

# **The environment: misleading claims and social responsibility in advertising**

Advertising Guidance (non-broadcast  
and broadcast)



## Foreword

The Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) offers guidance on the interpretation of the UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing (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 advertisements.

Advertising Guidance is intended to guide advertisers, agencies and media owners on 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 via our [online request form](#).

For advice on specific TV advertisements, please contact [Clearcast](#).

For clearance advice on specific radio advertisements, please contact [Radiocentre](#).

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## 1. Introduction

This guidance is principally intended to help marketers and agencies interpret CAP and BCAP's rules that concern environment-related advertising issues. These rules broadly relate to misleading environmental claims and social responsibility. The guidance includes a general overview of the principles that underpin the rules, which have been applied over decades by the ASA through rulings.

The increased urgency for businesses and other stakeholders playing their part in tackling climate change and other environmental harms is reflected in domestic and international legislation and agreements on climate change, such as net zero targets included in the Climate Change Act 2008 (and subsequent secondary legislation), a target to limit global temperature rise in the Paris Agreement, and the Glasgow Climate Pact. The UK's Climate Change Committee (and other experts) have emphasised that for the UK (and the rest of the world) to meet net zero targets, consumer behaviour must change.

Given the role that advertising can play in influencing consumer behaviour, this policy-making context is important to the regulation of environment-related advertising issues by CAP, BCAP and the ASA (together "the ASA system"), and sets the broad context for the areas of concern in which the ASA will, in future, apply a stricter interpretation under the CAP and BCAP Codes, where evidence exists of misleading or socially irresponsible advertising that concerns the environment.

This guidance sets out the existing principles of the ASA system's regulation. The ASA maintains a [resource hub](#), with a number of resources relating to the regulation of environment-related advertising issues, including a list of issue-specific guidance, which links directly to ASA rulings, many of which are the basis for principles set out in this guidance. CAP and BCAP will periodically review this document, in light of the ASA system's work on climate change and the environment, and relevant legislative changes.

## 2. Scope

CAP and BCAP have developed this guidance based on existing Code rules, ASA rulings and the ASA system's [review](#) of its regulation of environmental claims and issues in advertising, as a means of bringing key regulatory principles on the environment into one place for the first time. This guidance neither constitutes new rules nor binds the ASA Council when it considers complaints about a marketing communication. It is intended to bear out in greater detail the appropriate interpretation of the rules of the CAP and BCAP Codes (primarily those in section 11 of the CAP Code and section 9 of the BCAP Code), including examples of approaches that are likely to be problematic.

Marketers are advised to comply with all legislation and guidance that may apply to their ads. The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)'s [Making environmental claims on goods and services](#) guidance is designed to help businesses understand and comply with their existing obligations under consumer protection law when making environmental claims. The principles of the CMA guidance are intended to be consistent with the requirements of the CAP and BCAP Codes.

### 3. Environmental claims

#### 3.1 Basis of claims

Environmental claims are likely to mislead if the basis of the claim is not clear. Some information will be necessary for consumers to understand the basis of the claim, and unqualified claims could mislead if they omit this significant information.

The CAP Code states:

11.1 The basis of environmental claims must be clear. Unqualified claims could mislead if they omit significant information.

The BCAP Code states:

9.2 The basis of environmental claims must be clear. Unqualified claims could mislead if they omit significant information.

In addition, marketing communications must not mislead by omitting material information, or by presenting it in an unclear, unintelligible, ambiguous or untimely manner.

The CAP Code states:

3.3 Marketing communications must not mislead the consumer by omitting material information. They must not mislead by hiding material information or presenting it in an unclear, unintelligible, ambiguous or untimely manner.

Material information is information that the consumer needs to make informed decisions in relation to a product. Whether the omission or presentation of material information is likely to mislead the consumer depends on the context, the medium and, if the medium of the marketing communication is constrained by time or space, the measures that the marketer takes to make that information available to the consumer by other means.

The BCAP Code states:

3.2 Advertisements must not mislead consumers by omitting material information. They must not mislead by hiding material information or presenting it in an unclear, unintelligible, ambiguous or untimely manner.

Material information is information that consumers need in context to make informed decisions about whether or how to buy a product or service. Whether the omission or presentation of material information is likely to mislead consumers depends on the context, the medium and, if the medium of the advertisement is constrained by time or space, the measures that the advertiser takes to make that information available to consumers by other means.

Marketers must consider consumers' likely interpretation of a claim. Where general claims could be interpreted as absolute claims, or have multiple possible interpretations, additional information is required to make the meaning of the claim clear.

Marketers should consider how knowledgeable the audience of marketing communications is likely to be, and should not assume a high level of understanding, particularly if ads are untargeted. Qualifications may be necessary to explain the meaning of certain claims.

Where specific factors are likely to contribute to a consumer's interpretation of a claim, these factors should be included in the ad.

The following scenarios provide examples of the types of claims which are likely to mislead, if significant information is omitted:

- Ads must make clear if any advertised environmental benefit will only result from specific consumer action or behavioural change.
- If an advertiser references their compliance with a particular standard, the ad should provide consumers with sufficient information to understand the meaning of that standard.
- Claims that a product can be recycled must be substantiated, and must make clear any limitations to this.

### **Claims about initiatives designed to reduce environmental impact**

CAP rule 11.1 and BCAP rule 9.2 provide that environmental claims are likely to mislead if the basis of the claim is not clear, and that unqualified claims could mislead if they omit significant information.

The ASA has ruled on multiple ads which made positive environmental claims about specific aspects of a business in circumstances where that business remained responsible for a significant amount of emissions / harm. These have

included rulings on ads for products and services in some of the sectors identified by the Climate Change Committee as having a high adverse impact on the environment, and therefore where that Committee advises that significant consumer behaviour change and carbon reduction are required if the UK is to meet its legally binding net zero targets: (heating, energy, transport, waste and food).

The ASA found that these ads breached the CAP and / or BCAP Codes on the grounds that the ads were likely to be understood as making claims about a business's wider environmental impact and claims about their positive initiatives, therefore exaggerating the business's overall environmental credentials; in some cases, the claims were not contextualised or at least sufficiently contextualised with material information about the business's overall environmental impact, which was likely to mislead consumers. The CMA's *Making environmental claims on goods and services* guidance (referred to in section 2 of this guidance) includes the following related principles:

*2.9 Misleading environmental claims occur where a business makes claims about its products, services, processes, brands or its operations as a whole, or omits or hides information, to give the impression they are less harmful or more beneficial to the environment than they really are.*

*3.17 While claims that are more specific may be less likely to mislead, that will not always mean they are acceptable. For example, a specific claim relating to part of a product that only draws attention to a particular sustainability benefit could still mislead consumers even if it is true, if:*

- there are also significant negative impacts from that product, or*
- that benefit comes at a significant environmental cost (for example, a garment could accurately be described as organic but a huge amount of water is used in its production).*

*3.18 Similarly, businesses should not focus claims on a minor part of what they do, if their main or core business produces significant negative effects.*

The following section of the guidance draws on the principles established by ASA rulings and the above principles from the CMA's guidance, to which marketers should have regard when making claims about initiatives designed to reduce environmental impact. While it does not prescribe or proscribe certain creative approaches, this section is intended to highlight factors that make ads, and the claims within them, more likely to comply or less likely to comply with the Codes to support marketers in avoiding misleading consumers.

CAP and BCAP do not intend the guidance to prevent marketers from making environmental claims about their products or services, and the guidance is therefore intended to identify factors that make such claims more likely or less likely to comply with the Codes.

CAP and BCAP have identified the following principles established by the rulings, to support compliance with the Codes. (References to products are intended to include services, where applicable):

- Environmental claims which relate narrowly to specific products should make this clear, to ensure that they are not understood as being representative of the entire business. Unqualified claims about the environmental benefits of a specific product or specific products are likely to mislead if the product name could be understood to relate to the business as a whole (for example consumers would be unlikely to draw a distinction between the name of a specific product and the overall brand).
- Where businesses are responsible for a significant amount of harmful emissions or other environmental harm, ads which reference specific environmentally beneficial initiatives are more likely to mislead if they do not include balancing information about the business's significant ongoing contribution to emissions or other environmental harm. This is particularly the case in sectors where consumers are less likely to be aware of the business's contribution to emissions or other environmental harm (such as the financial sector's contribution to funding high-carbon industries), and where, notwithstanding consumers' unprompted knowledge of the business's contribution to a significant amount of emissions or other environmental harm, the overall impact of the ad is likely to give a misleading impression of the company's overall environmental credentials.
- The ASA acknowledges that consumers are generally aware that certain industries, such as those involved in fossil fuel extraction, have historically contributed to emissions or other environmental harm. It also considers that consumers are likely to be aware they are continuing to engage in those activities today and that many of these industries aim to significantly reduce their emissions in response to the climate crisis and climate goals. However, consumers are unlikely to be aware which companies are making significant progress towards these goals, how they are going about and plan to do this, and the significance of their green activities as a proportion of their total activities currently and in the future and their progress relative to any continuing emissions or other environmental harm. Without qualifying information around this knowledge gap, ads making claims about specific environmental initiatives or ads that promote more general positive environmental credentials, are more likely to mislead.
- Ads which refer to a business's lower-carbon activities without including information about its overall harmful environmental impact may provide a misleading impression of the proportion of the business's overall activities that are lower in carbon. The following are examples of the

types of content that are likely to misleadingly exaggerate the significance of lower carbon activities:

- References to multiple activities relating to lower carbon energy and their contribution to the energy transition, alongside general brand logos and environmental claims, have significant potential to create a cumulative effect, reinforcing a misleading positive impression about the overall impact of the business on the environment.
- Ads that refer to an immediate and significant consumer demand for cleaner energy alongside a general claim about the company's own energy production (for example, 'we're lighting up Britain') have the potential to suggest that a significant proportion of the company's business involves the provision of cleaner energy, and that the business has the capacity to meet demand for it. If this is not the case, balancing, qualifying information is needed to avoid misleading the audience.
- The ASA is likely to consider a water company's Environmental Performance Assessment (EPA), issued by the Environment Agency, when assessing its impact on the environment and whether that impact will be considered information the omission of which is likely to mislead. Where companies have high EPA ratings, meaning that their overall environmental impact is good, it is unlikely that this will be considered material information that needs to be included in the ad for balancing, qualifying purposes, or be seen to contradict positive environmental claims. Conversely, where they have low EPA ratings, such information is more likely to be considered material information that contradicts positive environmental claims and so should be clearly disclosed.
- Imagery of the natural world may, depending on the context, contribute to the impression that the advertised business is making a significant contribution towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Where such imagery is used in connection with a company responsible for a significant amount of emissions or other environmental harm, it is likely to mislead in the absence of balancing, qualifying information, unless the creative is obviously not portraying the organisation or product as environmentally positive.
- Absolute environmental claims (such as "sustainable" or "environmentally friendly") must be supported by a high level of substantiation. Evidence of initiatives which are intended to deliver results in the future is unlikely to be considered sufficient to substantiate absolute claims. Similarly, claims that go beyond aspirational claims and suggest that a business is already taking steps to reduce emissions and have a positive environmental impact are likely to mislead if the ad omits material information about the balance of current activities, current emissions and the pathway to reducing these.

- Ads which present a business's negative environmental impact as being in the past are likely to mislead if the company is still having a significant negative impact. Referring to negative impact in the past tense is likely to suggest that a business has moved on from those activities, any negative impact is now understood not to be significant, and the business is now primarily focused and delivering on positive action and initiatives.
- Ads which focus on specific initiatives as a way of achieving net zero should clearly contextualise those claims with information about the role that the initiative would play in that net zero plan, and how and when net zero emissions will be achieved. Without this information, these claims are likely to be interpreted to mean that those activities formed a significant element of the business's current activities and that the business is making meaningful progress towards achieving net zero emissions.
- When making claims about initiatives intended to meet net zero, the timeframe to achieve that goal is likely to be considered material information and should be stated in the ad.

### **Green disposal claims**

In November 2023, the ASA published independent research into consumer understanding of green disposal claims (i.e., 'recyclable'/'recycling', 'biodegradable', 'compostable' and "plastic alternative" claims). The broad findings can be summarised as follows:

- There were varying degrees of consumer understanding of the terms "recycled", "recyclable", "biodegradable" and "compostable".
- Participants' interpretations of the claims "biodegradable" and "compostable" were affected when definitions and specific conditions related to these claims were shared. This included the need for specialised conditions and processes in relation to a 'compostable' claim, and the unlimited timeframe and potential for toxin creation for 'biodegradable' claims.
- Participants considered that certain information should be clearly and prominently displayed in conjunction with the claims "recyclable", "biodegradable" and "compostable". Specifically: information about the product composition, where the claim only refers to part of the product; where and how a product should be disposed of; how long the disposal process takes; and the outcome of the disposal process, including the potential creation of by-products.

CAP rule 11.1 and BCAP rule 9.2 provide that environmental claims are likely to mislead if the basis of the claim is not clear, and that unqualified claims could

mislead if they omit significant information. CAP rule 3.3 and BCAP rule 3.2 provide that marketing communications must not mislead by omitting material information, or by presenting it in an unclear, unintelligible, ambiguous or untimely manner.

In light of the key findings from this review and the principles established by ASA rulings, that are linked to in the bullet points that follow, CAP and BCAP advise advertisers to take into account the following factors when making green disposal claims, to improve the likelihood of complying with the rules:

- A green disposal claim such as “recycled” or “recyclable” is more likely to comply if it is clearly qualified to make clear which parts of a product or packaging the claim refers to. Such qualification should effectively counter any overall impression created by the ad that the product is entirely recyclable.
  - Absolute claims, like “100% recycled bottle”, should not be used unless all the components of the bottle, including the cap and label, are recycled.
- If the disposal process referred to in an ad is likely to differ from the average consumer’s expectations of what that process entails, this may be considered material information, and the claim is likely to need qualification, for example by making clear where, and how, the product should be disposed of. Specific examples of this include:
  - Unqualified “recyclable” claims may be understood to mean that the product is easily recyclable once it has reached the end of its life cycle, and that the recycling process is widely available to UK consumers. Where that is not the case, because, for example, of difficulties posed to the recycling of the product due to its mixed composition, and/or the lack of existing UK infrastructure to process it, it is likely that this will need to be made clear.
  - Where products need to be recycled using a specific scheme or method that goes beyond usual consumer disposal, information relating to the special disposal method is likely to be material to consumers’ understanding of the basis of a “recyclable” claim, and should therefore be made clear in the ad.
  - Where compostable products are only suitable for industrial composting, for example because effective degradation will not occur in home composting, this information may be considered material to a consumer’s transactional decision. Claims which do not clearly and prominently include this information are less likely to comply.

- Where multiple claims (such as recyclable, biodegradable and compostable) are used, because, for example, they apply to different parts of the product and/or packaging, the ad must make clear what part each claim relates to. [Qualifying information](#) about what this means for the product's disposal should be included.
- The longer the time it takes for the biodegradation or composting process to complete, the more likely it is to be material information to consumers. Claims are more likely to comply if they are clearly qualified with information about how long it takes for a product to fully biodegrade or compost.
- Where disposal results in harmful by-products, ads which make this clear

are more likely to comply. Ads must not claim that the disposal process of a product, such as “biodegradable” does not have any negative impact on the environment if that is not the case (for example, because the product [emits methane](#) into the atmosphere as it biodegrades).

- Unqualified claims that a product produces less waste than alternatives may be considered misleading if the claim is based only on part of the product's life cycle. For example, an unqualified plastic reduction claim, such as [“with 70% less plastic”](#), is likely to mislead if the claim relates only to a reduction in the amount of plastic used to produce the packaging, and does not also factor in disposal.
- Any claims should comply with the usual standards of evidence for objective claims set out in section 3.3 of this guidance. Objective claims which are not supported by sufficient evidence will be problematic. For example:
  - Claims must be substantiated by evidence which relates to the likely conditions of use for a product. A claim that [dog waste bags are biodegradable](#) is likely to mislead if they are not biodegradable when disposed of in the manner called for on the product packaging (for example, in bins provided specifically for the purpose of dog waste disposal).
  - “Biodegradable” and “compostable” refer to different processes. Biodegradable products should only be referred to as compostable if both claims can be substantiated.
  - A claim that a product is [widely recycled](#) is more likely to mislead if it is not supported by evidence to show that it is recycled by the majority of local authorities in the UK.

### 3.2 Clarity of terms

Although consumer understanding of environmental claims is increasing, marketers should be careful not to assume a level of knowledge greater than is reasonable or likely.

The CAP Code states:

11.2 The meaning of all terms used in marketing communications must be clear to consumers.

The BCAP Code states:

9.3 The meaning of all terms used in advertisements must be clear to consumers.

Previously the ASA has ruled that utility companies have misleadingly implied that the energy consumers used was direct from “renewable” sources whereas it came from the National Grid. Similarly, a claim that a car was “so beautifully clean, it purifies the air as it goes” was upheld on the basis that the claim, as consumers would understand it, had not been substantiated. However, simplifying terms (for example, “fuel cells” to refer to “MCFCs”) may be acceptable, provided it aids a consumer’s understanding of the product or service.

### “Carbon neutral”, “net zero”, and similar claims

The ASA’s *Environmental Claims in Advertising* research, published in September 2022, made the following broad findings:

- There is a broad spectrum of consumer engagement on environmental issues, influencing their understanding of, and reaction to, environmental claims.
- Carbon neutral and net zero were the most commonly encountered claims, but there was little consensus as to their meaning. There were calls for significant reform to simplify and standardise the definitions of such terms and for claims to be policed by an official body, such as government.
- Participants tended to believe that carbon neutral claims implied that an absolute reduction in carbon emissions had taken place or would take place. When claims relied on offsetting and this was revealed, this could result in consumers feeling that they had been misled.

In light of the low understanding and lack of consensus around the meaning of carbon neutral and net zero claims, CAP and BCAP advise advertisers to take

into account the following guidance, which, if followed, means that claims are less likely to mislead:

- Avoid using unqualified “carbon neutral”, “net zero” or similar claims. Information explaining the basis for these claims helps consumers’ understanding, and such information should therefore not be omitted.
- Marketers should ensure that they include accurate information about whether (and the degree to which) they are actively reducing carbon emissions or are basing claims on offsetting, to ensure that consumers do not wrongly assume that products or their manufacture generate no or few emissions.
- Claims based on future goals relating to reaching net zero or achieving carbon neutrality should be based on a verifiable strategy to deliver them.
- Where claims are based on offsetting, they should comply with the usual standards of evidence for objective claims set out in this guidance, and marketers should provide information about the offsetting scheme they are using.
- Where it is necessary to include qualifying information about a claim, that information should be sufficiently close to the main aspects of the claim for consumers to be able to see it easily and take account of it before they make any decision. The less prominent any qualifying information is, and the further away it is from any main claim being made, the more likely the claim will mislead consumers. For further information, see CAP’s [guidance](#) on the use of qualifications.

### 3.3 Substantiation

Before submitting marketing communications for publication, marketers must ensure that they hold robust documentary evidence to prove all claims, whether direct or implied, that are capable of objective substantiation.

The CAP Code states:

11.3 Absolute claims must be supported by a high level of substantiation. Comparative claims such as "greener" or "friendlier" can be justified, for example, if the advertised product provides a total environmental benefit over that of the marketer's previous product or competitor products and the basis of the comparison is clear.

The BCAP Code states:

9.4 Absolute claims must be supported by a high level of substantiation. Comparative claims such as "greener" or "friendlier" can be justified, for example, if the advertised product or service provides a total environmental benefit over that of the advertiser's previous product or service or competitor products or services and the basis of the comparison is clear.

Marketers should be mindful of the fact that if the ASA considers a claim to be objective and capable of substantiation, they are likely to rule the claim misleading in the absence of adequate substantiation, even if the marketer's intention was to make a subjective claim.

The ASA has always expected advertisers making claims about the environmental impact of products and services to hold substantial evidence. The Codes make clear that absolute claims (for example 'green' or 'environmentally friendly') should be supported by a high level of substantiation.

Previous cases where substantiation has been deemed insufficient for absolute claims include:

- "The greenest stoves on earth"
- Claims that a waste carrier network could "Save CO2 emissions"
- "Eco-friendly" claims for an instant boiling water tap
- Offering 100% renewable energy to consumers "without harming your world"
- Coffins being made from "100% recycled cardboard"
- A bottle being "100% recycled"
- Claims for a recipe box, including "plastic-free", "absolutely no plastic" and "100% plastic-free recipe box", "100% recyclable" and "widely recycled", which applied to the box itself and not its components

Relative claims like 'greener' or 'friendlier' will require verifiable evidence that proves an environmental benefit over comparable products. Marketers should set out the relevant information in the ad or signpost how the information used to make that comparison can be checked by the target audience.

Marketers proposing to make claims based on future projections, should ensure that they are clear, based on accurate data and, if relevant, suitably qualified. If the ad makes claims about the future output of a specific site, such as a wind farm, the predicted output should be calculated using site specific data. If a claim is based on an estimated output but not on historical data (for example for a proposed site) that fact should be made clear to consumers. That can be done by stating "estimated output" or by making the output claim conditional, for example "could produce up to ...". Definitive claims about the output of sites that are not based on site-specific data are likely to be problematic.

### 3.4 Full lifecycle

General claims about the environmental credentials of products or services are likely to be interpreted as claims about the product's entire lifecycle, from manufacture to disposal.

The CAP Code states:

11.4 Marketers must base environmental claims on the full life cycle of the advertised product, unless the marketing communication states otherwise, and must make clear the limits of the life cycle. If a general claim cannot be justified, a more limited claim about specific aspects of a product might be justifiable. Marketers must ensure claims that are based on only part of the advertised product's life cycle do not mislead consumers about the product's total environmental impact.

The BCAP Code states:

9.5 Environmental claims must be based on the full life cycle of the advertised product or service, unless the advertisement states otherwise, and must make clear the limits of the life cycle. If a general claim cannot be justified, a more limited claim about specific aspects of a product or service might be justifiable. Claims that are based on only part of an advertised product or service's life cycle must not mislead consumers about the product or service's total environmental impact.

Examples of general claims which are likely to be considered full lifecycle claims, unless stated otherwise include:

- Good for the planet.
- Good for the land.
- Helping to support a more sustainable future.
- 100% eco-friendly.
- Environmentally friendly.
- Zero emissions.
- Give back to the environment.
- Less plastic.

General claims like these should not be used without qualification unless marketers / broadcasters can provide evidence to demonstrate that the claim applies to the entire lifecycle of the product or service, from manufacture to disposal.

Absolute claims like "environmentally friendly" must only be made if the advertiser can demonstrate that the product or service has no detrimental effect on the environment, taking into account its entire lifecycle.

If marketers/broadcasters cannot justify general claims, the limits of the lifecycle must be made clear. More limited claims about a specific aspect of a product or service may be acceptable. Where a claim relates only to part of a product or

service's lifestyle, this should be made clear. Ads must not mislead consumers about the product's total environmental impact. For example:

- A **zero emissions** claim may be acceptable when made about an electric vehicle, if the ad makes clear that the claim relates to driving only.
- Where the farming methods used provide an environmental benefit over other farming methods, the ad must **make clear** that the claim relates to the farming method only.
- If an advertiser has reduced the production of plastic packaging for part of a product, the ad **must not imply** an overall reduction in plastic waste for the whole product.

### 3.5 Scientific opinion

Marketers should hold evidence to substantiate all objective claims and, if a significant division of scientific opinion exists or evidence is inconclusive, that should be made clear to readers: marketers should not suggest that their claims command universal acceptance if they do not.

The CAP Code states:

11.5 Marketers must not suggest that their claims are universally accepted if a significant division of informed or scientific opinion exists.

The BCAP Code states:

9.6 Advertisements must not suggest that their claims are universally accepted if a significant division of informed or scientific opinion exists.

When assessing ads under these Code rules, the ASA may consider the extent of the differing opinion, and whether it constitutes a "significant division" under the Code. Often ideas and concepts are disputed by academics and opinion is divided; however, marketers must be convinced that the *relevant* informed opinion is not divided, and, if it is, they should make that clear in their marketing communications.

### 3.6 Adverse effects

The CAP Code states:

11.6 If a product has never had a demonstrably adverse effect on the environment, marketing communications must not imply that the formulation has changed to improve the product in the way claimed. Marketers may, however, claim that a product has always been designed in a way that omits an ingredient or process known to harm the environment.

The BCAP Code states:

9.7 If a product or service has never had a demonstrably adverse effect on the environment, advertisements must not imply that the formulation has changed to improve the product or service in the way claimed. Advertisements may, however, claim that a product or service has always been designed in a way that omits an ingredient or process known to harm the environment.

Marketers of products that do not damage the environment should not claim that the product has been changed to make it safe. And, if a product is, by its nature, environmentally damaging, marketers should not imply that by improving it they have stopped an adverse impact. For example, a petrol or diesel four-wheel drive might be “greener” if its manufacturer has lowered its emissions but not “green”. It is, of course, legitimate to advertise the environmental “improvement” that the product has undergone.

### 3.7 Environmental benefit

The CAP Code states:

11.7 Marketing communications must not mislead consumers about the environmental benefit that a product offers; for example, by highlighting the absence of an environmentally damaging ingredient if that ingredient is not usually found in competing products or by highlighting an environmental benefit that results from a legal obligation if competing products are subject to that legal obligation.

The BCAP Code states:

9.8 Advertisements must not mislead consumers about the environmental benefit that a product or service offers; for example, by highlighting the absence of an environmentally damaging ingredient if that ingredient is not usually found in competing products or services by highlighting an environmental benefit that results from a legal obligation if competing products are subject to the same requirements.

Even where claims can be substantiated or are technically correct, ads must take care not to mislead consumers about the environmental benefit of a product or service.

The ASA has previously ruled that, by suggesting that refill pouches used 70% less plastic than bottles, a TV ad for a cleaning product breached the Code on the basis that it implied that they were more environmentally beneficial. The claim actually related to the reduction in the amount of plastic used to produce the refill pouches, which wasn't made clear.

Although the ASA has accepted that some highly stylised or fantastical images such as an oil refinery producing flowers from its chimneys are unlikely to be understood by readers as an accurate depiction of reality or to imply that the activities shown had an environmental benefit, marketers should nonetheless be cautious about overstating their environmental credentials. One ad, which claimed “we use our waste CO2 to grow flowers and our waste sulphur to make super-strong concrete”, [breached the Code](#) because the advertiser could not show that most or all of the CO2 and sulphur it produced was recycled in that way.

## 4. Social responsibility

### 4.1 Social responsibility

The CAP Code states:

1.3 Marketing communications must be prepared with a sense of responsibility to consumers and to society.

The BCAP Code states:

1.2 Advertisements must be prepared with a sense of responsibility to the audience and to society.

As set out in section 1, the increased urgency for businesses and other stakeholders playing their part in tackling climate change and other environmental harms is reflected in domestic and international legislation on climate change. The UK’s Climate Change Committee (and other experts) have emphasised that for the UK (and the rest of the world) to meet net zero targets, consumer behaviour must change. The ASA will take into account this fast-changing wider context when applying the CAP and BCAP rules on social responsibility.

The following non-exhaustive list includes examples of grounds of complaints, considered by other advertising regulators, gathered during the ASA system’s review of standards across the globe; and demonstrates the types of issues that could fall to be considered by the ASA in future complaints under the social responsibility rules, in light of the increased focus on the role of consumer behaviour change to achieve net zero targets:

- Trivialising consumer behaviour likely to result in harmful pollution or excessive waste
- Encouraging or condoning non-recycling of recyclable packaging
- Encouraging or condoning consumers to disregard the harmful environmental impact of their actions

- Encouraging or condoning littering

Given the ASA's role as an advertising regulator, not a regulator of products or services, the social responsibility rules apply to the creative content of ads, as distinct from the products they are promoting. Any consideration of ads in future would be underpinned by this important distinction. As always, compliance with the Codes is assessed according to the marketing communication's probable impact when taken as a whole and in context. That will depend on, for example, the audience and its likely response, and the nature of the product or service being marketed.

Any advertising practices or ad creatives that become more commonplace or problematic in the future, in an evolving context in which legislators confer top priority to climate change, could be addressed via ASA rulings and / or additions to this guidance (or potentially to the CAP and BCAP Codes).

The ASA assessed complaints, under rule 1.3 of the CAP Code, about a press ad for a Sports Utility Vehicle (SUV), which featured an image of the vehicle in a forest setting with the headline "*LIFE IS SO MUCH BETTER WITHOUT RESTRICTIONS*". Complainants considered that the ad was socially irresponsible because it implied that the vehicle depicted could be driven in forests or similar ecologically-sensitive environments which could encourage or condone behaviour that was detrimental to the environment.

Given the overall context of the ad, the ASA considered the ad did not encourage or condone the use of the vehicle in ecologically-sensitive and off-road environments, such as forests or national parks that were subject to legal restrictions on the use of motor vehicles, in ways that could be detrimental to the environment, and it was not therefore socially irresponsible. This ruling demonstrates that it is important for advertisers to take care when depicting vehicles in off-road scenarios to ensure that the overall context of the ad does not encourage use that could be detrimental to the environment.

## 4.2 Behaviour grossly prejudicial to the protection of the environment

The CAP Code states:

30.7 Advertising must not encourage behaviour grossly prejudicial to the protection of the environment.

The BCAP Code states:

4.12 Advertisements must not condone or encourage behaviour grossly prejudicial to the protection of the environment.

Advertising content which breached these rules would also breach the social responsibility rules of the Codes, and as such, the guidance in 4.1 above applies.

Last updated: October 2025

*Advice on specific non-broadcast marketing communications is available from the Copy Advice team via the [online request form](#).*

*Our [resource hub](#) contains a number of resources relating to our regulation of environment-related advertising issues, including a list of issue-specific guidance, which links through to relevant Code rules and ASA rulings.*

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