

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.

Taste and decency: depiction of men

As the sexes become more equal, men and women have increasingly been depicted in advertisements in “non-traditional” roles. Accompanying this, over the past decade the ASA has seen an increase in the number of complaints about the way men are shown in ads. The complaints we receive can be placed into two broad categories: men being shown in a demeaning or weak manner or made the subject of jokes – in these ads there is often a women playing a stronger or wiser character.

The UK Advertising Codes contain specific rules about offensiveness and discrimination, which aim to strike the right balance between what is, and is not, acceptable. The ASA can also take into account the fact that ads can be humorous and that people are often happy to poke fun at themselves or particular situations.

The rules

Ads should contain nothing that is likely to cause serious or widespread offence. Particular care should be taken to avoid causing offence on the grounds of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation or disability. Compliance is judged on the context, medium, audience, product and prevailing standards of decency.

- **Ads may be distasteful without necessarily breaching the Code**
 - **Ads must not condone or encourage harmful discriminatory behaviour or treatment.**
 - **Ads must not encourage or condone violence or cruelty.**
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Complaints

Encouragingly, the number of complaints the ASA receives about how men are depicted in ads remains very low. In 2009, the ASA received just over 100 complaints about around two dozen ads where complainants felt that men had been portrayed in a derogatory way. This was out of the total 29,000 complaints about 14,000 ads received by the ASA during the year.

What is acceptable?

Even though some people might find even the most light-hearted stereotyping objectionable, the ASA does not object to the use of certain stereotypes which would be seen as acceptable to most men and the wider public. Because ads have to

communicate something in a very short space of time, advertisers often use easily identifiable characters to help them get their message across, whether it is a “working parent”, an “office clown” or an “outdoors type”. The ASA only intervenes when the depiction becomes harmful.

However, when it comes to depicting men, advertisers have, predominantly, stayed on the right side of the line. That said, the ASA has taken action in the past and will do so again if any ad strays too far and is demeaning on the grounds of gender.

ASA action

Newspaper Marketing Agency - 2004

Complaints were received about a newspaper ad that featured the body of a man impaled on large black-stiletto heeled shoe. The ASA ruled that the ad trivialised and stylised violence, and ordered that it should not be used again.

MFI Retail Ltd – September 2007

A TV ad showed a woman slap her husband twice across the face as punishment for leaving the toilet seat up. We concluded that the scene was likely to cause serious or widespread offence to viewers and could be seen to condone intimidation, domestic violence and aggression as an acceptable way to resolve issues.

HomePride Ltd - 20 May 2009

A TV ad for an oven cleaner included the line “so easy, even a man can do it”. Some viewers believed the ad suggested that men were stupid and lazy and others thought the ad implied that cleaning was normally a woman’s job. The ASA judged that majority of viewers would see the ad as light-hearted and comical, and did not uphold.

Somerfield Stores Ltd - February 2009

During this TV ad a wife scolds her husband and says to the shop assistant ‘what are they like?’ The ad was not formally investigated after the ASA Council decided that it had not portrayed the husband in a derogatory way but instead played on the light-hearted stereotype that men were not very good at shopping.

Further reading

The [UK Advertising Codes](#)

The [European Advertising Standards Alliance report](#) on how advertising regulators across the EU tackle the issue of gender portrayal in advertising.