

PERFORMANCE AUDIT IN BRIEF

Government Advertising

Department of Premier and Cabinet
Department of Commerce

About the audit

Governments may legitimately use public funds for education or information campaigns to explain government policies, programs or services. Yet there is much controversy and debate around government advertising and its ability to promote the incumbent government and influence voter behaviour.

We previously examined government advertising in 1995 and made a number of recommendations for government to improve guidance to agencies and strengthen the approval process.

In this audit we wanted to find out:

- what has been spent on government advertising
- whether the current guidelines for government advertising are sufficient to prevent the use of public funds for party political purposes.

We did not seek to form an opinion on whether any past campaigns contained party political content. Rather, we tested the current review and approval process to see if it was adequate to prevent advertisements containing party political content.

Audit opinion

Since our performance audit in 1995 the government has improved guidance for agencies and introduced a more robust framework for approving advertising campaigns. This new approach aims to improve the effectiveness and value for money of government advertising.

There was an increase in the amount spent on placing advertisements in the media leading up to the March 2007 state election. Although this may be justified, it contributes to the perception that government advertising may be promoting the incumbent government.

We found that the current guidelines are not adequate to prevent the inappropriate use of public funds for advertising.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, there are no general principles to ensure campaigns do not contain material that serves party political interests. Secondly, there are no criteria to help agencies judge whether a campaign could be seen to promote the incumbent government.

The Department of Commerce has drafted guidelines that, if adopted, would go some way towards helping agencies avoid the appearance that advertising campaigns may serve party political interests. These guidelines should be updated in line with recommendations in the report and released to agencies as soon as possible.

We also found it difficult to obtain information on the total amount spent on advertising campaigns. This is because there is no central record of the total expenditure, only the cost of placing advertisements in the media. Greater transparency around what is spent would support more accurate and informed debate.



