

Why advertising self-regulators are coming together at a global level?

As in so many aspects of life, digital has been the great leveler in advertising. By its very nature, its benefits can be worldwide but so can the concerns around it. Around the world, people are consuming digital in similar ways – because the underlying technologies are available everywhere. This, in turn, means that there is a coming together of the nature of advertising as well as the related concerns. These span a wide arc, from misleading claims to privacy concerns and from data theft to manipulated media. So, naturally, there is greater collaboration among self-regulating bodies of advertising markets around the world.

Take, for instance, the influencer marketing guidelines that the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) launched recently. The guidelines were a recognition that influencer marketing is mainstream and that consumers have a right to know what content is promotional in nature. This is a fast-evolving space, assuming new forms and presenting new opportunities all the time. It's no coincidence that the India guidelines followed closely on the heels of such norms launched in many other countries. All these guidelines tackle the same problems and offer broadly similar solutions.

There have been instances of influencers in, say, the UK with the lion's share of their followers in India. How does one ensure that Indian viewers are informed when content is paid for? In India, several influencers posted COVID-related messages during the pandemic. While the vast majority of the messages were around awareness, we needed to guard against incorrect information or misleading brand claims going out through these handles. This is where collaboration between self-regulators of different countries makes a lot of sense too.

Then there's a new phenomenon we're dealing with – virtual influencers. How does one enforce guidelines and frameworks when it's not a real person's handle? Again, an exchange of ideas, information and best practices between self-regulators can lead to effective solutions.

After all, according to digital marketing agency AdLift, the global influencer market is worth \$1.75 billion while India's is estimated at \$75-\$150 million a year. As this industry grows, the role of all countries' advertising self-regulators will become crucial as well as similar. In such a situation, collaboration is natural.

So, as the International Council for Advertising Self-Regulation (ICAS) sought to better represent the world, it made sense to appoint ASCI Secretary-General Manisha Kapoor to its executive committee. Set up by the European Advertising Standards Alliance in 2008, ICAS is a global platform of self-regulatory organizations.

Similarly, at the ICAS Awards announced in June, one of the winning entries was a collaboration between entities from three countries. This, too, is a manifestation of a single world reality instead of a fragmented one.

By getting fast-emerging markets like India involved on the global stage, you are well positioned to act quickly and effectively against new concerns like deep fakes. Who can forget, for instance, the deep fake about Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg bragging about abusing “stolen data” from users? In India, we’ve had morphed videos of politicians criticizing their opponents. As you can tell, the problem is not restricted by geography.

Also, an occurrence in one country automatically sparks an interest elsewhere because the concerns are similar and the solutions could be replicated anywhere.

It almost seems as if there are new challenges popping up every day:

- Take cryptocurrency – it’s become a rage globally and is catching on fast in India. However, not everyone understands how it works or the risks associated with it. It’s up to self-regulators to ensure that advertising around it educates consumers about the risks too, not just the rewards.
- Sustainability is another area for us to ally on. The environment is a priority area for today’s consumers, especially the young. This offers an opportunity for brands to make misleading green claims. This is why the World Federation of Advertisers – which represents 90% of global marketing spends – is focusing on them, declaring it as the theme for all of this year.
- Technology platforms like Google, Facebook, TikTok and others – which are so much a part of our lives now – are global and so are their policies. This, too, is an opportunity to speak as one voice.

These are all complex issues that need us to work together because the forces involved are global.

Most importantly, given the pace at which digital technology is progressing, you don’t know what lies around the corner. And the evolution of the next new trend, tool or technology happens at warp speed. Influencer advertising is just one example of it – look how quickly it’s taken marketing by storm! So, conscience keepers of the advertising industry have very little time now to respond; they need to always be ready for whatever hits next.

This is why advertising’s self-regulators are coming together to form a universal knowledge and insights pool as well as a worldwide collaboration to deal with contemporary challenges.