

CAST BRIEFING 35 - January 2025



Clamping down on fossil fuel advertising: What industry professionals want policymakers to know (and do)

Key messages:

- Senior advertising professionals, working in the UK's largest advertising agencies, acknowledge that their industry is hindering climate goals. Advertising and PR agencies promote environmentally damaging products and encourage mass consumption.
- Some advertising professionals have tried to steer their organisations away from working with highly polluting clients, especially oil and gas companies. However, their efforts have largely been unsuccessful.
- Government regulation may be the most effective way to limit the advertising industry's contribution to climate change. However, there has been little policy progress on this issue in the UK.
- Policymakers should re-assess the current legislation on advertising for fossil fuels and other highly polluting goods and services.



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

CAST is a global hub for understanding the systemic and society-wide transformations that are required to address climate change. Based at the University of Bath, our additional core partners are Cardiff University, the University of East Anglia, the University of York, the University of Manchester and the charity Climate Outreach.

Introduction

This briefing is for politicians and policymakers working on climate, media and communications.

How is advertising preventing us from reaching Net Zero?

In June 2024, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres urged governments worldwide to ban fossil fuel advertising. He called on advertising and PR firms to stop accepting new fossil fuel clients and sever ties with existing ones. While some countries have already made strides in restricting such advertising – most notably France, which banned ads for energy products linked to fossil fuels in 2022 – the UK has yet to explore similar measures for oil, gas, or other highly polluting products and services.



Figure 1: A screenshot of news coverage on the June 5th climate speech of UN Secretary-General António Guterres

The UK advertising industry – the third largest globally with revenues of \$41 billion – continues to promote environmentally harmful goods and services. Advertising for oil and gas companies, for example, masks the rollback of their climate commitments, conveys misleading impressions of their net zero targets, and normalises the continued use of oil and gas, at a time when our fossil fuel dependence needs to drastically reduce.

More broadly, advertising perpetuates a society of mass consumerism. The UK has committed to legally binding Net Zero targets, which cannot be reached without behavioural shifts, including significant reductions in consumption while public narratives encourage reducing, reusing, and recycling, the UK advertising industry encourages people to 'buy-buy-buy'. Advertising could contribute to as much as one-third of the carbon footprint of each UK consumer.

How can we reduce the advertising industry's contribution to climate change? The House of Lords has investigated how advertising could support lower carbon consumption and activist groups have pushed for restrictions on polluting products. But what do senior advertising professionals – those at the heart of the industry – think?

What do advertising professionals think?

In light of this knowledge gap, CAST interviewed 30 senior professionals from major UK advertising agencies over the course of a year. They were asked why they cared about the climate crisis and how their values motivated them towards taking action in their organisations.

Key findings reveal how deeply conflicted industry professionals feel, and despite advocacy for change from within the industry, some feel their profession is hindering the pace of change. One study participant commented on how the industry promotes fossil fuel products:

“We are complicit in the advertising industry... we are complicit in the delay [to Net Zero]. We target politicians and financial decision makers to make them think that fossil fuel clients are part of the solution – like, that's in the briefs.”

How are advertising professionals pushing for change?

Many of the professionals CAST interviewed, senior yet not powerful enough to change corporate strategy, had attempted to steer their organisations away from working with polluting clients, particularly oil and gas companies. Senior professionals' actions were directed at national heads of their agencies as well as the C-suite in the global corporate holding groups that own them. Efforts included organising internal campaigns, petitioning executives, forming climate groups, highlighting climate risks and persistently presenting evidence as to the benefits of disengaging from polluting clients.

However, participants reported that their efforts were largely unsuccessful. They felt this was because agencies were unwilling to relinquish the significant revenues from oil and gas companies (and other large polluting brands). It is important to note that many smaller advertising agencies now refuse to work with fossil fuel clients, retaining an ethical stance on the issue. They have abandoned oil and gas revenues, as well as revenues from other controversial clients, yet continue to thrive, demonstrating that cutting ties with polluting clients can still lead to business success.

The consequences of senior professionals' attempts to disengage their agencies with polluting clients were at times significant. Some faced a backlash – even losing their jobs – and others resigned out of frustration. One professional commented:

“I was made redundant ... and I'm absolutely certain it's because of the work that I was doing. On a personal level, I ended up in a very, very, dark place.”

Another professional, who handed in her notice, commented:

“It suddenly became very clear to me... I was part of an industry that was having a massive identity crisis and a recognition that we were just as bad as the oil companies and anyone that was extracting. I mean, I don't know how you go to bed at night feeling your conscious is clear.”

What needs to be done?

Many advertising professionals expressed their concerns that their industry's governing body, the Advertising Association (AA), is failing to engage on this issue. Whilst the AA's mandate is to communicate the concerns of its members to the Government, there was no indication that it had, or would, feedback about the issue of agencies working with highly polluting clients. One senior professional commented on his frustration:

“They [The AA] absolutely do not have a point of view or won't have a point of view... so, yeah, I'm frustrated by the AA. I have no faith that the AA will do anything about this.”

Another commented:

“They [the AA] have not touched the conversation around, for example, evaluating your clients and moving away from, for example, big oil clients. That's not something that they are pushing.”

Many professionals thought that change would only come through government regulation. They pointed to the success of past tobacco advertising restrictions as a precedent for how similar measures could benefit the environment. They also discussed how recent legislation around high fat-salt-sugar foods had been brought in by the Government, despite resistance from invested brands. One professional commented:

Findings

“There should be a ban on fossil fuel advertising. And when you look at the data that shows that as soon as you ban advertising of cigarettes people smoke less, it's got to be a good thing that they [fossil fuel companies] are not allowed to kind of pedal their dirty wares.”

Another commented:

“I would love the government to step in and say: ‘from next year you'll no longer be allowed to advertise any of your services’... unless a much more stringent regulation comes into [force]... I don't think that the agencies are going to voluntarily stop working with these clients. It's just too embedded.”

Recommendations

What can policymakers do?

CAST's research highlights the need for policymakers to recognise calls from senior advertising professionals who ask for government reform around advertising for polluting goods and services, especially oil and gas products. Having unsuccessfully tried to create change from the inside, industry professionals feel government regulation is the only effective remaining avenue to explore.

Policymakers should re-assess the current legislation on advertising for fossil fuels as well as other highly polluting goods and services and consider implementing tobacco-like restrictions to enable the UK to move towards its Net Zero goals.

Further reading

- CCC 2023. The implications of behavioural science for effective climate policy (CAST). Available: <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/the-implications-of-behavioural-science-for-effective-climate-policy-cast/>
- HOL 2022. Mobilising action on climate change and environment: behaviour change. Climate Change Committee.
- KITE, G., & VANDUYNSLAGER, L. 2023. Selling unsustainable: The influence of advertising in emissions via UK consumption.
- U.N. 2024. Secretary-General's special address on climate action "A Moment of Truth" [Online]. Available: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2024-06-05/secretary-generals-special-address-climate-action-moment-of-truth-delivered> [Accessed 04.10.2024].
- UK-GOV 2024. UK shows international leadership in tackling climate crisis.

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We research and develop the social transformations needed to produce a low-carbon and sustainable society; at the core of our work is a fundamental question of enormous social significance: How can we as a society live differently – and better – in ways that meet the urgent need for rapid and far-reaching emission reductions?

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