



# ***What's Hot?!***

**May 2026**



## How Brands are Adapting to New LHF Regulations

Four months into the new Less Healthy Foods (LHF) restrictions, the industry is continuing to adapt to the new regulatory landscape. As with any new regulation, this initial period has been shaky – with the ASA recently striking down the first ads under the new rules – but advertisers have risen to the challenge to create fame-driving campaigns for their brands.

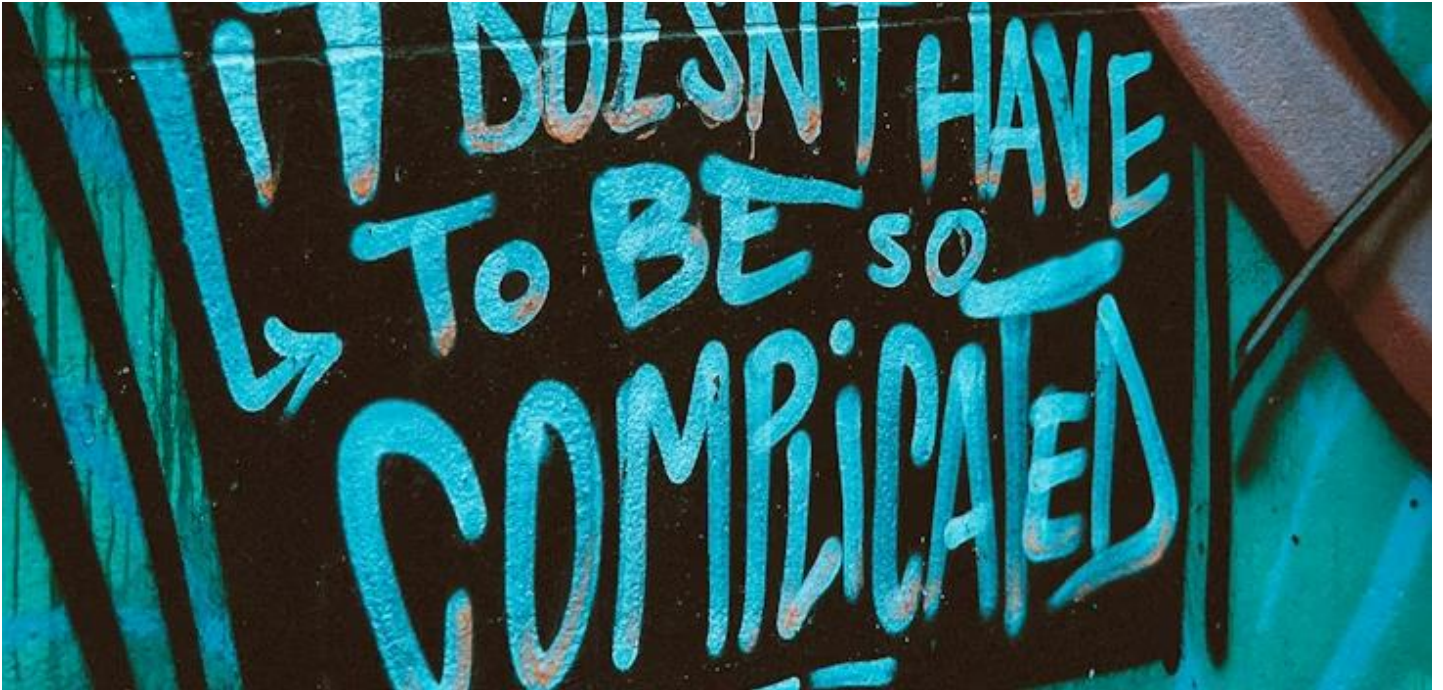
Though the restrictions officially came into force in January, the industry voluntarily adopted the new rules back in October, and planning had begun months earlier still. While the regulations posed challenges for brands – particularly those in the food and beverage industries which had traditionally invested heavily in AV – they were also an opportunity to experiment and challenge conventions.

Whether through changing brand strategies and creative approaches, or by switching up the channels on a plan, LHF restrictions have touched all areas of the advertising industry. Chief among these is the Outdoor market. Many of the most iconic FMCG campaigns of recent years have utilised OOH as a primary channel, from IRN-BRU's 'Made in Scotland from Girders' to 'It has to be Heinz'. With OOH not subject to the national LHF restrictions, the channel has gained greater prominence for many food and beverage brands, while driving up competition for sites. This has knock-on effects far beyond the food and beverage category.

While brands subject to the new restrictions have innovated, LHF-compliant brands have sought to capitalise on the opportunity to drive stronger cut-through. As Matt Jackson, the7stars's planning director for Froneri, a leading ice cream manufacturer with brands including Rowntree's ice lollies, notes, 'the new regulations have created whitespace for us to advertise where our competitors like Walls cannot. The key area where we've seen this is within digital, and this has allowed us to make use of the top performing digital activations from the wider Froneri portfolio from previous years across online video, social and display.'

Indeed, while OOH is not subject to the national restrictions, local LHF bans – including on the Transport for London network – have long been in force. As Jackson notes, this has further created opportunities for compliant brands. 'Across OOH, there have been examples of local councils, such as that in Manchester, banning LHF brands across their sites. This therefore became an opportunity location for Rowntree's to dominate, and as a result, we've focused additional spend there through engaging large format displays. This has granted us the opportunity to concentrate our spend in these LHF whitespaces and increased our share of voice within the category.'

With the regulations still in their infancy, the initial uncertainty remains, and more brands will inadvertently fall foul of the restrictions before the new normal is fully settled. However, far from doom and gloom, the new restrictions have provided new opportunities – both for brands subject to LHF rules to get out of their comfort zones, and for those excluded to pursue new opportunities to grow. With further regulation likely to occur in future, advertisers will continue to innovate to meet the changing demands of the industry.'



## Who Is Responsible for LHF Compliance in Programmatic Advertising?

As LHF (Less Healthy Foods) advertising regulation reshapes the UK advertising market, one question continues to divide the industry: who is responsible for ensuring programmatic creatives are compliant?

The legal answer appears straightforward. Regulators generally place primary responsibility on the advertiser — the brand promoting the product. If an LHF campaign breaches advertising rules, the advertiser is usually the first organisation asked to explain how and why the ad was approved. Programmatic advertising complicates this as delivery is distributed across multiple layers of technology, agencies, publishers, and automated systems.

From the advertiser's perspective, complete control is difficult to achieve. Modern campaigns can involve multiple DSPs, dynamic creative tools, audience data providers, exchanges, and hundreds of publishers. Brands may argue they are acting responsibly by approving compliant creative assets, applying audience restrictions, and relying on specialist agencies and platforms to execute campaigns correctly.

Media agencies often see themselves as the operational managers of compliance risk. Agencies typically configure targeting, manage inclusion and exclusion lists, oversee contextual controls, and monitor campaign delivery. Because they directly control campaign execution, many believe they share significant responsibility for ensuring LHF compliance.

Yet agencies do not fully control the environments in which ads ultimately appear. Audience data can be probabilistic, inventory metadata may be inaccurate, and placements can shift within milliseconds through real-time bidding systems.

Ad tech platforms take a different view. DSPs, SSPs, and exchanges usually position themselves as infrastructure providers rather than legal decision-makers. They offer tools such as contextual targeting, age-gating, brand safety controls, and reporting systems, but often stop short of guaranteeing compliance. This distinction matters because most programmatic technology operates on signals and probabilities rather than certainty. Platforms may facilitate compliance but rarely accept sole responsibility for determining whether a campaign is lawful.

Publishers also sit in a difficult position. While they control the environments where ads appear, many programmatic transactions happen automatically through exchanges with limited visibility into campaign-level decisions. Publishers may block categories or label child-directed content, but many argue they cannot realistically verify whether a specific product or audience strategy complies with HFSS rules.

Increasingly, legal experts believe LHF enforcement is moving toward a shared responsibility model. While advertisers remain primarily accountable, regulators are paying closer attention to whether agencies, platforms, and publishers applied reasonable safeguards and acted responsibly within the areas they controlled.

In practice, LHF compliance is no longer simply a creative approval issue. It has become a supply chain governance challenge involving brands, agencies, technology providers, and media owners. The industry's broader challenge is that programmatic advertising was built for efficiency and automation, not necessarily regulatory transparency.

As LHF enforcement evolves, companies across the ecosystem are likely to face growing pressure to demonstrate clear processes, stronger controls, and documented compliance efforts. Ultimately, responsibility may not rest with one party alone. Instead, the future of LHF compliance in programmatic advertising will depend on how effectively the entire ecosystem can manage risk together.



## When The Going Gets Tough, Brands Get Tougher

The IPA [has released](#) its latest *Bellwether* report into spend in the UK advertising industry for Q1 of 2026. The report, which is always hotly anticipated, uses trended spend data for individual channels to forecast future growth and decline. While providing a macro view of the industry, this report can also arm marketers with clarity on future media opportunities.

The headline stat is that marketing budgets are on the rise, increasing by +7.3% in Q1 2026, compared with 0.0% in Q4 2025. Without accounting for channel-specific trends, this rise is significant considering the current geopolitical and global economic uncertainty that has so far plagued 2026. The steep rise indicates that the oft repeated saying that: 'When times are good you should advertise, when times are bad you must advertise' still holds true; with consumers keeping their pockets tight, brands are dipping into their own to maintain salience.

Going deeper, at a channel level the outlook is more complicated. Video and online advertising are driving spend growth as both areas recorded increases of +5.7% quarter-on-quarter. However, the proportion expected to be spent on published media brands has declined, reflecting that the growth in spend is not one-way traffic. This likely indicates that budgets are being funnelled into a broader set of performance-driven channels, while brands continue to focus on AV as a brand building channel that communicates trust and fame. As consumers' purse strings tighten, building trust with audiences becomes even more important to retain their loyalty. This will only heighten if wage growth continues to struggle to keep pace with inflation.

As media investment returns to growth, so too has positive sentiment among many adlanders. Recent data from the Drum indicates that confidence levels have rebounded within the industry, with the proportion feeling positive about their role going from -19.0% in Q4 2025 to +0.6% in Q1 2026. This highlights that, despite the economic pressure faced by consumers, advertisers stand ready to face the challenge.

While the industry is in a more positive mood, this did not translate into how those who work in the advertising industry feel about the wider landscape. Industry-wide sentiment still stands at a negative -21.0%, although this is the highest reading in 5 quarters. This tells us that the wider macro-economic environment is still expected by many to worsen and have a knock-on effect on the advertising industry, but individuals are expecting their own businesses to weather the storm.

The latest IPA report showcases strong results for the advertising industry but still urges caution amidst the positive headlines. Overall, the industry is performing strongly, but there is an underlying sense of concern, predicated upon the virulent and volatile times in which we live. Moreover, on a channel level, it is important to note that spend increases are not universal, with traditional channels continuing to decline. This points to a shifting advertising landscape overall, but what is certain is that spending on advertising is currently seen as a critical necessity rather than a nice-to-have by businesses.



## 'Dopamine Extreme': How Consumer Priorities are Shifting in Uncertain Times

Graduating uni. Getting married. Buying your first home. Having children. These milestones were once near-universal, making lifestage a reliable predictor of the type of audiences a brand could reach.

But clear paths are long gone. As traditional weddings are scaled back or delayed, people rent for longer, and family planning is put on the back burner. The way we track lives is changing. As major life milestones become unattainable, unpredictable or undesirable, more achievable wants carry greater significance.

As priorities evolve, spending habits shift too. For brands, this poses a challenge, but those who recognise these shifts stand to benefit from changing consumer needs.

**The rise of dopamine-driven decision making:** When the things that are traditionally viewed as fuelling happiness no longer feel achievable, many place greater emphasis on things that feel good in the moment. In prior crises, this manifested as 'the lipstick effect', which, while still relevant, is taking a different shape.

'Little treat' culture – quick decisions that leave the purchaser with something to look forward to, be that a parcel, tickets or an appointment – has gained prominence across social media. Here, users showcase everything from an inexpensive chocolate bar to a matcha as their own miniature daily dopamine hit.

Such content is typically flooded with comments from viewers saying things like, 'you deserve it'; when big life goals feel unreachable, consumers feel they deserve a little boost. This takes on greater meaning as global conflict pushes prices up. While, traditionally, consumers would cut back, such small treats take on an outsize role while major financial outlays – saving for a home, a new car – are kicked down the road.

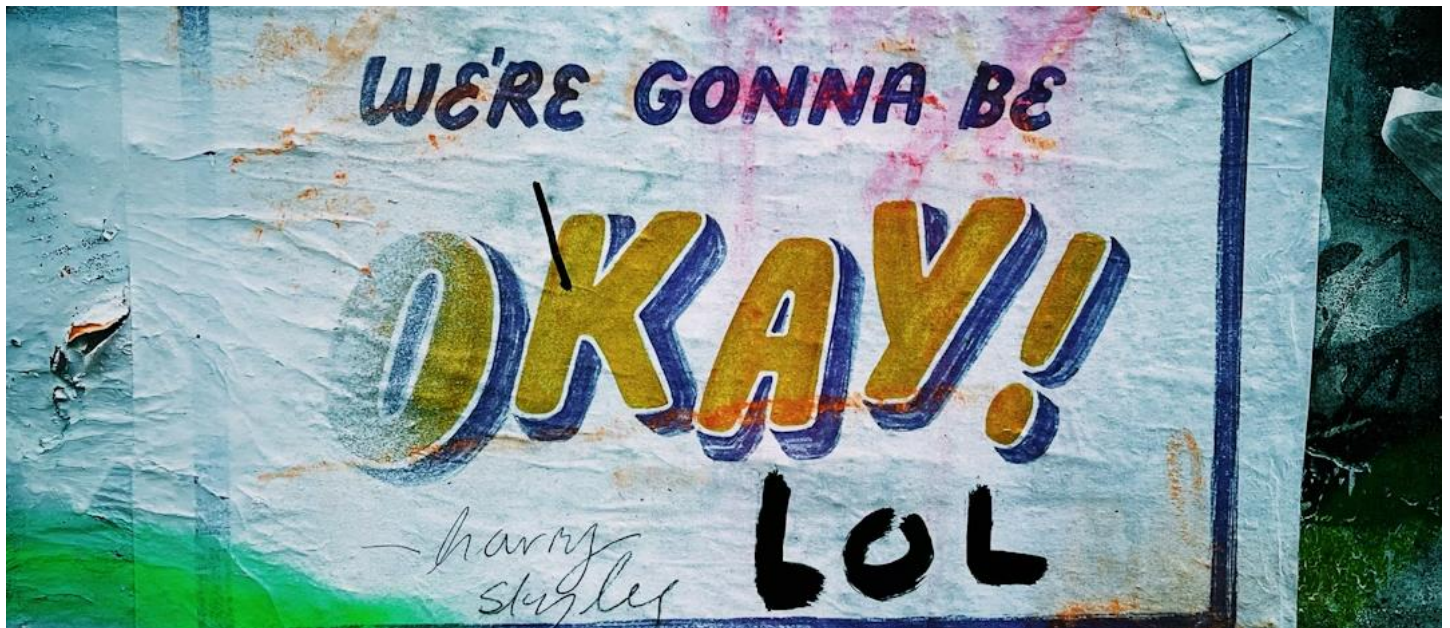
This shift is changing both how consumers rationalise their spending and why they seek social reinforcement. Purchase decisions once viewed as unnecessary are increasingly framed as affordable forms of self-care, particularly among younger audiences navigating economic instability. In this environment, small luxuries no longer feel frivolous; they feel earned. Peer recognition goes a long way towards validating those decisions, transforming everyday purchases into shared cultural moments.

Brands can tap into this mentality by highlighting their place in these small, dopamine-driving rituals. Bringing this to social platforms, particularly with user-generated content, will drive targeted cut-through among audiences.

It's not just little treats that are providing relief. As the7stars QT data show, holidays and short breaks are consistently prioritised by Brits, even in times of economic uncertainty. Be it tickets to Coachella or a trip to Bali, the shorter lead time of travel makes it feel more attainable than larger life milestones.

**How brands can adapt:** While brands may have once looked at women, in Surrey, in their late 20s and once been targeting them with wedding venue, engagement ring, pregnancy test or new build estate advertising, now, changing consumer priorities renders such demographic-based targeting unreliable.

Adopting a more nuanced audience approach, one based on attitudes and behaviours over demographic attributes, will ensure brands are better placed to find their customers. Additionally, brands that want loyalty from their customers should expect to give some loyalty back. While consumers are being cautious with spending now – delaying major life events while chasing that more immediate dopamine kick – their dreams will not go away. Those brands which champion the little treats now will be rewarded later.



## Oops, I Did It Again: The Role of Offbeat Humour in a Crisis

A faulty software update that crashed millions of computers worldwide. A fried chicken chain running out of chicken. A lorry full of KitKats being stolen in an elaborate heist.

What do each of these events have in common? All are examples of brands suffering seemingly catastrophic events – each certain to cause major disruption to sales – and embracing the chaos, through a self-mocking social media presence and tongue-in-cheek marketing, ultimately coming out the other side a stronger brand overall.

In the former's case, cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike leaned into the event by publicly [accepting](#) an award for 'Most Epic Fail', akin to Hollywood's elite showing up for a Golden Raspberry for their own performance. Less than two years later, the brand recently [announced](#) having experienced its 'best year ever'.

Back in 2018, KFC UK's chicken crisis prompted the brand to rearrange the letters on its logo, one letter short of an obscenity, reaching a [combined audience](#) of more than a billion. And in KitKat's case, its own unfortunate event led the brand to create a 'stolen KitKat tracker', [generating](#) some \$224m in earned media in just ten days.

Humour has always been a key asset in the marketer's toolkit, with brands ranging from Ginsters to Current Account Switch Service having long since mastered the art. But in the social media age, where ordinary people can reach millions within minutes through a viral post, its role is evolving.

As brand marketing shifts from a one-to-many to a many-to-many relationship, fuelled by an army of content creators and memes waiting to pounce on a viral trend, brands can no longer control the narrative around a crisis – many instead choose to encourage and amplify fans to make fun of it.

This is evident from the replies to KitKat's [official statement](#) regarding the chocolate theft. Through the power of AI image generation, users came armed with a litany of Breaking Bad, Scarface, and Willy Wonka-themed memes. The result was that a potential PR catastrophe immediately became a global sensation, providing millions in earned reach.

Of course, such an offbeat crisis management strategy will not work for all brands, and there are examples of brands that have missed the mark. If an event is likely to have created harm, it is not the best fit for a self-mocking apology.

Yet humour remains a powerful tool for companies, helping forge relationships with consumers seeking light relief in trying times. Brands looking to lean into humour should be playful, experimental and, above all, hand over control of the narrative to their audiences.