

## 'How to' Guides

### How to complain against sexist advertising

Lilith first began monitoring media portrayals of women in February 2003. We quickly realised that the much-vaunted new equality of men and women did not extend to advertisements and our TV screens, where women are still used as shorthand for passive, silly, and dependent, or in the new 'ladette' incarnation, as being predatory, amoral and in need of a man to calm them down.

More damningly, advertisers seem incapable of addressing female consumers of traditionally 'male' products such as cars, mobiles or computers. Lilith is therefore committed to challenging misogyny wherever possible.

In the interests of helping other groups, individuals and organisations express their distress at stereotyping or objectification of women in the current media, Lilith offers some information on relevant watchdogs to complain to.

#### 1 Adverts on TV – terrestrial or satellite

If you saw the advert on terrestrial or satellite TV, you should complain to Ofcom. You can find a complaint form on its website, or if you prefer, you can write to:

Ofcom Contact Centre  
Riverside House  
2a Southwark Bridge Road  
London SE1 9HA  
0845 456 3000/ 020 7981 3040  
Email [contact@ofcom.org.uk](mailto:contact@ofcom.org.uk)

You need to include as much information as possible about your complaint. For a complaint to be investigated, Ofcom needs the following information:

- Your name
- Your address (including postcode)
- Your email address if this is possible
- A description of the advert (including the product or subject advertised)
- The station (or Teletext page) it was shown on
- Date the advert was shown
- Time the advert was shown
- A summary of your complaint (try to be specific about why it offended you)

Ofcom also handles complaints about programmes; for more information refer to the Ofcom website.

## 2 Adverts in magazines, or on billboards, posters or the internet

These complaints are handled by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). The ASA pledges to enforce 'legal, decent, honest and truthful' advertising, but as it is funded by the advertising industry, it is often slow to act on complaints.

As with Ofcom, the best thing to do is to give as much information as possible about the offending advert, and stress that your point of view is valid and is most likely shared by a great number of consumers. You can fill in an online complaint form from the ASA's website or write to the address below.

The Advertising Standards Authority  
2 Torrington Place,  
London WC1E 7HW  
020 7580 5555

You will need to include the following information:

- The date that you submit your complaint
- Your name (including title and initials)
- Your company (if you are complaining on their behalf)
- Your address (including county and postcode)
- Your telephone number
- Your email address
- The media the advert appeared in (magazine, poster, flyer, billboard, internet, other)
- The advertiser (if known)
- The product or service being advertised (if known)
- Where you saw the advert (500 characters max)
- When you saw the advert (500 characters max)
- Your complaint (1,500 characters max)
- The URL of the advert if known.

If the advert appeared on the internet you may also be able to complain to the IWF (Internet Watch Foundation) at [www.iwf.org.uk](http://www.iwf.org.uk).

## 3 Adverts on the radio

Advertising and programme material broadcast over the radio is subject to approval by the Radio Authority. If you hear something which is unfair, inaccurate, harmful or likely to cause offence, you can contact the Radio Authority below for more details, or email them for a complaints form.

Radio Authority  
Holbrook House  
14 Great Queen Street  
London WC2 5DG  
020 7430 2724

## Some examples of Lilith complaints in the past

### 1 Easyjet billboard advert

In late spring 2003 Easyjet ran an advert on billboards across London. It consisted of a truncated woman's body, focusing on an enormous pair of breasts in a bra and the strapline *Discover weapons of mass distraction*. Lilith's complaint is reproduced below.

#### **Our complaint:**

**Media in which the advertisement appeared:** Poster

**The advertiser:** Easyjet

**What product or service advertised:** Easyjet summer flights

**Where you saw the advertisement:** Bus stop D805 Frame 3 Seven Sisters Road, jct Amhurst Park, Finsbury Park/Manor House

**When you saw the advertisement:** Week beginning 16 June 2003

#### **Your complaint:**

I feel that I must complain in the strongest terms about this advert, featuring a pair of breasts and the rider "discover weapons of mass distraction" as I find it extremely offensive and believe that the advertisers are behaving with the utmost irresponsibility.

Firstly, the posters are placed with no consideration of the community, and are displayed at bus shelters used by predominately school-aged children, and in areas where the sight of barely covered breasts are culturally sensitive to say the least.

Secondly, in a society that harasses and oppresses women by assuming that their bodies and attractiveness is obviously meant for male benefit, the idea of breasts being a woman's 'weapon' to attract a man's attention is repugnant and seeks to objectify women in the worst way possible. The onlooker doesn't even have a woman's face to engage with on the poster, just the objectified and sexualised image of breasts.

Thirdly, this image has a flimsy claim at best of having anything to do with travel at all, unless one entertains the possibility that people travel purely to look at women's breasts and therefore must be encouraged to discover new arrays of bosoms. In focusing entirely on an image of breasts the advertisers create an advert aimed entirely at men, which totally ignores female travellers, trading on the worst kind of gender discrimination.

#### **The ASA adjudication response:**

Easyjet Airline Co Ltd  
Easy Land  
London Luton Airport  
Bedfordshire LU2 9LS

Complaints upheld in last 12 months: 3

**Date:** 30 July 2003

**Media:** National press, Poster, Regional press

**Sector:** Holidays and travel

**Public Complaint From:** Nationwide (x186)

**Complaint:**

Objections to an advertisement, for an airline, that appeared in the Metro, the Daily Express, the Daily Star, The Daily Telegraph, the Evening Standard, The Independent, The Independent on Sunday, the Mail on Sunday, the Sun, the Sunday Express, the Sunday Mirror, The Sunday Telegraph, The Sunday Times, The Times and on posters. The advertisement was headlined "Discover weapons of mass distraction" and featured a picture of a woman's breasts in a bikini top. Beneath the picture was the claim "Lowest fares to the sun".

Some complainants objected that the picture was offensive and demeaning to women.

Other complainants objected that the advertisement was offensive because it trivialised the recent war in Iraq.

Codes Section: 5.1, 5.2 (Ed 11)

**Adjudication:**

The advertisers stated that the advertisement was the latest of a series of topical, humorous and irreverent advertisements. The advertisers said they believed the advertisement was not sexist or demeaning to women; they asserted that they had received positive feedback from both male and female customers. They said they believed the advertisement did not trivialise the recent war in Iraq; the term "weapons of mass destruction" had been in the news for several weeks and they had changed the last word to "distraction" to highlight one of the attractions of being on holiday in the sun. The advertisers explained that they had thought of the phrase first and had sourced a picture to support it. The advertisers stated that the number of complaints received was a small proportion of those who had seen the advertisement.

The Evening Standard said they believed the advertisement was a witty play on a phrase in common usage and did not trivialise the Iraqi war. They believed the woman's body was modestly clothed and not exaggerated. They said they believed the advertisement would appeal to their open-minded and modern readers and they had received no complaints. The Independent and Independent on Sunday said their readers were mostly young and open-minded people who would recognise the humour of the advertisement. The Telegraph and the Sunday Telegraph said they believed the advertisement used traditional "Carry On" humour and did not trivialise the war in Iraq. They said they had received four complaints but the vast majority of their readers had seen the advertisement as humorous

and had not been offended. The Mail on Sunday said they had received one complaint. The Daily Express, the Daily Star and the Sunday Express said they had received no complaints. The Times and the Sunday Times said they had run the advertisement because of a fault in their internal procedures but had received no complaints from their readers about it. The Sun said they had had a very positive response to the advertisement from their readers. The Metro said they believed the advertisement used a clever play on words and was not degrading to women. The Sunday Mirror did not respond.

1. Complaints not upheld.

The Authority considered that the advertisement was light-hearted and humorous. It concluded that the advertisement was unlikely to cause serious or widespread offence.

2. Complaints not upheld

The Authority considered that, although the phrase "weapons of mass distraction" was likely to be seen to refer to recent events in Iraq, the advertisement did not trivialise the deaths, injuries or plight of those involved or affected by the conflict. It concluded that the reference was distasteful but did not trivialise the recent war in Iraq.

## 2 Comic Relief advertising campaign

Comic Relief ran an advertising campaign in 2003 with a reclining, nude Sophie Dahl in a mock-up of the *American Beauty* pose. In the Comic Relief version, Ms Dahl's breasts and genitalia were covered by red noses.

### **Our complaint:**

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F.T.A.O. Kevin Cahill,  
Chief Executive  
Comic Relief  
89 Albert Embankment  
London SE1 7TP

25 March 2003

Dear Kevin Cahill,

We are writing to you on behalf of the women of London to complain about the *American Beauty*-inspired adverts that you ran for RND03 featuring Sophie Dahl reclining naked except for a few positioned red noses with the caption "We've got it covered".

We are the Lilith Project, part of Eaves Housing for Women, a project working towards ending violence against women, and we feel that this advert was a deeply inappropriate choice for a charity that has such a long history of funding women's organisations. As you rightly point out on your webpage, Comic Relief funds large numbers of organisations working towards improving services for women, including funding Women's Aid refuges, the jointly funded Comic Relief/ Home Office Domestic Violence freephone number, and other services including outreach for sexually exploited and prostituted young women and domestic violence outreach.

We therefore cannot understand why you chose to advertise this commendable and essential work by showing an image of a naked, passive young woman whose body you are exploiting for the most cynical publicity reasons. Women who are benefiting from the services that you are funding can only be shocked at your willingness to portray unnecessary and unhelpful stereotypes of women that alienate the very people that you are trying to reach out to and assist.

For these reasons we believe that Comic Relief should in future take the aims of its beneficiaries into consideration. We fully understand that raising money is difficult and that a slick and noticeable campaign is essential for a visible charity, but we feel that it is deeply wrong to alienate and ultimately damage the very people you intend to help by falling back on such a crass PR ploy. Thank you for your attention in this matter and please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further queries.

### 3 Complaint to Phones 4U

The Phones 4U TV advert *Ashamed of your mobile?*, voiced by Paul Merton, ran in early spring 2003 on television after 9pm and at the cinema. A man demands a plaster from his scantily clad female neighbour, then hides his outdated mobile while he repairs his sex doll in front of her shocked face. This advert was so popular that Phones 4U went on to create the DollSoho site.

#### **Our complaint:**

Dear Sir,

I am writing to complain about your promotion *Ashamed of your mobile?* in which you run an internet advertisement called DollSoho (<http://www.dollsoho.co.uk/>) offering customers a chance to pick their "ideal" sex doll, which is then revealed as a choice of mobile phone.

This promotion is not only deliberately ignoring female mobile phone consumers by exploiting male stereotypes and using questions with heavy innuendoes such as whether customers down "the easy pink" or "the difficult brown", it also attempts to mainstream the male-dominated ideals of the sex industry by dehumanising women as being possessions, and claiming in a supposedly amusing way that "going latex" is "bags more fun".

Furthermore, you link this (arguably adult content) site to your official webpage, positively encouraging younger consumers to use it, and offering a Sony PlayStation as an incentive.

For these reasons, I would ask that you remove the promotional site as soon as possible.