BSI
Brand Safety Institute

# THE IPG/OMNICOM CONSENT DECREE

## A NEEDED REBOOT

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Brand Safety hit the headlines like a ton of bricks in 2017. The news that ads for major brands were running alongside ISIS recruiting videos on YouTube sent shivers through the industry. The "all-hands-on-deck" reaction by brands and agencies to insist that their reputations be protected, especially in still-emerging social user-generated environments, was completely understandable.

There was a desire for a baseline of assurance that any place where an advertiser might want to reach their audience online would have policies and tools in place to allow brands to feel the same assurance that Standards and Practices provided when dealing with TV, radio, and print in the pre-digital days.

## WHAT CHANGED?

As an industry, we frequently lump brand safety and brand suitability (or unsuitability) together as concepts. This makes sense, as the concepts are certainly related, but has done the industry a disservice when it comes to identifying who the ideal party is to take the lead in each case. The concept of brand safety – a generally agreed-upon floor, below which all brands would agree they wouldn't want their ads to appear adjacent – is fundamentally different from brand suitability, that content which a specific brand in a specific geographic area associated with a specific campaign would object to their ad showing up adjacent to, but with which other brands may be comfortable.

The difference is crucial because it gets to who is best positioned to take a leadership position in setting strategy. In the case of brand safety, where most brands agree on a baseline standard, an agency is extremely well positioned to take the collective interests of their clients and, as stated above, evaluate policies, create playbooks, and generally advance the shared objectives of their clients to avoid that below-the-floor content.


## WHY DOES THIS DISTINCTION MATTER?

Over the past eight-to-ten years, the conversation has evolved from brand safety to brand suitability. There are still occasional (and well publicized) instances where, due to gaps in the supply chain, brands still find their ads running against objectively unsafe content. More frequently, though, when the topic is discussed these days, the discussion is around the suitability or unsuitability of a property, page, video, podcast, or other environment where an ad might appear.

Whether or not you believe that anyone in the industry colluded to deprive publishers of one political leaning or another of advertising dollars – frankly, I've yet to encounter a publisher of any political persuasion who doesn't feel like they're being shortchanged in the current environment – the move away from agencies taking the lead as the conversation progressed from brand safety to brand suitability should have happened long ago.

Brands taking the lead on establishing their own unique suitability strategy, determining what policies and tools they require of their preferred partners to implement that strategy, building trusted partnerships, and evolving their approaches as the world experiences inevitable news cycles will lead to:

- ☐ Suitability better aligned to individual brands, geographies, and campaigns.
- ☐ Deeper benches of people who understand a given organization's approach to media buying and how it balances reputational risk with other businesses outcomes like price, reach, and effectiveness.
- ☐ A stronger pool of tools and data vendors that offer different approaches to achieving a less homogeneous set of brand suitability goals.
- ☐ No concern with or appearance of concerted or coordinated action.

## WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

To support a brand-led approach to brand suitability, the industry should be promoting something else, which should be a universal shared value: transparency. To make choices best suited to their unique approach to brand suitability, brands must have access to the tools and data necessary to reach their own conclusions about who they want to partner with and where they want to spend their ad dollars. Where previous industry efforts in the space expressed opinions that might have been interpreted as directives or boycotts, future industry efforts should focus on providing brands with the data they need to reach their own conclusions based on objective data about what each potential partner in the ecosystem has to offer.

At BSI, we are committed to doing just that — developing tools and resources that empower practitioners tasked with brand suitability across the supply chain to do their jobs more effectively. Earlier this year, we launched a diagnostic tool for publishers allowing them to assess where and how their sites may be flagged or penalized for a widening array of inventory quality factors. The goal was to give them insight that would allow them to make better informed decisions about their business.

Others in the industry have followed a similar approach, providing data and tools to support brands in their decision-making and execution without editorializing on end outcomes:

The Trustworthy Accountability Group (TAG) has developed process guidance for maintaining keyword block lists and partnered with the Brand Safety Institute to develop and provide free virtual training to organizations create and maintain their own lists in keeping with their own brand values.

The Trade Desk has released its OpenSincera API to allow brands, publishers, intermediaries, and other industry organizations to determine the best path to using Sincera data to optimize their advertising strategy.

In the above cases, the organizations developing the tools and content make no recommendation on whether and how individual brands should leverage them, or whether the information therein is the "right" way to do things. These initiatives and others like them simply make it easier for brands and other stakeholders tasked with making decisions about brand suitability and other aspects of media responsibility to do their jobs effectively.