Greenspeaking with confidence

Environmental claims in advertising

CAP

Introduction

This guidance* aims to help marketers communicate their environmental credentials – or the "green" benefits of their products and services, confidently, clearly and responsibly.

It sets out practical advice on how to make environmental claims in advertising that are accurate, well-evidenced and easy for people to understand.

While this document focusses primarily on the key environmental rules, there is some overlap with other rules such as those on misleadingness and social responsibility and marketers should familiarise themselves with the broader Advertising Code rules that might apply.

Please note that the likelihood of claims being considered acceptable under the Ad Codes will also depend on the context in which they appear within marketing communications.

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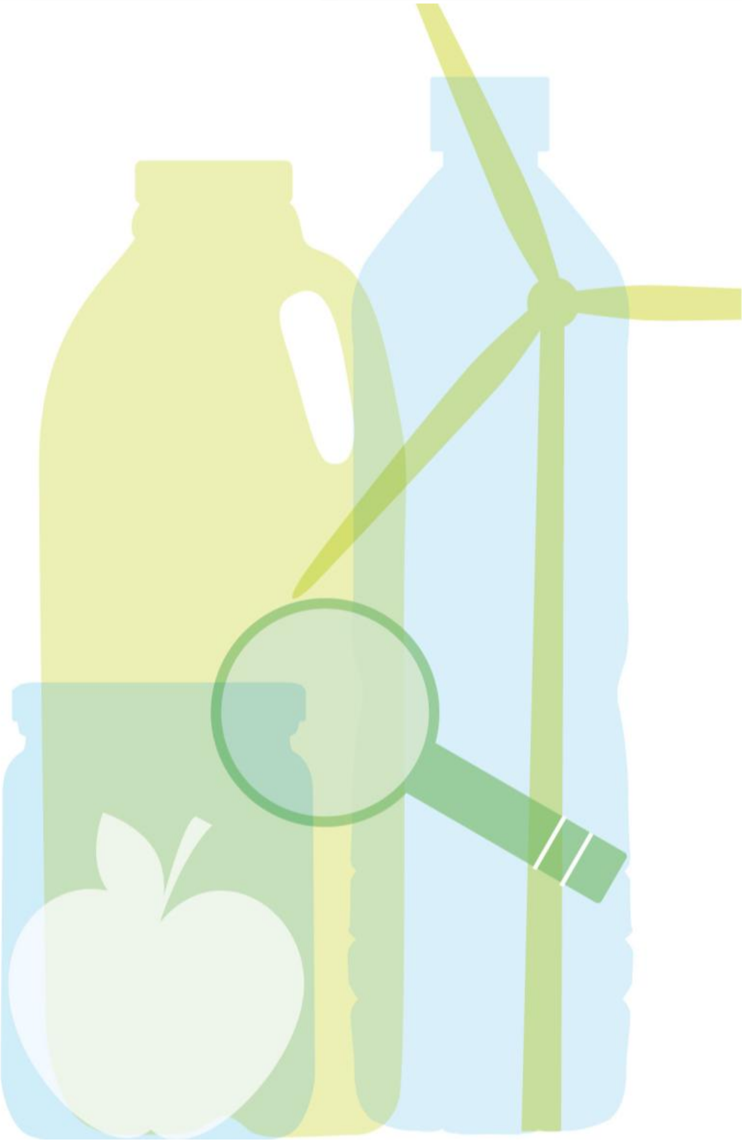
Key principles for environmental claims



* **Please note** that this guidance reflects the CAP Copy Advice Team's understanding of the ASA's likely application of the rules. It is not a substitute for the Codes, nor does it constitute legal advice or bind the ASA Councils in the event of a complaint.

Consider the audience

When making environmental claims, marketers need to think carefully about how the target audience is likely to interpret the ad, not just what they intend to communicate.

The ASA assesses ads from the perspective of the average consumer, someone who is reasonably well-informed and observant, but not an expert in environmental issues.

How the ASA assesses claims

When investigating environmental claims, the ASA focuses on:

- **The likely effect:** how the message is understood in practice
- **Risk of misleading consumers:** whether the claim could influence someone to make a transactional decision they would not have otherwise made

ASA research suggests some consumers may have a limited understanding of environmental terms, particularly in ads aimed at a broad or non-specialist audience. This means clear and accurate claims are essential.

Material information

Material information is anything a consumer needs to fully understand a claim or make an informed decision. If key details are missing, unclear or ambiguous, the ad could mislead.

For example, an unqualified claim such as “recyclable” might lead consumers to believe the product can be easily recycled at the end of its life and that suitable recycling facilities are widely available in the UK.

If only part of the product is recyclable, or if specialist facilities are required, that limitation is material and should be included in the ad.

Where space or time in an ad is constrained, the ASA will consider measures taken to make material information available by other means.

Environmental imagery

Imagery associated with nature such as landscapes, wildlife or use of the colour green, can influence how consumers interpret environmental claims.

Even where no explicit environmental claim is made, these visual cues may lead consumers to assume that a product or service is environmentally beneficial.

ASA research into environmental claims in food advertising shows that imagery and colour can play a significant role in shaping consumer assumptions.

Marketers should therefore consider whether the imagery used could alter or amplify the meaning of a claim and ensure that it does not imply environmental benefits that go beyond what can be supported with evidence.

Hold adequate evidence

Marketers must hold robust written evidence to support any claim that consumers are likely to see as objective/factual. This evidence must be in place before an ad is published.

Whether an objective claim complies with the rules will always depend on whether appropriate substantiation is held.

To support a claim, evidence should be:

- Relevant – directly linked to the specific product or service being advertised
- Current – up-to-date and reflective of the product or service as it exists today
- Specific – precise enough to support the exact claim being made

Claims in ads should always accurately reflect the evidence they are based on.

Limiting or qualifying a claim can help make sure that it accurately matches the scope and nature of the supporting evidence.

Take a step back and ask yourself at the initial stages:

- *What evidence do we currently hold?*
- *Is it strong enough to support the type of claim we want to make? If not, would a more specific or limited claim be more appropriate?*

Evidence for environmental claims

All objective claims require robust evidence to be held, and the level of substantiation required depends on the type and strength of the claim.

Absolute claims

Absolute claims are statements that are not qualified or limited in any way. Examples may include “green”, “sustainable” or “environmentally friendly”.

Claims like these should usually apply to the product’s whole life cycle (unless the claim is limited), so the evidence needed to substantiate them is high.

For example, some absolute claims, without qualification, can suggest a product causes no harm or has an overall positive impact on the environment, which would be difficult to prove.

Comparative claims

Comparative claims, such as “greener” or “friendlier” are more limited claims that suggest a product or service is environmentally better relative to something else.

The comparison could be with a competitor’s product, or another version of the marketer’s own products. These claims must be supported with evidence, and the basis of the comparison must be clear.

Comparative claims based on limited aspects of a product, or a specific stage of a product’s life cycle, are more likely to be justifiable and demonstrable with evidence.

Comparisons with identifiable competitors

Where a claim compares a product with an identifiable competitor, the claim must not mislead and must be verifiable for consumers.

The ad must include, or clearly signpost to, the information a consumer would need to check the comparison for themselves.

Absolute claim – a high level of evidence is required:	**Comparative claim** – more likely to be justified and demonstrable with evidence:
"Enjoy peace of mind travelling with [X] Rail, the green way." Evidence supporting this unqualified "green" claim would likely need to demonstrate that rail travel does not cause any harm to the environment over the course of its full life cycle.	*"Travel from Birmingham to London with [X] Rail, with lower CO_2 emissions per passenger than driving a petrol car."* Evidence for this comparative and more limited claim should demonstrate lower CO_2 emissions per passenger for the marketer's rail service than emissions from petrol cars, for the advertised route.
"Eco-friendly group holidays." Similarly, evidence showing the advertised holidays do not cause any harmful environmental impact would likely be required.	*"Enjoy more sustainable group holidays. We only use accommodation that prioritises energy efficiency, water conservation, and waste reduction."* Evidence would need to demonstrate that the accommodation used for the advertised holidays was, in comparison with identifiable competitors, more energy efficient, used less water, and had processes that reduced the proportion of waste sent to landfill.
"Our new planet-friendly bottles." The marketer would need to hold evidence for this broad "planet-friendly" claim, demonstrating, over the bottle's full life cycle, it does not cause any harm to the environment.	*"Our new lighter bottles made with 20% less plastic."* Comparative evidence would be needed demonstrating that the brand's new bottle uses 20% less plastic than the previous model.

Industry standards and legislation

Some environmental claims, such as “organic”, have established standards or evidence requirements for using that particular term.

These standards are often set out in legislation, and approval or certification may be required from a relevant body.

If such requirements apply, the ASA will expect them to have been followed in marketing communications.

Some industries also use agreed methods for calculating environmental metrics—for example, standardised calculations used in the energy sector (such as estimating wind farm output).

Marketers should make sure the evidence they use aligns with these accepted methods.

Additionally, some environmental claims are subject to statutory information requirements. Marketers need to ensure they understand any legal obligations that apply to their sector.

Limit the scope of claims

Broad claims, such as “good for the planet” are generally understood to apply to a product’s entire life cycle, unless the ad states otherwise.

This means that, unless a claim is appropriately limited, marketers must hold evidence covering the product’s full life cycle.

What is a product's full life cycle?

A full life cycle includes all stages from beginning to end, such as:

- inputs in production (e.g., energy, raw materials, ingredients)
- packaging
- transport
- active use
- disposal

If the evidence only relates to ***some*** of these stages or components, an unqualified, broad claim is likely to mislead. In these cases, the claim should be narrowed to match the specific stage or aspect supported by the evidence.

Clear qualification helps prevent consumers from interpreting the claim as covering the total environmental impact or the full life cycle when it does not.

For example, stating that an electric vehicle produces "zero carbon emissions" may be acceptable if the ad makes clear that this refers only to driving, rather than the full life cycle of the vehicle.

Comparative claims

Comparative claims, such as describing a product as "greener", must be supported by evidence relating to both the marketer's product and the competitor or alternative product being compared to.

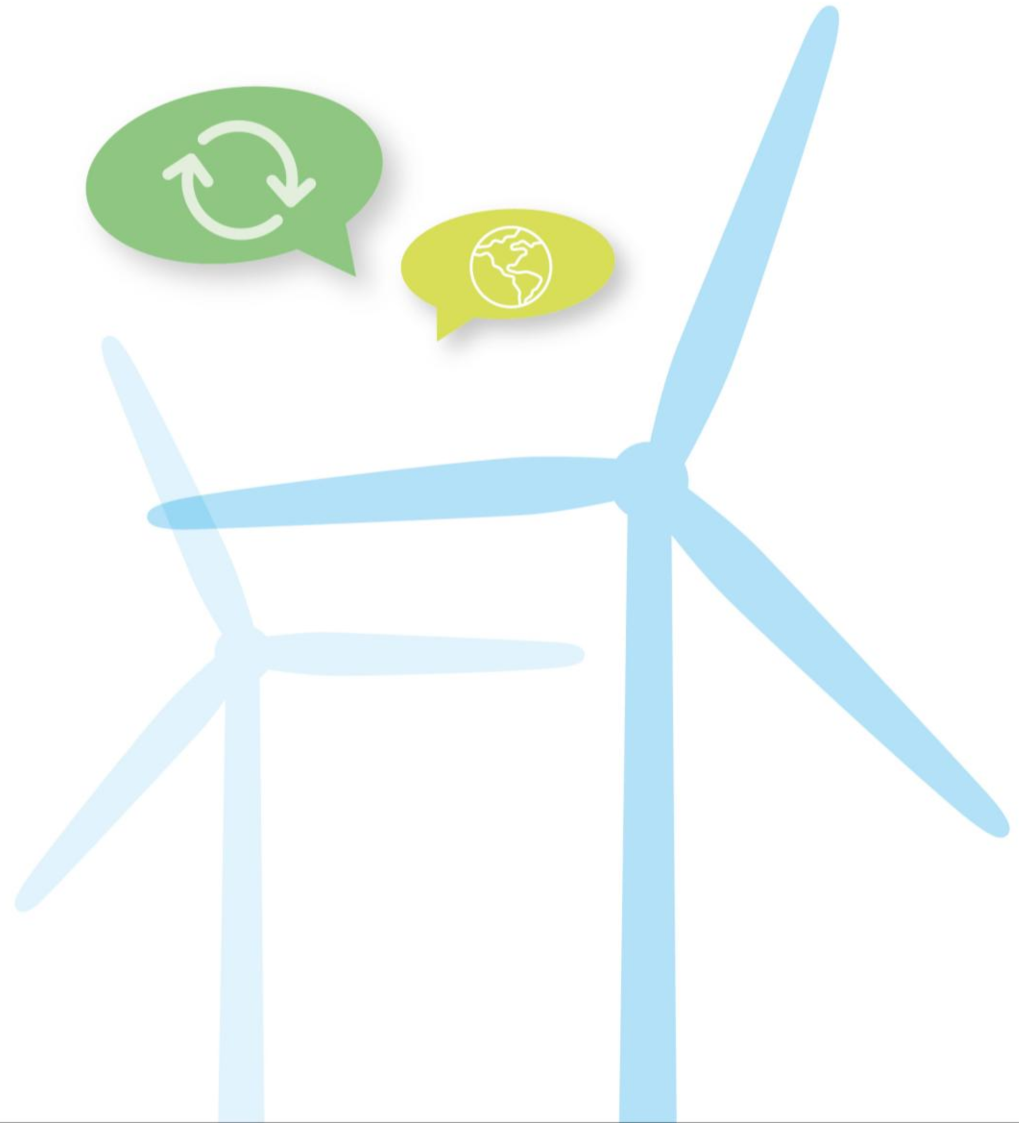
✗ ***"Planet-friendly bags"***

✓ (if supported with evidence)
"Compostable bags. Friendlier to the planet than the plastic alternative - less energy used during production, and can be placed in home compost bin."

✗ ***"The electric [car model] – the emission-free option"***

✓ (if supported with evidence)
"The electric [car model] – as a fully electric vehicle, it produces zero carbon emissions when driving."

Ensure claims are clear



As well as limiting the scope of environmental claims, marketers should take steps to ensure claims are clear and easy for consumers to understand.

Consumers should be able to understand what an environmental claim is based on. If a claim is ambiguous, it will need additional information or context.

Make sure claims can be easily understood

In practice, this means:

- making the basis of the claim clear
- explaining exactly what you mean when using any technical environmental terms, such as "sustainable" or "biodegradable"

Making the basis of claims clear

Qualifying a claim helps to define and limit its meaning and reduces the risk of exaggeration.

Marketers should also avoid leaving out information that is essential to the audience understanding the claim.

Where relevant, ads should state the specific metric, data point or comparison the claim is based on.

When do claims need qualification?

An environmental claim will usually need to be qualified or put into context if it:

- is ambiguous and could be understood in more than one way
- omits material information
- only applies in a limited way, such as to a specific product, component or stage of the product's life cycle
- is only true under certain conditions or on a particular basis
- uses terms or jargon that some consumers may not understand
- depends on a consumer action or behaviour change (for example, using a specific recycling route)

Whether a claim is sufficiently qualified will also depend on the overall context of the ad, including any accompanying claims or imagery.

How should claims be qualified?

Qualifications should be:

- clear
- prominent
- placed close enough to the main claim so consumers are likely to see and understand them before making a transactional decision

Qualifications must not mislead by contradicting the claim they are intended to clarify.

The more important a qualification is to understanding a claim, the more prominent it needs to be. In some cases, this may mean including it within the main claim itself or in the body copy of the ad, rather than relying on a small-print disclaimer.

The less prominent or more removed a qualification is from the main claim, the more likely the claim is to mislead consumers.

For further information, see CAP's guidance on the use of qualifications.

✗ Unqualified claim
"Eco-friendly packaging"

✓ Qualified claim (if supported with evidence)
"Plastic-free packaging with outer sleeve made from 80% recycled cardboard"

✗ Unqualified claim
"Bringing clean energy to your home"

✓ Qualified claim (if supported with evidence)
"Bringing electricity from renewable sources into your energy mix, originally supplied to the national grid"

✗ Unqualified claim
"Invest green"

✓ Qualified claim (if supported with evidence)
"Invest in shares in offshore wind farms"

Clarifying the meaning of environmental terms

All environmental terms should be communicated in a way consumers can understand. Terms or buzzwords should generally be used in line with how consumers are likely to understand them.

If a claim could have many different meanings or is potentially ambiguous, the ad should include sufficient contextual information, through supporting claims and/or imagery, to clarify what is meant.

ASA and CAP research has shown that many consumers have limited understanding of certain terms, or there's often little consensus about their meaning. In particular, "carbon neutral" and "net zero", or similar terms, are often used interchangeably and don't have a universally agreed definition.

As a result, consumers may assume these claims mean that products or their manufacture generate no emissions and may not realise that such claims often rely on offsetting.

For claims such as "carbon neutral" or "net zero", marketers should:

- **CLEARLY** set out the basis of each claim (avoid using these claims without qualification)
- **CLARIFY** whether the claim relates to offsetting or to the active reduction of carbon emissions, and to what extent
- **PROVIDE** information about any offsetting scheme used
- **ENSURE** that claims about future goals are based on a verifiable strategy
- **AVOID** implying that the product or business produces zero or almost no emissions, if that is not the case

✗ ***"Your purchase supports a carbon neutral business"***

✓ (if supported with evidence)

Your purchase supports a carbon neutral business.

Over the last 5 years, we've reduced our Scope 1 & 2 emissions by 50%. To tackle the remainder, we use offsets purchased via [X scheme]."

Be transparent about initiatives

When communicating about environmental initiatives, marketers should take care not to give a misleading impression, either through claims or imagery, about the wider environmental impact of the business.

This is particularly important where the business is responsible for a significant amount of ongoing emissions or environmental harm.

How should claims be qualified?

When making claims about environmental initiatives, marketers should consider the following:

Limiting claims
Claims should be limited so they only relate to the initiative itself. This helps avoid implying that the benefits apply to the whole business or brand.

If there's a risk that the ad could suggest the business has made greater progress on its "green" journey than it actually has, the ASA is likely to view the ad as misleading.

Balancing information
Businesses in higher-emitting sectors, such as fossil fuel companies or those who finance them, need to be particularly careful.

Ads highlighting initiatives designed to reduce environmental impact may need to include balancing information if leaving it out could mislead consumers about the initiative's significance relative to the company's overall activities.

Ads with claims about such initiatives, activities or investments may need to explain:

- the size or scale of the initiative in proportion to total operations, or
- the actual environmental impact it has compared with the company's wider footprint

The extent and prominence of balancing information needed will depend on the context and narrative of the ad.

If the ad already shows or refers to the business's high-impact activities, a less prominent qualification may be acceptable.

If these activities are not acknowledged in the main narrative, then small-print or low-prominence balancing information are unlikely to be adequate.

For example, an energy provider's ad that shows both its high-carbon operations and its investments in renewable energy as part of the main creative might justify a less prominent qualification.

Future developments
If an ad refers to initiatives or innovations that are still in early development or not yet operational, this must be made clear and there must be a verifiable plan (preferably already underway) for them to come to fruition.

Leaving out this information could mislead consumers into thinking:

- the initiative is already delivering environmental benefits
- or it will do so in the very near future

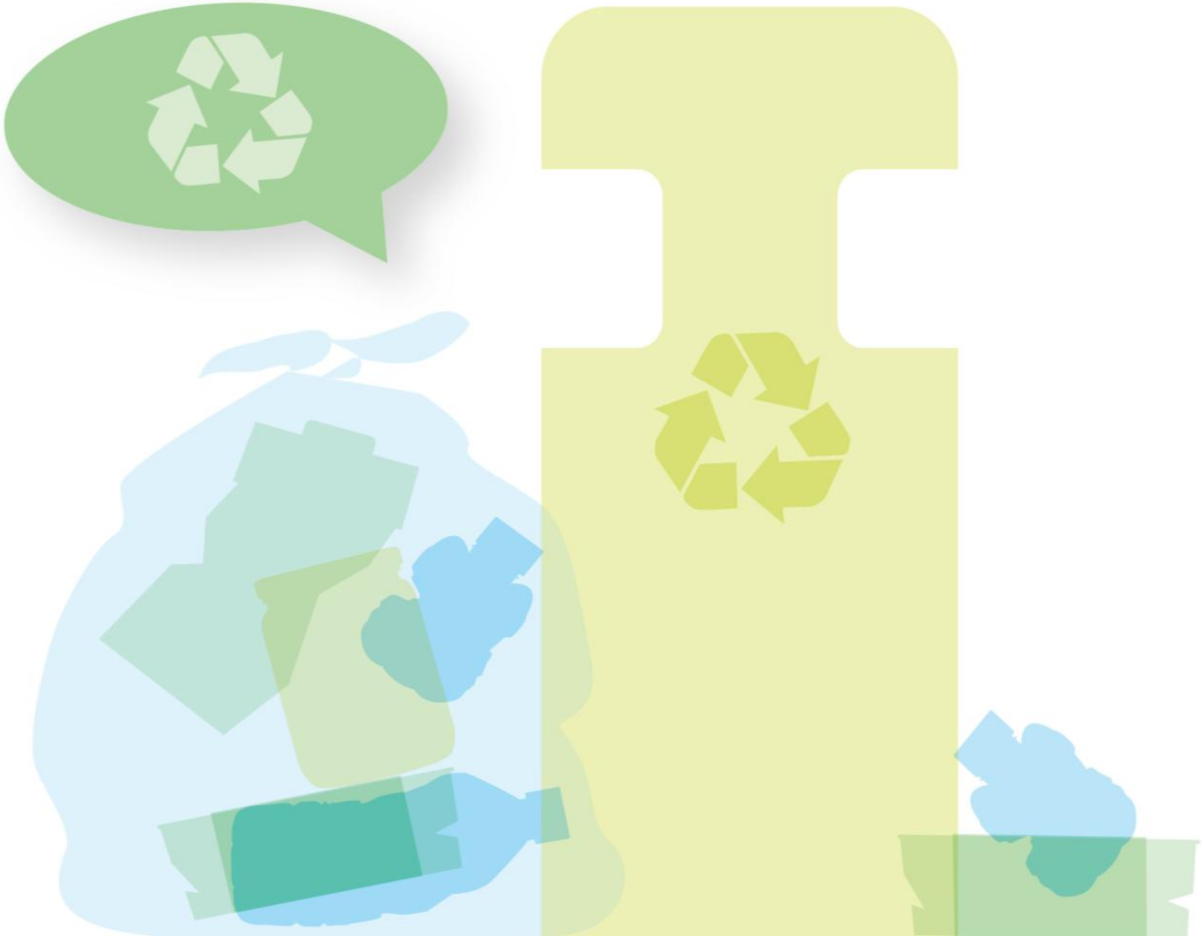
Ads should also avoid suggesting that the business's negative environmental impacts are in the past if this is not accurate.

Initiatives contributing to net zero
If a business highlights specific initiatives as part of its plan to reach net zero, the ad should clearly explain:

- the initiative's specific role in achieving the target
- how it contributes to the wider plan
- the expected timeline for reaching net zero. The timeframe is likely to be considered material information

Additional considerations

Ads that depict environmentally harmful behaviours could be considered socially irresponsible.



Social responsibility

Potentially problematic depictions include (but are not limited to):

- trivialising activities likely to cause pollution or excessive waste
- encouraging or condoning failure to recycle packaging that is recyclable
- encouraging or condoning consumers to disregard the harmful environmental impact of their actions
- encouraging or condoning littering

Avoid taking undue credit

Marketers must not mislead by taking undue credit for product features, benefits or innovations, or claim an environmental advantage if one doesn't meaningfully exist.

Marketers should only take credit for genuine environmental improvements, and should avoid:

- ✗ **IMPLYING** an environmental benefit stems from their own actions if it is simply a legal or regulatory obligation
- ✗ **SUGGESTING** a product lacks a harmful ingredient or effect if competitor products generally do too
- ✗ **CLAIMING** there is universal agreement if a significant division of informed or scientific opinion exists

✗ ***"Recyclable – because we care about the planet… a greener tomorrow."***

Scenario: it is a legal requirement for all producers of the product to provide and fund recycling routes already.

✓ (if supported with evidence)

"Recyclable" with recycle logo

✗ *"Scientists agree that X material leaves no harmful plastics behind."*

✓ (if supported with evidence)

"X technology packaging has a lower environmental impact than traditional plastic bottles."

Focus on what you can demonstrate.

Resources and information

Further CAP guidance

The following guidance can also be found on the ASA website:

- CAP Advertising Guidance on The environment: Misleading claims and social responsibility in advertising
- Overview of the ASA and CAP's work on climate change and environmental claims
- CAP AdviceOnline on Environmental claims: General and Environmental claims: General "Green" claims
- CAP e-learning training on Climate Change and the Environment, and many other topics

CAP Copy Advice

If you are developing marketing communications, the CAP Copy Advice team also provide a bespoke, pre-publication advice service on whether prospective non-broadcast advertising is likely to comply with the CAP Code.

The rules – in full

If you want to read the rules on environmental claims, misleadingness, or any other aspect that might be relevant in full, then check out:

- CAP Code for non-broadcast ads
- BCAP Code for broadcast ads

The CMA

Marketers should comply with all legislation and guidance that may apply to their ads.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has produced various resources to help businesses understand and meet their obligations under consumer protection law when making environmental claims.