

When you see an ad, do you assume that what it says is true? Most ads are truthful—that’s the law—and most give important information about a product. But it’s a good idea to use your judgment and evaluate the claims you see in ads. The FTC only sees and hears ads once they’re on the air, online, or in print; it doesn’t look at ads in advance to make sure they’re truthful.

In addition to telling you about a product, ads are trying to sell you something. To do that, advertisers sometimes exaggerate, telling you that their product is “the best on the planet” or “just plain wonderful.” This isn’t actually illegal. These advertisers are just making the product look and sound so great that you want to buy it.

Most of the time, ads give you some useful information about a product. But some ads may not tell you everything you need to know to make an informed decision. An ad for a new mp3 player that looks very cool might get you interested in buying it. But what else might you want to know? How many songs it holds? Whether it shows videos, too? The battery life? You might want to do some research online, compare it to similar products, and ask friends who have it what they think of it before you buy something based just on the ad.

Talking Smack

Have you ever wondered about companies that talk about their competition in ads? Ads can have information on their competitor’s products, and they can compare the prices and quality of the product—but what they say has to be true. It can’t be deceptive or misleading.

Simply the Best?

What is the “best” video game, the “coolest” kind of shoe, the “hippest” mp3 player? Your answers may be different than your best friend’s, and from someone your age who lives a few states away. Those words mean something different to everyone, and advertisers use words like these to sell their product. It’s known as “puffery,” because these terms “puff up” products. Puffery usually isn’t considered misleading, because it’s a pretty obvious exaggeration.

When a company gets into facts that can be checked, though, the claims have to be true. Consider these two statements:

- (a) “The best-tasting juice in America!”
- (b) “75% of people prefer our juice.”

Which one would require proof? If you said (b), you’re right. The company would have to be able to show the survey that they took to make the claim.



Fried Chicken: The Healthy Alternative?

An ad for a fried chicken restaurant says: “Our chicken has less fat than a burger. It’s better for you.”

Is it true? An investigation found that the fried chicken has slightly less total fat than a burger, but it has more sodium, transfat, and cholesterol, which makes it higher in calories and not necessarily better for you. So, while a chicken restaurant can compare its product with some other product, they have to tell the truth. The fried chicken restaurant had to stop running a similar ad and agree not to make those false claims again.

Because I Said So...

Ads often feature someone talking about a particular product: it might be a celebrity, an expert, or a regular person. These are called endorsements or testimonials, and according to the law, they have to be true—and the advertiser has to have evidence that what’s said is true. If a celebrity endorses something, it should be their honest opinion or belief. If someone in an ad says he’s an expert on something, he actually has to have the qualifications. And when “regular” people talk about a product in an ad, their comments are supposed to be true, too. Unfortunately, companies sometimes hire actors, sports stars, or even regular people who have never used or even heard of the product they’re promoting.

It’s difficult for shoppers to know if the testimonials are genuine or paid for. When you hear testimonials, or when you see a celebrity endorsing a product, remember that they may be getting paid to say how “great” the product is.

Things to Talk About and Do

- Find some examples of ads that would require proof of their claims, and some examples of “puffery.” How do you know the difference between the two?
- Think of something you’ve seen advertised that you want to buy. What information did the ad give you about the product? What other questions might you have about the product before you decide to buy it? Where would you get that information?
- Find an ad that includes an endorsement or testimonial. Do you believe the person in the ad uses and likes the product? Can you know for sure?

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Federal Trade Commission
www.ftc.gov

