Overdrive Fights Stigma to Make Partying Safer

Imagine you're at a party, and someone pulls out a bright orange box that resembles a cigarette pack. But instead of offering you a light, your fellow partygoer wants to test the drugs on hand for fentanyl contamination.

Overdrive Defense, the latest venture from Brian Bordainick and Julie Schott—the entrepreneurs behind Gen Z darling brands Starface and Julie—wants this practice to be as normal as refilling a drink. Bordainick and Schott have a track record of "going into a highly stigmatized space and making it more accessible," said Overdrive creative director Ryan Weaver.

With Overdrive, which sells kits to test for fentanyl contamination in recreational drugs as well as for spiked drinks, the aim is to normalize a safety practice to combat drug overdoses, which killed more than 80,000 people in the U.S. last year, per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Like Starface's pimple patches or Julie's emergency contraception, Overdrive has leaned into bold packaging and lifestyle marketing tactics to appeal to younger audiences and disrupt a sector typically shrouded in shame. But since its debut last year, Overdrive has faced an uphill journey to win over consumers, retailers, and social platforms in a stigmatized area.

Now Overdrive is shifting its strategy to pave the way in a new category and appeal to a wider audience.

"The easiest way to de-stigmatize something is to not leave it in the shadows," Weaver told ADWEEK. "The thing that will casualize this and help people find safety is being able to

talk about it in a way that won’t freak them out.”

Bold marketing

In September 2024, Overdrive launched with a splash, unveiling its orange boxes of fentanyl test strips and sleek black and blue drink spiking test kits. The brand and its founders made the cover of The New York Times Style the following month.

Overdrive initially borrowed from the marketing playbooks of its sister brands Starface and Julie, which have both been playful, flashy, and humorous despite dealing in fraught subjects like acne and emergency contraception. For example, Julie, which has also debuted a cold sore treatment, dropped spring break merchandise and ran commercials poking fun at unsuitable boyfriends.

For Overdrive’s part, it has partied with skateboarding legend Tony Hawk and showed up at events “at the intersection of thrill and danger,” according to Weaver, such as X Games, ESPN’s action sports tournament; SummerSlam, WWE’s professional wrestling event; and the Las Vegas Grand Prix.

Overdrive Defense

In less than a year, Overdrive has achieved a few milestones, with two products on the market, more than 100,000 Instagram followers, and selling its fentanyl test kit in thousands of CVS stores nationwide—becoming the first non-CVS branded fentanyl test kit carried by the retailer.

While Overdrive initially focused on “community building, brand building, and entertainment” through event, social, and creator marketing, according to Weaver, the company is now focused on ramping up sales. To do that, it’s making a key change in how it talks about its business.

At the beginning, Overdrive said it was working in “harm reduction,” a space that has historically been dominated by

nonprofits and charities. Now it says it’s in the business of “nightlife safety” and is the first commercial brand to break into that category.

“We looked around and realized we’re one of the first businesses in a new vertical,” Weaver said. “There are not a lot of other people talking about this from a business perspective, with the goal of developing the best products possible.”

Fighting stigma

The motivation behind this change in language is to overcome stigma and help people understand the products. Though retailers like Amazon, Gopuff, and CVS—which also carries Starface and Julie—already stock Overdrive, others have been hesitant to sell products that “could be seen as drug paraphernalia,” Weaver explained, “when really they’re safety tools.”

Overdrive has also faced hesitancy from social platforms, where its content has sometimes been flagged or suppressed. The brand’s team typically has to avoid using certain terms like fentanyl, date rape, or overdose in posts, Weaver said.

Overdrive Defense
Over the next year, Overdrive will ramp up its product-focused, educational marketing to behave more like a “classic CPG” brand, Weaver said.

Its goal now is answering an age-old dilemma: “How do we educate and help sales scale rapidly, while still being creative?” said Weaver. “So that cool lifestyle energy starts to get matched by more product focused marketing that can create awareness around the problems at stake and how our tools work.”

Marrying AI with human creativity

A key part of Overdrive’s strategy now is experimenting with artificial intelligence (AI), Weaver said. It will be relying

on generative AI tools, from Midjourney to Claude to ChatGPT and others, to create a higher volume of online content and videos at speed.

At this stage of the startup, “AI allows for creation of those types of assets at scale, so the churn can be a lot quicker,” Weaver explained.

Despite its interest in AI, Overdrive isn’t abandoning its human-fueled creative pursuits, either. It works with a team of talent including creative directors, video producers and editors, designers, and social media marketers, Weaver said, adding: “Part of the DNA of Overdrive is seeing ourselves as a media and content company.”

Last month, Overdrive released a 13-minute documentary called “The Plug,” which follows filmmaker Sam Hayes, a former opioid user, on a journey through Miami to uncover how fentanyl gets into the city’s drug supply.

The film is reminiscent of a Vice documentary, with first-person narration and raw scenes capturing slices of real life.

“The goal is for this to be a very digestible piece of content that can start to shine a little light on topics in the shadows through interesting characters and a participatory style,” Weaver said.

He sees “The Plug” as a kind of “pilot” for Overdrive to create more entertainment that will ultimately help break down taboos and keep people safe.

“Our fundamental belief as a brand is, this isn’t that scary to talk about,” Weaver said. “We’ve got to live in reality, talk about what’s happening in words that actually make sense to have that conversation. If we don’t, the only thing that wins there is the problem. How can we address it if we can’t

even have a conversation about it?”

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