

# GET IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE



## HOW FAR CAN YOU PUSH OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE LIMITS?

**S**wearing or references to swearing in advertisements usually result in complaints to the ASA.

While some advertisers may argue the humour in their ads means consumers will not be offended, they may be in breach of the Advertising Codes.

Here are our **top tips** to make responsible, language-appropriate ads:

## 1 LOOK AT THE RESEARCH

The ASA often refers to the [BSA research on the most offensive words](#) when considering offensive language complaints. Avoid issues by checking the research before you write your ad. The acceptability of words can also change over time, so make sure you are aware of the latest survey or do your own.

## 2 THINK ABOUT CONTEXT, MEDIUM, PLACEMENT AND PRODUCT

Just targeting your content to adults won't necessarily mean it's OK for you to use offensive language in an ad. It's important to consider the current climate and context, as well as who is likely to see your ad.

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### 3 THINK ABOUT A GENERAL AUDIENCE

Your target audience may not be the only people who will see your ad, depending on placement. Consider whether a particular word or phrase is likely to offend people on a large or widespread scale.

### 4 STEER CLEAR OF LOOKALIKES AND SOUNDALIKES

Missing out letters and replacing similar-sounding words may seem inventive but is often not distinct enough to avoid complaints. The best advertising uses creativity rather than the shock factor.

### 5 ERR ON THE SIDE OF CAUTION

Not sure if it crosses the line? Media companies can decline to accept your ad so if the campaign is pushing boundaries, be sure to get their OK first or you may have paid for a blank space.

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### What are the rules around offensive language in advertising?

Offensive language falls under social responsibility (Principle 1: Social Responsibility) in the [Advertising Standards Code](#), and Rule 1 (c) Decency and Offensiveness, which refers to anything that is indecent or likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offence. The guidelines under this rule state that advertisers must not use offensive, degrading or provocative copy and/or images to attract attention or promote the sale of products or services.

The rules apply to ads in all media.

### Remember the spirit and intention of the Code

When interpreting the Codes, the ASA Complaints and Appeal Boards consider compliance with both the spirit and intention as well as the rules and principles of the Codes. When checking Code compliance, we think about what the consumer takes away from the advertisement rather than the intent of the advertiser.

### Further help

We offer [industry training](#) on this topic, or you can contact the [AdHelp Information Service](#) for written information about the advertising rules and guidelines. For a more detailed look at the rules, head to the [Advertising Codes](#).