

Marijuana Is Now Big Business

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As soon as Coloradans cast their votes for legalization in 2012, would-be profiteers celebrated the expected green rush. One former Microsoft executive proclaimed that he would create the Starbucks of marijuana and “mint more millionaires than Microsoft.” A couple of Yale M.B.A.s started a multimillion dollar equity firm dedicated solely to financing the marijuana industry. Indeed, the big business of marijuana was born.

Like Big Tobacco of yesteryear, Big Marijuana knows that it needs lifelong addicted customers to prosper. Addictive industries generate the lion’s share of their profits from addicts, not casual users. This means that creating addicts is the central goal. And — as every good tobacco executive knows (but won’t tell you) — this, in turn, means targeting the young.

Welcome to Big Tobacco 2.0. In the emerging marijuana industry, potent edibles in the form of colorfully packaged cookies, candies, sodas and brownies are being advertised on the Internet and in mainstream newspapers and magazines across the state. A relentless marijuana lobby insists that these products are not especially attractive to children, yet continues to block controls on advertising, labeling, shape and color. When Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper wanted to limit access to marijuana magazines containing cartoon ads and coupons for one dollar joints by placing them behind the counter out of reach of children, the industry sued and won. That was the first of many victories for the marijuana lobby, whose case is buttressed by protections of commercial speech as free speech.

Five months into legal sales in Colorado, it is clear that big business is winning and public health is suffering. Despite some high profile deaths, increased calls to poison centers, more workplace marijuana positives and reports of fourth graders selling pot edibles at school, the industry shows no willingness to compromise private profit for public good. If real changes are to be made in the interest of health, the industry needs to get out of the political process and allow policy makers to implement measures like sweeping ad restrictions and limitations on product sales. But none of this is likely. The longstanding Madison Avenue culture of hyper-commercialization isn’t going away soon and so, legal marijuana in Colorado will continue to lead us down an all-too-familiar path.