.

Recently I asked Tim Sarnoff, one of my current board members, to speak at a function that my company was sponsoring. Tim pointed out that interactive television started in 1953 with a program called 'Winky Dink and You' that aired Saturday mornings on CBS from 1953 to 1957, and pioneered interactive television programming. The show featured host Jack Barry and his sidekick, the aptly named Mr. Bungle, who showed clips of the animated adventures of a crudely drawn star-headed, big-eyed, little boy named Winky Dink, and his dog, Woofer. The program employed a simple, but brilliant marketing gimmick that actually allowed kids to "interact" with the TV: Host Jack Barry offered within the program a special 'Magic Drawing Screen Kit', which he encouraged kids to obtain.

The kids (or more likely, their parents!) sent 50 cents to an address in New York City, and within a couple of weeks they would receive their eagerly awaited package by U.S. Mail. The kit had a plastic screen that stuck to the TV tube using static electricity, and crayons were used to draw on the screen. When a character needed extra assistance, the kids would be asked to draw whatever was needed to help free the beloved character from trouble. So, for

example, if a character needed to cross a river with no bridge, the viewer would draw a line ('bridge') on the screen so the character could cross and thus escape danger. Jack even employed Social Networking as a marketing tool for the Magic Drawing Screen Kit: He would encourage his young viewers to invite a friend over to watch the program and share in the drawing, the idea being that the invited kids would then want their own Magic Drawing Kit. Brilliant! This interactivity fueled by commerce (and vice versa) kept of millions of children watching their televisions on Saturday mornings. 'Winky Dink and You' was successful because of its pioneering interactive marketing scheme, and the protagonist, Winky Dink, went on to become one of television's most popular characters of the 1950s. Unfortunately, the show's production was halted despite its popularity due to concerns about X-rays from TV picture tubes (this was particularly true of early color television sets). Also, CBS was concerned about parents' complaints that children who didn't have the interactive screen were actually drawing directly on the TV screen!

During the early days of television, sponsors with the main goal of selling their product specifically created many TV shows, using the entertainment angle as a hook to hold audience attention. A good example of this is the early children's show 'The Magic Clown' on NBC, which was created by Tico Bonomo essentially as an advertisement for Bonomo's Turkish Taffy. Children's programming seems to have pioneered a number of television innovations!

Infomercials proliferated in the United States after 1984, when regulations that were established in the 1950s and 1960s to govern the commercial content of television were eliminated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Infomercials started using "800" numbers that enabled viewers to call and instantly purchase the item or service being offered, the "800" number enabling impulse buying. Then in the mid-1990s infomercials exploded with motivational and personal development products and infamous 'get-rich-quick' schemes that were based on the premise that one could quickly become wealthy by selling anything through either classified ads or real estate 'flipping'. By the use of different 800 numbers on different channels and geographic locations, marketing folks were (and are) able to use valuable television time to run the most effective infomercial on the right channel in the best region. Today, according to tapebeat.com, over $150 billion of consumer products in the United States are sold through infomercials. This is truly interactive television commerce, and certainly proves the point that interactive television can be extremely effective.

In 1994, astute cable executives and a handful of industry visionaries began evangelizing the concept of interacting with your television to do everything from purchasing clothing to ordering pizza using your remote control. Trials and tests proved that people were willing to use the new technology as a commerce tool. Then something happened: Computers became commonplace, AOL connected everyday users to the Internet, and yes, we could now order our clothing, books, music and pizza right from our computers! The Internet, that many had once questioned, now truly connected the world, and, just as importantly, created a huge global marketplace for goods, services and advertising. I was at the 1994

NCTA show in Las Vegas with a very well-known Venture Capitalist who mused that he just didn't know how anyone was going to make money with the Internet. He then went on to sponsor and fund companies who made billions of dollars in the Internet space.

It's important to remember that television is not free. Advertising, subscriptions or other types of commerce pay for almost all television programming. With 500 channels to watch and the ability to fast forward through television commercials using DVR technology, television advertising is far less effective and as such not as valuable, in terms of dollars, to advertisers. The cycle begins; advertising revenue, on a per show basis, begins to diminish, television networks budgets begin the shrink, production companies have smaller budgets to create great programming and we the television consumer are stuck with 500 channels and nothing to watch. A bit dramatic but you get the point.

Smart phones and tablet running second screen applications are nothing more than advanced portals that allow users to easily access the elements of commerce associated with television programming. Media Enhancement applications offer opportunities to augment and greatly improve the ability of content owners, television networks and over-the-top providers to generate revenue from advertising, subscription services and selling products, goods and services (e-commerce). Keeping the viewer interested in the program and not changing the channel during commercial breaks improves the effectiveness of the advertising, and thus the value of the advertising spot being aired. My suspicion is that very few kids drawing on their Winky Dink Magic Drawing Screens changed channels during the commercial break!

What we need now are creative minds, creating cool content, using cool tools to bring the element of imagination and wonder back to the television viewing experience.

So, the next time a question arises regarding the practicality or value of interacting with your television using Second Screen Applications or Media Enhancement applications, just remind them that interacting with the television is as old as television itself, and to go look up 'Winky Dink' on that curious technology called the Internet!

Author Bio: Thomas Engdahl is a pioneer and early day entrepreneur of technologies ranging from telecommunications and cable to Internet-based content and video delivery. He has established, built and led technology companies to financial health by conceptualizing and executing strategic marketing and business development campaigns that consistently delivered strong revenue gains. His ability to raise capital, turn around struggling endeavors, and establish joint ventures and strategic partnerships has led to IPOs and profitable sales of a number of companies. Prior to Magic Ruby, Tom launched, operated and expanded many successful established businesses including: Radiance Technologies, Pathfire, Inc., Applied Digital Access (ADAX), and Alopa Networks. As a start-up entrepreneur, Engdahl has also built teams and successful businesses for Comcast and Arris International. In addition, Tom has held key positions at companies such as M/A-Com Linkabit, Northern Telecom, DSC Communications, and Pacific Bell. He holds six patents for telecommunications and video-cable products and has been active in setting standards in the M&E and telecom industries since 1984.