

The Advertising Association comments on a proposed new order

The think-tank Compass has issued a manifesto titled "The Advertising Effect", offering a solution to the country's (and possibly the world's) dissatisfaction with life, love and well-being.

The picture of a society unhappy because of the choices now available, the debts it has accumulated, and general social ills expressed in the document: point to advertising as the root cause. A set of proposals have been outlined to induce a utopian vision of yesteryear.

One of the headline proposals is to ban all advertising in public spaces. Outdoor advertising generates income for national government, and local authorities, which in turn funds free amenities such as bus shelters, and a number of free sites for local messaging. If public advertising was banned local authorities would be forced to increase local taxation to meet the reduction in income; but more likely well-lit, safe public areas, shelters and subsidised transport, particularly in rural areas, would be detrimentally affected. A throw-back to a darker time?

Another idea proposed is for advertising agencies to give more back to society through using their skills to help "change our behaviour: to volunteer, give, downsize, vote, pay taxes or recycle". This is already well underway, through COI campaigns for the UK Government, with an advertising spend of £193m in 2008¹ and various commercial ventures such as the business4Life programme, as part of the Government's Change4Life initiative. This is enabling businesses to work with, and support, the community.

Advertising agencies also either commit to work for charity clients on a *pro-bono* basis, or aim to offer to undertake projects for charities or good causes periodically. Charities clearly see the value of advertising and

¹ AA/Warc *The Advertising Statistics Yearbook 2009*

communications since they spent £355m in 2008, a little more than the pharmaceutical industry at £341m².

The moral arguments stressed throughout the document, presume a “them and us” conflict with the advertising industry when, in fact, the 248,600³ people employed in the creative industries are consumers too. To suggest that a free society requires the state to dictate when, where and how we communicate with each other contradicts the concept of liberty and free thought/speech.

The think-tank calls for “debate”, when advertising is one of the most commented on and debated industry sectors in the UK – by definition almost everyone has a point of view, whether in the industry or not. However, it is unfortunate that the Compass document is poorly referenced, making a weak case for points raised.

The UK also enjoys the most stringent regulation, admired worldwide, and administered by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) the independent regulator of advertising across all media - to protect the public and any vulnerable groups - by ensuring ads are legal, decent, honest and truthful by applying the advertising codes. The [CAP/BCAP](#) codes are constantly reviewed and revised, and have undergone a public consultation phase last year with many individual citizens responding; the results of which are due to be made public shortly. We do not know if Compass took the time to engage in this process.

Advertising also funds media pluralism and therefore freedom of speech. As a society we are creative, vibrant and have a need to interact and communicate with each other. Advertising offers information, advice, keeps

² AA/Warc *The Advertising Statistics Yearbook 2009*

³ DCMS Creative Industries Economic Estimates, February 2010
http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/publications/6622.aspx

prices and brands competitive which benefits consumers, and thereby offering us a choice.