

Influencers' guide to making clear that ads are ads

October 2026



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Who's behind the rules?



The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is the UK's advertising regulator. The ASA makes sure ads across UK media stick to the advertising rules (the Ad Codes).



The Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP), whose members represent advertisers, media owners and agencies, is responsible for writing the Ad Codes.

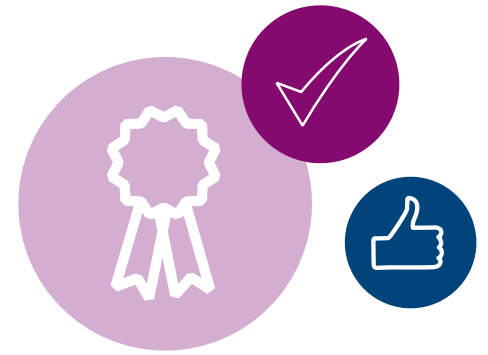
Together, we work to make ads responsible. We do this by acting against misleading, harmful, irresponsible, or offensive advertising and providing advice and training to help businesses get their ads right. For more on the ASA & CAP, see our [website](#).



The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) is an independent non-ministerial UK Government department and is the UK's principal competition and consumer protection authority. Our purpose is to promote competition and protect consumers with a clear end goal - to drive economic growth and improve household prosperity.

For more information, visit the CMA's official [website](#).

Who is this guide for?



This is a best-practice guide for influencer marketing in the UK, designed to help ensure that advertising content posted by influencers is clear about what it is.

While it's written for influencers, the guidance is also useful for brands and agencies.

Who counts as an influencer?

An 'influencer' includes any human, animal or virtually produced persona active on any online social media platform, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitch, YouTube, and others.

Though they may be named differently on certain platforms or in regulatory frameworks, e.g. 'bloggers', 'streamers',

'celebrities' or 'content creators', they are all within scope of this guidance.

This guide will provide you with a good understanding of

- the laws and rules that apply to you; and
- how to follow those rules for the benefit of your audience and the wider influencer marketing industry.

What are the rules?



Simply put, it needs to be clear that ads are ads.



The main rules to take notice of are in the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 (**DMCC Act**) and the UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing (the **CAP Code**).

Part 4 of the DMCC Act bans 'unfair commercial practices', including:

- posting a fake review;
- posting a review that conceals the fact that it has been incentivised; and
- using editorial content in the media to promote a product where a trader has paid for the promotion without making that clear in the content or by images or sounds clearly identifiable by the consumer (advertorial).

A fake review is one which appears to be based on a person's genuine experience, but is not (more detail on [p17](#)).

Other unfair practices include falsely claiming or giving the impression that an individual

is acting outside of their business purposes or falsely representing themselves as a consumer; failing to identify a commercial intent behind a social media post; and omitting or hiding 'material' information (e.g., that you are an ambassador for a brand whose product you have posted about).

The CAP Code, enforced by the ASA, also applies to most forms of influencer marketing. It is broken up into sections containing rules that relate to different subjects. For example, **Section 2** contains rules about how ads should be recognisable as ads, and **Section 3** sets out rules that advertisers must follow to avoid misleading people.

Why should you disclose?

If complying with the law and the CAP Code isn't reason enough for you, think about your audience and reputation.

The **ASA's research** found:

- 80% of the UK online population prefer it when influencers are clear about when they are advertising something
- 80% of respondents believe that clear labelling is essential to identifying influencer ads

This affects how they respond to the posts, including whether they trust the recommendation.

When users know the content they are watching is an ad, it builds trust and allows them to make informed decisions. Poor disclosure makes users wary of influencers' genuine content.

If you don't believe us, these are quotes from participants in the ASA's research:

When an influencer I know posts an ad, I would be interested and look into the product more as I trust the influencer (page 36)

it maybe doesn't feel as shady... because it feels like it's obvious that it is an ad (page 76)

For the longest time, people were saying, 'I'm being paid to talk about this thing but it's really cool', and I'm really okay with that. But I feel like we're seeing more people doing really subtle product placement and trying to sneak it in there, subliminal messaging almost, and I really don't like that. (page 78)

Why explicit disclosure matters

The research also showed that clear labels are a big help. While most people think they're pros at spotting ads, they actually struggle in practice. When we tested this with a real social media feed, only about half got it right—and many even mistook influencers' genuine reviews for ads.

Protect your reputation

It's also worth thinking about your reputation in the industry. Brands look for partners they can trust to be honest. Since you're both responsible for the ads you post, they won't want to risk a sanction from the ASA or CMA because of a missing label.



When do you need to disclose?



If you've received payment or any other incentive, or you are otherwise personally or commercially connected to the brand, any related content will need to make clear that it's advertising.

This includes money, free products, or being an owner, employee, or friend of the brand. You must disclose even if the brand doesn't oversee your content.

The easiest way to do this is to include a clear and prominent 'Ad' label upfront before people view the rest of the content ([see p9](#)).

When can you stop disclosing?

You, the brand and any agents involved in creating or publishing

the content are responsible for ensuring that content is properly labelled. You are expected to disclose throughout any ongoing relationship and in relevant content for a period of **12 months after** a relationship ends.

For more detail, including rulings, read our guidance on [recognising ads in social media and influencer marketing](#).

What counts as 'payment' or 'relationship'?

It's fine to be paid or incentivised to create content – as long as it reflects your genuine experience and you're upfront about it.

Obviously, if you're paid by a brand to post a particular piece of content, that counts as 'payment'. However, any incentive – even if it's not money – also counts as a 'payment' for any resulting content.

If you have any kind of commercial relationship with a brand, this qualifies as 'payment'. This includes:

- being a brand ambassador or shareholder;
- being a director or having a position in the company;
- collaborating on your own 'edit' or 'collection';
- receiving an exclusive discount or a commission; or
- receiving products, services, trips, hotel stays, event invites, loans, leases, rentals, or shares etc. for free (whether requested or unsolicited).

It doesn't matter if there was no obligation to post about free items / services received, it still counts as 'payment' and needs to be disclosed.

Personal and family connections

Similarly, if you promote any brand that you, your family, or your friends own, it needs to be disclosed as an ad. This includes products or businesses you've created; events, gigs, or concerts you're doing; filters or 'presets' that you're selling; and any prize draws or giveaways you're running or participating in.

What about affiliate marketing?



In an affiliate relationship, you and the brand must both ensure content complies with all the rules.



When a link or discount code means you get paid for ‘click-through’s’ or sales, it’s ‘affiliate marketing’ and counts as advertising. This includes trackable links obtained directly through brand-owned affiliate programs, such as ‘Amazon Associates’, or through affiliate networks like ‘Awin’, ‘Skimlinks’ or ‘LTK’.

Both you and the brand involved in an affiliate relationship are responsible for ensuring that the content follows the rules (and not just the ones on disclosure, [see p18](#)).

How to label affiliate marketing

If the content is just about affiliate-linked products, the whole post is advertising and you’ll need to make that clear upfront ([see p8](#)).

If only some of the products mentioned in your content have affiliate links or codes and the rest you’ve mentioned in a purely editorial capacity (or some of the content is completely unrelated

to the affiliate-linked products), you need to make clear which parts relate to affiliate-linked products and are therefore advertising. The easiest way to do this is to add a clear, prominent ‘Ad’ label before any relevant content.

Don’t use vague disclaimers – you need to specifically highlight what parts of the content are advertising. Avoid labels such as ‘aff’, ‘af’ and ‘afflink’, which most people don’t understand. [See p9](#) for more information about labels.

For more guidance, read our [**advice on affiliate marketing**](#).

How should you make it clear?



“Contextual clues like brand mentions or a promotional tone can help, but they’re rarely enough on their own for people to recognise that a post is advertising.”

People should be able to immediately recognise when content is advertising – without having to click or interact with it. They also shouldn’t need any special knowledge or have to figure it out.

Most influencer and affiliate marketing sits alongside normal, organic content, and often looks very similar. That means people usually can’t tell from the context alone whether something is or isn’t an ad.

Contextual clues like brand mentions or a promotional tone can help, but they’re rarely enough on their own for people to recognise that a post is advertising.

79% of people in the UK think influencers should put ad labels where they can see them straight away, without needing to click or search for them ([ASA Research](#), February 2026).

What if you’re promoting your own products or services?

Your audience shouldn’t have to check your bio or scroll through your other posts to realise you’re promoting your own products so make sure you clearly label those posts as ads.

For more guidance, read our advice on [recognising ads in brand-owned and paid-for social media](#).

The bottom line is, if it’s not obvious from the context that something’s an ad, a clear disclosure is needed upfront.

For example, you can include a prominent label that is visible as soon as a person sees the post. Don’t bury the disclosure in other hashtags or leave it poorly contrasted with the content background.

What labels are OK?



#AD

Considering the **ASA's research**, labels must explicitly call the content what it is in a way consumers understand.

Platform tools

Where a platform provides a tool to label branded content for you, this may be sufficient if the label is upfront and prominent. If the label blends into the background or doesn't make the advertising nature of the post clear, you should include an additional label yourself.

Some platforms may have tools like "co-authoring" that provide context, but these aren't always enough. If you're unsure whether your audience will understand your content is an ad, you should include an upfront label.

Recommended labels

Both the ASA and the CMA expect labels that "say it how it is." We recommend:

#Ad

#Advert

#Advertising

#Advertisement

#AdvertisementFeature

You're free to include extra information about the type of ad it is, as long as you've made it clear upfront that it's an ad and any added words will be understood by the average person.

Labels to avoid

While these labels are popular with influencers, research shows they are not clear to users. We advise against:

Gift / Gifted

Affiliate / Aff / Af / Afflink / Collab

PR / PRTrip / PRTreatment
/ PRHaul / PR Stay



Supported by / Funded by

In association with / In partnership with

Thanks to [brand] for making this possible / Made possible by

Just tagging the brand in the content

iworkwith / brandambassador

myedit / mycollection

Any other abbreviations or words that consumers are unlikely to be familiar with

We also advise against '**Sponsorship / Sponsored / Spon / Sp**'. The ASA has previously ruled these are insufficient because they don't clearly show the advertiser has editorial control.

Hashtags

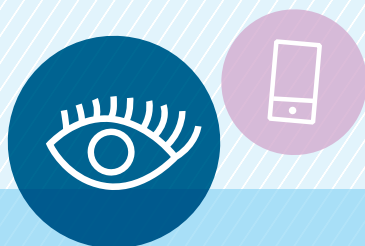
It's not necessary to use a '#' in the label, provided it is prominent and separate from other content.

Bottom line: If in doubt, label it.

How should you present this?



Always put yourself in the audience's shoes – if you didn't already know, would you be able to tell immediately, without a shadow of a doubt, whether that piece of content is advertising?



You know it's advertising, but your audience is seeing it among lots of other content — so it needs to be clear straight away. It must be obvious from the outset.

Placement is key

Any label you use needs to be clear, prominent, upfront, timely, appropriate for the platform and format of the content (e.g. a post, a story, a reel), and suitable for all devices.

The disclosure should be at the very beginning of the advertising content – whether that's the start of the post text, a title or thumbnail or on an image – whatever people see first.

Don't:

- Bury the label in a sea of hashtags.
- Hide it where it can only be seen by clicking 'more' or expanding content
- Place it where readers need to scroll to find it.
- Disclose it part-way through a video.

Different formats

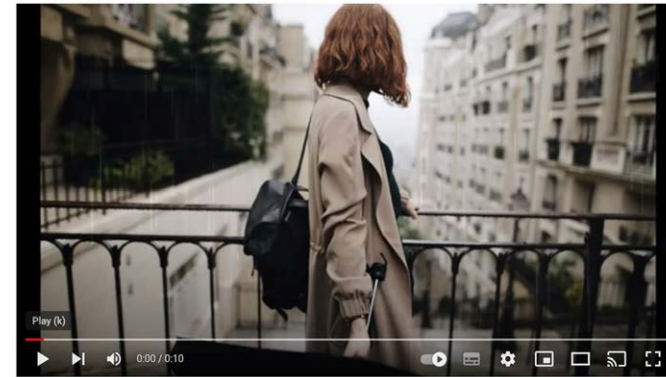
- **Stories:** If advertising spans several stories, especially if they may be viewed separately, you should label each individual story in the series.
- **Multiple formats:** If the same advertising appears as a Story, post and Reel, or is reposted from one format to another, each individual piece of content must be clearly labelled.
- **Long-form:** For 'ad breaks' within longer editorial content, you don't need to label the whole piece – but you must clearly label the specific sections that are advertising.

What does that look like?

TikTok



Facebook



#AD Rainy day adventures!

An Influencer

Subscribe

0

Share

Save

...

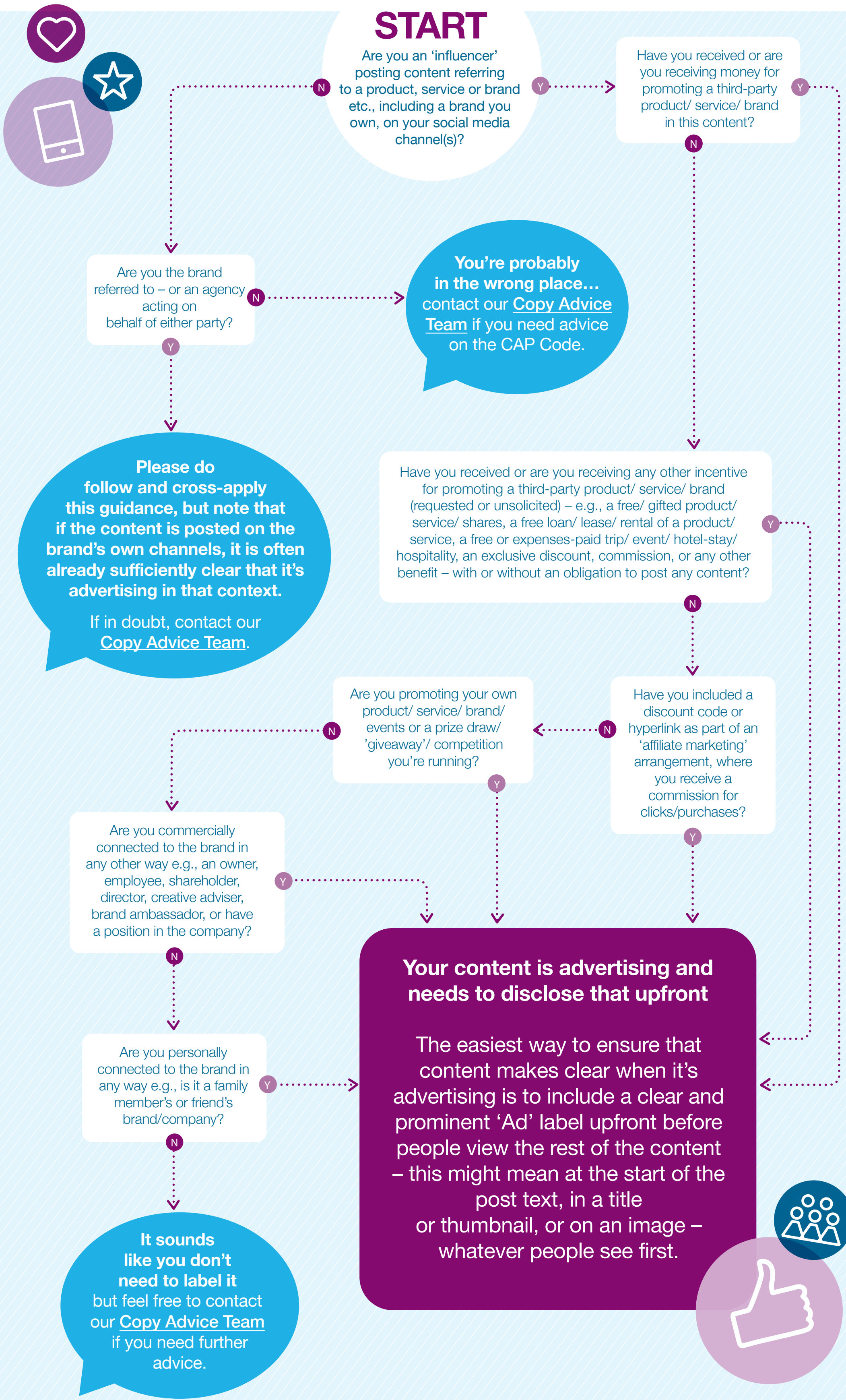
5 views 22 hours ago

#AD Thanks @brand for the memories! Show more

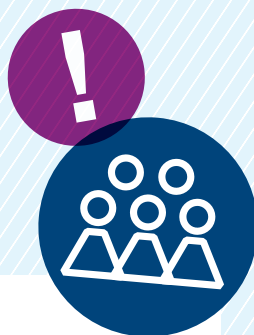


Instagram





Who enforces the law?



The CMA and Trading Standards Services have powers to investigate and take legal action, including imposing fines and requiring corrective measures, to stop breaches of consumer protection law which may harm the collective interests of consumers. The CMA can do so directly; both the CMA and Trading Standards can also act through the courts.

Illegal practices

Part 4 of the DMCC Act bans unfair commercial practices which distort

consumers' decisions, such as whether they will purchase a product or engage with a brand.

Specific banned practices include:

- not making it clear to consumers that you have received payment for something you are promoting;
- creating the impression that you are just a consumer; and
- publishing a review of a product/service that is not based on your genuine experience.

Compliance and responsibility

Breaking the DMCC Act is against the law. You can read the CMA's guidance for influencers on complying with the unfair commercial practices provisions of the DMCC Act on the [GOV.UK website](https://gov.uk).

When posting incentivised endorsements, the CMA expects commercial relationships/payments to be disclosed upfront, and any views expressed by influencers to be genuine.

Everyone in the chain (including brands, marketers and influencers) is responsible for following the law. The CMA expects there to be robust

compliance processes in place that accurately reflect the requirements of the law.

It is important to note that industry rules may be specific about certain points but under consumer law, it does not matter who is 'in control' or who is selling a product/service.

Consumer law does not distinguish between types of endorsements, so whether you are promoting your own products/services or advertising/endorsing something on behalf of a brand, a clear and upfront disclosure is always necessary.

While brands can legally pay for promotion, consumers need to know the endorsement has been 'paid for'. If this isn't clear, your post risks breaking the law.

We strongly recommend referring to the [CMA's guide for content creators](#), which also includes information on who enforces the law. You can find further detail, including case updates, on the [CMA's case page](#).

Who enforces the CAP Code?

The ASA enforces the CAP Code and can act when you're advertising your own products (whether you're selling them yourself or doing so in collaboration with a third party), running a competition, prize draw or giveaway and when you post affiliate marketing.



It can also act where a brand:

1. 'paid' you in some way (doesn't have to be money),

AND

2. had some form of editorial 'control' over the content, including final approval.

A brand has 'control' if they tell you what to say or when to post. This includes using particular words, phrases, themes, hashtags or 'key messages' you need to include (or not include), or you need to post a specific number of times or on certain dates/times.

Similarly, if the brand has specified what needs to be in an image, required you to include a specific action in a video or specified the type of content you need to create

(e.g., 'unboxing' the featured product), this is all likely to count as 'control'.

If a brand reserves the right to check/approve the content before it's posted and/or to ask you to change it, this could similarly count as 'control'.

They don't need to have asked for changes – if they could, and you would have to do it, that's enough.

Even an expectation that content will be created, as opposed to a hope that it might be, could be seen as 'control' for the ASA's purposes.

As a rule of thumb, if you weren't completely free to do and say whatever you wanted whenever you wanted, or to do nothing at all, then there was probably some level of editorial 'control' by the brand.

What happens if you don't disclose?



If you don't clearly disclose when your posts are advertising, the ASA and CMA can impose sanctions to enforce compliance.

The ASA can:

- Add your details to a dedicated '**non-compliant social media influencer**' page for up to three months (before consideration of further sanctions); and
- Run 'On-Platform Targeted Ads', alerting your followers that you have repeatedly failed to properly disclose your ads.

Brands can also be added to the 'non-compliant online advertisers' page.

For more detail, see the **ASA's sanctions page**.

Platform and brand consequences

The social media platform can also impose sanctions

such as taking down your content, removing functionality or closing your account completely. Brands may also stop working with you.

Legal action

You could also face formal enforcement action by the CMA or Trading Standards. Under its direct consumer enforcement powers, the CMA can impose financial penalties and issue directions for breaches of certain consumer protection laws, including Part 4 of the DMCC Act.

The CMA has taken action against **a number of influencers**, and **set out the standards** it expects influencers and brands to meet when advertising on social media.

Other ways to improve transparency



In addition to labelling, you can take a few extra steps to make the commercial nature of your content clearer, including:

- **Review your agreements:**

If you have a contract with the brand, review it to see whether they require you to make it clear that the ad is an ad and how to check that it complies with the rules.

think the content is obviously recognisable before publishing it. You can submit a draft of your post or ask them any questions about the CAP Code.

- **Work only with transparent partners:**

Refuse to work with brands who discourage you from disclosing the ad to your followers.

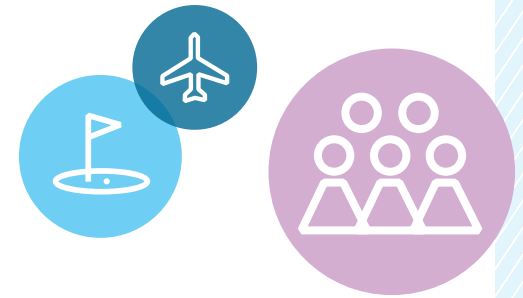
- **Separate ads from editorial content:**

If your content includes multiple products, some of which are ads and some are not, you can enhance your transparency by clearly indicating the editorial pieces.

- **Get advice before you post:**

Consider asking the CAP Copy Advice team if they

What about fake reviews?



If your content is a review, it must be based on your genuine experience. If it isn't, it's a fake review and that's against the law and the CAP Code.

Be honest about what you experienced

For example, if a brand asks you to say that their new drink was delicious but you haven't tried it, you must not claim that you did. You also shouldn't gloss over negative aspects of the product and only focus on the positives.

This includes being paid to make the post, and any differences between your experience and what a typical consumer would get. For example, if you review a personalised version of a product, you'll need to make that clear.

Why this matters

Remember, influencer marketing operates on trust, far more so than most other forms of advertising. Your audience probably share your taste and will take this into account when you give your opinion, which is why it's important that it's genuine.

You can review a product you didn't like, as long as you don't claim that you did.

What counts as 'relevant information'?

You also shouldn't leave out any information relevant to the circumstances of you writing the review.

What else do I need to remember?



Making clear that content is advertising is just the beginning. Other rules also apply to your content and how it's targeted, so make sure you understand the relevant ad rules and legal requirements, especially if you are:

- Making claims about the product (you'll need to **back them up** with proof).
- Advertising age-restricted products (like **gambling** or **alcohol** and **e-cigarettes**).
- Promoting products subject to lots of rules (like **food, drinks and supplements** or **medicine**).
- Running your own **'giveaways' and prize draws** (definitely read **Section 8**).
- Advertising to children (you need to use **enhanced disclosure** and take **particular care** with the content e.g. don't directly ask them to buy anything).
- Take care if using AI. AI-generated content must also comply, and some online platforms may require disclosure of the use of AI.

These are just a few key watch-outs – the **CAP Code** covers a lot more (as does the law!).

CAP✓

Where can I get help?



Looking for more support? Visit our **Influencer Marketing page** for a disclosure tool, guidance articles and other useful resources.

Online Guidance

We've also got loads of **free advice on our website** covering various topics – from alcohol to weight loss claims and everything in between.

Training

We offer **seminars** and **eLearning** modules on a wide range of topics, including social media. Keep an eye out for **webinars** too!

Newsletter

For topical tips and guidance updates direct to your inbox, **sign up to our Insight e-Newsletter**.

Tailored Advice

For bespoke advice, contact our **Copy Advice team** through our website.

You can also follow us on **LinkedIn** for the latest news and guidance updates.

CMA

Where can I get help?

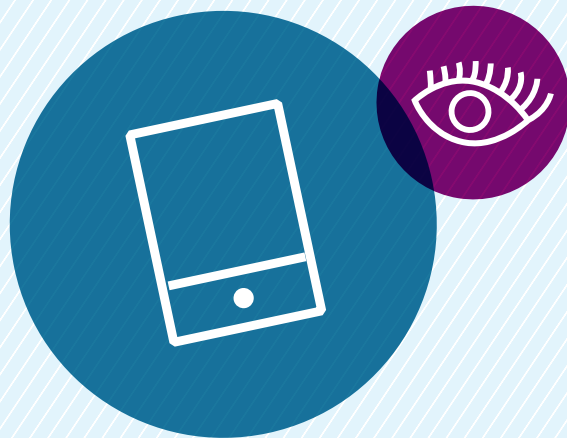
For more advice and information from the CMA, see the resources below.

[Reviews and social media endorsements: what businesses and content creators must know](#)

[Fake reviews](#)

[Unfair commercial practices](#)

Note: The CMA cannot provide legal advice or guidance on compliance with the law on an individual basis.



Where can I get help? (more)



The Internet Advertising Bureau (IAB) UK, the trade association for digital advertising representing brands, media owners, technology providers and agencies has created [Good Practice Guidelines](#) and an [infographic](#) to help you work out when and how to disclose content-based and native advertising. IAB also offer training for creators as part of the [EASA AdEthics programme](#), with content developed in partnership with the ASA and CAP.



The Influencer Marketing Trade Body (IMTB) is the professional voice of creator marketing in the UK. It is dedicated to securing a stronger, smarter and sustainable future for our industry. One that is credible, creative and commercially powerful. Access free [resources and guidance](#) on its [website](#) including the [Influencer Marketing Code of Conduct](#).



The Incorporated Society of British Advertisers (ISBA), the organisation that represents major brands, has an active Creator Marketing Forum led by its members.

The Group has co-authored a [Code of Conduct for brands, talent agencies, and influencers](#) themselves, promoting adherence to disclosure requirements as well as collaboration and good practice.

ISBA has also created a set of template contractual terms for the industry – including clauses that address labelling of content – that influencers and brands alike can use to ensure proper commercial relationships.