

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.

Motoring

Driving creativity

Motor vehicles are big business and competition for market share in this lucrative industry is fierce with millions of pounds spent on advertising each year.

However, European and UK legislators have long been concerned that motoring ads should not emphasise speed or encourage irresponsible behaviour. This has led to great creativity in UK ad campaigns as advertisers (especially those marketing high-performance vehicles) try to make their vehicles stand out, while staying within the rules.

Responsible advertising

The UK advertising Codes contain specific rules that reflect society's concerns about dangerous driving practices and irresponsible behaviour. Amongst the key requirements of the Codes are rules that advertisers must not make speed or acceleration claims the predominant message and nor should they encourage people to drive irresponsibly or break the law.

Advertisers also need to be careful not to include misleading price information, for example, by showing a top-of-the-range model alongside a headline price for a basic model.

The rules

Some of the main requirements of the Codes are that advertisements should not:

- make speed or acceleration claims the predominant message
 - give the impression that vehicles in normal driving circumstances on public roads are exceeding the UK speed limit
 - encourage motorists to drive irresponsibly or break the law e.g. break the speed limit or promote 'radar detection' equipment for evading police speed traps
 - portray or refer to practices that encourage anti-social behaviour
 - contain safety claims which exaggerate the benefit to the consumer
 - quote prices which do not correspond to vehicles illustrated
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Motoring and the environment

As consumers become more interested in the environmental impact of their driving, advertisers have increasingly been talking about the greener aspects of their products, such as lower-emission, hybrid, electric, hydrogen and bio-fuelled vehicles. Advertisers sometimes fall foul of the Codes by exaggerating the environmental benefits of their product or if the basis of the claim is not clear in their ads. For example, does their “greener” claim relate to previous models of the same car, other cars in the same class or something else? The ASA advises motor advertisers to pay particular attention to the ‘environment’ sections of the advertising Codes¹.

Complaints

The ASA strictly enforces the ad Codes: just one complaint can lead to the removal of an ad campaign. In 2008, we received 1,864 complaints about 593 motoring advertisements. 128 of those complaints were upheld, relating to 61 advertisements.

The rules most frequently breached are those concerning a car’s performance such as acceleration, braking power, road holding and top speed claims.

ASA action

Fiat Group Automobiles UK Ltd t/a Alfa Romeo UK (August 2008)

This national press ad misled consumers by quoting a headline price for a car which did not correspond with the top of the range limited edition model shown in the ad.

BMW (GB) Ltd (July 2007)

The ASA ruled that the text “Floor it” and the accompanying graphics on this interactive internet ad could be seen to encourage speeding.

Lexus (GB) Ltd (May 2007)

Complainants believed the claims "LOW EMISSIONS" and "ZERO GUILT" in this ad misleadingly implied the car caused little or no harm to the environment. Whilst we acknowledged the CO₂ emissions rate was low compared to other cars in its class, we considered the claims implied the vehicle's emissions were low regardless of category.

Peugeot Motor Company plc (March 2007)

Despite complaints that this ad encouraged fast and irresponsible driving in the countryside, the ASA felt there was no indication that the car was travelling above the speed limit and complaints were not upheld.

Full adjudications for all of the above case examples can be viewed at www.asa.org.uk.

Further reading

¹ See the [ASA Background Briefing on Environmental Claims](#).

The [advertising Codes](#) contain specific rules for motoring advertising.

The [Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders Limited](#) provide information on the motor industry.