

Advert vetting - Old problems, new challenges

Vetting is one major assignment that binds the regulatory arm of advertising, Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) and its critical stakeholders together. However, the issues arising from this assignment have remained a dividing line between the regulator and the sectoral bodies. In this report, Olamide Bakare takes a critical look at how agencies and clients have been grappling with the challenges of vetting, even with the introduction of an accelerated process.

In today's marketing world, advertising is considered as one major part of the marketing mix that must be deployed to reach out to a critical mass with a view to getting the message across. Little wonder, most upcoming companies and enterprises have a huge chunk of their investments dedicated to this tool of marketing communication with the mind of getting a share of the market. Even the major brands and multinationals that have come to stay seem not to be left out in this spending spree as they churn out creative campaigns on regular basis to remain on top of their game.



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Despite this increasing volume of investment on advertisement, advertisers and agencies are confronted daily with a big hurdle called vetting. Over the years, vetting has become one big source of acrimony between the regulator and stakeholders in the industry, with issues ranging from non-compliance with the advertising code, flagrant violation of the law, unnecessary delay on the part of the regulator to point accusing fingers on regulator for double standard serving as points of disagreement.

Problems arising from vetting

Among other issues, problems arising from vetting have continued to be a dominant feature in the industry, leaving many to wonder if the Council was living up to its responsibilities in ensuring that creative copy gets approval before being exposed. A case in point is the [face-off between Guinness and APCON](#) which came up recently. Guinness, as one of the a major players in the alcohol category was reported to have exposed part of its last Nation's cup campaign on the front page of some newspapers, an action which run contrary to the advertising code considering the implication on children. As it is expected, the Council did not only place a ban on the said advert but went as far meting out sanction to the erring defaulter. Despite this sanction, some pundits are of the view that the regulatory body has not been acting as it should as it could be seen in other professional regulatory bodies.



This case is one among many others which have continued to pitch the regulator against most practitioners.

Besides, if there is one critical area that seems to have presented itself as huge relief to practitioners on vetting, it is the introduction of accelerated process. Until recently, many a practitioner have often had to confront the challenge of getting approval for campaigns that are time bound. However, in the views of many stakeholders, the introduction of vetting has had of its fair share of the good and the bad.

Accelerated vetting

Speaking with our correspondent through a telephone conversation on the introduction of accelerated vetting, the Chief Executive Officer, Noah's Ark Communication, Lanre Adisa, explained that the introduction has impacted positively on the business, stating that there has been some tremendous improvement.

Says Adisa: "It is really not a bad idea, especially if you consider what you go through in getting approval for a campaign

that is time bound. I think one of the reasons why this was introduced was to help most businesses while bearing in mind the need to discourage unwholesome and unprofessional practice in the industry."

Although Adisa agreed that vetting was indeed necessary, he is of the opinion that the impact of vetting on the advertising profession may limit creativity and ideas, urging practitioners and the Council to take learning from developed markets which have chosen self-regulation as a vital alternative.

"Vetting in itself tends to limit creativity and ideas generally. Because, what you consider as being offensive may not be adequate enough to conclude. In some other markets, people are allowed to self-regulate. They do this by writing to the authority, informing them about the clear message which the advertising is trying to preach and all that. But as far as I am concerned, though the environment is not ripe enough, I think we must ensure that whatever goes out meets the standard and in agreement with the code of ethical practice," says Adisa.

Compliance with rules

The President of Experiential Marketers of Nigeria, (EXMAN), Kayode Olagesin who spoke on issues associated with vetting, emphasised that compliance with rules and codes was tantamount to getting approval, noting that it was rare to encounter any challenge, provided due process was followed..

Says Olagesin: "From my experience, there isn't such a terrible challenge with vetting materials if one follows due process. Once you are familiar with the rules and avoid claims that are superlatives or that cannot be substantiated, or other clearly unethical practice, there really shouldn't be a problem in getting your materials approved."

"The general complaint may also be in terms of timing as the Vetting Committee has scheduled meeting times, so you need to time your application right. Even if you miss the scheduled provision, you can always do the fast-track where you get accelerated vetting for a little extra. So, if you need it in a hurry, you should be ready to pay the price.

"There have been occasions when the outcome of the vetting has not gone exactly as expected, but if you ask the right questions to find out where the issues are, sometimes it is possible to salvage the situation by just tweaking some elements. This means, working with them as opposed to being confrontational which usually is not helpful. I believe with constructive engagement the outcome can mostly be a win-win for all concerned."

A quicker flow of the process

On his part, the newly elected President of Advertising Agencies Association of Nigeria, Kelechi Nwosu noted that the initiative is seen more as a blessing, considering the huge impacts as far as promoting and facilitating the growth of the advertising business was concerned.

Says Nwosu: "For me, I think accelerated vetting has allowed for a quicker flow of the process from concept to publication. Since it was launched, It has become beneficial to the industry which has helped in empowering clients and agencies to react quickly to market needs."

Commenting further, Adisa pointed out that the introduction has not only helped the industry but provided practitioners with more options who may have been handicapped by the limited option which allows for a two-week grace period before getting approval. In his view, the introduction is one major contributor to internal revenue generation drive for the Council, as this helped in boosting their finance support base since those who require such services may be asked to pay extra charges.

Asked to evaluate the role of the Council with respect to compliance and enforcement of rules, Adisa commended the regulatory body for its effort noting that there was a room for improvement as far as discharging its responsibilities was concerned.

A welcome development

"Now, pertaining to getting approval for works that are offensive, my thinking is that if such works can produce an approval, there is a problem. I know for a fact that among the channels, radio remains the only one that insists on having APCON approval certificate before advert can be aired. But this is not so in other channels. It is quite unfortunate that those who we consider as partners, whose roles are important as far as these issues are concerned, are the ones flouting the rules".

To Adisa, the issue of challenges associated with accelerated vetting do not exist at all. In his considered view, its introduction should be seen as a welcome development.

While Nwosu sees vetting cost as a challenge for practitioners, Olagesin believes it is a price which the concerned agencies or clients have made up their mind to bear, considering the huge benefits accrued.

Absolving the Council of blame with regards to offensive copies still dominating the media space, Nwosu believes that most of these offensive copies are usually generated by quacks.

"I believe that a majority of the 'bad or irresponsible' copy would have come from poor and unregistered practitioners operating outside APCON regulation. In any case, there is the need to continue enforcing the APCON reform to shut out these unapproved ads," says Nwosu.

Lending his voice to the issue of vetting, the Publisher of *Marketing Edge* magazine, a wholly based marketing journal, John Ajayi explains that the launching of this initiative has helped a great deal in promoting advertising business.

Says Ajayi: "Before the introduction, there has been unnecessary delay as you rightly observed. But the truth of the matter is that the situation has changed. Though the issue is not much about accelerated vetting, but in a way, it has achieved certain objectives.. The problem advertisers face is multiple vetting by different agencies who lay claims to certain categories of products. The CBN or they claim to know have their own, NAFDAC has their own on health related products. Ditto SON, which lay a general claim to every product. While an advertiser will succeed in getting APCON in vetting the copy, other agencies may not do their own on time. This is where the problem lies."

Commenting further on the challenges associated with accelerated vetting, Ajayi urged the regulatory body to remain focused by ensuring that the initiative thoroughly serve the purpose it was meant to be. "Time is also an issue. But I think APCON and the concerned authority should make accelerated vetting truly accelerated.

"APCON should also be wary. This means that as industry regulator, no stone should be left unturned to ensure fairness, objectivity, transparency and accountability in both compliance and enforcement of rules because whoever must go to equity must go with clean hands. Take for example a situation where a multinational which was initially indicted for a particular offence or indicted for flouting rules gets duly and promptly punished. Now, compared with a situation where another multinational was alleged to be involved in similar flouting rules and the multinational was now being given a kid glove treatment. That to me, is unhealthy for the industry and the practice. It presupposes an uneven playing field rather than a level playing field. On this note, the Council leadership should make sure that all the departments under its supervision function objectively.