What's Hot?!

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Navigating HFSS Restrictions: What Brands Should Know

With the UK government set to tighten HFSS (high fat, sugar and salt) advertising restrictions from October 2025, the media and advertising industries are facing a landscape shift. The new regulations significantly limit when and where HFSS product advertising can appear. Navigating this change will require strategic agility, creative thinking and early planning.

From 1st October 2025, HFSS advertising will be banned on Ofcom-regulated TV and on-demand platforms before 9pm, and across all paid-for digital advertising targeting UK consumers at any time. This includes display, video, social media ads, paid search (including retail media), influencer marketing, advertorials and in-game ads. Even paid listings on aggregator sites like food delivery platforms are covered.

Some formats are exempt – including brand-led campaigns (with careful execution), B2B marketing, digital-only audio (like podcasts and music streaming) and small business ads. However, the burden of compliance and interpretation lies with advertisers, making clarity and foresight crucial.

What Actually Qualifies as an HFSS Ad? The key test is whether the 'average UK consumer' would reasonably identify an ad as promoting a specific less healthy product. Direct reference to HFSS products – including packaging or distinctive branding – are almost certainly within scope. Even stylised or background references can breach the rules, especially for brands closely linked to HFSS categories.

Brand campaigns may be permissible, but only if they avoid product-specific cues. This grey area is sparking debate and uncertainty, as marketers weigh how far they can push messaging without regulatory action.

Industry-Wide Impacts: The impact will extend beyond HFSS categories. All advertisers will feel the ripple, particularly when it comes to AV inventory. As more spend shifts to post-9pm slots, we can expect rising evening airtime costs, relaxation of traditional clash codes and even a shake-up in trading models.

Out-of-home (OOH) media is also expected to feel indirect pressure. As advertisers redirect budget away from restricted digital and AV formats, demand for high-impact, unrestricted formats like OOH may increase – driving up costs and lengthening lead times. Booking early and locking in premium placements will be key.

This is not just a compliance issue – it's a strategic one. To thrive in this environment, brands must embrace:

Media Effectiveness: The fundamentals remain – campaigns need both reach and resonance. What's changing is how and when to achieve that reach. As visual inventory tightens, creative effectiveness becomes even more vital.

Fame Campaigns: High-impact, talked-about campaigns can bypass restrictions, sparking organic sharing and coverage. Fame-driven strategies boost ROI and help brands stay visible in lew of paid touchpoints.

First-Party Data: With cookies crumbling and regulations tightening, first-party data has never been more valuable. It enables sharper targeting and more resilient digital strategies across compliant channels.

Cross-Channel Coordination: Alignment across channels, messages, creative assets and timings is now business-critical. Disjointed plans will struggle to perform under these complex conditions.

Looking ahead, the HFSS regulations mark a major shift, but they're also a catalyst for smarter, more creative marketing. By planning ahead, leaning into brand-building tactics, and investing in fame and first-party data, agencies and brands can turn disruption into a competitive edge.

Why Outvertising's Advocacy Playbook should be on the agenda for Pride 2025

In a time of poignant and growing hostility which threatens LGBTQIA+ people, specifically trans folks, Outvertising's Advocacy Playbook provides an opportunity for Adland to learn and improve, while also answering the question of 'what can I do to help'.

Created by Chris Dunne's industry-wide organisation, the playbook focuses on harnessing the power advertisers hold to shape the cultural landscape, in order to enlighten and inspire, and to create change for a fairer future for LGBTQIA+ people.

But, beyond Adland, why is LGBTQIA+ inclusion beneficial for everyone? There are plenty of reasons why businesses should be advocating and catering to queer audiences, ethically and economically.

In terms of the business case, audiences are getting queerer, with spending power now becoming too large to be overlooked. The LGBTQIA+ community annually spends £33 billion in the UK, $1 trillion in the US, and $3.7 trillion globally.

Allies are also getting louder, with 2 in 3 Brits under 60 believing it is important to fight discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people. Given that globally, according to Kantar research, 75% of consumers say that diversity and inclusion – or the lack of it – influences their purchase decisions, brands cannot afford to ignore the LGBTQIA+ community; doing so risks losing consumer trust, within and beyond the community.

This view is backed by research from the Unstereotype Alliance and Saïd Business School at Oxford University, which shows empirically that progressive advertising drives significant impact on sales, both short- and long-term. It also strengthens brand equity with a strong multiplier effect. Consequently, embedding progressive advertising into commercial strategies can help futureproof growth.

Anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment has grown, with Community Database Dysphorum recording a 212% increase (2018-2023) in content published about transgender people and rights, the majority of it negative. Over the same period, transphobic hate crimes have experienced a 110% increase, strengthening the conclusion that the anti-trans preoccupation in the media is directly linked with the rise in violence. As advertisers, we must examine how our spending decisions are fuelling this issue. Strategies should reflect brand values, and investments assessed accordingly.

The playbook outlines a 3-step framework that businesses can adapt and use to build equity into their operations. It is split into 3 stages: 'set the foundation', 'build an inclusive workplace' and 'advocate for societal change'. Each stage has three main callouts. In stage 1, *set the foundation*, businesses are encouraged to articulate their values, champion their people and evaluate internal policies and processes. This is fundamental to building authentic allyship – not just performative gestures once a year.

By committing to inclusive practices year-round, advertisers have the power to shape a more equitable future – where pride is not just celebrated but genuinely felt.

Podcast Advertising Forms a Powerful Part of The Media Toolkit

With the IAB recently releasing a new State of Audio Ad Tech report, now is a good time to reflect on audio in advertising.

The IAB report found that while some form of audio accounts for 31% of consumer's time spent on media, only 9% of media budgets were dedicated to sound. One specific audio medium that received repeated callouts in the report, for both its recent growth and ongoing innovation, is podcasts. It's therefore worth exploring how the past year has advanced this relatively new channel's advertising potential.

While it is no surprise that podcasts are continuing to grow in popularity, the key development for advertisers is the advancement of dynamic ad insertion and creative optimisation at scale. Creatives tailored to specific audiences can now be inserted, swapped or adapted, depending on live factors like location, time of day, weather and even mood. This lets advertisers respond to their audience's environment and context in real time, affording the brand's message greater relevance and resonance.

A key target for advertisers and brands when running a campaign is cost-effective reach – delivering your creative to the right audience, in the right place, at the right time. Against this goal, these recent developments in podcast advertising offer a clear use-case of how audio could strategically fit into media plans.

New research suggests that audio, and podcasts in particular, play a distinctve role in the behavioural change model of advertising. Differentology found that 64% of listeners pay full attention to podcast ads, while Kantar found that purchase intention increases across the board after exposure to podcast advertising.

In a similar vein, the7stars recently worked with SimplyBe to tailor an audio campaign to emotional connection by utilising a well-placed podcast partnership with a range of famous faces, including Fleur East and Zawe Ashton. Positive sentiment toward the brand increased, organic search increased year-on-year, and particular praise was directed toward the personal stories that the campaign championed from audiences.

As new research and advertising developments in podcasts continue to evolve, and culminate in award-winning work, it is vital to keep reassessing how we use different media channels to tell individual stories effectively. In this case, podcasts excel as a medium that delivers highly resonant key messages by combining dynamic advertising with already-captivated audiences.

The Golden Age of Attention

As media effectiveness continues to evolve, and AI drives new measurement innovation, there has been much debate in recent years about the role of attention as a metric of success. While it's not the elusive 'silver bullet' that marketers have been hunting for decades, with different ramifications across channels, attention is playing an increasingly central role in media strategy.

Research published in *Warc* earlier this year found that 47% of advertisers plan to use attention metrics on 'most' media buys. Though attention metrics are not new to the media industry, they remain harder to quantify than other leading indicators, such as Share of Voice or Touchpoint Recall. Given this challenging environment, the shift towards attention-based buying can be viewed as a revolutionary step, a leap of faith, or something in between.

Dr Karen Nelson-Field, a prominent figure in media science, argues that the advertising industry is experiencing a significant transformation: the 'next attention revolution'. Her research underscores that traditional metrics like impressions and viewability fall short in capturing genuine consumer engagement. Instead, Nelson-Field champions attention-based metrics that evaluate the quality and duration of consumer interaction with advertisements, offering a more accurate predictor of advertising effectiveness.

The icing on the attention cake is that these metrics can also stimulate fresh conversations with creative teams. By understanding which formats and messages capture the most attention, brands can build more compelling creative from the outset.

At the7stars, we have proactively embraced this shift by integrating attention measurement into our media planning processes. Our proprietary Gravity Planning approach incorporates attention metrics to enhance investment allocation decisions, ensuring that media strategies are not only data-driven but also aligned with actual consumer behaviour. This integration allows us to tailor campaigns to the specific attention thresholds required by different brands and messaging strategies.

Our independence and neutrality afford us the flexibility to adapt our planning strategies to the unique needs of each client and campaign. This agility ensures that we can adjust attention benchmarks as necessary, optimising for the most effective outcomes. Furthermore, our collaborative relationships with a diverse array of creative agencies enable us to consider attention metrics throughout the entire campaign development process, from initial concept to execution.

As measurement capabilities continue to mature, attention metrics are providing the foundation for a new planning imperative. By grounding our media planning in attention-based insights, we are well equipped to navigate the complexities of the modern media landscape. This approach not only enhances campaign performance but also ensures that we are delivering meaningful engagement for our clients in an increasingly attention-scarce environment.

Does Advertising Have an Age Problem?

The latest results from the Advertising Association's bi-annual All In Census offer much cause for optimism. Since 2021, the proportion of women in C-Suite positions has grown from 39% to 46%. Across all ethnic groups, fewer people now express a likelihood to leave the industry due to discrimination or lack of inclusion. Representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals remains strong in both C-Suite positions and the wider workforce. Reasons to be cheerful, one, two, three.

Amidst progress, however, age exclusion in Adland is a glaring outlier. According to a new IPA report, just 8% of those working for UK advertising agencies are over 50, compared with one-third of the UK workforce and over one-fifth of the information and communications sector. This figure has remained flat, indicating that older talent continues to vacate the advertising industry at pace.

The reasons for this disparity are complex and many, with menopausal policies, caregiving responsibilities, and an industry culture that favours youthful vigour all likely contributors. But the consequence is clear: a disproportionately young industry continually under-represents and misrepresents older people.

A 2022 analysis from System1 and ITV found that just 23% of the 1000 highest-spending TV ads featured a person over the age of 55. Even fewer ads portray an older character in a leading role, according to Channel 4. And when they do appar, stereotypes abound – from tiredness to tech ineptitude.

One defence of age stereotypes is that older people are simply harder to influence. Yet, this should be further evidence of the benefits of procuring age-inclusive media. A Gransnet study found that 69% of over-50s would be more receptive to advertising if it better portrayed their age group, with almost half actively avoiding brands that ignore their demographic. In a country in which the average age of a linear TV viewer gets older by the year and over-50s control nearly 70% of household wealth, brands who get this right unlock serious spending potential.

But age inclusion must extend beyond creative portrayals. Subconscious bias risks contaminating channel strategies. Katy Howell, CEO of social media agency Immediate Future, recounts younger marketers hesitating to buy Facebook ads due to their own lack of interest in the platform. As UKOM data reveals the online lives of under-35s and over-55s are diverging. Planners and buyers must understand their target audiences – even if it means buying channels they consider 'uncool'.

Some brands already excel at this. Under their 'Made for Midlife' platform, JD Williams celebrates the 8.5m middle-aged women in the UK. After aligning with the perfect property – ITV's older dating show *My Mum, Your Dad* – the brand saw 10% uplift in consideration ahead of the crucial Christmas season.

As the spotlight shines on inclusivity following the latest All In reveal, age discrimination in media must rise up the agenda. Flexible, age-inclusive policies are essential for retaining over-50s talent – so is better audience understanding. Campaigns that reflect older people more accurately are not just morally justified – they could well hold the key to untapped profitable growth.

Bountiful Cow Study Claims All Newsbrands Are 'Brand Safe'

A new study from the7stars' sister agency, Bountiful Cow, has found that premium news inventory flagged by automated brand safety firewalls delivers higher attention scores for advertisers than content flagged as 'safe'.

The study claimed that across established publishers including News UK, Mail Metro Media, and Reach, over 800,000 articles had been blocked by brand safety filters – even those focussed on innocuous stories like the Super Bowl and Halloween.

Bountiful Cow, which has a stated mission of finding 'relative advantages' for clients, further stated that all impressions on quality newsbrands are brand safe, and that accessing such content can help challenger brands to gain an advantage in their categories.

US Brands Scaling Back Pride Initiatives

A number of large US-based brands have quietly scaled back investments in LGBTQIA+ events, including Pride celebrations in New York City and San Francisco. These and others have reported a combined drop in corporate sponsorships totalling nearly $1m.

While this shift has been largely attributed to the Trump administration's hostility towards DEI initiatives, tighter marketing budgets could also be a contributing factor, according to analysts. In a similar vein, Bloomberg has reported that corporate sponsorship for UK Pride events is also down this year.

As many sponsors back out, this creates an opening for equality-driven brands to form stronger partnerships with the LGBTQIA+ community in their place.

Global Adspend Hits $1trillion in 2024

A Campaign Red report has found that global adspend surpassed the trillion dollar mark for the first time in 2024. This followed a 5.3% growth in real-terms investment, a rebound following two successive years of decline.

More than half of this total was spent with just five companies: Google, Meta, ByteDance, Amazon and Alibaba. However, the report also found that adspend was the only area of marketing budgets in growth, with spend on agencies declining.

UK adspend was previously forecast to grow by 6.3% this year, surpassing £45bn, according to the Advertising Association. However, as noted in the Q1 IPA Bellwether Report, UK marketing budgets are now declining for the first time in four years.