2021 Could Usher in a Golden Age of Cannabis Marketing

If there were ever any doubts that the cannabis industry could thrive during the pandemic—there were, believe it or not—let the following results show just how wrong the skeptics were and how high the category flew this year.

Americans spent nearly $18 billion on legal weed in 2020, a 67% jump from the previous year, according to research from Leafly. Buyers broke records during the initial lockdown-related green rush in March and again around popular holidays like 4/20 and Green Wednesday. In nine states, including Arkansas, Illinois, Florida and North Dakota, sales more than doubled year over year, Leafly reported.

Election 2020 logged a five-state sweep for weed legalization, where voters in even conservative strongholds overwhelmingly approved ballot measures for medical and recreational sales. At the same time, the movement for decriminalizing cannabis and other formerly verboten substances picked up steam.

The industry ends the year in the strongest position of its young life, with Greg Butler, chief commercial officer of Cresco Labs, likening it to "a roaring wave—it can't be ignored anymore."

Against that backdrop, leaders in the category predict a golden age of weed marketing in 2021, one that takes a page from traditional consumer packaged goods but with a canna-centric twist.

"The time to own the cannabis narrative is now—to build brand recognition, establish trust and tell the world who you are," said Jason White, CMO of Curaleaf, a top-tier player that operates 95 dispensaries in 23 states. "The window to lead is

closing and only followers will remain.”

Loyalists and beyond

More than 111 million Americans, about 33% of the population, already have or will soon have access to legal flower, tinctures, edibles and infused drinks where they live. (Cannabis is fully legal for adults—recreational and medical sales—in 15 states and Washington D.C. and for medical sales in 36 states).

That means the industry has the opportunity to tout their products to longtime or lapsed fans and also to new potential buyers like cannacurious women, millennials, Baby Boomers and other coveted demographic groups.

A marketing surge, though not without its regulatory hurdles, would serve several purposes, such as chipping away at the lucrative illicit market and combating some lingering misconceptions about the category, said Cory Rothschild, svp, brand marketing, Cresco Labs, a multi-state cannabis operator and the largest weed wholesaler in the country.

“There’s still a pretty heavy lift on education, and the category has a lot of baggage,” he said. “But what if you can be the first brand that makes people feel comfortable with the category?”

The field is crowded and competition will be even more fierce going forward, Butler said, so “driving awareness and building points of differentiation will be critical. Strong brands matter in a commodity business.”

Creativity will blossom

Much of cannabis advertising has graduated from old-school pot leaf imagery and psychedelic colors, preferring to take the route of California-based Island, which recently unveiled a rebrand that had been in the works since early last year.

“I think stoner culture and tropes have kept cannabis in a dark alley,” said Lindsay Berg, Island’s vp, marketing. “Those associations can be very polarizing and unrelatable. We want it to feel more appealing and accessible to the masses.”

Sophisticated packaging and branding that mimics mainstream (but hip) consumer goods and steers clear of jargon that only

weed connoisseurs would understand “is a critical step,” she said. And the product needs to be Instagrammable and worthy of “bringing to a dinner party or keeping in your purse or pocket.”

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