



Corporate Marketing That's Going to Pot



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J.M. Smucker's "Munchie Mobile" — parked outside cannabis dispensaries to attract consumers to its sweet and salty snacks — is an unscrupulous cause marketing strategy. These last-ditch efforts by companies to gain markets by aligning with other products and claiming the message will not influence youths to favor the products are disingenuous. The headline used in the Wall Street Journal's business page news article is telling: ["Are Twinkies and Cannabis the New Cookies and Milk?"](#)

These corporate marketing strategies are what Big Tobacco did for decades to secure lifelong customers, including attracting youths as replacement smokers. It was a laborious and painful process to unravel the deleterious health effects of tobacco use, as a range of financial stakeholders and apologists kept a campaign of abject denial alive that there is something wrong with ingesting smoke.

There are significant signs that this nascent, but growing, cannabis enterprise is déjà vu, given that these industry leaders ostensibly do not want youths to smoke. Yet, their marketing strategies speak otherwise. The marijuana industry is now Big Tobacco 2.0.

We have not done a good job of prevention and mitigation of legal drugs we already have: alcohol, tobacco, vaping and opioids. Therefore, it is peculiar that public officials and interest groups are aiding and abetting another layer of addiction-for-profit into the mix, at the expense of the most vulnerable: children.

Admittedly, public opinion polls show that adults are open to medical marijuana and less so to legalizing the mood-altering substance. Still, pollsters are not willing to test to see what the public knows about the short-to long-term health risks of cannabis use. The health risks, like tobacco, are head-to-toe.

Children's and adolescents' brains are still developing until at least 25. Promoting and marketing to these populations has already led to skyrocketing marijuana poisonings, particularly those 5 years of age or younger, with many requiring intensive care in the hospital. Marijuana is now the most prevalent substance found in teen suicides in Colorado, and most states are not even looking at this data. The link to negative mental health — like depression, anxiety and suicide — have been strongly associated with marijuana use. Promotion and marketing will lead to a rise in public health and safety problems.

After the brain, the heart is the second target organ. Growing scientific evidence strongly supports the risk of heart attack, sudden death, heart failure, arrhythmia, and stroke with marijuana use. Of even more concern, these cardiac effects are being noted in people under 50, an age group not commonly associated with serious cardiovascular events.

The data related to in-utero exposure to marijuana should cause significant concern. Outcomes related to stillbirth, low head circumference, and other birth defects have been described in the medical literature. The Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development study monitored these outcomes over time and included 12,000 people. Psychotic-like episodes, behavioral problems, and drug-seeking behavior have been described in offspring exposed to marijuana in-utero.

A close read of the state laws and regulations on the marketing (advertising, promotion, public relations and personal selling) of cannabis is commendable as these are direct, clear, unambiguous and comprehensive. However, expecting this industry to act responsibly in controlling minors' access to these products is naïve. History shows that youth are drawn to forbidden fruits such as tobacco, alcohol and vaping, and public health and school systems' educators have proven to be no match for the marketing tactics employed by these enterprises.

We are seeing questionable marketing tactics in the selling of medical marijuana. For example, one medical marijuana dispensary in Pennsylvania is named "CURE," while another is called "Curaleaf." A dispensary setting up in Philadelphia is branded "Restore," with the tagline "Dispensing Happiness" in its print ads; another is called "Beyond Hello." The examples continue, with names that give the impression, at a minimum, of suggesting "Don't worry, be happy," and "Have we got an elixir for what ails you!"

The metric to use in this business's marketing and sales should be zero tolerance. To post a major food seller of products attractive to kids with cannabis dispensaries as a backdrop exacerbates the uphill efforts that public health and healthcare leaders face in keeping youths drug-free.

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