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U.K. Regulators Warn Alcohol Advertisers Against Mood-Change Claims

Recent rulings show how influencer posts, meme formats and delivery slogans can suggest alcohol creates confidence or relaxation

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The U.K.’s Committee of Advertising Practice on Thursday, November 12, reminded advertisers that alcohol marketing cannot suggest that drinking changes a person’s mood, behavior or abilities, using recent rulings to warn brands, influencers and retailers about how easily social media jokes, tag lines and visual cues can cross the

line.

The guidance centers on rule 18.7 of the CAP Code, which says marketing communications must not imply that alcohol has therapeutic qualities and must not portray it as capable of changing mood, physical condition or behavior. The rule also bars suggestions that alcohol can improve mental or physical performance or contribute to professional or sporting success.

CAP said the “change of mood” part of the rule generates many complaints and can be difficult for advertisers because the idea of mood is broad. It can include happiness, confidence, excitement, relaxation, bravery or playfulness. That makes the rule especially relevant to advertising formats that rely on humor, aspiration or lifestyle imagery.

The regulator’s message was that alcohol can be shown in positive settings, but advertisers must avoid implying that the drink itself produces the emotional shift. In practice, that means people in an ad can already be enjoying themselves, but the ad should not suggest alcohol is what created the fun, confidence or release.

CAP illustrated the point with several Advertising Standards Authority rulings. One involved social media posts by television presenter Laura Whitmore for The Muff Liquor Company. The posts showed her trying different drinks, including water, peppermint tea, beer and a “Muff & Tonic,” while her dancing became more energetic and uninhibited as the sequence moved toward alcoholic options.

According to CAP’s account of the case, the ASA found viewers were likely to understand the post as suggesting alcohol made Whitmore feel more confident and changed her mood. The regulator said the contrast between subdued movements for non-alcoholic drinks and more animated, carefree behavior for alcoholic drinks made the alcoholic choices appear more fun and exciting than sobriety. CAP also noted that song lyrics referring to being “fucked up” contributed to the overall impression and led the ASA to conclude that the ad encouraged irresponsible drinking and implied alcohol could change behavior. The complaint was upheld.

CAP used that case to stress that a familiar meme format or comic tone does not shield an ad from the rules. The body said marketers increasingly use meme-style content online, but those posts still have to comply with sector-specific advertising standards. It added that brands that repost a meme can still be responsible for it even if they did not create the original content.

Another example involved an electronic poster for the grocery delivery service Zapp. The ad showed a bottle of gin next to the words “Friday Feels – in minutes, 24/7.” Zapp argued that the message referred to the speed of its delivery service. But the ASA found consumers were likely to interpret the ad as saying alcohol could quickly deliver the sense of relaxation and enjoyment associated with the end of the workweek, and that those feelings were available at any time.

CAP said the regulator considered that wording and imagery together to be a direct link between alcohol and an improved emotional state. Because the ad suggested alcohol could create or accelerate “Friday feels,” the complaint was upheld.

CAP also pointed to a ruling that it said showed how advertisers can stay within the rules. In a television ad for Tanqueray gin, people were shown in settings including a beach, a roof terrace and in front of a mirror, alongside the line “Let’s live magnificently.” CAP said the ASA found that ad did not breach the code because the upbeat mood was established before alcohol appeared. The people in the commercial were already smiling, socializing and enjoying the occasion, and the aspirational tone was tied to their behavior and the effort they made to create special moments, not to the act of drinking.

That distinction matters because the regulator is not banning happy scenes in alcohol advertising. Its position is that marketers must not imply the happiness comes from the drink. The emotional atmosphere can exist, but it cannot be presented as an effect of alcohol.

The reminder has immediate relevance for alcohol producers and sellers marketing wine, beer, spirits and ready-to-drink products in the U.K., especially as campaigns increasingly run through influencers, memes, delivery apps and fast-moving social media formats. Brands and distributors may face compliance risks not only in

traditional television, poster and print ads, but also in reposted online content and branded collaborations where humor or trend-based formats can blur the line between atmosphere and prohibited claims.

CAP’s notice also suggests that wording intended to describe convenience or speed can create problems if it appears next to alcohol imagery in a way that links the product to a rapid emotional payoff. That could affect how beverage companies and retailers frame promotions around delivery, weekends, celebrations and nightlife.

The body directed advertisers to further guidance on alcohol marketing, including material on therapeutic claims, enhanced capabilities, boredom and loneliness, and themes of bravery and machismo. It also said its Copy Advice team is available to review campaigns before publication.