

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.

Violence

Rising complaints

With reports about gun and knife crime frequently in the headlines, images of weapons or depictions of violence in ads are becoming increasingly unacceptable to consumers.

In 2007, complaints about violence in advertising doubled to nearly 1,800 complaints.

The ASA has an important role to play in striking a balance between protecting the public from advertising that may cause harm and offence, while maintaining a level playing field for advertisers.

The rules

What is acceptable?

Judging whether an ad is likely to condone or encourage violent or anti-social behaviour is highly subjective and it is very difficult to have definitive guidelines as to where the line should be drawn.

There are different advertising rules for TV, radio and non-broadcast media. But the main principle of all the advertising Codes is that:

- ads should contain nothing that condones, or is likely to provoke violence, cruelty or anti-social behaviour
 - gratuitous and realistic portrayals of cruel or irresponsible treatment of people or animals are not acceptable
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Children

The public has told the ASA that it is very concerned about children being exposed to violent images. Where an ad appears can have a direct impact on whether children are likely to see it. Timing restrictions, remote controls and web filters can stop children seeing violent images on TV, radio and online. But posters can be seen by any age group. Advertisers should be wary if including weapons in ads on billboards or bus shelters.

What is an acceptable way to show a gun or knife?

For some people depicting weapons in ads will always be unacceptable, but advertisers promoting an action or horror film, for example, often show characters holding guns and knives. As a general rule, advertisers should avoid pointing guns at

the viewer. But even if a weapon is pointing away from the viewer, ads with prominent or glamorous images of guns or guns being brandished in an aggressive manner and ads with a general theme or implied threat of violence, are likely to be problematic.

Context

Graphic depictions of violence should be avoided, especially in posters, but humorous, light-hearted, stylised or cartoonish approaches in targeted media can be acceptable.

It is worth bearing in mind that people's attitudes change. High-profile shootings and stabbings can increase the public's sensitivity to violent images.

What does the public think?

During an ASA seminar held in November 2007, delegates urged us to maintain a tough stance on the gratuitous portrayal of violence in advertising. They recommended, however, the context be taken into account – either the nature of the product advertised or the kind of media in which the ad appeared.

ASA action

Universal Pictures International UK & Eire Ltd - September 2008

The ASA received 18 complaints about this poster campaign for the film 'Wanted'. We upheld complaints about the ads, which featured the actress Angelina Jolie, on the grounds that they could be seen to glorify or glamorise gun use.

Entertainment Film Distributors Ltd - November 2007

A poster campaign for the film 'Shoot 'Em Up' showed an image of a man holding a gun. The ASA concluded that the ad could be seen to condone violence by glorifying or glamorising the use of guns.

MFI - September 2007

The ASA considered this TV ad showing a woman slapping her husband gave the impression that aggression and violence was an acceptable way to resolve issues.

Dolce & Gabbana - January 2007

Despite the stylization, the ASA considered a fashion ad showing men brandishing knives condoned and glorified knife related violence.

Midway Games Ltd - December 2005

A viral ad showing office workers fighting to the death was deemed to glorify violence and judged irresponsible because it contained scenes which could be emulated.

Further reading

The [advertising Codes](#) contain specific rules relating to violence and anti-social behaviour in advertising and many of the general rules on decency and offence are relevant.

[What you looking at? Drawing the line on violence in advertising.](#) Report from the ASA's event held in Nottingham on 21 November 2007.