

Background Briefing

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) works to maintain the highest standards in advertising by taking action to prevent ads from being misleading, harmful or offensive. Visit www.asa.org.uk for more information about our activities, to view the Advertising Codes or to access our database of adjudications.

Environmental claims

How green is green?

As consumer, investor and policy maker concerns about sustainable development and green issues become ever more prominent, advertisers now often seek to communicate the environmental credentials of their companies and products.

However, because of differing scientific opinions in this area, there is a lack of official definitions about what can be called 'green'. ASA research has revealed a high level of confusion and little basic understanding about environmental claims and what they mean.

The rules

When making environmental claims, advertisers should always ensure their factual claims are backed up by supporting evidence.

Specific rules for environmental claims in ads include:

- making the basis of any claim clear
- requiring claims such as 'environmentally friendly' or 'wholly biodegradable' not to be made unless advertisers can provide convincing evidence that a product will cause no environmental damage in its full life cycle
- avoiding the suggestion that claims command universal acceptance where there is a significant division of scientific opinion or evidence is inconclusive
- avoiding the use of extravagant language as well as bogus and confusing scientific terms. If it is necessary to use a scientific expression, its meaning should be made clear.

Cynicism

If advertisers don't get their ads right, there is a danger that consumers will become cynical about so-called 'greenwash' – an attempt by an advertiser to boost its public image by exaggerating its environmental practices or the environmental benefits of its products or services.

Who can tell us what green means?

Whilst our rulings can set standards for claims in ads about things such as carbon emissions and environmental impact, the ASA alone cannot define what green is. We keep an open dialogue with relevant government departments, other regulatory organisations and interested parties to ensure our rulings reflect current evidence and thinking in this area.

Can a company claim its products are 100% green?

Very few products have been proven to be totally harmless to the environment because most products pollute in their manufacture, use or disposal. However, advertisers may be able claim 'greener', 'friendlier' or 'kinder' if they provide sufficient evidence to back up their claims.

Keeping the rules up to date

When the new Advertising Codes were introduced in September 2010, the Broadcast Advertising Code contained, for the first time, a dedicated environment section, providing greater clarity for broadcast advertisers. The environment section in the Non-broadcast Advertising Code was also updated.

It is not the role of the ASA to prevent companies from advertising their environmental credentials, but we are here to maintain standards so that consumers can have confidence in the ads they see.

ASA action

Here are just some of the ads the ASA has considered which have set benchmarks for the industry to follow.

Finnair – January 2010

A poster for the airline suggested consumers be 'eco-smart' by choosing Finnair's brand new fleet. The ASA upheld complaints, judging that the public would interpret 'eco-smart' as 'environmentally friendly', which air travel is not.

Eurostar Group Ltd - June 2008

Eurostar claimed "carbon neutral journeys". The ASA did not uphold complaints as the journey itself was being offset, ruling it would be unreasonable to expect Eurostar to cover other emissions such as those generated from Eurotunnel.

British Gas Trading Ltd - January 2008

British Gas implied the fuel it used was carbon free and did not produce carbon dioxide. The ASA ruled that, as a fossil fuel, carbon dioxide would be a by-product of its use.

Further reading

The ASA held a stakeholder consultation seminar entitled '[Environmental Claims in Advertising: Is Green a Grey Area?](#)' on 12 June 2008. The [summary report](#) of the event can be viewed on the ASA website.

In 2011 the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) updated its [Green Claims Guidance](#), which sets standards for information the public can expect to be given about the environmental impact of consumer products and services. The ASA worked closely with Defra on the development of the Guidance.