# LHF advertising curbs reshape UK food and drink media strategies ahead of October rollout



In the first quarter of 2024, the advertising landscape for food and drink brands in the UK has been significantly shaped by a newly defined concept: "Less Healthy Food" (LHF). This term encapsulates the recent regulatory changes banning advertisements for a large portion of the national diet on television before 9pm as well as entirely in digital environments. Known officially as HFSS (High in Fat, Sugar, and Salt), the newly adopted LHF moniker is now used by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA).

The implications of the LHF regulations extend beyond the food sector, impacting media planning across the advertising industry. Observers note that any alterations in supply and demand dynamics, particularly in TV and digital media, are likely to influence all stakeholders involved. The consequences of these changes cannot be ignored by marketers, making awareness of LHF critical.

The path to these regulations has been lengthy. Initial expectations suggested that only imagery related to LHF products would be targeted for removal; however, a January statement from the ASA indicated that all advertising for brands regarded as "synonymous" with LHF products would also be prohibited. This has raised concerns, particularly among retailers, regarding the potential disruption to their marketing campaigns, especially during the lucrative Christmas period. According to research from Kantar, eight of the ten most effective Christmas ads for 2024 would not be permissible after the LHF regulations come into effect.

The new regulations derive from government impact assessments conducted on the effects of TV and digital advertising. The assessments estimated potential losses in ad revenue — £204 million from TV and £184 million from digital platforms, based on 2017 figures. The studies suggested, however, that the overall benefits to public health and the economy would outweigh these losses over a span of 25 years. They projected £800 million in healthcare savings and an additional £1.9 billion in economic benefits stemming from improved health outcomes.

Despite these forecasts, the extensive rollout of the regulations has prompted significant discussion among advertisers and media firms, who argue that several factors could undermine the current cost/benefit analysis. One key point of contention is that the government’s assessments assume that online advertising carries the same weight as television advertising, a stance that critics challenge due to the limited scientific evidence connecting online ads to calorie consumption.

Moreover, the economic effects on advertisers not linked to LHF products remain unaccounted for. Analysts predict that restricting food and drink advertising to post-watershed slots while reallocating digital budgets may elevate costs in other advertising segments, such as press, radio, and outdoor markets due to increased demand yet unchanged supply. This, they argue, could lead to decreased return on investment (ROI) for advertisers, possibly resulting in multinational corporations shifting budgets away from the UK.

The ASA’s guidance on advertising policies set for October further complicates matters. Current proposals stipulate that only branding linked to specific LHF products would be subjected to regulation, leaving some ambiguity regarding broader brand advertisements.

As advertisers brace for the impending regulations, many LHF brands are already pivoting towards promoting compliant products. Retailers, for example, may focus more on loyalty schemes, a strategy that might circumvent LHF limitations if brand advertising remains acceptable. However, it appears unlikely that traditional television advertising can sustain its effectiveness if restricted to the more crowded post-watershed period.

In response to these regulatory challenges, brands may need to rethink their media strategies. Utilising channels such as print, outdoor, and radio could offer alternative avenues for advertising, albeit likely with lower blended ROI. Effective adjustments may require ad planners to explore creative solutions, such as localised messaging and more commitment to media partners.

The introduction of audio and out-of-home (OOH) advertising, meanwhile, is expected to continue to evolve as brands seek to maximise outreach. Major media organisations, including Global and Bauer Media Group, may play pivotal roles in integrating these channels more effectively.

As brands begin to navigate this transitional landscape, opportunities in other marketing domains may also arise. With digital advertising for LHF products facing significant restrictions, physical marketing initiatives and in-store experiences are set to gain traction. This pivot could see brands adopt a publisher-like approach, akin to strategies employed successfully by companies such as Red Bull and Foot Asylum to cultivate substantial media platforms over time.

With the ASA's latest consultation recently concluded, updated guidance is anticipated in the lead-up to the 1 October rollout. As Christmas marketing strategies materialise, the combined pressures of evolving regulations and changing consumer preferences may prompt advertisers to optimise their campaigns in unprecedented ways.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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