

Clampdown on greenwash

By Tim Bradshaw

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Companies will face tougher tests when advertising their green credentials, under proposals released on Thursday.

The Committee of Advertising Practice, the industry's self-regulator, proposes to expand the environmental and social responsibility sections of the broadcast advertising code, to "prevent marketers from exaggerating the environmental benefits of their products".

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The clampdown on greenwashing is part of a wider consultation into the first major changes to the advertising code in eight years. The review also includes efforts to enhance child protection, while relaxing bans on advertising condoms before the watershed and sexual products on encrypted adult entertainment channels.

CAP's proposed new rules require green advertising on television to be based on the full life cycle of the advertised product or service. It also will use general principles rather than specific rules, which it says could quickly become outdated.

"Absolute claims must be supported by a high level of substantiation," the proposed rules say, although comparative terms such as "greener" may be allowed in some circumstances.

"It provides a catchall for the unintended and the unexpected," said Andrew Brown, chairman of CAP and BCAP, the broadcast committee.

Complaints about greenwashing have risen sharply, reflecting the increased popularity of environmental claims in advertisements. In 2006, the Advertising Standards Authority received approximately 117 complaints about 83 advertisements, rising to 561 complaints about 410 advertisements in 2007.

Environmental claims have become a "new form of competitive language for advertisers", requiring tighter rules that provide "less excuse through ignorance and obfuscation", said Mr Brown.

David Norman, director of campaigns at WWF UK, whose complaint against an advertisement by **Royal Dutch Shell** last year was **upheld by the ASA**, gave the change in rules a cautious welcome.

"WWF would say certainly it sounds like a good move to strengthen regulations so that those companies who do have genuine investments in green technology and answers to climate change are rewarded for that, rather than the companies who invest in marketing."

Mr Brown said that in general, the review of advertising rules – the first to revise broadcast and general advertising codes simultaneously in their 50-year history – was designed to help broadcasters and advertisers adapt to an increasingly fragmented media landscape.

CAP plans to ensure the code "remains as relevant for the multichannel world it is facing as it was for ITV in 1955", Mr Brown said. The consultation will gauge the public's appetite for advertising relevant products on channels catering to adult and health niches.

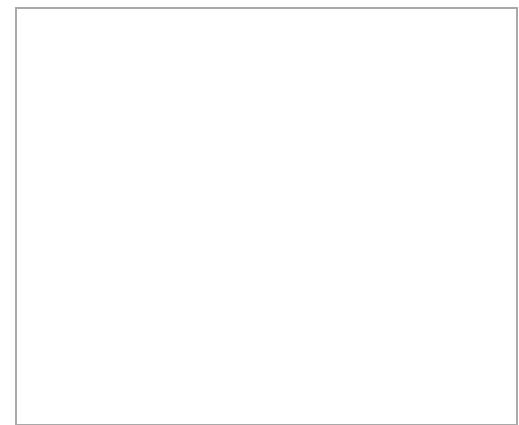
It also proposes allowing condom advertising before 9pm, while avoiding programmes aimed at the youngest viewers, "in light of the UK having the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Europe".

"I'm sure the usual suspects will say it will be open season ... but it isn't a massive liberalisation," said Mr Brown.

The consultation closes on June 19, 2009, with the conclusions published later this year. The new rules are expected to come into force next year.

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