Marijuana industry pushes to eliminate the word 'stoner'

By Gary Robbins

SAN DIEGO _ There's a badge on her uniform, possibly a gun on her hip, and her arms are spread a little, suggesting she's ready for anything.

You might think that you're looking at a police officer walking a beat.

But what you may have seen on billboards and, more recently, the internet is an effort by MedMen Enterprises of Culver City to remind you that marijuana users come from all walks of life. They can be cops, nurses, teachers, scientists, construction foremen, and grandmothers.

All of these people appear in MedMen ads that also feature the word "stoner" with a line drawn through it. As in, let's get rid of this.

"That word can be used to negatively stereotype people," said Daniel Yi, senior vice president of communications at MedMen, which operates 14 retail pot stores. "We want to take that stigma away. We want to make marijuana mainstream."

MedMen's $2 million "Forget Stoner" advertising campaign debuted earlier this year and is part of a larger, ongoing push by the cannabis industry to normalize the use of marijuana.

Some retailers have asked media outlets _ including the San Diego Union-Tribune _ to stop using the world "pot" because they think that it carries a negative image _ one that can dampen sales.

Other companies _ like San Diego's Kb Pure Essentials _ partly avoid such issues by marketing cannabis-based health and wellness products. Things like oils and salves that customers use to treat sleep problems, stress and inflammation.

The products _ which haven't been evaluated by the government _ contain CBD, a compound in cannabis that doesn't get a person high.

"It's legal now," said Brooke Brun, the company's co-founder. "People don't feel so bad about asking for it, or being seen at a CBD booth."
The marijuana market has opened up since Jan. 1, when licensed retailers began selling recreational cannabis throughout California. And more growth is expected.

"The negative prophecies didn't come true," said Dallin Young, executive director of the Association of Cannabis Professionals in San Diego. "California hasn't turned into some 'Mad Max' world."

But there's still a stigma attached to marijuana. And it was apparent earlier this month when Elon Musk, the controversial chief executive officer of Tesla, smoked weed on an entertainment program broadcast live on YouTube.

The company's stock fell the following day, a drop also affected by other issues at Tesla.

Musk also consumed alcohol during the program, which drew little notice.

Yi has seen this kind of thing before and believes the public doesn't treat the two substances equally, even though both are legal in California.

"The Stephen Colbert show (on CBS) does this thing where Colbert takes shots of tequila with some of his guests," Yi said. "That doesn't show up on the front page of the L.A. Times.

"But Musk smokes one blunt on the Joe Rogan Experience and it gets lots of press coverage. Alcohol is acceptable, marijuana isn't.

"Overall, cannabis is much healthier than alcohol. But it is a free country. If you want to use to to socialize, great. Just do it responsibly."

The Union-Tribune got a mixed responses to MedMen's push to discourage people from using the word stoner, and to the kind of thinking expressed by Yi.

"The alcohol industry has for eons shown advertisements of imbibers in all professions appearing to lead normal, healthy lives," said Don Paret of San Diego.

"Why (shouldn't) the pot industry do the same? MedMen's attempt to create a more legitimate image of pot users is no different than the alcohol industry portraying a similar image."

Gary Deacon of San Diego's Bay Park neighborhood has a similar take, but he doubts whether MedMen, one of the nation's fastest growing cannabis companies, will be successful.

"While 'stoner' may conjure images of a permanently buzzed Jeff Spicoli-type, I think trying to stop people from using it is a pointless and losing battle," Deacon said.

"Either embrace and reclaim the epithet by showing that 'stoners' can be productive contributors to
society, or promote an alternate term for people to use."

(EDITORS: BEGIN OPTIONAL TRIM)

Alicia Espinoza believes heavy marijuana users need help getting straight, not a different nickname.

"When we see a stoner or someone who refers to themselves as a stoner, they are in no way an upstanding member of society," said Espinoza, coalition coordinator for Drug Free Escondido.

"They are not appearing to make positive social changes or improvements in their lives or the lives of others. This is the reality that we see and live with, every day. Changing the perception or definition of the word stoner would be nothing more than smoke and mirrors."

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Pat Klaasen of San Diego hears echoes of the nation's current political climate in the discussions over the word stoner.

"Why are people so divided?" Klaasen said. "I think it has a lot to do with why all of America is so polarized in this era. Folks are either open or close-minded. They are willing to experience life and its wealth of options, or remain in their narrow, prejudiced mind-sets.

Stephen Martin of La Mesa has a different concern _ MedMen's uses inclusion of teachers and nurses in its ads. (Actors portray the figures in the ad.)

"I became a Registered Nurse and I can assure you I did not work high," Martin said.

"Now, the MedMen Enterprises have millions of dollars to try to social engineer current language to include nurse, teacher and grandma who choose to use cannabis for 'medical reasons.'

"I would like to hear the hospital or teacher union's response to nurses or teachers who purchase cannabis legally and work 'high.'

"Yeah, it's legal. (But) so is Budweiser, and the alcohol industry has finally gone (on) to responsible use."

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