

# 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](http://www.asa.org.uk) for more information about our activities, to view the advertising Codes or to access our database of adjudications.

## Charity advertising Shock tactics

Shocking images have long been used by charities to grab people's attention. Whether it's a young girl drinking cooking oil or a baby with a cockroach in its mouth, visually powerful images can be an effective way of raising awareness of important issues.

The ASA and the public tend to give charities more leeway to use shocking images than commercial companies because of the good ends they are trying to achieve. But ads by charities and voluntary organisations still need to comply with the rules in the advertising Codes and the ASA will uphold complaints if it considers those rules have been breached or if advertisers have tried to shock just for the sake of it.

### The rules

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#### What do the advertising Codes say?

Whether on TV, radio or in print, ads should contain nothing that is likely to cause serious or widespread offence.

Ads by charities also need to comply with the other general rules in the advertising Codes, such as:

- not misleading consumers
  - not encouraging irresponsible behaviour
  - not denigrating others or portraying people in an adverse way
  - matters of opinion – they may give a view about any matter providing it is clear they are expressing their own opinion rather than stating a fact
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#### How effective are shock tactics?

During their controversial campaign about domestic child abuse in 2008, which the ASA did not uphold complaints about, Barnardo's reportedly saw hits on their website double from 103,000 to 200,000 compared to the same six weeks the previous year. They also reported an increase of almost 50% in people wanting to donate to Barnardo's after exposure to their advertisement.

But there was a downside. Letters received by the ASA would suggest that, regardless of whether the ad achieved its aims, it polarised opinion resulting in the loss of some goodwill and sympathy.

## **No such thing as bad publicity?**

A controversial campaign can prompt high numbers of complaints and so generate press interest and thus raise a charity's profile. But is it worth it?

The ASA would never condone such an approach. It argues that a poor campaign can:

- erode consumer trust in charity advertising and advertising as a whole
- be expensive if complaints are upheld because the campaign will have to be removed or amended
- risk alienating those whose support the charity seeks: the public

## **So what is acceptable?**

Where the subject itself has the potential to be distressing or cause offence, rather than the marketing communication, consumers tend to be more likely to accept that a shocking approach can be justified. As with all marketing, acceptability under the advertising Codes will be assessed according to the overall impact when taken as a whole and in context.

One of the crucial factors the ASA takes into account is the audience that is likely to see the ad. Outdoor ads can be seen by anyone of any age. Advertisers should take particular care when targeting their messages that children are not exposed to anything that might be harmful or upsetting.

## **ASA action**

### **The British Diabetic Association t/a Diabetes UK – March 2009**

This poster and press ad campaign showed people being menaced by a shadowy figure. The text stated: "Diabetes. Beware the silent assassin." Complainants said the ads both stigmatized and were distressing to diabetics and unduly appealed to fear.

### **Barnardo's – December 2008**

A hard-hitting campaign for this children's charity attracted complaints from people who believed the repeated scenes of drug taking and violence against a young girl were distressing.

### **Save the Children Fund – October 2006**

This direct mailing that stated "If you have brown eyes, you're more likely to die young" attracted complaints from recipients who thought it could cause fear and distress to young children who might view it.

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### **Further reading**

[The advertising Codes](#)

[Charity advertising live issue](#)