

The Story of Blab-Off

By Laura Alpern

My father created Blab-Off, a device that turned off the sound on your TV set, in the fall of 1952. In those days TV commercials were obnoxious and aggressive, and worst of all, they were a lot louder than the TV programs. Today, no matter how much we gripe, commercials are often just as good as the programs they interrupt.

Here is my father's story. Late one evening, he and mother were sitting on the sofa watching TV. Suddenly a really irritating commercial boomed out. My father didn't feel like jumping up to turn it off.

"There ought to be a way to shut off the blab without running over to the TV," my mother griped. "It'll wake the kids."

"Easy," said my father. "I could invent a way in ten minutes, it's that simple."

He went over to the TV console, knelt on the floor behind it and took a look at the speaker. "Nothing to it," he said. "There're two little wires running from the transformer to the speaker terminals. All you have to do is cut one of the wires with a scissors, and lengthen that line by inserting a length of lamp cord; then at the other end of the cord, you need an on-off switch. Simple."

"Bet you can't do it in ten minutes."

He could. While my mother timed him, my father ran to the basement and returned with twenty feet of lamp cord, a scissors, a Gilbert on-off line switch, electrical tape, and a flashlight. He got back on the floor by the TV console, put it together, and presto, it worked.

The next evening my brother and I sat on the sofa, taking turns switching the sound on and off. The quality of the sound and the TV picture were not affected no matter how many times we switched.

"You see before you the world's first Blab-Off," my father said. He had already christened his new gadget, taking the name from my mother's remark about turning the blab off.

For the next week or two, my father was busy making refinements on his gadget. He went to a radio supply store and bought two little clips. He soldered them to the two exposed wires at one end of the lamp cord, and then attached the clips to the two ends of the cut wire at the speaker. He fastened one end of the cord to the inside bottom of the TV console. To prevent the attachment from pulling apart, he hammered a small insulated staple over the lamp cord, securing it against tugging.

He invited our neighbors over for a demonstration.

"You could make a million dollars if you marketed this amazing gadget!" said our next-door neighbor. "Everybody with a TV set will buy one."

A million dollars sounded good. My father kept his day job, but he got busy on his new gadget. He rented space in a downtown office building with a good mail order address. He set up a tiny factory with two employees to manufacture Blab-Off. The process consisted of attaching an on-off line switch to one

end of twenty feet of standard lamp cord and soldering two small clips to the two wires at the other end, then packaging the whole thing along with an instruction sheet and an insulated staple, in a mailing box. He added a decal that said "Blab-Off: remote control TV sound switch."

He soon learned that you can't patent a contraption as simple as twenty feet of lamp cord with an on-off switch at one end, two readily available clips at the other. He did the next best thing: he registered Blab-Off as a trade mark.

Next problem: he was afraid of losing his job. His name, Howard Manischewitz, of "Man-oh-Manischewitz" fame, was not one that would go unnoticed. He adopted a pseudonym, "Bob Grant," and kept his real identity secret. But who would help him advertise his subversive invention?

He found a brave advertising agency named Leonard M. Sive & Associates, who prepared some TV spot announcements. Seven stations turned them down. Next they prepared ads to place in major market newspapers. Fifteen major newspapers refused the ads. Just one ad was accepted. Leonard Sive had sent it to the New York Mirror because the famous news anchor Walter Winchell wrote for the Mirror and might see the ad and pick it up as a news item. He did. On March 22nd, 1953, Walter Winchell announced on his national TV show:

"The most terrifying gadget in television for TV set owners will soon be announced, and sells at \$2.98. One flip of your finger from your easy chair in your parlor will turn out all commercials and commentators that annoy you. It is called Blab-Off, named after, I guess, the commentators."

Next came a call from the Reader's Digest. The voice on the phone asked if they could send one of their best writers down to our home in Cincinnati to get an interview?

"Yes!" said my father. A Reader's Digest journalist named C. Lester Walker came from New York to our home in Cincinnati. His interview lasted two days. My father showed him his notebook full of letters from satisfied consumers. The Reader's Digest didn't just settle for Walker's interview. They prepared a questionnaire and hired an independent organization to mail it to hundreds of Blab-Off owners, gathered at random from my father's files. The questionnaire found that "88 percent of those who bought the gadget installed it, and 98 percent of them were currently using it."

The Reader's Digest advised my father to get a stock of Blab-Offs boxed and ready for sale in department stores and drug stores across the country. He borrowed fifty thousand dollars in order to do this. He enlarged his Blab-Off factory and designed a display carton and shipping container, plus signs, leaflets, cards, stationery, and invoices.

The Reader's Digest issue for November, 1953 appeared with a two-page article: "How to Stop Objectionable TV Commercials," by C. Lester Walker. It was a rave article from start to finish.

Mail came into my father's office by the pouch-full, and with several thousand orders a day, he got the fifty thousand back in a matter of weeks. The mail order requests kept coming in. But for some reason, it didn't sell in the shops. Why not? Sabotage? My father called in a packaging expert, a marketing expert, a sales expert. None of them found an explanation.

Soon it was too late anyway, for along came the imitators. My father realized he was not going to make a million. He re-focused his attention on his day job and sold Blab-Off to three friends. They continued selling it by mail order, making a modest profit, at least enough to consider they had not been cheated.

Within a couple of years the tables were turned. For about seventy dollars, Zenith TV offered a remote control that would turn the sound on and off but also change channels. Suddenly it was politically correct for Zenith to announce in full-page ads that "now you can eliminate the sound from annoying TV commercials." You could still trip over the wires, though. People had to wait a few more years until gadgets without a connecting wire were marketed, always astronomically higher than \$2.98.

Blab-Off and its successors had an enormous impact on Madison Avenue. Beginning in 1954, TV commercials abruptly changed. They were no longer so loud, and they were a lot cleverer. They had to be good, informative, and entertaining or else they would be Blabbed-Off.

If you look at the usual sources, such as Wikipedia or the Zenith website, you will read that remote devices were first developed in 1950 by Zenith. Maybe they did stumble upon the idea around the same time as my father. If they did, they were definitely keeping it under wraps. And maybe they would have kept it off the market for years longer, if my father had not created Blab-Off.

My father never went down in history, and he never became rich. All that remains is the article from the Reader's Digest, and a couple of old Blab-Offs that I kept as souvenirs.