WOMEN AND WEED

Cannabis companies are changing how pot is marketed—one rose-gold vape pen at a time

By Annie Daly

The cannabis industry is having a moment. As more and more states are legalizing marijuana—10 plus Washington, D.C., have currently legalized it for recreational use, 33 for medical use—brands and marketers are hopping on the green train, too, bringing it into the mainstream for the first time in U.S. history.

Barneys, for example—yes, that Barneys—opened a cannabis lifestyle shop in March called The High End. Located on the fifth floor of its Beverly Hills flagship location (and also online), the shop sells 40 cannabis accessories, ranging from $60 precious stone pipes all the way to a package of cannabis accessories called La Grande Fete Gift Set that retails for nearly $9,000. Even mainstream drug stores and beauty stores are getting in on the game. In July, Sephora started selling Lord Jones CBD products in 171 of their stores, after making them available on sephora.com in October 2018. And back in March, CVS and Walgreens announced that they will sell CBD products at 800 stores in eight states.

Although cannabis has clearly become more mainstream, there are still serious social issues and inequities surrounding marijuana policy in the U.S. The ability to even think about normalizing weed, let alone begin to do so, is a privilege, one that’s largely held by white men and women. While certain brands and companies are making a splash and getting coverage in glossy magazines selling and creating new products that help shift the cannabis conversation—products that, like the Barneys gift set, cost thousands of dollars—there are thousands of people, largely young men of color, in prison for the very thing that these new brands are targeting. And there is still a long road ahead to change that.

But it’s also true that as weed becomes legal in more places, its overall persona is changing by the day. Images of booby blondes serving weed on silver platters have given way to a new, sleeker and decidedly more sophisticated cannabis culture—and, perhaps most important, women are the coveted, fastest-growing target audience.

Women, weed and the grass ceiling
You’re not imagining things if you feel as though you hear more women singing the praises of cannabis than ever before, or see
them casually vaping as you’re strolling down the street on a Saturday afternoon. For one thing, pop culture has finally started to depict women enjoying weed, but doing so in a chill way that doesn’t make weed the main event. The main characters on millennial touchstone series such as Comedy Central’s “Broad City” (2014-2019) and HBO’s “Girls” (2012-2017) regularly blazed, but pot smoking was never presented as a morality tale. Networks have come a long way since Showtime’s “Weeds” (2005-2012), whose central character’s decision to become a pot dealer to support her kids after her husband died was considered so out there she was compared to the schoolteacher-turned-meth kingpin in “Breaking Bad.”

In the past few years, pop culture finally started to mirror what many women have come to know to be true already: Weed is an increasingly popular, yet casual, part of Americans’ daily lives. And the numbers back that up, too: A March 2019 report called “What Women Want in Cannabis,” from Headset, a firm that analyzes weed consumption, found that women make up one third of the cannabis market (around 31 percent). That’s still less than men, true, but considering that previous reports have historically found a huge discrepancy between men and women who use cannabis, it’s really quite telling.

Perhaps more interestingly, though, is the type of cannabis women are choosing. That same report found that women prefer to lump it into the “wellness” category, opting primarily for edibles, topicals, tinctures and sublinguals that help promote good sleep, curb anxiety and increase sexual health. An online group called Cannabis Feminist, which labels itself as “a community transforming cannabis into a universal wellness product empowering women to lead the industry,” perfectly captures this take. With 46.2K followers on Instagram, their feed is filled with testimonials from women who’ve used marijuana to heal their bodies, minds and souls. A report from the cannabis market research company BDS Analytics even found that 36 percent of women who’ve used cannabis in the past six months said that it improved their sexual experience.

Men, on the other hand, don’t see cannabis as a means to a wellness end as much as women do, and still tend to go for more traditional methods, such as concentrates, flower (the industry term for straight weed, or bud) and vaporizer pens. (To be fair, the numbers surrounding vape pens are very similar: Vaporizers made up 23.5 percent of the men’s market, and 22.3 percent of the women’s market—a virtual tie.)

Women are also shattering the so-called “grass ceiling” in the entire cannabis industry. The latest research from Marijuana Business Daily found that women held 27 percent of the executive-level roles in the industry in 2017, which, according to Forbes, is actually more than they occupy in other businesses overall (21 percent). Myriad professional groups for women in weed include, most notably, Women Grow, an organization that connects, educates and empowers women in all segments of the cannabis industry. The 2017 documentary “Mary Janes: The Women of Weed” follows the most well-known “Puffragettes” (pot + suffragettes) in the industry as they navigate their way through business and through life.

While there isn’t any conclusive data on why women are grabbing high-profile

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Kiana Anvaripour, VP of marketing, Beboe
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positions in greater numbers than the business world at large, some theorize that the legal marijuana industry is still so new that there aren’t as many institutional biases floating around to get in the way of women rising to the top. Others believe that the industry simply attracts women who love the work and want to do the work, too. That was certainly the case for Ann Skalski, chief brand officer at the luxury vaporizer company Double Barrel. Before joining the cannabis industry, she was vice president of creative services at Saks Fifth Avenue. But she made the switch because cannabis makes her so happy.

“There’s a movement here,” Skalski begins. “Cannabis makes so many of us feel better, and when you have someone who is so connected to the end goal, someone who cares about it and can bring an acute understanding as to why a consumer may choose this over that, it’s a perfect match.”

**The rose-gold effect**

The fact that women are consuming more weed than ever before and that women are making waves in the industry go completely hand in hand. Many cannabis founders and marketers have embarked on a united mission to seize the moment and continue to bring women into the weed conversation. Their goal is to reframe the entire cultural narrative around cannabis—destigmatizing use among all consumers while doing the same for women who use it. And most of these founders and marketers agree that the best way to normalize weed is to make it look, well, a lot more normal.

“If you have a look throughout history, design changes people’s minds, and so we set out to design products for women that were not off-putting—and spoke to what was already on their vanities and in their lives,” explains April Pride, founder of the female-focused cannabis brand Van der Pop. Van der Pop sells many items, including the pink and black Grinder Cards and the Calla Multi-Tool, which is designed to help users pack bowls and roll joints more easily. “Our hope is that by making our products look accessible, more women will feel comfortable using them without feeling nervous or ashamed,” Pride, who holds a master’s degree from Parson’s School of Design, continues.

She’s certainly onto something. Mary Pryor, CEO and co-founder of Cannaclusive, a nonprofit that supports diversity, inclusion and education in the cannabis industry, says that good branding and marketing have indeed been key in bringing women into the cannabis conversation.

“Branding has made weed more approachable and user-friendly, for sure. The brands I see people caring about are the ones that look small, compact and sleek—and don’t look too in your face,” she confirms. And that’s especially true when it comes to branding that appeals to women. “Traditionally, marketing weed to men has either been about projecting fantasy, or appealing to the everyday guy that men feel like they could smoke a bowl with. But for women, we want to know what gets the job done.
without having to do too much work to know what we’re going to get. The [product branding that works] is what looks sleek and stylish and doesn’t put us out there like that.”

The e-commerce brand Tetra, for example, also sells discreet-looking weed accessories that look like they could be displayed on a glass table in an upscale apartment. There’s a beautiful $115 silver storage box; a $30 gold and silver Round Stick Lighter that does not, in fact, look like a lighter at all; and a $550 gold ashtray, to name a few. Then there’s the $1,250 geometric glass ashtray and lighter set that stacks into a table-top sculpture when you’re not actually using it.

Jeanine Moss, the founder of Annabis—a line of odor-proof designer accessories for women who smoke weed—also believes in products that don’t put women out there like that. Dubbed the “Coco Chanel of cannabis” by Quartz, Moss makes accessories for women who want to carry their marijuana in fashionable bags, just as they carry around everything else in their lives.

“Our motto is that cannabis is something that you do, not something that you are. It shouldn’t define you. The way you carry your weed should be a reflection of everything else in your life,” Moss explains. “Why have a big Jamaican flag or a huge green marijuana leaf all over your purse when that’s not who you are?”

It’s a valid question, and one that’s at the heart of other design-forward cannabis brands, too—like Beboe. Launched in 2017 and described as the “Hermès of Marijuana” by the New York Times, the Los Angeles-based brand produces beautiful, Instagram-worthy products. Their disposable vaporizers, which retail for $60, come in rose gold only, and they also sell an assortment of other goodies, like a pack of edible pastilles ($25 for one tin of 25),

Clockwise from top l.: Annabis Maya snake-print clutch/wristlet with accessories, Tetra seed bowl, Tetra Bauhaus Box, Tetra lighters, Beboe Box with vaporizers and pastilles (2)
Women and Weed

and various CBD products. Beboe even recently launched a skincare line, Beboe Therapies, which includes both a CBD serum and a face mask.

Although Beboe didn’t set out to target women (the founders are both men), their clientele is about 65 percent female. In fact, in a true testament to that majority female clientele, the brand usually skips marketing their products for 4/20, and instead focuses on Mother’s Day.

“Moms really love Beboe, because they recognize themselves in our products, and they aren’t ashamed to talk about them,” confirms Kiana Anvaripour, Beboe’s VP of marketing.

“The way that the media has portrayed weed in the past can be intimidating, with the big bongs and the black vaporizers and the huge joints, but our products are simple and beautiful,” she continues, adding that women especially love their pocket-sized mini vaporizer pen, because it looks like a lip liner, and fits perfectly into their clutches. “Our clientele is highly educated, and they are still highly functioning humans. They just want something that will help them relax, something to help them chill out at night, and something that they don’t have to hide.” Of course, it’s not just the look of the product that matters. While Anvaripour says women are initially attracted to their products because of their design—elevated, luxurious and accessible—it’s also the quality of the oil and the pastilles that keeps them coming back for more.

Another SoCal-based luxury cannabis company, Canndescent, has also gained a large following, thanks in large part to their branding. The cannabis itself is incredibly high-quality, too—they were even named the state’s top-selling luxury flower cannabis brand in 2018. But in the end, it’s their unique take on naming their products that truly sets them apart, and may be what helps them appeal to women who, in Pryor’s words, are often just “looking to get the job done.” In 2015, Canndescent ditched their traditional strain names like Sour Diesel, which have been historically associated with that old-school stoner aesthetic, and instead opted to name their strains after the feelings they created, including Calm, Create, Connect, Charge and Cruise. It’s a move their CEO, Adrian Sedlin, compares to Apple’s marketing strategy.

“What we did with our strain names is similar to what Apple did with their products,” he begins. “If you look at the nature of this category historically, cannabis was mind-numbingly stupid and difficult. You used to have to learn 6,000 strain names with crazy names like Alaskan Thunderfuck—it was like you had to literally be a weed scientist to buy weed. So we simplified cannabis and made it more approachable. We said, ‘You know what, forget all of these acronyms—let’s just make our names an answer to how people will feel.’”

Sedlin says that this approach wasn’t meant to target women specifically, as the desire for a pared-down approach is universal. “We didn’t set out to build a women’s cannabis company. We set out to build a cannabis company that certainly tried to speak to both men and women in a way that transcends gender. And that was through good taste,” he begins. That said, women have responded especially well to the brand. Their numbers skew toward women: 55 percent of their consumers are female, and 45 percent are male. Sedlin can’t pinpoint the exact reason for the divide, but he theorizes that the branding and packaging helped women gain trust in the company overall. “Women get really excited about our packaging,” Sedlin explains. “But what they’re seeing, really, is a care in detail that evokes trust that’s familiar to some of the other product categories they’ve shopped. We’re essentially an aspiration brand that attracts women in a category that’s historically chosen to ignore them.”

Looking ahead

Clearly, the cannabis industry is disrupting everything we’ve ever known about weed—and it continues to move full speed ahead. A November 2018 market research report released by MarketsandMarkets predicted that the whole business is expected to be worth $39.4 billion by 2023, up from $10.3 billion in 2018. And so, as we head into the election year and marijuana is still not actually legal at a federal level, the question becomes: How will brands prepare for whatever the outcome may be?

Sonia Hendrix, the CEO and co-founder of
Gallery PR—which describes itself as taking a new-age approach to publicity, specializing in cannabis and other lifestyle clients—believes that federal legalization is likely not going to sweep across the country. But change is coming regardless. “I think that legalization will happen on a state-by-state level, and that will be the big experiment,” Hendrix theorizes. What that means for brands like Besito LA, one of her clients, is that they will have to start growing cannabis in other states in order to exist. And growing in other states means getting new licenses, which in turn means they will need more money. “These brands are now being forced to accept VC money and to merge to exist in other states. So now, the future is in these really big entities that are housing multiple brands and investing in multistate operators,” she explains.

Hendrix also predicts that more and more brands will embrace social justice campaigns. “The fact is that the cannabis industry is living in two Americas,” she says. “On the one side, there are black and brown communities who are in jail and suffering because of weed, and on the other side, there are wealthy, white communities who are making billions of dollars from the same thing. That’s a major injustice, and the millennial generation is not going to stand for it. And brands know that.” The people behind these brands also genuinely care about the injustice as well, Hendrix points out.

Take, for example, Jason White, the former executive vice president and head of marketing for Beats by Dre who left to join the cannabis industry as the CMO of Cura Partners. White, who’s been an advocate for diversity throughout his marketing career, left Beats because he saw injustice happening in the cannabis industry and knows he can help, Hendrix points out. “Social injustice is a big and authentic component for these brands,” she continues. (Plus, it doesn’t hurt that Cura—which is best known for its Select Oil and Select CBD lines—was recently acquired by Curaleaf in a $949 million deal, and is set to become the first billion-dollar cannabis company in America.)

And finally, and arguably most important, women will continue to be an influential and ever-growing force in the industry. “I think about the Cheech & Chong stereotype where it’s like two people hanging around with nothing to do but be stoned all day. And that’s not our reality now,” muses Skalski. “Women want reality ... and we want our reality to be amazing.”

Canndescent named its strains after the feelings they induced.
THE ‘CASUALLY CANNABIS’ MOVEMENT

While weed accessories have certainly gotten the Glossier treatment as of late, the entire lifestyle surrounding cannabis has changed, too. People who smoked weed on the regular used to be labeled “stoners,” but the new wave of cannabis users don’t define themselves by their love for the green. They simply incorporate it into their daily lives without making it the main event, a noteworthy shift that is captured by many new publications, online communities and brands alike. Think of it as the “casually cannabis” movement.

The brands
Much like many of the popular direct-to-consumer brands that rely on Instagram to project their brand image, the social accounts of upscale weed accessory companies like Canndescent and Beboe are filled with carefully styled glamour shots that are also very strategic. This is partly because weed still isn’t legal on a federal level, which means that Instagram has the power to shut down accounts that showcase photos of the actual plant—so brands are forced to be more discreet. But mostly it’s because brands now want to sell the entire lifestyle of the people who use their products as much as the products themselves.

The magazines
Broccoli and Gossamer, two newish print magazines that launched in November 2017 and October 2017, respectively, are both firmly rooted in the idea that while weed may not be the central thing in anyone’s life, it is nothing to be ashamed of. As Anja Charbonneau, founder and editor-in-chief of Broccoli, explains, “When women see something that looks like the rest of their lives, something that fits in with their style—the way they decorate their houses, their offices—they can be like, ‘Oh, maybe it’s okay for me to leave a pipe on the table.’ Maybe it’s not something they have to hide.’”

“We want everyone, both men and women, to feel comfortable reading Gossamer and having it on the coffee table,” Gossamer co-founder Verena von Pfetten adds, “because everything in it is smart and beautifully designed and intellectually engaging and visually inspiring. There’s no way people can look at it and be like, ‘Oh, that’s for stoners.’”

The online communities
High Girls Club markets itself as a community that keeps “the vibe high with a girly gallery of cannabis-inspired art & photography.” With 97.6K followers, their Instagram posts feature whimsical photos and artwork of women who simply love cannabis, like an illustration of a woman in a wedding dress carrying a weed bouquet down the aisle. Similarly, Miss Grass is an online publication that’s focused on the larger green lifestyle—though it also sells cannabis accessories. As “an elevated lifestyle shop and publication for women, cannabis and good living,” the site features articles ranging from Q&As with interesting tastemakers in the space to primers on how to use CBD for stress.
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Staff:
Writer: Annie Daly
Senior Art Director: Jennifer Chiu
Copy Editor: Kate Papacosma

Contact us:
James Palma
General Manager, Revenue and Client Partnerships
jpalma@adage.com

John Dioso
Editor, Studio 30
jdioso@adage.com

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