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Industry as a partner for sustainable development

Advertising

European Association of
Communications Agencies (EACA)
World Federation of Advertisers (WFA)



*Developed through a multi-stakeholder process
facilitated by:*



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Industry as a partner for sustainable development

Advertising

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Disclaimer

In a multi-stakeholder consultation facilitated by the United Nations Environment Programme, a number of groups (including representatives from non-governmental organisations, labour unions, research institutes and national governments) provided comments on a preliminary draft of this report prepared by the World Federation of Advertisers (WFA) and the European Association of Communications Agencies (EACA). The report was then revised, benefiting from stakeholder perspectives and input. The views expressed in the report remain those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Environment Programme or the individuals and organisations that participated in the consultation.

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Part I: Foreword and executive summary

1.1 Foreword

This report is a contribution from the advertising sector to the deliberations at the World Summit for Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, (South Africa), 26 August to 4 September 2002. Submitted by the World Federation of Advertisers (WFA) and the European Association of Communications Agencies (EACA), this report evaluates progress within the sector since the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development (UNCED) meeting in 1992, in Rio de Janeiro, (Brazil), and identifies key challenges for the sector in the future. The report aims to portray the world of advertising, its role in sustainable development and a balanced overview of those issues where advertising can contribute to the successful implementation of the principles and activities of Agenda 21.

The report is part of an important effort by the business community in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme to prepare situation reports from several key sectors as an input for the Johannesburg discussions. We would like to acknowledge the leadership provided by the UNEP DTIE⁽¹⁾ Advertising and Communication Forum in assisting a diverse sector like advertising to come together to address these issues.

The report reflects the views and perspectives of the industry, that is EACA and WFA, on issues related to the complex concept of sustainable development. Many organisations within the industry and outside the industry have provided information, comments and suggestions. In particular we thank AAAA (American Association of Advertising Agencies), McCann-Erickson, Unilever and Procter & Gamble for their contributions and support.

1.2 Executive summary

Sustainable development is about ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come. Advertising, in all its forms, has a key role in providing this.

Perhaps unlike many of the other sectors producing reports, advertising is part of all of our lives – we all do it – from manufacturers of branded products and services, to governments, to NGOs, to private citizens selling unwanted items or offering their services. This report, however, focuses on the commercial advertising sector – comprising advertisers and advertising agencies.

Advertising helps improve quality of life around the world through what it does – communicating messages to a wide range of audiences about products, services, companies, consumer behaviour or government priorities – and importantly it enables the vast majority of media vehicles which bring news, education, information and enjoyment, to exist. Advertising contributes to all three pillars of sustainable development: economic development, environmental protection and social responsibility.

Advertising does this through a variety of general and specific roles in the marketplace. To achieve sustainability through the market, effective competition is essential to promote innovation and efficiency. Competition thrives on advertising and advertising thrives on competition. Through competition and the development of mass markets, advertising helps bring down the price of goods and services that can improve consumers' lives. Competition promotes innovation which leads to better products, and more variety and choice for consumers. Advertising leads to more power, and greater media choice for consumers.

(1) UNEP DTIE is the United Nations Environment Programme, Division of Technology, Industry and Economics. Internet address: www.uneptie.org

Beyond this general role, there are many positive, business-building opportunity areas where advertising can contribute to sustainable development by improving quality of life around the world, through:

- promoting new products and services that can really improve quality of life – such as health products and services. This area is particularly relevant in developing economies, where product campaigns often include health education and awareness raising;
- providing social or environmental messages, whether as part of corporate or public service campaigns;
- promoting innovative products which have particular environmental or social benefits, including through labelling or other information schemes;
- promoting more sustainable use of existing products, so that any environmental or social benefits are actually realised;
- promoting the sustainability attributes and performance (environmental, social and/or economic) of companies. With the increased interest in corporate social responsibility, consumers increasingly want to know about the companies behind the brands.

Advertising is essential if we are to achieve sustainability through the market, but its role and effects have increasingly been challenged

that the 2.8 billion people who live on under USD2 per day have appropriate products and services available to improve their lives.

There is also a wide misperception that in developed countries, advertising is a root cause of over-consumption. This is to misunderstand what advertising can and cannot do. Advertising cannot make people buy things they don't want or need, nor does it change values or create new values. However, it is very skilled in detecting new values and trends in consumers, and using them. As sustainability increases in consumer awareness and values, so it can form the basis of advertising messages and brand equity. Advertisers and advertising agencies cannot, however, regulate the overall demand for goods and services.

As well as improving quality of life through what it does, advertising also contributes to sustainable development through the way that it does it – through environmental protection and corporate social responsibility of its own operations. The advertising industry recognises the direct and indirect environmental impacts of its activities, though these are relatively modest compared with most industries. They are being addressed and reviewed on a regular basis, together with the needs for environmental management systems and sustainability reporting.

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