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Media Release

ASAS sees increase in feedback about online and derogatory advertisements

The Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore (ASAS), an advisory council to the Consumers Association of Singapore (CASE), received substantially more feedback regarding advertisements that appeared on the Internet and on mobile devices in 2015 as compared to 2014. The tabled feedback received for 2015 is attached at Annex A (Table 1). For online advertisements, ASAS received feedback on 91 occasions in 2015 across all industries, double the number in 2014 (45). In addition, feedback about derogatory advertisements was received on 13 occasions, up from six in 2014.

The statistics on the five industries with the most feedback in 2015 may be viewed at Table 2.

Online advertisements

ASAS received feedback on 91 occasions in 2015 about advertisements that were seen on the Internet and personal mobile devices. The spike may be attributed to the following:

- With widespread consumer adoption of technological innovations, consumers in Singapore are spending more time on the Internet, social media and their mobile phones. Businesses are venturing online and increasingly are putting advertisements on their websites, social media channels and electronic direct mailers (EDMs) to reach potential customers.
- With online business models becoming increasingly popular, many brick-and-mortar businesses have ventured to the online space resulting in a boom in e-commerce due to the popularity and convenience of e-shopping. As a result of the lower barriers of entry, as well as an eagerness for market share in a crowded online marketplace, not all online advertisements have been placed with a view toward responsible advertising to consumers.
- With more eyes on online advertisements an increase in public feedback from this area is not unexpected. In the course of its investigations, ASAS also noted that some retailers held the mistaken belief that the Singapore Code of Advertising Practice (SCAP) does not apply to their online advertisements and that they are free from the restrictions of traditional media. ASAS would like

to highlight that SCAP applies to advertisements in all media, including electronic communications and websites. The key premise of SCAP is that all advertisements must be legal, decent, truthful and honest.

According to the feedback received, some consumers were misled by discounts and rates that were not as attractive as advertised, false depictions of products in pictures or questionable claims about product efficacy.

In the light of this trend, ASAS is working on guidelines for digital and social media advertising that will encourage businesses to engage in ethical online advertising. It conducted a public consultation exercise on the draft guidelines from 7 December 2015 to 8 January 2016. ASAS is reviewing the comments it received and the guidelines will be finalised by the end of the second quarter of 2016. ASAS takes a stern view of breaches of SCAP and will implement measures, such as adverse publicity and informing the media owners to block the advertisements, against businesses that repeatedly engage in unethical advertising.

Derogatory advertisements

In 2015, ASAS received feedback about derogatory advertisements on 13 occasions, up from six in 2014. This may be seen as a result of the following:

- Local consumers are becoming better-informed through the news and social media about what their counterparts in other developed countries deem to be derogatory depictions of women and minority groups. Hence consumers are more inclined to voice their objections when such depictions appear in advertisements in Singapore.
- As a result of globalisation, Singapore is also home to international communities of various races and faiths. Local advertisers may be unaware that certain imagery, language and portrayals that they select for their advertisements are insensitive and derogatory to these groups of people.

The most highly-publicised of these was an advertisement placed by a restaurant in a busy commercial shopping district that featured the posteriors of female models. Four members of the public felt that it was sexist. Other feedback that ASAS received involved imagery and depictions that the individuals felt were derogatory toward their own ethnic groups. When informed by ASAS, the advertisers expressed that their intention was not to offend the public. Nonetheless, ASAS informed them that their advertisements had to be modified or removed.

ASAS would emphasise the importance of being sensitive in the preparation of advertisements and marketing activities. Advertisers should follow the SCAP ethos that advertisements should be non-derogatory and promote the shared values of racial and religious harmony in Singapore.

Beauty feedback remains highest

As in 2013 and 2014, feedback about the beauty, hair and slimming industries remained the highest across all the industries. Most of the feedback was given by members of the public who were sceptical of the claims made by businesses about the effectiveness of the advertised products and services. Several of these claims were not supported by appropriate studies and data, resulting in ASAS informing the businesses to modify or cease the advertisements.

However, the absolute amount of feedback from this industry and its percentage of the total feedback have dropped. This may be the result of measures that were taken in 2015 to promote more responsible advertising in the industry. For instance, ASAS had provided guidance to the media owners in the vetting of these advertisements and shared what was acceptable advertising. Separately, industry associations such as the Spa and Wellness Association Singapore (SWAS) introduced measures to raise the standards of accountability in the industry. More work needs to be done, however, to ensure that industry players use only claims that can be delivered on and are backed by rigorous and thorough scientific evidence. ASAS will continue to work with the stakeholders to bring about this improvement.

As the marketplace and society continue to mature and evolve, so will the nature of advertising. ASAS will continue to keep abreast of these developments and raise awareness to ensure that all stakeholders maintain a high standard of ethical advertising in Singapore.

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Chairman
Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore (ASAS)

Annex A

Table 1: Total feedback from 2013 to 2015. The feedback includes queries, requests for advertising advice and complaints that are either consumer-to-business or business-to-business in nature.

| Year | Total Feedback Received |
|------|-------------------------|
| 2013 | 307 |
| 2014 | 273 |
| 2015 | 272 |

Table 2: Top 5 industries for feedback from 2013 - 2015

| No. | 2013 Industry | 2013 Feedback | 2013 % of Total Feedback | 2014 Industry | 2014 Feedback | 2014 % of Total Feedback | 2015 Industry | 2015 Feedback | 2015 % of Total Feedback |
|-----|-----------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Beauty (Includes Hair & Slimming) | 78 | 25.4% | Beauty (Includes Hair & Slimming) | 117 | 42.8% | Beauty (Includes Hair & Slimming) | 54 | 19.9% |
| 2 | Food & Beverage | 22 | 7.2% | Food & Beverage | 21 | 7.6% | Food & Beverage | 31 | 11.3% |
| 3 | Travel | 19 | 6.2% | Finance | 21 | 7.6% | Health | 19 | 6.9% |
| 4 | Telecommunications | 12 | 3.9% | Health | 17 | 6.2% | Finance | 17 | 6.2% |
| 5 | Electrical & Electronics | 12 | 3.9% | Electrical & Electronics | 11 | 4% | Travel | 13 | 4.8% |