# UK food companies increase advertising spend ahead of new regulations



Food companies in the UK ramped up their advertising expenditures by £420 million in 2024, representing a significant 26% increase from the previous year. This surge in spending occurred just months ahead of the implementation of new regulations designed to curb the nation’s obesity crisis, which includes a ban on advertising unhealthy food products during television commercials past 9pm and a complete prohibition of such advertisements online starting in October 2024.

This advertising boom coincided with a particularly strong year for snack food sales, with consumers purchasing an additional 45.4 million packs of chocolate, cakes, and crisps from leading brands. According to James McDonald, the director of data, intelligence, and forecasting at WARC Media, the correlation between increased advertising spend and sales growth is evident: “I think the timing is interesting, given the introduction of HFSS [foods high in fat, salt or sugar] regulation this year."

Campaigners suggest that food companies are changing their marketing strategies to avoid the effects of the new regulations, opting to utilise outdoor posters, audio ads on streaming services like Spotify, and collaborations with social media influencers, all of which fall outside the scope of the impending regulations. The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is expected to release guidelines to clarify how these new rules will apply, particularly regarding brand advertisements that do not display identifiable products but focus on the brand name itself.

The Food and Drink Federation has raised concerns, arguing that the advertising industry may suffer due to uncertainties surrounding the new regulations. The government’s junior health minister, Ashley Dalton, expressed a perspective in favour of brand advertising, stating that “pure brand advertising” should remain unrestricted. This reasoning posits that merely associating a brand with less healthy products does not necessarily warrant regulatory action against the advertisement.

Advocacy groups such as Bite Back 2030 have drawn attention to the prevalence of junk food advertising, especially in deprived areas. Their surveys revealed that nearly 50% of advertising posters in cities like Liverpool, Birmingham, and London were for food and drink, with 44% of advertisements for unhealthy options located in the most deprived regions.

While the government prepares to implement these new advertising restrictions, some experts remain sceptical about their potential effectiveness. Dr Chris van Tulleken, an NHS doctor and broadcaster, highlighted that the forthcoming regulations may cover less than two-thirds of foods deemed unhealthy, diminishing their impact. He expressed concerns about the saturation of unhealthy food marketing, noting its pervasive presence across shops and public spaces, making healthier options less accessible for many consumers.

Historical data reveals a troubling trajectory regarding obesity in the UK. The National Heights and Weights Survey indicated that obesity rates in 1980 were 6% for men and 9% for women. By 2022, these figures had escalated to 28% of adults classified as obese, with processed foods comprising a significant portion of UK diets.

Efforts to regulate unhealthy food advertising began in earnest in 2007, but continued advocacy from health campaigners has prompted the introduction of increasingly stringent measures over the years. The latest regulations aim not only to restrict advertising but to push food brands towards reformulating their products.

Industry representatives, including Rob Newman, the director of public affairs at ISBA, raised concerns regarding the financial implications of these restrictions. He warned that potential losses in advertising revenue could reach hundreds of millions of pounds, disrupting existing marketing plans that many companies had developed under previous legislative understandings.

As the ASA prepares to refine advertising guidelines and the new regulations take effect, both public health advocates and the food industry are intensifying their campaigns to influence the narrative around these critical changes in advertising policy.

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

## References

* <https://www.warc.com/content/feed/uk-ad-spend-grows-97-to-reach-106bn-in-q3-2024/10253> - This URL supports the increase in UK advertising spend, especially by food companies, in 2024, aligning with the significant rise in advertising expenditures by the food industry ahead of regulatory changes.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-on-restricting-unhealthy-foods-when-advertising-on-tv-and-on-demand-programmes> - This URL provides details on the UK government's consultation regarding restrictions on unhealthy food advertising, which includes a ban on such ads after 9 pm on TV and online starting in October 2024.
* <https://www.asa.org.uk/about-asa.html> - The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is involved in preparing guidelines for new advertising regulations on unhealthy foods, which is relevant to how these rules will apply to brand advertisements.
* <https://www.foodanddrinkfederation.org.uk/> - The Food and Drink Federation represents the food industry and has raised concerns about the impact of new advertising regulations on the sector, reflecting the uncertainty and potential financial implications for advertisers.
* <https://www.biteback2030.com/> - Bite Back 2030 is an advocacy group that has highlighted the prevalence of junk food advertising, particularly in deprived areas, emphasizing the need for stronger regulations.