



Case Report

1	Case Number	0435/16
2	Advertiser	NSW Rural Fire Service
3	Product	Community Awareness
4	Type of Advertisement / media	TV - Free to air
5	Date of Determination	26/10/2016
6	DETERMINATION	Dismissed

ISSUES RAISED

2.3 - Violence Causes alarm and distress

DESCRIPTION OF THE ADVERTISEMENT

There are two versions of this television advertisement, 15 seconds and 30 seconds. In each the scene is dark with slow moving footage of flames. The voice of the character 'fire' speaks throughout the commercial. The sequence ends with a woman's voice, encouraging people to take action and make a fire plan.

THE COMPLAINT

A sample of comments which the complainant/s made regarding this advertisement included the following:

Advertisement triggers frightening and traumatic memories of bushfire emergencies of recent years.

Advertisement discourages people from believing in emergency services' ability to keep them safe when it says there will always be more houses than fire trucks.

Advertisement terrifying for children (screened at 8.30pm on a school holiday night). Shows a backyard in flames including a bicycle with training wheels in foreground - so it targets children.

Unnecessarily threatening and panic-inducing voiceover and dark images on screen.

THE ADVERTISER'S RESPONSE

Comments which the advertiser made in response to the complainant/s regarding this advertisement include the following:

Background to the advertisements

It is a fact that bush fires are dangerous. Bush fires have the potential to kill and cause significant destruction, along with having long lasting effects on infrastructure and communities.

The I Am Fire campaign was developed as a response to recent bush fire events in NSW and other states. These include the 2009 Victorian bush fires, in which 173 died, and the 2013 NSW bush fires where over 200 properties were destroyed.

The advertisements were developed following research by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre which found the majority of people in bush fire prone areas do not personalise the risk of fire. The advertisements seek to inform viewers of simple steps that can be taken to reduce their risk.

The I Am Fire campaign was developed in 2015 and was first aired across the bush fire season of 2015/16. No formal complaints were received regarding the advertisements during the first year of campaign activity.

The campaign has been subject to the NSW Government annual approval process, including peer review.

Complaint regarding Section 2.3 of the Code of Ethics

The NSW Rural Fire Service rejects any assertion that the advertisements are in breach of Section 2.3 of the Code of Ethics.

Recent bush fire events in NSW and other states clearly demonstrate the danger posed by bush fires. It is a fact that bush fires are dangerous and have the potential to kill and cause significant destruction.

Examples of this include the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday bush fires which killed 173 people, and the 2013 NSW bush fires which saw large and destructive fires which impacted on areas including the Blue Mountains, Port Stephens, Southern Highlands, Coonabarabran and Yass areas. These fires have had a significant and long lasting impact on these communities.

The advertisements demonstrate the real danger posed by bush fires, while presenting viewers with a call to action to reduce their risk of fire.

Research over the past ten years consistently demonstrates that, without a personal/emotional understanding of their bush fire risk, many in the community will not take action. Interventions like our advertising campaigns must engage with residents regarding the risk of loss and destruction [Bushfire CRC synthesis; Skinner & Skinner; 2014; p21].

The advertisements portray the impact of fire on property, such as homes, and not directly on

people. On this basis, the NSW RFS argues that the advertising campaign does not present violence as such.

The NSW RFS argues that showing fire and explaining how fire can be indiscriminate is intrinsic to educating the community the very real risk of bush fires.

The Victorian Bush Fires Royal Commission in 2009 found that deaths could have been avoided if people had made more realistic appraisals of the threat posed by their risk of bush fire [‘Understanding community bushfire safety issues from social psychological perspectives – a discussion paper’; Ruth Beatson and Jim McLennan; 2010; p28].

The NSW RFS strongly rejects the complainant’s assertion that the advertisement ‘discourages people from believing in emergency services’ ability to keep people safe from bush fire’.

It is a fact that there will never be as many fire trucks as there are houses during a bush fire. There are 2.8 million households in NSW, and the NSW RFS has a total of 4,385 fire tankers.

The NSW RFS regularly works to educate the community about the need to prepare for bush fires. Over-reliance on emergency services is a significant risk, and it is important for community members to prepare their properties, have a plan, and take decisive action during a fire event. Not taking these actions, and instead relying on fire services’ sometimes limited ability to put out a fire, increases that person’s risk significantly.

The target audience for the advertisement is people aged 25-54 years of age living in bush fire prone areas. Advertisements have been aired subject to their rating or classification.

The NSW RFS argues that the advertisements do not breach this or any other section of the Code of Ethics.

THE DETERMINATION

The Advertising Standards Board (“Board”) considered whether this advertisement breaches Section 2 of the Advertiser Code of Ethics (the “Code”).

The Board noted the complainant’s concerns that the advertisement included themes that would be frightening to children.

The Board viewed the advertisement and noted the advertiser’s response.

The Board considered whether the advertisement was in breach of Section 2.3 of the Code. Section 2.3 states: "Advertising or Marketing Communications shall not present or portray violence unless it is justifiable in the context of the product or service advertised".

The Board noted that this television advertisement features images of flames consuming a house while the character ‘fire’ speaks about his plan to burn down the house.

The Board noted it had previously considered a similar complaint in case 0508/11 where:

“The Board noted that the advertisement features a darkened screen and the sounds of a

family arguing about sprinklers and getting their belongings, and then we see a burnt out house and the words, “Don’t risk your life on a last minute decision” appear on screen.

The Board noted that the advertisement was screened in Victoria and the complainants mentioned the after effects of the 2009 bush fire. The Board noted that many people were very badly affected by bushfires and that an advertisement such as this which suggests the death of a family is likely to be upsetting for many viewers the topic is very emotive and that some members of the community would find any mention of bush fires, including this advertisement, to be upsetting.

The Board noted that at the end of the advertisement the tagline reads, “Don’t risk your life on a last minute decision” and refers to the Victorian Government website where you can go to make your action plan. The Board considered that whilst the advertisement would be upsetting for some members of the community the important community safety message needs to be broadcast and is designed to draw the attention of the viewer to the importance of being prepared and planning in case a bush fire situation was to occur.”

The Board noted that while community standards can and do change over time the Board considered that the message in the current advertisement is still as important today. The Board acknowledged that some members of the community could find the advertisement to be upsetting but considered that the actual content of the advertisement is factual and informative and the sense of menace used is appropriate in the context of a community awareness message relating to bush fire preparations.

The Board noted the complainant’s concern that the advertisement discourages people from believing in the emergency services’ ability to keep them safe and considered that the warnings in the advertisement are factual statements designed to highlight the necessity to follow bush fire safety tips rather than a suggestion that the emergency services are unable to do their important jobs.

The Board determined that the advertisement did not breach Section 2.3 of the Code.

Finding that the advertisement did not breach the Code on any other grounds, the Board dismissed the complaint.