



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the Tom Black/Smithsonian Magazine Oral History Interview

NMAH.AC.0505

Tom Wiener

January 27, 1994

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Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
Arrangement.....	2
Biographical / Historical.....	2
Scope and Contents.....	2
Names and Subjects	3
Container Listing	4
Series 1: Transcripts.....	4
Series 2: Oral History Interview.....	5
Series 3: Background Files.....	6

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Tom Black/Smithsonian Magazine Oral History Interview
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0505
Date:	1993
Extent:	1.5 Cubic feet (3 boxes)
Creator:	Black, Tom, 1924- Wiener, Tom
Language:	English
Summary:	Oral history interview, transcripts, and background material documenting Tom Black's career as director of advertising for Smithsonian Magazine from its founding in 1969 until his retirement in 1994.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Tom Black agreed to be interviewed for the project and donated the related papers, which were photocopied, in December 1993.

The Tom Black Oral History Collection was made possible by a generous gift to the Center for Advertising History by *Smithsonian Magazine*.

Related Materials

Materials in the Archives Center

The Estelle Ellis Collection (AC0423) also contains material on the history of magazines, in that case the consumer periodicals *Seventeen* and *Charm / Glamour*.

Processing Information

Collection processed by Tom Wiener, January 27, 1994.

Preferred Citation

Tom Black/Smithsonian Magazine Oral History Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

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Biographical / Historical

Tom Black was *Smithsonian Magazine's* first Director of Advertising. He joined the magazine in September 1969 and retired in the spring of 1994. During his tenure, the magazine became one of the major success stories in publishing, mushrooming from an initial circulation of 164,000 to over 2 million, making it the leading magazine in the so-called quality field. From the beginning, the magazine's readership ranked high in such demographic factors as level of education and disposable income. Black and his sales force, however, had problems at first trying to sell a magazine which many advertisers associated with a musty, dusty museum complex in Washington, D.C. Just when sales were at their lowest ebb, in the summer of 1971, sales turned the corner and took off. Black's father, Howard Black, was *Time Magazine's* first ad salesman, and Tom grew up with Henry Luce, the father of modern magazine publishing, as a frequent guest in his parents' home. After serving in World War II, Tom Black joined J. Walter Thompson, then the world's leading advertising agency, as a trainee but soon decided that he was more interested in being a part of a new and growing enterprise. He joined the fledgling sales force of ABC Television and wrote the network's first rate card. After a short stint with *The March of Time* newsreel operation, he found himself on the sales force of *Life Magazine*, where he spent most of the 1950s, switching over to *Time* for much of the 1960s. In 1969, at the age of 45, Black was looking for a new challenge when he was contacted by former *Life* editor Edward Thompson, who was starting a new magazine for the Smithsonian Institution. As Black modestly recalls it, Thompson probably remembered a favor Howard Black had done years before for Thompson and his son in making Tom Black *Smithsonian's* first ad director.

Scope and Contents

This collection consists of 4.25 hours of interview material. Oral historian Tom Wiener spoke with Black in his New York office December 15-16, 1993. Black also generously loaned materials from his files, including charts and statistics which illustrate some of his observations about the growth of the magazine and the shifting demographics of American society that have affected magazine readership and advertising, plus internal memos from the magazines's early days. Also included are an unedited transcript of the interview, plus an edited version. The latter was the basis for a booklet, which was presented to Black and guests at his retirement party in the spring of 1994. A copy of the booklet rounds out the collection.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into three series.

Series 1: Oral History Interview

Series 2: Transcripts

Series 3: Background Files

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Advertising executives -- 1960-2000
Advertising, magazine -- 1960-2000

Types of Materials:

Audio cassettes -- 1990-2000
Interviews -- 1980-2000
Oral history -- 1990-2000
Transcripts

Container Listing

Series 1: Transcripts

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| Box 1, Folder 1 | Tom Black Oral History Transcript (unedited) |
| Box 1, Folder 2 | Tom Black Oral History Transcript (edited version) |

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 2: Oral History Interview

Box 2 Two sets of cassettes, five in each set. Researcher copies, with and without time code tracks

Box 3 Nine reel to reel tapes

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 3: Background Files

Box 1, Folder 3

Background files, memos, correspondence, charts and statistics

Memos, correspondence, charts and statistics from Tom Black's files

[Return to Table of Contents](#)