

18 May 2017

Summary and ABAC response to the ABAC Community Standards Research

Introduction

Colmar Brunton Social Research undertook research in early 2017 to explore whether decisions made by the ABAC Complaints Panel are in-line with the view of community standards. This was an update of research first undertaken in 2013.

Six face-to-face focus groups along with an on-line survey of 1225 people tested 13 alcohol advertisements that had been subject to consideration by the ABAC Complaints Panel. One television advertisement that elicited almost no concern from the focus groups was excluded from the on-line survey to ensure the survey was an optimal length.

Of the 12 advertisements tested, 7 complaints had been upheld, while 5 had been dismissed, by the Complaints Panel.

Key Findings (2013 findings included in brackets by way of comparison)

1. Prior to being exposed to the Code, only 1 of the 12 advertisements was considered unacceptable by the majority of community respondents while the Complaints Panel found 7 of the advertisements to be unacceptable.
2. It was found that the Complaints Panel had:
 - Dismissed complaints about 2 advertisements that were deemed acceptable by the community (alignment with the community);
 - Upheld complaints against 3 advertisements/packaging that were deemed unacceptable by the community (alignment with the community);
 - Conservatively upheld complaints against 4 advertisements/packaging that were deemed acceptable by the community.
 - Dismissed a complaint against 1 advertisement and 1 product label that was deemed unacceptable. In both cases, when unprompted the material was considered acceptable by a majority of respondents and when prompted it was a small majority of respondents that found the material to be unacceptable (46:40% & 56:32%). In the case of the advertisement, a majority of the focus group participants found the ad to be acceptable.
 - Community opinions on 1 advertisement was evenly split with 44% of respondents aligning with the Panel decision and 40% of respondents reacting differently (alignment with the community).
3. Overall, there was slightly less alignment between Complaints Panel decisions and community standards compared to 2013. However, as was the case in 2013, the Complaints Panel was still generally more conservative than the community on both an unprompted and informed basis.
4. Knowledge of alcohol advertising regulation was low across all groups, but once prompted a majority 65% (69%) were aware that they could complain to the Advertising Standards Bureau.
5. In the last 12 months, 64% (66%) of the general public had no concern or offence about advertising standards in general and 62% (66%) of the general public were not particularly concerned about the content of alcohol advertisements in Australia.

ABAC Response to the Research

- ABAC notes that the unprompted assessment of the 12 advertisements (1 of the 12 were found to be unacceptable) against the decisions of the Complaints Panel (7 of the 12 complaints were upheld) is generally reflective of the high standards set by the Code for alcohol advertising.
- ABAC notes that as was the case in 2013, the ABAC Complaints Panel decisions are generally more conservative than the community on both an unprompted and informed basis. The ABAC Management Committee has no intention of lowering the high standards set by the Code for alcohol marketing in Australia.
- ABAC notes that a majority of the respondents had no concern or offence about advertising standards in general (64%) and were not particularly concerned about the content of alcohol advertising in Australia (62%).
- ABAC will utilise the research to assist in its periodic reviews and ongoing evaluation of the Code standards.

Background:

- The ABAC Scheme is the centrepiece of Australia's system for responsible alcohol marketing and is administered by a management committee which includes industry, advertising and government representatives.
- The ABAC Responsible Alcohol Marketing Code regulates the content of alcohol marketing (including packaging) in Australia. Subject to regular reviews, the Code reflects community expectations and changes in the media and advertising industries.
- An Alcohol Advertising Pre-vetting Service provides independent, confidential advice to advertisers on whether proposed marketing communications comply with the Code. This service is offered on a 'user pays' basis.
- The ABAC Adjudication Panel, headed by the Chief Adjudicator, Professor the Hon Michael Lavarch AO, considers public complaints about alcohol marketing communications that fall within the jurisdiction of the Code. The Panel and its deliberations are independent of the Management Committee and the broader alcohol and advertising industry.
- In 2016, alcohol complaints represented 2.5% of all advertising complaints received by the ASB.