Marijuana industry gets blunt: Stop using the word 'pot'


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Gary Robbins

Jan. 16--He was dressed in a three-piece suit. But Chris Coggan nearly went unnoticed when he dropped by a San Diego city councilor's office last year to do some lobbying on marijuana laws.

"An aide came to reception and asked, 'Where's the pot guy?,' said Coggan, co-founder of Therapy Tonics & Provisions, a La Jolla cannabis drink company.

"He seemed to be looking for someone in a tie-dyed shirt with a joint stuck behind his ear."

California voters overwhelming approved the use of recreational marijuana in 2016. And licensed stores in San Diego began selling it on January 1st, generating brisk business.

But marijuana still carries a stigma that surfaces with the use of old slang like pot and weed. For many, the words evoke an image of lazy, not-so-bright people who puff their lives away.

The image deeply bothers the marijuana industry, which is telling the public -- sometimes gently, sometimes curtly -- that they should use the word cannabis. That's the scientific name for the plant from which marijuana is derived.

Many retailers also are marketing marijuana as a health and wellness drug even though recreational sales will soon dwarf those of medical marijuana.

"People are taking a more sophisticated approach to using cannabis, especially in using the right dosing," Coggan said. "We don't want people to think of it as negative."

It's all part of larger effort to normalize cannabis, a drug that could generate $5 billion a year in sales in California by 2019.

The state is providing plenty of help. It enlisted Cheech Marin of Cheech and Chong fame to help show Californians how to register their marijuana businesses.

The state also ran a YouTube ad that extolled the benefits of using marijuana while warning that it should
never be used by drivers. The ad was pulled after conservatives complained that the ad said too little about the perils of driving stoned.

The industry is pushing ahead with normalization, sparking a cultural war with many baby boomers and GenXers who commonly refer to marijuana as pot, weed or grass. Many of them don't think the drug carries deeply negative connotations.

They have their own allies, including San Diego-based Jack in the Box, which partnered with Merry Jane, a marijuana news and lifestyle website, to promote the "Merry Munchie Meal," which will be sold in a handful of Jack in the Box restaurants in Long Beach this month.

The "munchie" campaign is a wink and a nod to people who love to eat fast food after consuming pot. They're the same people who like to stream "Disjointed," a new Netflix show that focuses on the exploits of some dopey old-school stoners at a California dispensary.

None of this amuses B. Le Grand, the 32-year-old publisher of the Los Angeles-based Edibles List, which promotes edible marijuana.

"People in our industry and activists don't like the word pot because it doesn't focus on the medicinal value of the plant, which is what's important," said Le Grand. "We don't like the word marijuana, either."

Zach Lazarus agrees, and he blames the media for helping to perpetuate old stereotypes instead of highlighting new markets.

"You hear newscasters referring to dispensaries as pot shops. You don't hear the same newscasters referring to a liquor store as a Booze Shop or an Alcoholic's Store," said Lazarus, co-founder of A Green Alternative, a cannabis store in Otay Mesa.

Tok Thompson has heard this sort of thing before

"Language constantly changes. It's a social process that can cause disruption," said Thompson, a professor of anthropology and communication at the University of Southern California.

"The word gay used to have a much different meaning than it generally does today. People get accustomed to words. Then the words go out of date. It can be disruptive."

Disruptive also describes the history of cannabis.

Pharmacies sold products containing marijuana in the 19th century, even though little was known about it scientifically.

Things began to change in the early 20th century when immigrants from Mexico showed Americans how
the plant could be used as a recreational drug. The drug took on a highly negative connotation, with some opponents referring to it as the "Marijuana Menace."

Marijuana was criminalized by Congress in the 1930s, the period in which the drug also became widely known as pot. Entomologists say pot represents a shorter version of the Spanish word potiguaya, which refers to certain wines or brandy that contain marijuana.

The drug surged in popularity during the counter-culture movement of the 1960s and 70s. That led to stiffer laws from the federal government. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush announced a "War on Drugs", legislation partly focused on marijuana.

Public opinion took a big turn seven years later when California became the first state to legalize medical marijuana. Today, that type of marijuana is legal in nearly 30 states, and recreational cannabis is legal in eight. Other states -- including Michigan -- might make cannabis legal this year.

That means efforts to normalize cannabis could grow. It's the sort of cultural shift that many people have struggled with, including Virginia Falces, communications director at Outco, which cultivates marijuana at an indoor plant near El Cajon.

Falces grew up in California in the late 1980s and early 80s and says she "had always called cannabis either weed or pot, with the occasional grass or dope thrown in for variety or to sound cool.

"I had to retrain myself to use 'cannabis' or 'medical marijuana' in my new professional capacity as I quickly learned that industry almost universally preferred those over the names I was used to."

Le Grand can sympathize, saying, "My dad was born in 1949 and he still refers to cannabis as pot, even if I ask him not to. I accept it."

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