Weed marketing will be more low-key than blunt. By: Lisa Wright
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-glimpse into the future of legal marijuana advertising in Canada,
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on the site, which offers his products in the legalized state of Colorado,
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Canopy Growth. [ABSTRACT FROM PUBLISHER] (AN:
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Don't expect to see pot puns in advertising when drug is legal

To get a glimpse into the future of legal marijuana advertising in Canada, look no further than Snoop
Dogg's website.

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three varieties of medical marijuana in Canada through a partnership with Smiths Falls, Ont.- based
Canopy Growth.

His buds, concentrates and edible Dogg Treats from peach gummies to peanut butter gems are actually
hidden behind polished and professional but very plain packaging - and quite deliberately, experts say.

While pot producers and related companies want to appear approachable and friendly to stoners à la
Snoop to make sales, they are starting to shift their promotional emphasis toward being a safe and
trusted source for the product given very restrictive upcoming legislation, says marketing professor Ken
Wong of the Smith School of Business at Queen's University.

"You won't see all the buzzy puns and pot jokes that we're used to," he says, noting it's ironic that the
historically liberal pot community will be pressured to be more conservative in the lead-up to legalization.

Now before the Senate, Ottawa's cannabis bill bans the promotion of products featuring endorsements
from real people or cartoon characters and anything targeting youth. Also forbidden is any marketing that associates pot with a lifestyle that depicts "glamour, recreation, excitement, vitality, risk or daring."

In other words, no Cheech and Chong testimonials or scenes of people sitting around a campfire rolling joints and laughing hysterically. Recent "High Toronto" TTC ads from Weedmaps and the bright pink flyers promoting Weedora delivery service a couple months ago likely won't be welcomed in the new marijuana marketplace either, say marketing experts.

"It is going to make branding and marketing a real challenge," says Jeff Swystun, president of Toronto-based Swystun Communications, who has worked more than 20 years in branding and advertising at several agencies.

He says medical pot will continue to have strict guidelines to follow when it comes to use and benefits.

"Not only will government ensure this but industries that see this as competition will demand it. At the same time, this could be great for pharmaceutical giants and supplement companies who will use the ingredient in their own products," says Swystun.

However he predicts cannabis producers and distributors will test the waters anyway to see how far they can go before being reined in by regulators since it's uncharted territory.

"It is going to be a Wild West for a while," he says. As it stands now, medical pot growers are prohibited from making medicinal claims or even promoting their brand.

"The core dilemma is the challenge of creating dual regulatory standards for medical versus recreational cannabis consumption," says Michael Mulvey, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Ottawa's Telfer School of Management.

"The industry made its initial attempt to gain legitimacy via the health claims - that the consumption of medical marijuana could provide pain relief for patients whose needs could not be adequately served by existing commercial offerings," Mulvey says.

"In effect, they knocked on, opened, and walked through the door into a sector dominated by big pharmaceutical companies," he says.

He calls legalized recreational pot "the final frontier of regulation."

"In my opinion, we are witnessing the substitution of an underground economy for a managed bureaucracy," Mulvey adds.

Overall, "pot will be facing a combination of what cigarettes and alcohol currently face. Any hint of marketing to youth will be a no-no," Swystun says.
The minimum age to buy pot in Ontario is 19 under a new provincial law that also bans smoking up in public places, workplaces and vehicles, and the target price for recreational pot will be about $10 a gram.

Under the federal Bill C-45, Canadian marijuana companies are also restricted from advertising anything about pricing anywhere but at the point of sale, and can't have their names on stadiums or other venues attended by the public that they might sponsor. "In this sector there is little room to innovate or deviate with respect to product packaging, labelling, quality assurance and distribution," Mulvey says.

"While some investors have placed their bets on marijuana company stocks, I'd be putting my money on law firms that are at the fore of this budding industry," he says.

Marketers "will understand and respect that this is a significant decision in our society" and that consumers will need clear, compelling communications to understand that and make informed purchases, Swystun adds.

"In short, we should expect to see the full array of marketing tools being used, even if mass advertising is prohibited as it is for tobacco," Wong says.

And since the typically blunt Snoop and his investors are using uncharacteristically subdued marketing to push his product, you can pretty much expect the same approach in Canada, Wong says.

There are zero pictures of the weed-loving rapper Snoop Dogg smoking a big blunt on his website. Under Ottawa's Cannabis bill, marketing that glamorizes the use of pot will be forbidden. The products on Snoop Dogg's website are deliberately hidden behind plain packaging, experts say.

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