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Will the Rebranding of Weed Culture Succeed?

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, September 26th, 2018

Those of you who live in California may not need a reminder, but the milestone bears repeating. Of all the legal weed states, California is one of the later entrants in the recreational marijuana ranks, but yours was the first state to legalize medical marijuana. After that, the green gates were opened. It was only so long until other states legalized weed for both medical and recreational use, and with legalization came the rebranding of marijuana culture.

San Francisco-based company The Dab Lab is no exception to this trend. Even including the word "lab" in the name is part of the rebrand. The Dab Lab was founded in 2011. That was back when the law was supposed to make sure that marijuana extracts — "dabs" — only ended up in the hands of cancer patients and other medicinal card holders in need of extremely high quantities of THC.

The Dab Lab asserts, "The fact of the matter is that for the vast majority of human history worldwide, the cannabis plant was not only legal, but a preferred crop for its usefulness in textiles and medicine." It's reminders like this that are part of the rebrand. The rebrand is an effort by pot-industry professionals to change weed's image. Cannabis in the form of hemp, as well as marijuana and marijuana extract in the form of dabs or oil, are not the stock and trade of stoners, hippies, and drug dealers. They're the stuff of industry, medicine, and human history.

This is true, but somewhere along the way, pot — due in large part to aggressive attempts from the government to brand it negatively — became the stuff you roll up in blunts, the stuff that makes you "get stupid," and the stuff that Elon Musk said he doesn't normally smoke because "it's not good for productivity."

Tell that to the marijuana industry, which is eyeing the possibility being worth $47 billion within the next decade. Pot professionals are anything if not productive — in fact, that's all they do: produce. And they're trying to change the perception that pot hinders productivity. This is a battle to get it legalized across the United States. Productivity is what our society cares about the most. If people can smoke weed and bolster industry, well then that's a win-win.

If you live in LA, you've probably seen the new billboards. They're part of the pot industry's effort to change the stoner stereotype. The MedMen dispensary spent $2 million on a bunch of billboards featuring individuals who, although they smoke weed for one reason or another, aren't "stoners." The first thing you see is a huge photo of a person set against a red background, which draws the eye. Next, beneath the picture of the person, you'll probably notice the word "stoner" crossed out,

and above it, you'll see that they're a nurse, or an officer, or a "queen," a coach, an entrepreneur. The message is, "These people just so happen to smoke weed, and it's fine, that doesn't make them a stoner, it's legal." Most importantly, when it comes to the pot industry's strategy of normalization, these billboards make it clear that people who smoke weed can be productive, working members of society.

The pot industry has never been so high-tech, strategic, and responsible. Marijuana as an adult thing attracts other industries. Berkshire, a big industrial cleaning supply company, touts grow room cleaning supplies that protect "your marijuana grow room from powdery mildew, botrytis cinerea, and other microbial offenders." This is a company that primarily caters to "respectable" industries, including aerospace and defense, healthcare, and university/scientific research.

It's hard for companies not to go where the money is. But there's still the nagging factor that weed isn't federally legal, which makes it hard for weed companies to buy ads. TV and radio won't touch marijuana ads. Compared to the internet, the TV and radio domain represents the old guard. For the old guard, pot culture still reeks of anti-establishment stoner vibes.

The lack of federal support is at least partially responsible for the continuing stigma around pot culture. Among gatekeepers who shape popular opinion, there's a tradition of condescension when it comes to weed. "Many of the nation's premiere news outlets, pundits, academics, politicians and senior government officials remain willfully ignorant about marijuana," says NBC opinion columnist Matt Laslo. Laslo laments the "hypocritism" from members of the media and others, such as Jeffrey Sonnenfeld of the Yale School of Management, who, in an interview with CNBC, called Elon Musk's marijuana moment "reckless." Laslo is saying plenty of people — including members of the media — have smoked weed, but when Elon Musk takes one toke they say it's a sign he's losing it.

Laslo makes the point that he and millions of other people suffering from chronic pain and other ailments use marijuana to function and it doesn't impede their "functionality." Besides, 61 percent of Americans think weed should be legal. The gatekeepers of popular opinion are missing actual popular opinion.

Once weed became medicinally legal in California, it fired up a train that can't be derailed. The federal government and conservatives all over the place can fight legalization as much as they like. But now that it's legal in Canada, and 30 U.S. states have some form of legalization, full-blown legalization is about as close as anything gets to inevitable here in America.

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