

Whatever Business You're In, You Can Pivot to the Cannabis Business



Want to get into weed? Look no further than your résumé. These entrepreneurs took their skills to the cannabis industry and are killing it.

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You want in on the cannabis boom, but you don't know a blunt from a bong. What do you do? For many entrepreneurs who've made the plunge, that question is also the answer: Whatever they did before legalization is the skill they brought to cannabis. And there are lots of skills needed in the new green world.

Anytime a state legalizes, every business that “touches the plant” – think growing weed, baking edibles, distilling tinctures, packaging pre-roll – has to be confined within the borders of that state, creating exciting new opportunities for every sort of local business. Indoor grow operations need wiring and plumbing, dispensaries need architects and construction crews, entrepreneurs need local lawyers and accountants to guide them through the inevitable regulatory maze. On top of that, the onerous constraints required to do business across state lines for a product that is still illegal under federal law have generated demand for a whole new breed of legal, financial, and deal-making specialists, wherever they are.

Regardless of whether you’re in a big-city law firm or an entrepreneur hustling in your hometown, there is room in the cannabis industry for what you do. You just have to tweak it a little, according to these eight entrepreneurs who have converted their traditional careers into green success stories.

Related: She Runs One of The Biggest PR Companies in Cannabis. So Why Haven’t You Heard Of Her?

1. The Public Relations Switch

For 10 years, Rosie Mattio ran a thriving eponymous public relations firm in Seattle. She’d built a steady clientele of global food and technology brands when her first cannabis client came knocking. This was 2014, shortly after Washington State legalized adult-use marijuana. The client was the team behind *The Stoner’s Cookbook* (now called HERB), who were impressed with Mattio’s food and tech expertise and hired her to launch their first hardcover edition. The campaign was so successful, Mattio decided to pivot her company: “A lightbulb went off in my head,” she says. “Why not bring our mainstream approach to the cannabis sector?”

Representing the new and disruptive green industry was exciting but not easy. “When we worked with a popcorn company, we could FedEx a sample to *Shape* magazine to try the product for review,” she says. “We can’t just put cannabis in the mail, though. How is a reporter supposed to write a story about a product they have not tried?” And that was the least of her problems. Outside of *The Stoner’s Cookbook*, most cannabis companies were still skittish about exposure and reluctant to spend much on PR, often because they didn’t have the money. When they did? “I once had a client pay me five figures in cash out of a drawer in his office,” Mattio says. “This can often be an interesting business, to say the least.”

She isn’t the only publicist to go green. In 2013 Cynthia Salarizadeh was finishing up her bachelor’s degree at the University of Pennsylvania and researching sustainable development with the Department of Defense. In 2014 she decided to join the cannabis crowdfunding startup CannaFundr. As she got into the industry, she began imagining what it would be like to do PR for a product that was banned from broadcast TV and radio.

In 2015, with just a laptop, a cellphone, and \$2,000 to live on until she got a client, she launched Salar Media Group, focusing exclusively on cannabis, including hemp. As with Mattio, the early days were hard. “Cannabis companies were still underground for the most part, so most people were hiding from exposure,” she says. Her first two clients were both nonprofits advocating for medical marijuana access – CannaMoms sought it for children, and the Weed for Warriors Project focused on veterans. “There is no money in advocacy,” Salarizadeh says. “I was working for a tenth of what I would be paid doing PR for commercial clients in any other industry, but I knew it was worth the time invested.”

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She was right. Commercial cannabis companies did hire her. And after three years of growth, Salar Media was acquired by KCSA Strategic Communications. From there, Salarizadeh channeled her experience into a new opportunity: cannabis-focused media. Today her companies include AxisWire, her newswire service for the industry, and Green Market Media, a platform with publications like CannDex, which serves as a cannabis industry index. On the side, she's launching House of Saka, which sells a cannabis-infused, nonalcoholic Napa Valley rosé.

For Mattio, the early struggles were also worth it. Today her roster is full of cannabis industry standouts like CannDescent, Flowhub, and LeafLink. And, she says, no one pays her in cash.

2. Bed-and-Breakfast with a Twist

Russ Belville and his life partner, Lori Duckworth, were renters in a four-bedroom home in Portland, Oreg., when their roommates moved out. The duo, both marijuana legalization activists – Belville, a retired podcaster; Duckworth, from the marijuana healthcare world – decided to put the new vacancies on Airbnb. They'd never used the service before (and had to get a signed affidavit from the landlord, per city ordinance). But unlike gazillions of other listings on Airbnb, this one mentioned their cannabis lifestyle. "We wouldn't want someone who was anti-pot to rent a room, then demand a refund when they found us smoking marijuana by the fireplace," says Belville.

Business took off swiftly, and the experiment turned into the cannabis-friendly Delta-9 House, a two-bedroom, \$42 to \$79 per night bed-and-breakfast, which the couple still rents. It launched in 2017, three years after Oregon legalized recreational cannabis, and to date has hosted guests from 46 U.S. states and countries on all six continents and earned a place on *High Times'* Best Bud & Breakfasts list.

Along the way, Belville and Duckworth definitely had to greenify their approach. A cannabis-friendly Airbnb, for example, is less friendly to the non-cannabis set, so Delta-9 expressly forbids children and adults younger than 21 unless they have an Oregon medical marijuana card. Besides letting people consume on the premises, they provide smoking accessories from the Daily High Club, share cannabis from their backyard garden, and offer vintage copies of *High Times* from the '70s and '80s. Now that they've got the model, they're selling Delta-9 property management services in any state where recreational marijuana is legal. (They just opened three log cabins in the mountains of Eastern Oregon and are in negotiations with properties throughout Oregon, Northern California, and Seattle.) "If you are someone with the property to rent, then this is a fantastic way to cash in on your state's Green Rush," Belville says. "Even better, know the difference between an indica and a sativa, and have your own favorite strains you grow and consume."

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3. Accountant for the Cannabis Crowd

About six years ago, after years in a successful corporate accounting career, Summer Wilkinson, a CPA in Plano, Texas, decided to buy her accounting firm. To her surprise, it made her miserable. When she later merged with a larger firm, it made her even more unhappy. "I just was not having a good time," she says. "I was working constantly, missing time with family, and last year I turned 50, which got me thinking."

What Wilkinson thought about was Colorado. The state had ignited a business boom when it legalized adult-use marijuana in 2012, and *that* led her to think more about weed (as a business, not as an antidote for her job stress). She quickly

realized there had to be a big demand for accountants who know cannabis. The IRS brutally taxes both adult-use and medical marijuana businesses. The agency treats state-legal cannabis companies as if they were drug dealers, forbidding them to deduct normal business expenses like marketing, travel, or rent. They are allowed to deduct COGS (cost of goods sold), which creates opportunities to avoid taxes through intricate business arrangements that attract close IRS scrutiny. Any misstep in structuring the business for tax advantages is almost certain to backfire and result in harsh penalties.

“I thought that would be a very challenging and interesting niche to work in,” Wilkinson says, “but I just didn’t know how to go about it.”

If she’d been in any other business, she could have easily found professional guidance published online by the Big 4 accounting firms. Guidance for complying with GAAP – generally accepted accounting principles – also would have been readily available, as would plenty of industry-specific accounting, tax, and bookkeeping software. The IRS itself provides lots of information. None of that exists for the multibillion-dollar cannabis industry. But in 2017 she discovered a brand-new program called Dope CFO. “Every other industry – marketers, plumbers, attorneys, you name it – is in cannabis. CPAs are last to the party,” says Andrew Hunzicker, Dope CFO’s cofounder and managing partner.

Hunzicker, a CPA in Oregon, had made his way to founding Dope CFO after the state legalized and he began taking cannabis clients. Like Wilkinson, he quickly realized that none of the normal resources were available for the green industry, and consequently, there are very few accountants adequately trained for the thousands of cannabis companies desperate to shrink their tax burden to something bearable.

Hunzicker gradually began building some of his own templates to help his new clientele, and he freely shared his advice

with bewildered bookkeepers and CPAs from around the country who'd heard about him. Initially he launched Dope CFO with one of those CPAs, Naomi Granger, with the idea of creating an accounting firm just for cannabis businesses. But they pivoted the company to provide training and resources for CPAs, CFOs, and bookkeepers like Wilkinson, who was the first person to enroll in the program.

Since then, Wilkinson has gotten out of the business arrangement she so disliked and is working with cannabis clients in Oregon and Oklahoma. ("Cannabis accounting is a good option for working remotely," she says.) Texas has a minimal medical marijuana program, but Wilkinson is attending cannabis events and networking there to have a foundation for when the state goes legal.

There's a huge opportunity for accountants who want to go green, according to Hunzicker, who says that since 2018, nearly 200 professionals from 40 states have enrolled in Dope CFO. "We had one guy come into the program, he's in Massachusetts, and he got 12 clients in three months, all of them in California," he says. "We tell people, 'If you want to grow a cannabis niche practice, it will be a great niche for the next 10 to 20 years.' "

4. Cooking Up Green Cuisine

It's an understatement to say Matthew Stockard, a.k.a. Chef Matt, was prepared when California legalized adult-use cannabis in 2016. By then the world-traveled chef had been experimenting with cannabis in the privacy of his home kitchen for more than 20 years.

"I've been making a cannabis barbecue sauce for friends since 1994 or '95," he says, recalling that back in those pre-sinsemilla days, he routinely sifted lots of seeds from crumbled buds before cooking with them.

Stockard grew up in Long Beach, Calif., but went to Oklahoma for college and in 1998 opened his first restaurant during freshman year. It was called the Langston Lounge, and it launched Stockard's career as Chef Matt. He returned home to Long Beach to open The Beach Cafe, and he kept it open while demand for his talents led him to travel the globe and master various cuisines. When he returned he sold the café to concentrate on catering and stints as a personal chef.

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Life as a chef was good for Stockard, but prohibition limited his cannabis cooking to a passionate hobby. That changed in 2014, and it was not in his plans. At the time he was preparing to leave for a lucrative job running an upscale restaurant at a hotel in Dubai when a friend and fan of his cooking (particularly the infused barbecue sauce) gave him a call. His friend had moved to the hills to grow pot professionally. "He asked what was next for me," says Stockard, who told him about Dubai. "He remembered the barbecue sauce and asked if I'd ever considered cooking with cannabis. I told him yes, and he showed up at my front door a couple of weeks later with two bags of bud and trim."

With an ample supply of the raw ingredient, Stockard began experimentally infusing any ingredient that seemed infusible – olive oil, peanut butter, vegetable oils, jellies, soy sauce, and, of course, barbecue sauce – and cooking with them in all his favorite dishes. Somewhere in the process, he canceled the Dubai gig. "I gave up a nice salary and a chance to go work overseas again," Stockard says.

Cooking up a storm, he developed a long list of recipes with precisely measured doses of THC and CBD. By Stockard's estimate, he has spent \$15,000 standardizing the recipes to have consistent dosing and use only the whole plant, a much more demanding process than if made with isolates. In 2015 he

quietly launched Ganja Eats to cater private parties with his new cannabis cuisine derived from organically grown California marijuana strains.

Ganja Eats took a quantum leap when California voters legalized adult use marijuana in 2016. “While everybody was doing Rice Krispie treats and brownies,” Stockard says, “I was infusing steak and chicken, working more on the savory side. I was killing it with ribs, mac and cheese, stir-fry. The phone still rings off the hook. I turn down as much business as I accept.”

Because Stockard has developed his recipes to professional food preparation standards, a person feasting at a Ganja Eats gathering can expect to imbibe around 25 milligrams of THC (as a reference, California limits a packaged, single-serving edible to 10 milligrams of THC), so they know what to expect. “I take dosing very seriously,” he says. “I believe there’s a difference between 25 milligrams of flower and 25 milligrams of distillate. I prefer introducing people to the flower high. It’s more natural and body-relaxing versus the shock of distillate.”

The focus, he says, is wellness and pleasure, not escapist intoxication. “My coffee creamer is for people who want to start their day with cannabis, not drink their coffee and their day is over.”

After learning that many of his customers wanted just the medicinal benefits, Chef Matt unveiled CBDaily Eats in 2017, a CBD-only version of his Ganja Eats cuisine for private groups. He has since begun online sales of hemp-infused oils, sauces, and honey, and calculates that 75 percent of his sales are “white label” products sold by others.

Looking ahead, if Stockard can get the necessary licenses, he’s planning a parallel line of Ganja Eats foods with measured doses of THC; he’s also exploring how to license his

own name for sale in other states as they legalize. “I know my website says ‘cannabis chef,’ ” he’s quick to note, “but I am a chef first. A chef who cooks with cannabis and CBD.”

5. Photography Through a New Lens

Ophelia Chong had spent 25 years shooting for fashion and high-style magazines (she worked for the seminal design publication *Ray Gun*) when an illness in her family drew her to medical marijuana. Her sister was using cannabis to relieve the pain of scleroderma, an incurable autoimmune disease that hardens the skin and other parts of the body. “She tried cannabis to alleviate some of the symptoms,” says Chong, “and as she was ingesting, I looked at her and thought, *Oh, my God, my sister is a stoner!* Then I started crying because I was stereotyping my own sister.” That’s when she got the idea to take her camera into the world of cannabis and change the picture.

Chong discovered that the traditional stock photo agencies trafficked in stereotypes. When she searched for “cannabis,” she says, “I found images of African American men with keywords like *addict, illegal, and criminal*. I was shocked, and I thought, *I’m going to start my own agency to fight against all this stuff and put out images of real people with cannabis, like my sister.*”

She launched StockPot Images in 2015 with about 25 photographers and 3,000 images. And today the company has grown to include more than 240 photographers and 24,000 images, including plant shots of hemp (with and without human models), along with the most extensive collection of distinct cannabis strains in the world. Chong recently added psilocybin (contained in magic mushrooms) after reading about efforts in Oregon and Colorado to legalize it.

Cashing in on the green boom requires knowing the plant as well as you know your craft, Chong says. “A lot of mainstream

companies are trying to get into cannabis,” she says, “but if someone says the wrong word or thinks they know it when they don’t, they can come off very badly to a client.”

With that in mind, Chong sees nothing but a growing demand for talent of every sort. “Whatever you’re great at,” she says, “just add cannabis.”

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