

Debate

The Ethics of Marijuana Advertising

Issue: Should marijuana be advertised where it is legally sold?

Marketers in any vice industry face political, legal, and sociocultural challenges when communicating the message of their brand or product. Marijuana is no exception. The legalization of cannabis for recreational use in Colorado and Washington has created both opportunities in a new market as well as uncertainties associated with advertising to this market. The media industry as a whole is averse to promoting recreational marijuana use due to its controversial nature. While two states have legalized this activity and others are planning on putting the issue to a vote, federal law still considers it to be illegal. Marijuana retailers are technically considered to be narcotics traffickers, and marketers for the substance can be held as accomplices to criminal activity.

Google, one of the main online advertising outlets, has long restricted searches related to drugs out of its own conviction. Other advertising channels, such as newspapers and billboards, are legally restricted from accepting advertising money related to drugs. This is true in cities where the substance is legal for both recreational and medicinal use. These laws work to protect underage individuals from seeing the advertisements and sparking their interest in drug use. For example, Colorado laws state that any kind of mass media advertising that has the potential to reach 30 percent or more individuals under the age of 21 is restricted. Online content that does not block minors' access cannot contain marijuana advertising. Signage, flyers, and leaflets are also restricted as their reach cannot be controlled. Similar advertising regulations apply in Washington as well.

However, some startup advertising agencies are emerging to help marijuana retailers with their advertising. Seattle-based Mirsky Media is one such company, whose services include search engine optimization, Web page design, marketing consulting, and obtaining advice on how to get good feedback on the review website Yelp. There are other methods that marijuana retailers use to promote themselves as well. Sponsoring charity walks, sporting events, and live concerts have been an effective means of public relations for some dispensaries.

Despite these legal restrictions in advertising, the question as to whether marijuana dispensaries should advertise their products remains. On the one hand, they are a legal business in Colorado and Washington, and it is their ethical duty to generate a profit. But is this profit generated to the detriment of society? Some argue that the legality of the issue does not mean that it should be promoted. The use of marijuana is linked to side effects, including memory loss, a tendency toward depression, and a lack of motivation. It is also linked to more positive side effects such as slowing the progression of Alzheimer's, reducing the spread of cancer, and controlling epileptic seizures. Despite these linkages, adequate research has not been compiled to make any definitive claims.

There are two sides to every issue:

1. Advertising for recreational marijuana should be legal in states where its use has been legalized.

2. Because recreational marijuana use can be a detriment to society, advertising for recreational marijuana should be prohibited.

Sources:

- Bruce Kennedy, "Ad Agencies Prepare for the Legal Marijuana Market," CBS News, January 6, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/ad-agencies-prepare-for-the-legal-marijuana-market/> (accessed January 14, 2014).
- Eleazar David Melendez, "Marijuana Doesn't Just Sell Itself, As Marketers Face Resistance From Google, Media Companies," The Huffington Post, August 30, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/30/marijuana-marketers_n_3832448.html (accessed January 14, 2014).
- Melanie Williamson, "Legalized Weed Means Changes for Digital Marketing Strategies," Jasic, January 14, 2014, <http://www.jasic.com/legalized-weed-means443-changes-for-digital-marketing-strategies> (accessed January 14, 2014).
- Anne Holland, "Recreational Marijuana Retailers to Face Major Advertising Restrictions in Colorado," Marijuana Business Daily, September 17, 2013, <http://mmjbusinessdaily.com/recreational-marijuana-retailers-to-face-significant-advertising-constrictions-in-colorado/> (accessed January 14, 2014).
- Jacob Sullum, "6 Ways Washington's Marijuana Rules Are Looser Than Colorado's," Reason, July 5, 2013, <http://reason.com/blog/2013/07/05/6-ways-washingtons-marijuana-rules-are-l> (accessed January 14, 2014).
- Jennifer Welsh, Dina Spector, and Randy Astaiza, "The Positives and Negatives: How Marijuana Affects Your Brain and Body," thejournal.ie, January 11, 2014, <http://www.thejournal.ie/marijuan-health-effects-legalised-medical-negative-positve-1256236-Jan2014/> (accessed January 14, 2014).