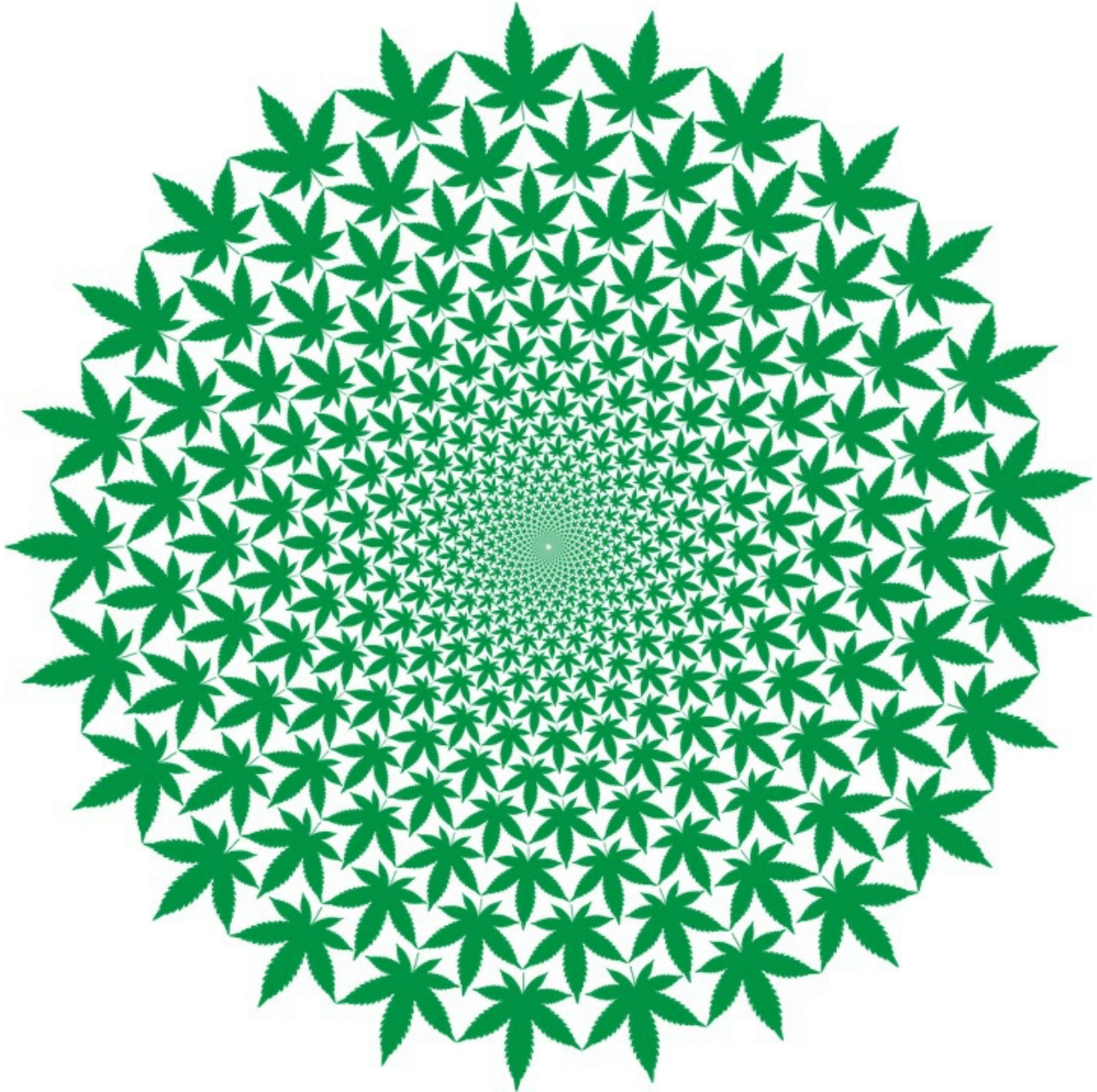


# 'Stoner' is so last century: Marketing marijuana will be about the buzz

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By TMO Reporter

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*In a recent survey, conducted among 1 200 support marijuana legalisation 21+ years of age respondents by the New York-based brand engagement and customer loyalty research consultancy Brand Keys ([brandkeys.com](http://brandkeys.com)), there was an acknowledged recognition that, like tobacco and alcohol, regulations will be put in place for marijuana marketing (92%), but that “buzz” was the way to go for cannabis marketers (96%).*

“Whether you call it grass, weed, pot, ganja, or Mary Jane, what’s undeniable is that 30 states and the District of Columbia currently have laws that – to one degree or another – legalise marijuana,” noted Robert Passikoff, Brand Keys founder and president. “What is clear is that laws legalising the use of marijuana are escalating, and it is going to be a big business that will need big branding.”

From a legislative perspective, it’s worth noting that voters in Maine approved a ballot measure legalising marijuana in 2016. Sales of recreational-use marijuana in California kicked off 1 January 2018. In Massachusetts, retail sales of cannabis are expected to start this July.

### **Branding a bit more difficult**

A number of states have decriminalised the possession of small amounts of marijuana – meaning no arrest, prison time, or criminal record for first-time possession of a small amount for personal consumption. “In most decriminalised states – at last count 22 states – these offences are treated like minor traffic violations,” said Passikoff.

Marijuana Business Daily estimates that U.S. retail sales of legal cannabis products totaled \$6.1 billion in 2017. Estimates are sales could rise to nearly \$14 billion by 2021, which means providers are going to have to learn how to market more competitively.

“Branding of cannabis will be more important than ever. Up till now, providers and growers have relied on logos and packaging, which are only the beginning in this category,” said Passikoff. “Branding will be a bit more difficult than selling a new breakfast cereal or shampoo.”

Parenthetically, the term “munchies” was first noted in a 1971 study on ‘being stoned’ by Charles T. Tart, where the mental state – and increased appetites – of 150 marijuana users was observed. More recent research has focused on the neurological processes behind the munchies, with scientists theorising the munchies-effect is caused by the psychoactive component of cannabis, Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), and its interaction with cannabinoid receptors in the brain.

### **Branding Maryjane**

So issues related to the creation of a mainstream marijuana brand will be liable to the usual branding requisites; create interest, legitimacy, trust, and differentiation, but also issues particularly different than other categories like breakfast cereals and shampoos. “And that will require strategies that go way beyond engagement and loyalty barriers like sugar content and pH levels,” said Passikoff.

“Consumer expectations of all brands increase every year and the same is true for cannabis,” noted Passikoff. Sophisticated consumers want a variety of cannabis products of please any palate (94%) with a brand position with a sleek design (88%) that comes across as professional – versus a “stoner” look (83%). As more entrants to the cannabis industry emerge, it is increasingly important for products to clearly communicate how they are differentiated from their competitors.

Cannabis branding will need to bring greater legitimacy to the industry (77%) and offer significant levels of trust to consumers (87%). “Currently, virtually all consumers speak to themselves before they ‘speak’ to a brand, and the same is true when the category is cannabis,” said Passikoff. Nearly all the respondents (96%) felt that social networking was the best platform for them to learn about marijuana options and offers,

“The bottom line,” noted Passikoff, “is when it comes to engaging loyal customers for cannabis, it’s going to come down to the basics – and the buzz.”

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