



LESS HEALTHY FOOD

Future-Proofing LHF Advertising:

Evidence from story, brand and situation-led creatives.



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01

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The advertising environment for less healthy food and drink (LHF) brands is entering a period of fundamental change. From October 2025, digital display will shift into a voluntary compliance phase, ahead **of full legal enforcement in January 2026**.

For years, LHF advertising has been anchored by product-led creative: simple, direct, and effective. But under the new rules, these familiar executions will no longer be allowed.

For marketers, this creates a clear challenge: how to keep campaigns effective when the traditional backbone of the category is taken away.

This transition also offers a rare advantage. Between October and December, brands have a live testing ground where they can trial different approaches without fear of penalty. It's a short window to understand what works, refine strategies, and head into 2026 with confidence.

As one of Europe's leading omnichannel media platforms, **Azerion has a unique vantage point** across the digital ecosystem. Our combination of **data-led insight, creative capability**, and **audience reach** allows us to see how regulation reshapes both strategy and effectiveness...

... and we can help brands and agencies navigate the regulatory transition.

To help answer the effectiveness question, we designed creative testing across three representative LHF categories: chocolate, biscuits, and fast food.

Each tested four types of creative, **non-compliant** (product-led), **story-led**, **brand-led**, and **situation-led**, benchmarked against a control.

Performance was measured across the full suite of brand and behavioural KPIs: awareness, clarity, consideration, recommendation, attention, emotional response, and comfort with advertising.

The findings point to a clear hierarchy of effectiveness under LHF restrictions. They reveal not only which creative strategies can deliver results, but also the role of explicit product cues in safeguarding clarity, and the surprising ways compliance itself can enhance consumer trust.

This paper shares those results in four chapters:

- **Story-led as the most effective creative strategy.**
- **The role of explicit product cues.**
- **The limits of brand-led and situation-led creatives.**
- **Compliance as an opportunity, not a limitation.**

Together, these lessons highlight how brands can adapt early, sharpen creative approaches, and turn compliance from a barrier into an opportunity for more effective advertising.

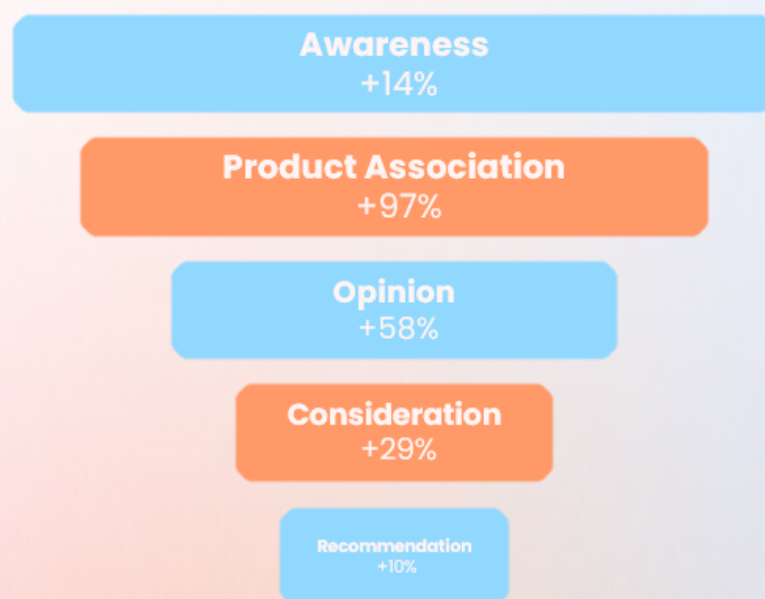
02

STORY-LED AS THE MOST EFFECTIVE CREATIVE STRATEGY

Story-led as the most effective creative strategy

The results show a clear winner: **story-led executions overall outperform every other compliant creative.**

Compared with control, story-led creative consistently drove uplifts across the consumer funnel:



Clarity is where story-led stands out most. Without product shots, many assume clarity would collapse, but **story-led executions almost doubled correct product recognition** compared with control.

For the **chocolate brand**, brand attribution reached 81% and product recognition 69%, more than double the performance of brand-led or situation-led creatives.

The **biscuit brand** echoed this trend, with story-led delivering the strongest uplift in positive opinion (+27%) and a 17% boost in consideration.

The **fast-food brand** went further, seeing a 50% uplift in consideration and stronger curiosity metrics when using storytelling.

Attention and emotion diagnostics via Daivid reinforce the results:

Story-led ads held attention more than even non-compliant product-led creatives (indexing 108 vs 101 throughout) and over-indexed on warmth by +18%.

Importantly, engagement was sustained throughout the test, with peaks in interest during narrative moments, showing how story-led kept audiences engaged from start to finish.

A clear age pattern also emerged. **Clarity in story-led versions declines steadily with age**, highest among 18–34s and dropping sharply from 45+.

Younger audiences seem to follow narrative-based advertising more naturally, finding it intuitive and engaging, while older viewers often need more direct cues to understand what's being sold.

For brands, this means that while storytelling is the most effective overall strategy, **it shouldn't be applied as one-size-fits-all**.

Story-led LHF-compliant ads should lean into richer, more emotive storytelling for younger audiences, while older viewers may need simpler narratives or stronger brand linkage to maintain comprehension.

These insights reflect not just data, but experience.

Azerion's in-house creative studio works daily with brands to translate findings like these into high-performing, compliant assets.

By blending creativity with compliance, our teams help brands retain storytelling power — without contravening regulation or sacrificing effectiveness.

03

THE ROLE OF **EXPLICIT** **PRODUCT CUES**

The role of **explicit product cues**

While storytelling was the strongest approach overall, the presence or absence of explicit product cues proved decisive for clarity.

The fast-food brand is the clearest example.

Although still building awareness in the UK, its compliant ads achieved clarity levels of 73–87%, higher in some cases than its non-compliant executions.

The key difference?

Each ad explicitly stated: “Louisiana Chicken,” via the brand logo, **anchoring the brand to its product category and removing ambiguity.**

Where cues were missing, clarity fell dramatically.

For example, the biscuit brand’s story-led executions, which made no reference to biscuits, lifted opinion but scored only 12% when respondents were asked about clarity, compared with 68% for its non-compliant version.

The chocolate brand’s situation and brand-led ads showed the same pattern, with product association as low as 27–32%, less than half the level achieved by its story-led execution that used the word “chocolate.”

Not all cues need to be verbal. The biscuit brand's best-performing clarity execution featured imagery of crumbs, a simple but recognisable visual signal that improved comprehension to 24%. Similarly, the chocolate brand's explicit reference to "chocolate" lifted both clarity and product association.

As highlighted in **Chapter 2**, younger audiences tend to understand narrative-based advertising more easily, while older viewers need more direct prompts.

Product cues therefore play a dual role: they not only boost overall comprehension but also help close that age gap in understanding.

The implication for brands is clear. Under LHF restrictions, cues are essential for everyone, but particularly for older audiences, who rely more on direct verbal or visual signposts to grasp the message.

For story-led creative, this means keeping narratives expressive for younger viewers while using stronger branding or explicit product mentions to maintain comprehension across all age groups.

In short, verbal naming ("chocolate," "chicken") and compliant visual signals (like crumbs) are not just helpful, they're the difference between building awareness and driving understanding. With the right cues, compliant ads can rival or even outperform traditional creatives.

04

THE LIMITS OF **BRAND-LED** AND **SITUATION-LED**

The limits of **brand-led** and **situation-led**

While story-led consistently outperformed, both brand-led and situation-led creatives revealed clear limitations when used alone.

Brand-led executions were strong at reinforcing awareness. The biscuit brand's version, for instance, lifted prompted awareness by +42% compared to control.

But clarity dropped sharply, down to just 24%, and for the chocolate brand it was less than half the level achieved by story-led. In short, brand-led works for recognition, but not for explaining what the brand is offering.

That said, brand-led ads tended to land better with younger audiences, especially those aged 18–34. They were up to twice as likely as older groups to feel positive about the ads or say they'd consider the brand.

This trend showed up across all three categories but was most pronounced for the fast food and chocolate brands, where brand-led versions scored highest on both positive opinion and intent among younger respondents.

Younger audiences are generally more used to modern branding styles and can connect the dots between brand and product without much help.

For older viewers, though, that link isn't as automatic, when product cues were missing, comprehension and intent dropped sharply.

Generational differences were a bit subtler for situation-led ads than for brand-led ones.

Responses were more evenly spread across ages, but younger viewers (under 35) still showed slightly higher engagement and more positive reactions, especially for the fast-food brand.

Older audiences, on the other hand, often found these ads less clear and were less likely to act.

Without a clear product link, situational storytelling on its own can leave older viewers unsure about what's being advertised.

Behavioural intent data supports this. The biscuit brand's situation-led ads reduced consideration versus control (-13%), while the chocolate brand's executions failed to deliver any uplift in purchase intent.

Both brand-led and situation-led creatives have their place, but they also come with clear limits.

Brand-led ads build awareness and a sense of familiarity, connecting especially well with younger audiences, but they often fail to communicate the product clearly to older viewers.

Situation-led ads create more even engagement across age groups, yet they struggle to drive understanding or persuasion unless there are clear cues linking the story back to the product or category.

Neither creative should carry the weight of a campaign on its own.

They work best when paired with story-led creative, brand-led to strengthen recognition, situation-led to provide relatable context, and story-led to deliver clarity and persuasion.

05

COMPLIANCE AS AN **OPPORTUNITY, NOT A LIMITATION**

Compliance as an **opportunity**, not a **limitation**

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06

CONCLUSION

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This research provides a clear roadmap for brands preparing for LHF restrictions:

Story-led creative, anchored with explicit product cues, is the most effective creative.

It outperformed others across awareness (+14%), clarity (+97%), positive opinion (+58%), and consideration (+29%).

Brand-led and situation-led creatives are limited.

They can reinforce awareness or provide context, but alone they fail to deliver clarity and persuasion.

Compliance can be a strength.

Rather than weakening performance, it can increase comfort, trust and evoke positive emotions, encouraging clearer, more credible communication.

Generational differences matter.

Younger audiences respond more naturally to narrative and brand-led styles, while older viewers need clearer cues and more direct linkage between story and product to maintain understanding and intent.

October to January is the critical test window.

With compliance voluntary before January, now is the time to experiment and refine approaches.

Ultimately, LHF restrictions should not be seen as a barrier to effectiveness.

They are a chance to sharpen storytelling, clarify brand offerings, and build greater trust with consumers.

Brands that adapt early will enter 2026 not only compliant, but creatively stronger.

Azerion is ready to help them get there.

With our omnichannel platform, award-winning creative teams, and industry partnerships, we're uniquely positioned to help brands navigate this change in legislation, turning regulatory change into an opportunity for smarter, more effective storytelling.



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