

CAST BRIEFING 40 - July 2025



Denial and delay in UK advertising: The role of the trade bodies in climate inaction

Key messages:

- Senior UK advertising professionals recognise that their industry contributes to climate change by promoting the consumption of polluting goods and services. These professionals want the advertising industry to take accountability and make changes.
- Advertising professionals find their trade bodies' efforts to tackle the industry's contribution to climate change inadequate. Trade bodies' initiatives deal with operational emissions from advertising, rather than the wider emissions associated with consumption due to advertising.
- Professionals also express concerns around a culture of denial and delay within their trade bodies, which seems to work to suppress progress on advertising regulation.
- Policy makers should consult senior industry advertising practitioners when crafting policy to decarbonise the advertising industry. Such practitioners may provide a more objective view than the trade bodies.



Centre for **Climate Change**
and **Social Transformations**

CAST is a global hub for understanding the crucial role that people play in fighting climate change. The CAST team is based across five UK institutions, including the University of Bath (our centre hub), the University of Manchester, the University of East Anglia and Cardiff University, as well as the charity Climate Outreach.

Introduction

This briefing is intended as a resource for policymakers and practitioners interested in crafting regulations to limit the impacts of advertising for high carbon products and services, including fossil fuels. It focuses on the role of trade bodies and can be read alongside '[CAST Briefing 35: Clamping down on fossil fuel advertising: What industry professionals want policymakers to know \(and do\)](#)', which makes broader recommendations from the same research data.

Advertising is highly effective at promoting the sale and consumption of goods and services, as well as influencing consumer behaviour. The UK advertising industry is the third-largest advertising market globally, worth £42 billion. It supports the UK economy and creates jobs. However, advertising that promotes highly polluting goods and services – including fossil fuels – threatens the UK's target of reducing emissions by 81% (compared to 1990 levels) by 2035. In other words, fossil fuel advertising is a barrier to tackling climate change.



Figure 1: A Vueling advert for flights to Spain at St Pancras railway station, London.

Senior advertising professionals express ongoing concerns around the industry's role in delaying climate action and the lack of transformation in the sector. Trade bodies, such as the Advertising Association (AA) and the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA), have, as part of their role, a mandate to communicate the concerns of their members (advertising companies and professionals) to the Government. Our research reveals what senior advertising professionals think of their trade bodies' efforts in this regard, as well as the trade bodies' public stance on addressing emissions from advertising.

Findings

Methods

We interviewed thirty senior professionals in the UK advertising industry over the course of a year. We asked them how they thought the sector might move towards decarbonisation. We then analysed online content, including blog posts, media articles, academic papers, publicly available business documents, and event recordings, to further explore key ideas emerging in the interviews.

1) Trade bodies demonstrate a significant lack of leadership on decarbonising the advertising industry

The senior professionals we interviewed felt their industry trade bodies are hindering sustainable transformation in advertising. Interviewees acknowledged that the trade bodies have an initiative called Ad Net Zero, which encourages advertising companies to reduce *operational* carbon emissions – those coming from activities such as using energy in offices or filming adverts. However, interviewees found this initiative inadequate because it ignores the wider environmental impact of the industry – the emissions that result from encouraging the consumption of polluting products. These are often referred to as *advertised emissions*.

“Ad Net Zero and the team behind it, I don't know how genuine, how successful any of it is... It's literally just for an agency to say, ‘look we're doing something around [sustainability]’ and so it's kind of an agency green washing itself.”

“It's not actually a Net Zero plan, there's no detail in there... to be honest, we are debating whether to stay on there as a supporter.”

“I guess that all the vested interests in Ad Net Zero - so the IPA kind of jointly work on that, with the AA - but their entire remit is still focused on operations.”

“The [advertised] emissions coming from [marketing businesses] is something like, I think it was 400 times more than the operational emissions.”

Figure 2: Quotes from senior advertising professionals on the Ad Net Zero initiative and advertised emissions.

2) Trade bodies deny the wider impacts of the advertising industry

Senior professionals said they had highlighted the importance of reducing advertised emissions to UK trade bodies. However, trade bodies generally downplayed and refused to acknowledge the wider environmental effects of advertising. Senior professionals described a culture of denial and delay, likely arising due to trade bodies wanting to preserve income from membership fees of big brand advertisers.

“I think [the trade bodies] are worried to even acknowledge the fact that the work we do with high-emitting clients is detrimental to the world.”

“I don't think that [the trade bodies] are comfortable with change, and I think that they're trying to minimise the change that happens.”

“The ad industry trade bodies like the Advertising Association and the IPA, I mean, just vested interests, you know, it's like, they're captured by the highest paying clients.”

“You know that [the AA] are funded by the advertisers, and I'm sure various fossil fuel clients have paid them a lot of money.”

“I'm frustrated by the AA's lack of spine ... I have no faith that the AA will do anything about this.”

“We are also a member of [another digital trade body], but I don't think they are lobbying government in the same way that actually the AA is... it's like the AA are being seen in the right conversations rather than actually being concerned with decarbonisation.”

Figure 3: Quotes from senior professionals on how UK trade bodies operate.

Our analysis of online sources supported interviewees' perceptions that trade bodies are downplaying the significance of emissions from the effects of advertising. We found that trade bodies quote research, sometimes research they have funded themselves, to make this claim to industry and government. [In one industry article](#), the AA explicitly warned its audience that the impact of advertising emissions is minimal, so tackling them won't help to decarbonise the advertising sector.



Figure 4: A screenshot taken from an [online article](#) titled: 'Ad chiefs warn: "Advertised emissions" won't help our industry to reach net zero', published by Campaign Magazine on 15th June 2023.

To emphasise the point that advertised emissions have minimal environmental impact, trade bodies even claim that advertising overall is ineffective in many cases. They promote the concept that advertising does not grow markets or sales but instead creates a 'displacement' or 'substitution' effect whereby a sale moves from one item or service to an alternative (i.e. no extra consumption is created).

“The sale of one product or service means the lost sale of another in most markets. As a result, the consumption emissions of the product or service are replaced.” [IPA](#)

“Advertising’s displacement effects – the sale of one product or service means the lost sale of another in most markets.” [IPA](#), [AA](#) and [ISBA](#)

“Most advertising does not grow markets... why, then, is it the case that most advertising seems not to grow market size?... Common sense suggests that at least some of their sales increases will have come from consumer substitutions.” [Ad Association](#)

“9 out of 10 cases did not demonstrate a market effect” (When speaking about advertising effectiveness), [Ad Association](#).

Figure 5: Quotes from advertising trade bodies on the ineffectiveness of advertising, from several online sources.

While a substitution effect may occur in some instances, academic and industry research shows that advertising is generally highly effective at growing markets, sectors, brands and product sales. Furthermore, the industry professionals we interviewed found the notion of advertising’s ineffectiveness confusing and counterintuitive. However, this stance enables trade bodies to deny any promotion of consumption and therefore avoid the need for advertising regulations or restrictions – something they have consistently done in relation to [fossil fuels](#), aviation, tobacco, [gambling](#), [high-fat](#), [salt and sugar food advertising](#) and in a variety of [other situations](#).

Commenting on advertising restrictions on fossil fuel products in a [Campaign Magazine article](#), the IPA argued: “A ban on the advertising of these products would therefore achieve next to nothing in terms of an effective solution to addressing the climate crisis, but would cause significant consequences to our business, including job losses.”

Conclusion and recommendations

This research found a deep concern among senior advertising professionals regarding the wider environmental effects of their work, and a frustration at their trade bodies’ denial of these issues. Policy makers who are interested in how advertising might contribute to achieving net zero goals should seek advice from expert advertising practitioners, rather than trade bodies, which appear to suffer from vested interests.

Further reading

- Harvey, V. (2025). Clamping down on fossil fuel advertising: What industry professionals want policymakers to know (and do). CAST Briefing 35.
- Harvey, V. (2025). Challenging Advertising: The potential for environmental change through the values and institutional work of senior managers. Doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia.
- Harvey, V., Packham, C. (2025). Parliamentary Briefing, Fossil Fuel Advertising & Sponsorship.

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