



FSSAI to tighten noose around companies over misleading ads

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The FSSAI is in the process of forming a committee of internal and external experts, consisting of members from the advertising and food and regulatory space, which will be screening advertisements across television, digital and print mediums.

The objective of the screening process will be to check the credibility of claims by companies, said the sources.

India's food regulator, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, is in the process of stepping up scrutiny in the advertising space, sources told CNBC-TV18.

According to the sources, who spoke to CNBC-TV18 on the condition of anonymity, the FSSAI is in the process of forming a committee of internal and external experts, consisting of members from the advertising and food and regulatory space, which will be screening advertisements across television, digital and print mediums.

The objective of the screening process will be to check the credibility of claims by companies, said the sources. For instance, the committee will be evaluating nutrition, dietary and non-addition claims. Non-addition claims refer to disclaimers of sugar, fat content, etc. on products.

The committee will also check on the usage of terms like 'natural', 'pure', 'fresh' in advertisements. This will ensure the consistency of information on labels versus claims in advertisements, the sources added.

The parameters are based on the recent 'Food Safety and Standards (Advertising and Claims) Regulations, 2018' which came into effect starting July 2019. The regulations state that any violation could attract a penalty of up to Rs 10 lakh.

The sources also stated that the FSSAI could also look at hiring a third party agency for the screening and monitoring process at a later date.

In response to CNBC-TV18's query, the FSSAI said that it will be looking at a structured screening process for ads in line with regulations. It will also engage in capacity building and training for SMEs.

Recently, the FSSAI sent a show-cause notice to McDonald's for its advertisement disparaging freshly cooked food and vegetables in its advertisements to promote fast food. This is because the food safety regulator "noted with concern incidence of irresponsible advertising by some food companies to promote sales of their own foods often considered unhealthy as a substitute for healthy foods."

Notices are issued to several companies on the basis of complaints or feedback to the FSSAI by consumers.

Indian advertising market as a whole is regulated and controlled by a non-statutory body, the Advertising Standards Council of India. However, there is no central statutory authority. The ASCI looks into ads based on complaints by public.

However, the ASCI members include representatives from FMCG companies, which could be one of the reasons why the FSSAI may independently look at the concerns related to ads of FMCG firms.