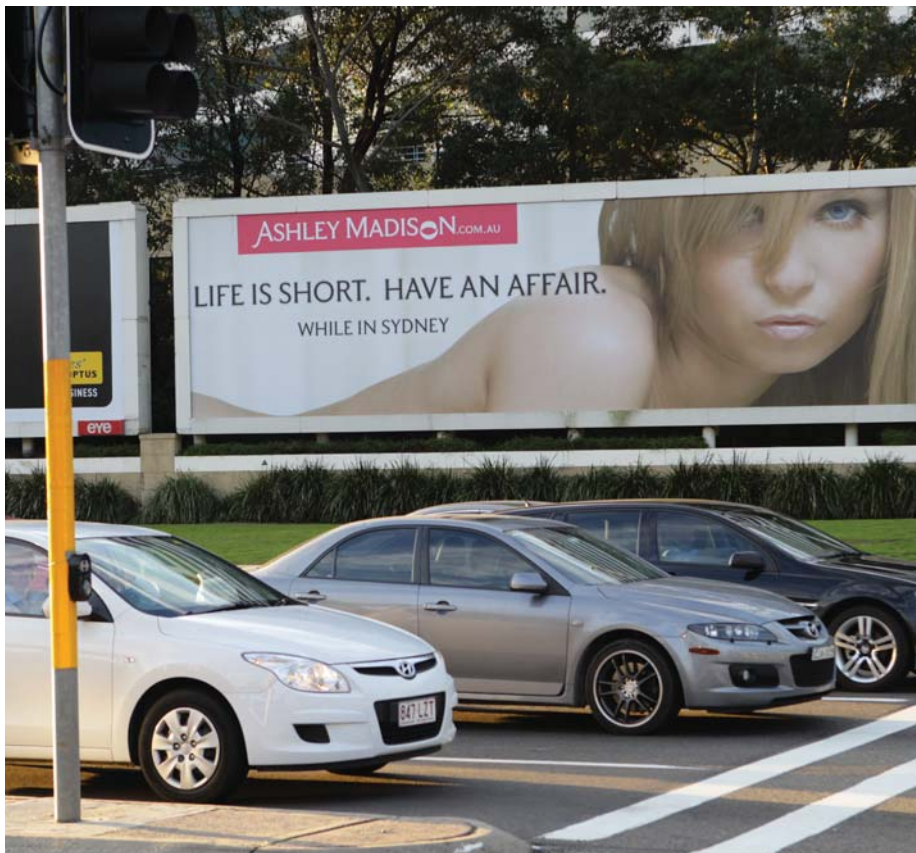


NEWS

Who's watching this space

Community concerns about billboards have led to a parliamentary inquiry.



PROVOCATIVE: Controversial billboards have sparked community complaints. Photo: Newspix

The body responsible for keeping advertisers in check disputes claims that complaints about billboard ads are on the rise.

Attorney-General Robert McClelland has asked the House of Representatives Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee to establish an inquiry into the rules which govern outdoor advertising, following what he described as a steady increase in complaints in recent years.

Several controversial ads have also prompted public debate over the issue, including a billboard at Sydney Airport last year which urged visitors to the city to “have an affair”.

The industry is self-regulated by the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) which is responsible for investigating consumer complaints and ensuring

that advertisers stick to industry codes of practice.

Figures from the ASB show that while ads broadcast on TV make up the most complaints, those shown on billboards come in second.

In 2009 almost 24 per cent of complaints about ads were about those shown outdoors, compared to 16.48 per cent in 2008, 12.8 per cent in 2007 and 3.67 per cent in 2006.

But ASB chief executive Fiona Jolly said those figures do not necessarily show a solid trend.

“Our statistics over the 12 years of operation have shown that outdoor pretty much is the second most complained about medium generally,” she said.

“The percentage of complaints will go from anywhere from 10 to 20 per cent based quite often on whether, for example, there may have been one

particular advertisement campaign that caused a lot of complaints.

“A lot of complaints about one or two ads can skew the percentage of complaints about a particular medium.”

The inquiry is investigating whether the system of self-regulation used by the advertising industry is a rigorous enough safeguard against campaigns which have the potential to offend, such as those using sexually suggestive phrases and images.

It is also exploring whether there are any levers available to the federal government under fair trading laws which could be used to keep the industry in check.

And it is considering the implications of future technological developments such as digital billboards which can switch between several ads or show different ads at various times of the day.

The ASB opposes any move towards government intervention in the regulation of advertisements.

Ms Jolly said the system is arguably more successful than many government mechanisms.

“We have a success rate of 99.03 per cent compliance from advertisers,” she said.

“We have an unbelievable record in advertisers voluntarily removing their ads from whatever medium that the board has decided it can no longer be shown in.”

Ms Jolly pointed out that government regulation would mean a cost to the taxpayer, in contrast to the ASB which is industry funded.

Committee chair Graham Perrett (Moreton, Qld) said he has received a lot of complaints from both his constituents and people Australia-wide about some billboards.

“I’ve had not just from my electorate, but from all over Australia people making contact once I went public on the call for this, saying how upset they were,” he said.

“Maybe there’s a whole untapped sea of discontent out there that doesn’t actually make its way through to a real written complaint.”

Mr Perrett said extra scrutiny of outdoor advertising is needed because unlike other mediums, such as television, families with children do not have the choice to avoid billboard signs they are travelling past.

“I think the fact there has only been 180 complaints over the last three years isn’t necessarily indicative of the community concerns over some of these outdoor spaces and how they’re being a bit too confronting on occasion,” he said.

Ms Jolly said while there are no specific rules applied to outdoor advertising, the ASB board when considering complaints takes into account the fact that billboards are hard to avoid.

“Over the past three years to be honest the board has become more strict with outdoor ads,” she said.

Four billboard ads made it into the top 10 most complained about in 2010 and 2009, with two in 2008.

The most complained about billboard ad last year was a promotion for the “Sexpo” convention held in Brisbane.

It received about 75 complaints but they were not upheld by the ASB.

Hot on its heels was an ad shown at Sydney Airport by a dating agency which encouraged visitors to Sydney to “have an affair” because “life is short”.

It received about 60 complaints and also attracted the attention of the NSW government which voiced its displeasure to the ASB.

The complaints were upheld and the ad was taken down in July last year.

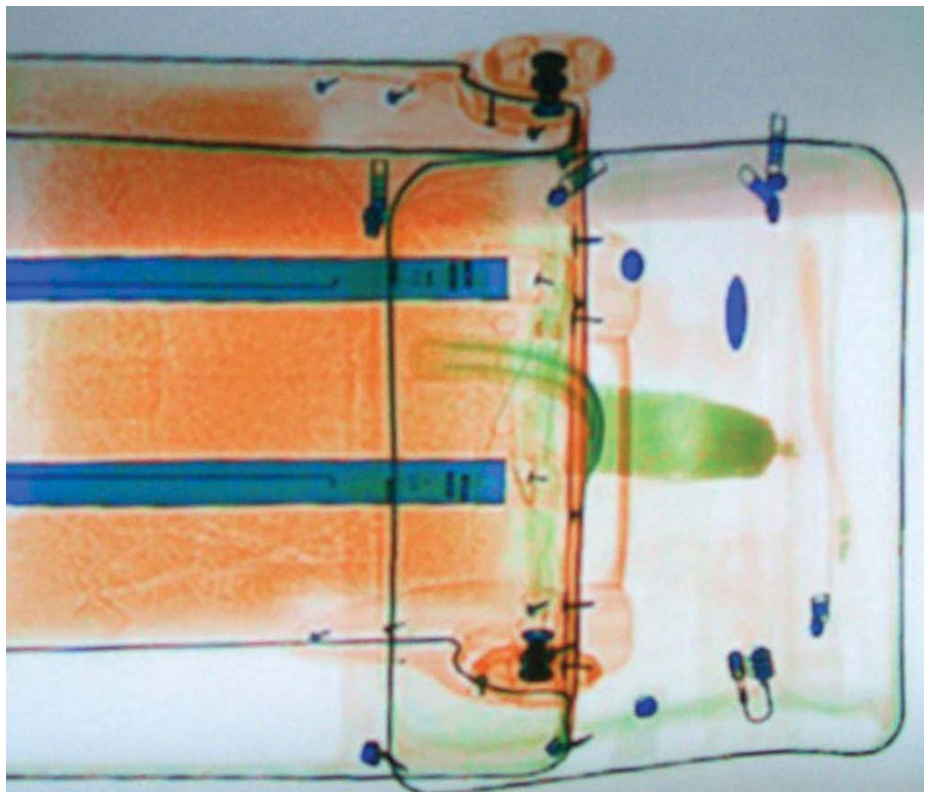
Other ads attracting criticism include those for sex performance products, Calvin Klein clothes, and an ad which urged customers to join the Fernwood Fitness Club “Now for Fox Sake”.

The inquiry is likely to report in the middle of this year after a series of public hearings. •

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SCREEN SAVER: Security screening at airports not enough to stop criminals. Photo: aapone

Liquid could have brought down plane

Threat revealed at air safety hearing.

A parliamentary review of aviation and maritime security has heard that a chemical being carried by a passenger arrested at Perth Airport in 2007 could have resulted in the crash of a passenger jet if the liquid had been opened on board the aircraft.

Maggie Plumb, senior research coordinator with Western Australia Police, told federal parliament’s Law Enforcement Committee: “That liquid would have been toxic at one part per million of oxygen, so we are talking here about a whole plane crashing. If the seal had broken or he had decided to empty it into the toilet, everyone would have died.”

Ms Plumb said Australia was “way behind other countries” in domestic aviation security, particularly when it comes to checking of passenger identification for domestic flights.

She suggested Commonwealth legislation should be introduced that requires domestic airline passengers to authenticate their identity before they can fly.

“Domestic passenger identity legislation would assist in disrupting anonymous travel and disrupting organised crime and other criminal activity,” Ms Plumb said.

She indicated domestic passenger identification was standard international practice, and introducing it into Australia would simply bring us up to the standard that is accepted overseas.

But Qantas argued that identity fraud and tracking of individuals were neither a priority nor appropriate functions for airlines to implement, and that the financial burden of a change in procedures would be unjustifiable.

“Verification of identity documents by commercial entities should not be