

The Art of Marketing Marijuana

How to make pot seem as all-American as an ice-cold beer

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TheAtlantic.com | April 2016

In the summer of 2014, *The New York Times* published its first-ever marijuana ad. The occasion was the enactment of New York's Compassionate Care Act, which legalized pot for some medical uses. The ad, a congratulatory note from a Seattle start-up, depicted a well-dressed, newspaper-toting man standing on his stoop while a young woman jogged past. Both wore determined expressions; the man, according to the text, consumed marijuana "to relieve his MS symptoms," and the woman used it "while fighting cancer." The ad made sense for its time and place. Earlier that year, Colorado and Washington State had begun allowing the sale of recreational pot, and critics were warning that as more states followed suit, profit-motivated corporations could start marketing a lot of pot to a lot of people. Savvy marijuana businesses, worried about confirming this suspicion, stuck to depictions of their most sympathetic users.

Pot's image problem has since begun to fade, especially in states like Washington and Colorado. Two more states, Oregon and Alaska, have legalized the recreational use of marijuana, and several others may soon have the opportunity to join them. But the people who sell the drug are facing a predicament. In a legal market, cannabis—the plant from which pot is derived—comes to resemble many other farmed products: One grower's plant looks and tastes a lot like his neighbor's. (Some pot connoisseurs with sensitive palates can differentiate among strains of cannabis—and even among brands—but they're as rare as the coffee drinker who can guess his beans' origins.) John Kagia, the director of industry analytics at New Frontier, which studies the marijuana business, is convinced that pot is becoming commoditized. In Colorado, the supply of marijuana flower is going up, and its cost down, partly because of technological advancements and larger, more efficient operations—just the kind of forces that have turned other products into commodities.

Pot businesses are, above all, businesses, and they're responding as businesses do: with marketing aimed at convincing longtime pot users that their brand is better than the others—and, just as important, at increasing demand by encouraging curious nonusers to try their product first. In other words, marijuana companies would like to sell a lot of pot to a lot of people. "Now that marijuana has been legalized, we have the opportunity to market it to a mainstream audience," Olivia Mannix, a co-founder of a marketing agency called Cannabrand, told me. But making good on that opportunity has required changing the way people think about the drug. In this regard, the early associations between pot and medicine—and hence harmlessness, even wellness—were helpful. Since then, the tactics have gotten more sophisticated.

Early on, Mannix and her business partner, Jennifer DeFalco, decided to avoid certain slang associated with old-school stoner culture—*ganja*, *weed*, *pot*, even *getting high*. Instead, in conversations with journalists and in ads for their clients, they use the pleasant-sounding *cannabis*. One dispensary chain they advised swapped out the off-putting metal safety bars on its

windows for frosted glass. When Mannix and DeFalco design ads or logos for clients, they use a lot of white space and replace bright-green color schemes with cool grays and blues. “A lot of clients come to us saying they want to look like Apple,” Mannix told me.

Marijuana businesses are now focused on making their brands seem distinct from one another, but still inviting to the general public. LivWell Enlightened Health, one of Colorado’s largest dispensary chains, publishes ads featuring some of the diligent-looking farmers and scientists it employs, to communicate professionalism and trustworthiness. Cannabrand, meanwhile, has rebranded one client, a dispensary originally called Verde Wellness Center, as Verde Natural, to suggest a rustic, sustainable, back-to-the-earth vibe. The ads that Cannabrand designs typically use lifestyle-oriented images: young people hiking, frolicking with friends, sitting around campfires. “You connect with a brand that you can relate to,” DeFalco told me. “If people are doing activities that you’re likely to do, you’re more likely to connect with that brand.”

Not long ago, I visited a Denver company called Dixie Brands, whose answer to the commoditization dilemma has been to sell goods that are derived from cannabis rather than selling the bud itself—sort of like selling salsa instead of tomatoes. It now makes pot-infused chocolates, mints, beverages, and balms. At a meeting during my visit, Joe Hodas, the chief marketing officer, presented Dixie’s co-founders, Tripp Keber and Chuck Smith, with three packaging options for a new line of vape cartridges the company was hoping to launch. One was a black box emblazoned with growling animals, meant to entice young men, the most-active vape enthusiasts. Keber and Smith recoiled. “Don’t like it—don’t like the animals, don’t like the colors,” Keber said. The problem was the idea that the consumer base would remain fixed; it would be better for business if more people started vaping, and Keber and Smith didn’t want to alienate potential customers. “I don’t think we should try hard to eliminate a portion of the marketplace we want to ultimately bring in,” Smith said.

What’s interesting about this evolution—from wellness ads to mainstream, lifestyle-oriented ones—is that it’s happened before, and not just once. David Courtwright, a historian of drug use at the University of North Florida, notes that a similar progression took place with mass-produced beer and cigarettes, two other products that were stigmatized in their early years. In the late 19th century, technological advances made it easier to sell both goods to a wide market. Drinking and smoking picked up, and people panicked about the social problems that might ensue. Breweries tried to distance their product from hard liquor by marketing it as a safer, healthier, more acceptable alternative. Before Prohibition, one beer merchant in Detroit created an ad featuring a toddler in a high chair toting a mug of beer about the size of his head; a caption read, “The youngster, ruddy with good cheer. Serenely sips his Lager Beer.” Cigarette companies used similar tactics. A 1916 ad for Helmar Turkish cigarettes featured a doctor pointing a stern finger at the reader and declaring, “My best professional judgment prompts me to recommend them.”

Beer and cigarettes were also like pot in that what set one brand apart from another was, largely, branding. Once beer and cigarette companies had shed the negative associations with their products, they redoubled their efforts to get people to choose their brand over the others. They also worked increasingly hard—notoriously, in the case of cigarette companies—to broaden their audience, sometimes at the expense of the market for other pleasures. In the 1920s, Lucky Strike

launched an ad campaign exhorting people to “reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet.” One observer noted at the time, “The anti-sweet campaign looks like the first attempt to *create* consumers instead of merely tossing consumers from brand to brand.” When Prohibition ended, beer companies played it safe for a while, portraying idyllic domestic scenes—a wife serving a beer to her husband, a white-collar worker enjoying a cold one after a day at the office. But by the ’50s, beer had been so firmly established as acceptable—even all-American—that companies could turn to the project of attracting new drinkers, in new settings. To do so, it would help to make the case—often subtly—that everyone loved to drink, and that drinking was woven into the country’s social fabric. It’s not a coincidence that this is when the classic ads with couples at the beach and suburban lawn parties started to proliferate.

Supporters of recreational pot are attempting to put legalization measures on ballots in several states this fall, including California. People in other states are sure to follow. This raises the question of what pot marketing might look like in a world in which marijuana’s use has become even more normalized. On this point, the stories of the beer and cigarette industries could be especially instructive. As more people started consuming alcohol and tobacco in the mid-20th century—thanks in large part to all the aggressive marketing—public-health officials became much more invested in studying their potential health effects. Courtwright notes that this is when alcohol and tobacco marketing began to diverge. Alcohol was shown to cause health issues, but the fact that only some “problem drinkers” suffered serious damage helped the industry avoid blame and allowed beer companies to continue projecting their images of mainstream, middle-class fun. Cigarettes, of course, experienced a different fate, as it became clear that they were bad for pretty much everyone. When cigarette companies started associating their products with rebellion and individualism, they may have been responding to the public-health backlash—the message being, “We smoke because we don’t listen to the Man.” These ads were memorable, but not particularly effective: Smoking rates declined, and as the government tightened restrictions on tobacco advertising, they fell even further.

One lesson in this, for marijuana companies, is that if their marketing efforts are successful, public-health officials will take note, and invest more in research to determine just what the drug’s health benefits and detriments might be. A big difference between marijuana and its predecessors, of course, is that marijuana is still illegal at the federal level—and likely will be for some time, if not forever. Transporting the stuff across state lines is prohibited, which makes it harder to create a national brand—the equivalent of a Camel or a Bud Light. That itself is likely to limit the public’s exposure to pot advertising, the rate of use, and the level of attention from public-health officials.

Still, there will surely come a point at which pot research will intensify—and while research so far suggests that marijuana, in its current form, is less harmful than either tobacco or alcohol, that could change as the product evolves and our understanding of its impact on health deepens. Should that happen, marketing will adapt, and the terms now out of favor—*weed*, *getting high*—may come back in. But whether the pot industry of the future bears a closer resemblance to that of beer or cigarettes will ultimately depend less on how it’s marketed than on what it does to us.