

ASB Clears “Operation Boomerang” Lamb Ad Despite Overwhelming Number Of Complaints – What Could This Mean For Your Ad?

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For the better part of a decade Meat and Live Stock Australia (MLA) have established an annual tradition of promoting the cooking and eating of lamb on Australia Day with an ad that is humorous, patriotic, tongue-in-cheek and ribald, and more often than not features Sam Kekovich in some fashion.

These ads normally contain a few good-natured barbs aimed at a variety of suspects, but often the sharpest is saved for MLA’s favourite target – vegans. This year’s ad was no exception, and sure enough complaints were raised to the ASB. This time, however, complaints were raised in record numbers, provoking unusually swift and extraordinary action (they met out of session to discuss this ad alone) from the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) that nonetheless, ultimately led to the dismissal of all complaints. The ordeal, whilst entertaining to watch unfold in its own right, raises some interesting questions:

What was the basis for the complaints?

For those who have been living under a rock the past week, the latest ad from the MLA depicted a farcical military-style operation dubbed “Operation Boomerang”, led by SBS presenter Lee Lin Chin, which involved a squadron of operatives “rescuing” a number of Australian ex-patriots around the globe, including some famous faces, and bringing them home to enjoy lamb for Australia Day. One of the rescue scenes involved an operative breaking down a man’s door to extract him, and reassuring him that he will soon be “eating lamb on the beach”, only for the man to proclaim he is vegan. This results in the operation being swiftly aborted, and one of the operatives setting fire to a bowl of kale with a flamethrower.

Why were people so upset about some crispy kale?

Complainants claimed that the scene vilified vegans and incited hatred of them. They were also concerned about the violent action of setting fire to the bowl, claiming this was menacing and unjustifiable violence towards vegans. There were also claims the ad encouraged bullying of vegans.

Were there any complaints that did not involve vegans?

Yes, several in fact. The ad received complaints on a number of fronts. Some complainants were concerned use of the term “Boomerang” was offensive to Indigenous Australians. Others were concerned that the use of a flamethrower indoors was irresponsible, and insensitive towards those at risk of bushfires. Further, others thought a scene depicting an Australian man and Japanese businessmen was also offensive, in that the portrayal of the Australian man as unsure of what cultural customs to employ implied he was foolish. Lastly, some complainants were critical of the overall lack of ethnic diversity in the cast of the ad.

So a wide net was cast. Were the ASB members concerned about any of that?

They were not. All complaints were dismissed. With regards to the vegan scene that attracted the majority of complaints, the ASB took the view that *"the intention is clearly fantasy, exaggerated behaviour to burn the vegetables on the table as a sign of a preference for lamb and a suggestion of BBQ."* The majority of the ASB considered that *"this depiction is not inciting hatred towards people who are vegan but rather is an exaggerated and humorous response to the food that is not lamb"* and *"the use of the flamethrower was unrealistic and humorous in the context of the advertisement and noted that it is not directed toward the man."* The scene was regarded as not violent as it was a short scene in a long advertisement that *"has to be considered in the overall context and that in this context it is fleeting, unrealistic and is in a context of images that do not encourage violence."*

In respect of the other various complaints, the ASB took the view that whilst certain members of the community may be more sensitive than others, the vast majority of Australians would not take offence at the aspects of the ad raised by the complainants. The ASB also noted that considerations with respect to ethnic diversity were outside of its mandate with regards to the Code of Ethics.

But wait, didn't you say there were a lot of complaints?

Yes, over 600 in fact according to the ASB.

Why so many?

It would be easy to poke fun at this and say vegans are a sensitive lot, but that would only serve to dismiss the fact that the level of activity surrounding this ad and the speed of the ASB's response was unprecedented.

In fact it is entirely possible that this experience could set a precedent for future "campaigns" that could impact the way in which the self-regulatory system operates.

It is clear from the number of complaints and the wide-ranging nature of them that an organised campaign of some degree was at play, with a clear aim to prevent the ad from continuing to be aired. This was evidenced by the fact that several versions of the ad received the same type of complaint, even though one particular version did not even include the vegan scene.

It is true that such organisation has been employed in the past against ads of certain type, particularly in respect of ads for fast food or sugary breakfast cereals that are aimed at children. It can often be fuelled by the type of flash-in-the-pan Internet outrage that has become increasingly common in modern society, particularly with the continued proliferation of social media.

However, the fact that the sheer amount of complaints generated by such a movement in this case provoked an extraordinary response from the ASB indicates there is scope for wide scale organisation to be employed again against ads that are perceived to be particularly offensive.

So could the ASB ever react this way again for another ad?

The ASB held a special session just to make a determination on this single ad due to the number of complaints received in such a short space of time. The fact that the ad was a special "Australia Day" activity that was a well-established tradition also might have played a role as the ASB may have felt obliged to ensure the matter was dealt with prior to Australia Day.

That said it is not inconceivable that if another ad was to provoke a response on a similar scale, that the ASB would hold another extraordinary meeting.

So should advertisers beware that certain groups may be sharpening their pitchforks in preparation for wide scale complaint campaigns?

Not necessarily. The complaints were dismissed in the end, indicating that the ASB does not take the volume of complaints into account when determining whether the actual ad is in breach of the Code of Ethics. The ASB must take into account community standards on some issues (such as the

treatment of sexuality), and these standards may change over time. However the weight of public opinion does not always come into play – what decides the outcome is the ASB considering the specific requirements of the Code of Ethics. An ad that is hugely controversial can often be completely legal. At best, the volume of complaints may only lead to a faster determination if it is the public's best interest.

And at the end of the day, wasn't this a good result for MLA?

Indeed it was an excellent result and some may say, exactly what they would have hoped for. In fact, the complaints provoked a lot of public support for the campaign as well. The ordeal generated a lot of press for them and got a lot of people talking about the ad, both nationally and abroad.

So what should advertisers ultimately take away from this?

1. It is possible to craft entertaining ads that portray edgy and thrilling content that is potentially offensive to certain groups, but advertisers should be mindful of the context and tone in which such behaviour is portrayed, and obviously, ensure that the ad is still within the confines of the Code of Ethics.
2. The rise of social media means that it is much easier for an offended party to campaign quite strongly against an ad, but provided the ad does not breach the Code, no amount of complaints will mean the ad is doomed.
3. Advertisers should not fear the self-regulatory system, but rather embrace it. It is possible to use it to your advantage where tactically prudent to do so.

Contact us

If you would like further information on advertising standards, or assistance in defending a complaint against an advertisement, please contact one of our experts below. We can provide tailored legal and practical advice to assist you with reviewing or clearing advertising material.

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