



PRESS RELEASE

In a pandemic year, ASCI processed over 6149 complaints in 20-21, overall compliance at 97%

- Covid related claims keep ASCI busy- only 12 out of 332 ads related to Covid were found to be scientifically correct

Mumbai, July 26, 2021: FY 2020-21 was a rough one for the advertising industry because of the turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consumers were vulnerable and so were brands. In this scenario, the role played by the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) in protecting consumer interests was even more vital. ASCI's initiatives and guidelines helped brands, agencies and other stakeholders cope with a changing marketing paradigm and shape the industry's narrative in one of its toughest phases ever.

The year started with a significant disruption in ASCI's own monitoring set up, however by June 2020, work from home and connecting through technology saw ASCI get back into the full swing of things.

From the first quarter itself of the pandemic, following a directive from the Ministry of AYUSH asking for ASCI to identify advertisements that violated its advisory dated 1st April 2020, ASCI escalated 237 objectionable ads to the Ministry of AYUSH. While 164 ads complied and modified the untrue claims, 73 covid related ads needed further investigation and action by the Ministry due to non-compliance

In addition to this, ASCI picked up advertisements of several other categories such as paints, apparel, detergents, skin care, ACs, fans, water purifiers, plywood and laminates, supplements and food- all promising Covid related benefit. In all, 332 covid related ads were picked up by ASCI through consumer complaints as well as its own monitoring, yet only 12 of these ads were actually able to substantiate the claims they made. ASCI's expert panel that comprises highly seasoned microbiologists were kept busy examining Covid related evidence provided by advertisers. Given the rampant exploitation of vulnerable consumers in the pandemic situation, ASCI issued a Covid advisory in October 2020, giving advertisers a clear directive to fully substantiate their Covid related claims through recognized testing facilities.

Manisha Kapoor, Secretary General, ASCI said, "In a period where consumer vulnerabilities were at an all-time high, many brands took unfair advantage of this, and tried to peddle their wares without establishing any robust evidence of their actual utility against the SARS Cov-2 virus. ASCI has worked hard to weed out such advertisements by using very stringent standards of evidence. Brands that offer proven benefits to consumers have a genuine role in the

pandemic, but unfortunately most of the Covid related advertising fell woefully short. Most advertisers were unable to prove that the products actually worked to help consumers in a real way as claimed in the ads.”

Besides Covid complaints, the ASCI Consumer Complaints Council (CCC) also processed 1406 complaints in the education sector, 285 complaints against food and beverage advertisements and 147 complaints related to personal care. In addition, 364 advertisements were found to be, prima facie, in violation of The Drugs and Magic Remedies Act.

ASCI's independent Consumer Complaints Council (CCC) convened 37 times during the year and ASCI achieved a 97% compliance rate from advertisers on its recommendations, scoring a strong point for the efficacy of self-regulation.

Other key initiatives

ASCI came up with various initiatives to help shape and monitor the advertising narrative. In September 2020, ASCI tied up with TAM to monitor 3,000 digital platforms. Since then, it has observed a rise in complaints related to online ads, both received from end consumers, as well as taken up suo motu. 35% of the advertisements looked into by the CCC were from the digital medium.

The pandemic year also saw a massive jump in online gaming activities and concerned with the unabated rise of online real money gaming advertisements which did not explain risks to consumers in a transparent way, ASCI developed guidelines for the sector. ASCI processed 67 complaints related to Online real money gaming from Jan-March 2021.

ASCI also launched the Trust in Advertising report in partnership with Nielsen IQ and the Indian Society of Advertisers, and the 'Chup Na Baitho' awareness campaign for consumers, encouraging them to report objectionable claims in advertising.

In addition, ASCI recently released detailed guidelines for influencer advertising. These guidelines make it mandatory for influencers and brands to specify what content is promotional in nature. Influencer marketing is mainstream now and the guidelines were the need of the hour. They were welcomed by all stakeholders and are being implemented.