

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.

Sound levels

Noisy ads

Even the blandest, most inoffensive ad can still cause real offence – if it's blasted at you at high volume during an ad break. Since assuming responsibility for TV advertising regulation in 2004, the ASA has received hundreds of complaints from viewers objecting to 'noisy ads'.

When the ASA looked into the complaints, it found that, despite seeming louder, many ads were being broadcast at levels that were acceptable according to the sound levels rule in the UK Code of Broadcast Advertising. This prompted the committee that writes the Code (the Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice) to revise the rule in 2007. The new rule provides more clarity for broadcasters, giving better technical guidance to help them ensure that the ads they broadcast are not "excessively noisy or strident". The aim has been to minimise the annoyance that can be caused to viewers by ensuring the sound level of ads is consistent with programmes and junction material.

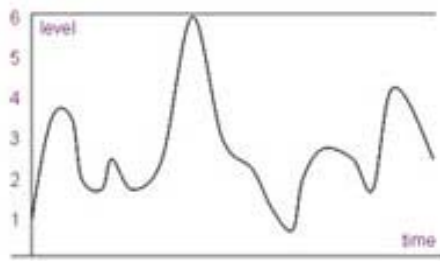
The rule

The Code states

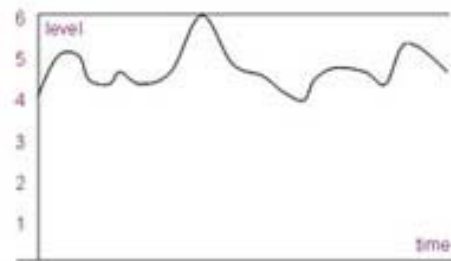
- Advertisements must not be excessively noisy or strident. The maximum subjective loudness of advertisements must be consistent and in line with the maximum loudness of programmes and junction material.
 - Broadcasters must endeavour to minimise the annoyance that perceived imbalances could cause when ads broadcast at a 'normally acceptable' level occur during especially quiet parts of a programme. The aim is that the audience need not adjust the volume of their television sets during programme breaks.
 - The rule provides technical guidance to help broadcasters ensure the ads they broadcast neither exceed the maximum acceptable loudness level nor are likely to be perceived by viewers as subjectively loud.
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What changed?

Previously, the loudness of an ad was judged by measuring its peak sound levels (that is, the loudest part, or parts, of the ad's soundtrack). But ads broadcast with compressed soundtracks seem subjectively louder to viewers. That's because compressing a soundtrack has the effect of leveling out the 'peaks and troughs' to raise the average loudness level, and, in doing so, making the ad sound louder.



Natural sound



Compressed sound

The new approach

The revised rule encourages broadcasters to measure the subjective loudness levels of ads rather than simply measuring peak sound levels.

Subjective loudness (the audience's perception of loudness) is affected by various factors, including:

- the peak levels of sounds
- the length of time sound levels are maintained
- the different frequencies, or 'pitches', contained in the soundtrack
- the loudness and 'mood' of the preceding programme segment

The Code encourages broadcasters to measure subjective sound levels using a loudness-level meter, preferably one that conforms to International Telecommunication Union (ITU) standards.

What does it all mean?

Broadcasters should now be better able to match the sound levels of ads with the sound output of the whole channel. This means the perceived imbalance between ad and programme sound levels should be reduced, leading to less viewer irritation and fewer complaints to the ASA.

ASA action

We are able to investigate complaints about ad sound levels but require details of the channel and time of broadcast of specific ads.

In 2007 the ASA received 306 complaints about noisy ads. In 2008, the year in which the revised rule came into force, we received 172 complaints. Of those complaints, just 18 warranted an investigation and 8 of those were found to be in breach of the rule.

Further reading

[The UK Code of Broadcast Advertising](#)
[International Telecommunication Union](#)
