

Broadband speed claims

Advertising Guidance (non-broadcast and
broadcast)

Foreword

The Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) offers guidance on the interpretation of the UK Code of Advertising (the CAP Code) in relation to non-broadcast marketing communications.

The Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP) offers guidance on the interpretation of the UK Code of Broadcast Advertising (the BCAP Code) in relation to broadcast marketing communications.

Advertising Guidance is intended to guide advertisers, agencies and media owners how to interpret the Codes but is not a substitute for those Codes. Advertising Guidance reflects CAP's and/or BCAP's intended effect of the Codes but neither constitutes new rules nor binds the ASA Councils in the event of a complaint about an advertisement that follows it.

For pre-publication advice on specific non-broadcast advertisements, consult the CAP Copy Advice team by telephone on 020 7492 2100, by fax on 020 7404 3404 or you can log a written enquiry via our [online request form](#).

For advice on specific radio advertisements, consult the [Radio Advertising Clearance Centre \(RACC\)](#), and for TV advertisements, [Clearcast](#).

For the full list of Advertising Guidance, please [visit our website](#).

On 17 November 2016, the ASA published [independent research](#) into consumers' understanding of broadband speed claims made in ads. As a result of the research, the ASA called for a change to the way broadband speed claims are advertised and CAP and BCAP announced they would review their guidance to advertisers on broadband speed claims. CAP and BCAP will report publicly in spring 2017 and this piece of guidance will be updated once that review is complete. The ASA will continue to have regard to the existing guidance for the duration of CAP and BCAP's review, ensuring that there is no reduction in the protection afforded to consumers in that period.

Background

The Help Note covers marketing communications for fixed-line broadband services, such as DSL, VDSL and cable, and mobile data services.

The reference to mobile data services is primarily focused on mobile network operators' radio access networks over which services, which allow access to the internet using a dedicated mobile broadband SIM or from a mobile phone, either as a stand-alone device or as a modem tethered to another device, may be delivered, for instance, HSPA (High Speed Packet Access) and LTE (Long Term Evolution).

The primary focus of the Help Note is on marketing communications that make maximum claims in the form of a numerical speed claim, for instance, "Up to 10Mb Broadband", but it also applies to other approaches used to indicate the maximum speed of a service, such as "superfast".

The Help Note and the legislative framework

The ASA Council has agreed to have regard to this Help Note when considering whether "up to" speed claims in broadband advertising comply with the relevant Advertising Code. The guidance may be revised as a result of ASA Council rulings and changes in the industry. The ASA's interpretation of the Misleading Advertising sections of the Codes takes into account factors identified by the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008 (CPRs) and The Business Protection from Misleading Marketing Regulations 2008 (BPRs).

- The CPRs require that advertising must not contain misleading claims, or omit material information, to the extent that the advertisements are likely to affect adversely consumers' transactional decisions about products. The effect on consumers is considered from the point of view of the average consumer. The average consumer is assumed to be reasonably well-informed, reasonably observant and circumspect. If an advertisement is targeted at a particular group of people, it is considered from the point of view of the average member of that group.
- The BPRs protect businesses targeted by business-to-business advertising. The BPRs state that an advertisement is misleading if it deceives the traders to whom it is addressed and is therefore likely to affect their economic behaviour.

- The Help Note recommends an approach that CAP and BCAP consider is likely to be acceptable within the legal framework. For the avoidance of doubt, it does not proscribe other approaches, nor is it intended to stifle innovation in telecommunications advertising. If complaints are received about a marketing communication in which a marketer has chosen to depart from the approach recommended by the Help Note, the ASA will simply expect the marketer to be able to justify why they did so and why the marketing communication does not mislead as a result.

Advice on marketing communications

Advice on specific marketing communications is available from the Copy Advice team by telephone on 020 7492 2100, or you can log a specific written enquiry via our [online request form](#).

The Copy Advice website contains a full list of Help Notes as well as access to the [AdviceOnline database](#), which has links through to relevant Code rules and ASA adjudications. For advice on specific radio advertisements, contact the Radio Advertising Clearance Centre (RACC), www.racc.co.uk or, for TV advertisements, Clearcast, www.clearcast.co.uk

The Guidance

Advertising of broadband services

In practice, different customers of the same provider achieve different broadband speeds. The variation in speeds can be negligible or highly significant depending on a number of different factors. This has implications for how broadband speed claims may be communicated by advertisers.

A range of factors affects the maximum speeds achieved by individual customers: for instance,

- The variation in achievable speeds from customer to customer caused by signal attenuation¹ on ADSL networks is likely to be very significant.
- For mobile services, speeds are determined by the strength of signal received by the device. Signal strength depends primarily on distance from the mast, but it is also affected by the user's environment and any obstructions or 'clutter' in the area.²
- Individual users' speeds also vary over time on all platforms due to factors such as contention³, traffic management and network capacity.

As a consequence, along with variations in performance between different platforms, there are variations in performance between different ISPs on the same platform.

Speed claims

Principle

CAP and BCAP consider that maximum speed claims should be based on the actual experience of users and therefore marketers should be able to demonstrate that the speeds in their advertising can be achieved by a reasonable proportion of the provider's customers.

Policy

Where advertisers make a numerical speed claim that is likely to be understood by consumers as the maximum speed of their service, they should be able to demonstrate that the speed is achievable for at least 10% of the relevant customer base.

- Signal attenuation is the depreciation of signal strength between the end user and their local telephone exchange as the broadband signal travels over copper wire.
- An example of 'clutter' is the effect of structures in an urban area creating areas of variable signal strength dependent upon how they interfere with communication between devices and the network mast.
- Contention is the effect of multiple users sharing the same bandwidth on a provider's network.

This policy applies to relevant claims wherever they appear in a marketing communication and if a claim is a part of the name of the service. Marketers may, however, choose to round their maximum speed claims down to a figure that is more convenient for marketing purposes.

Qualifying speed claims

Principle

The maximum speed achieved by customers of all providers varies to different extents. Advertisers should therefore include appropriate qualifying information to accompany the maximum speed claim to ensure the average consumer is not likely to be misled.

It is a general principle of the Codes that advertisers must not mislead consumers by including or omitting information, if the inclusion or omission of that information is likely to cause consumers to take a transactional decision they would not otherwise have taken.

Below are several different qualifications that are likely to be necessary depending on the level of variation in speeds achieved by customers of an ISP.

Policy

a) “Up to”

In circumstances where some customers’ maximum speed falls below it, the maximum speed claim must be prefixed with “up to”.

Where a marketer makes a different type of speed claim, for example, an average speed as a general indication of performance, an “up to” qualification is not required.⁴

b) Significant factors that limit speeds achieved by customers

If a marketing communication does not mention factors that are likely to cause some customers to receive speeds significantly below the claimed maximum speed, the marketing communication might mislead. Significant factors affecting a service should therefore be stated.

- The ASA will expect any such claims to comply with the Codes. Principally, they should be clearly explained and based on robust and reasonable representative data

For instance,

- The ASA currently requires providers to include a qualification referring to the effects of signal attenuation on ADSL2+ services.
- Some forms of traffic management result in a proportion of customers receiving speeds at certain times that are significantly below the stated maximum.

Evidence of the significance of a given factor will be considered on a case-by-case basis in accordance with consumers’ likely expectations of the service.

The wording of a qualification must make clear, in terms easily understood by consumers, the likely effect of the relevant factor on consumers’ ability to achieve an advertised speed. In particular, marketers should avoid technical terms unless they are widely understood by consumers or are explained clearly within the marketing communication.

Qualifications should be prominent, appearing in the body copy of non-broadcast marketing communications and the equivalent for claims appearing in broadcast advertisements.

c) Criterion for further qualifying information

In certain instances, one of the factors relevant to (b) above may cause a significant proportion of a provider's customer base to receive a maximum speed that is so much lower than the advertised maximum that it prevents those customers from carrying out (including to an acceptable performance standard) the types of online activity that they might reasonably expect to undertake on the service advertised. Where this happens, marketers must include further qualifying information that bears out, in terms easily understood by consumers, the likelihood of the service not being able to meet the expectations of that element of the customer base.

'Types of online activity' includes, for instance, streaming of content using an application that requires a minimum speed to function properly.

For instance, the advertiser might include:

- A statement that a proportion of customers can expect to achieve speeds below a certain speed. For example, "X% of our customers receive speeds below YMbit/s", or
- A statement that a proportion of customers can expect to achieve speeds above a certain speed. For example, "X% of our customers receive speeds above YMbit/s", or
- A statement that a proportion of users achieve speeds within a certain range, for example, "X% of our customers receive speeds between YMbit/s and ZMbit/s".

It is for advertisers to decide the values, as illustrated by X, Y and Z in the examples above. However, the levels chosen should satisfy the criterion set out above.

The qualification should be prominent, appearing in the body copy of non-broadcast marketing communications and the equivalent for claims appearing in broadcast advertisements.

If a marketing communication for an ADSL2+ service contains information of the kind described above, that will obviate the need to refer to the effects of signal attenuation in the marketing communication.

Other claims

Non-numerical speed claims

Terms that are likely to significantly influence a consumer's expectation of the speed of a service such as "superfast" should, where relevant, be qualified with the information detailed in the Section 2 above.

The ASA will assess non-numerical speed claims on a case-by-case basis.

Upload speed claims

The Help Note is primarily focused on download speeds as these are the speeds most commonly presented in broadband marketing communications. Upload speed claims should conform to the guidance where relevant.

Comparisons

Comparative advertising should comply with the Comparisons sections of the CAP and BCAP Codes. It is important when making comparisons with identified competitors or their products on the basis of speed testing data that the methodologies used are based on the same principles (see Section 5 ‘Substantiation’) and that the marketing communication includes enough information to allow the consumer to verify the comparison.

General guidance on comparisons can be found on the [CAP website](#).

Invitations for consumers to check their line speed

As individual consumers can only receive the most accurate indication of their likely speeds by checking with the provider or a third party website, providers may wish to include a statement urging consumers to check their likely speed independently or with the provider themselves.

Substantiation

Principle

The substantiation required for speed claims must be robust and reasonably representative of actual performance.

Data used to support claims should be relevant to the audience targeted by the marketing communication.

The ASA will judge each submission on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the context in which speed claims are used in the marketing communication and the criteria set out below.

Acceptable approaches

There are different approaches to measurement, sampling and normalisation and statistical methods that can be combined to produce data that meets the criteria outlined in the paragraphs below.

The Help Note does not require a specific method or approach to gathering and processing speed testing data.

- The ASA has previously accepted data gathered and processed on behalf of ISPs by independent third parties and from ISPs’ own tests. In principle, data based on either approach is acceptable for both fixed and mobile broadband.

- The ASA has also recognised that many services have large customer bases making it very difficult to test the lines of all customers. It is therefore acceptable to use an appropriate sample of a particular customer base and apply statistical methods to make the data representative of actual performance.
- For mobile networks it may be relevant to test network performance in a wide range of locations representative of where users access mobile broadband services, including indoor and outdoor locations and areas of different signal strength

Marketers should be able to explain clearly to the ASA how they designed their speed testing regime and how the approach taken is relevant to the claims made.

Relevant factors

Marketers should account for all the relevant factors that cause a reduction or variations in speeds. The principal factors are:

- Signal attenuation
- Congestion/contention
- Traffic/network management
- Protocol overheads
- User's distance from the mobile mast
- Environmental obstructions between the user and the mobile mast ("clutter")

CAP and BCAP acknowledge that some factors have an impact on speeds which are negligible and therefore do not need to be accounted for specifically by a testing regime.

Marketers may also choose not to take into account certain factors in designing their speed testing regime for a particular claim. In both instances, they should be able to explain why the factor was not relevant for the service or the audience targeted.

Factors beyond marketers' control

Factors beyond a marketer's responsibility would not ordinarily need to be taken into account by a testing regime. For example, the presence of viruses on a user's device that impact upon speed of internet access.

Marketers should pay particular attention to how similar factors have different effects on different platforms. For example, on fixed line services, those factors affecting a user's hardware set up within their home, are likely to be considered to be beyond the marketer's control. However, for mobile broadband, testing should take into account the fact that a large proportion of mobile broadband use is indoors, which has an impact on signal strength.

Measurement

There is no established standard for testing broadband speeds. Marketers should therefore use methods based on relevant industry standards.

Measurements used should be appropriate to the claims made, for instance:

- Specific claims, such as “50Mb Download speed”, should be based on tests of protocols relevant to downloading large files.
- Speed claims for a service in general should be based on speed testing that is representative of the activities that users generally perform.

Marketers might take various factors into account at the measurement stage, for instance:

- Testing could be carried out at peak and off-peak times in order to account for congestion and contention issues.
- Measuring actual speeds could take into account the effects of protocol overheads.

Marketers may test individual users’ lines when compiling testing data. However, for mobile services, where individual users can move in and out of a testing area, it might be appropriate for measurements to be carried out each time there is a network access attempt in a network area or cell.

Sampling

The ASA is likely to accept testing based on a sample of performance from the relevant customer base in the context of the claims being made.

Sample sizes should be statistically robust.

The selection of lines, exchanges or areas tested should be representative of the target audience:

- A general campaign intended for a broad or national audience should use data relevant to the whole customer base of a particular service.
- A campaign targeted at a specific area might use data from tests carried out in that area. Any other data used should not be unrepresentative of performance in the area targeted by the campaign.

Marketers should also be able to demonstrate that the lines chosen for testing are not unrepresentative. The selection of lines, exchanges, masts or network areas for testing could be used to take into account, for instance:

- The effects of signal attenuation on ADSL service.

- Different levels of mobile broadband performance caused by differing signal quality or bearer (e.g. HSPA or LTE)
- Different levels of mobile broadband performance caused by indoor/outdoor location
- Variations in network capacity between particular areas.
- The effects of urban/rural locations on mobile broadband performance.

Normalisation and statistical methods

Marketers may use statistical methods to account for the impact of certain limiting factors either to enhance the accuracy of testing data or as an alternative to testing for a particular factor. For example:

- For ADSL technology, where signal attenuation caused by line-length is the primary determinant of a users' speed, marketers might use normalisation to make the results of their testing of a sample of lines representative of the wider customer base. If the target audience is national or general, they should use a normalisation curve based on the national profile of line lengths.
- Data may be adjusted to account for protocol overheads such as IP headers to ensure that it is representative of what users actually achieve.

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