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## **An Industry Ready to Bloom**

***Transition from illicit gateway drug to buzzy new investment***

Prior to Canada's nationwide legalization in 2017, the average Canadian cannabis user was typically what might be considered a risk taker ("A society in transition"). As expected, this means that they were more likely to be young (aged 18-34), and in their "quest to live life to the fullest", were more likely to partake ("A society in transition"). Legalization, however, has set the stage for a more conservative experimenter to emerge—typically one aged 35-54, has a university or graduate school education, and has family or other responsibilities. They are expected to consume less than once a month. However, these consumers are far from newbies: 74 percent of them have had prior experience with recreational cannabis, and 41 percent have used it in the past five years. ("A society in transition")

*"The total cannabis market in Canada, including medical, illegal, and legal recreational products, was expected to generate up to \$7.17 billion in sales in 2019—up to \$4.34 billion coming from the legal recreational market" ("A society in transition").*

Legalizing recreational cannabis has marked a significant transition in Canadian society ("A society in transition"). While the industry continues to remain controversial, especially in the United States, it is important to note that the bloom of this sector has spurred innovation, entrepreneurship, and jobs. In Canada, legalization is making it possible for the success of a "dynamic, sophisticated industry that will create new jobs, new opportunities for businesses, and new revenues for government." ("A society in transition")


The successes in Canada's budding marijuana industry will be echoed in the United States, if we can ever manage to get our state and federal government on the same page. From marijuana's historically sordid criminalization to the emerging recreational industry, there is an opportunity here to uplift those impacted by the War on Drugs. Women in creative design and marketing fields are uniquely positioned to help usher in a new era of Mary Jane.

## **But First, Let's Get Our Facts Straight**

***America's War on Drugs***

It is no secret that the cannabis industry continues to struggle to be seen in a positive light by stereotypically conservative older voters in the United States. 85 percent of American voters surveyed aged 18-34 think pot should be legalized recreationally in the US, compared to the 44 percent approval among surveyed voters over 65 years old (Malloy). Stemming from the racial prejudices of the 1971 Nixon era War on





Drugs to the 1980 Reagan era 'drug hysteria', marijuana has been smeared with negative connotations time and time again. Outlined in the Controlled Substances Act, signed into law in 1970 by the Nixon administration, marijuana is listed as a Schedule 1 drug. On the list of Schedule 1 drugs, marijuana is accompanied by LSD, heroin, and MDMA (ecstasy), among others. Drugs classified as Schedule 1 are said to be the most dangerous, "as they pose a very high risk for addiction with little evidence of medical benefits" ("A Brief History"). I can only speak to my own observation here, but marijuana seems out of place among the other drugs in the same category. For added context, examples of Schedule 2 drugs (those deemed less dangerous or risky for addiction than Schedule 1) include cocaine, meth, oxycodone, and Vicodin ("Drug Scheduling"). Here's what'll really bake your noodle: during an interview in 1994, John Ehrlichman, Nixon's Domestic Policy Chief who was later jailed for his role in Watergate, suggested that the launch of the War on Drugs had ulterior motives in helping Nixon keep his job. According to Ehrlichman, Nixon's campaign had two enemies: "the antiwar left and black people." Ehrlichman goes on to say,

*"We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did" ("A Brief History").*

Allow that to sink in for a moment. Note that marijuana remains listed a Schedule 1 drug to this day, fifty years later. Persistent data findings show that rates of illegal recreational marijuana use among white and black Americans is equivalent, and yet the national arrest rate for blacks for marijuana possession

was 3.73 times higher than the arrest rates for whites in 2010. In addition to a long history of discrimination in housing, employment, and education, black and Latino Americans are far less likely to be able to open marijuana businesses.

“The interlocking systems of inequality leading to the racial wealth gap have made many of the black and Latino victims of marijuana prohibition unlikely to capitalize on the newly permissive environment” (“DRUG POLICY”). It is estimated that less than 36 of the over 3,000 cannabis dispensaries in the America are owned by black people. Despite predictions that the cannabis industry will top \$18 billion by 2020, profits have already disproportionately gone to middle- and upper-class white Americans. (“DRUG POLICY”)

The negative stance of the federal government has fueled the less than savory image that cannabis has among older voters – a stance that is rooted in prejudice, racism, and misinformation. This is where our Mary Janes of Marketing can hope to make a difference. The opportunity to advocate for a truthful image of marijuana—one free from the restraints of historical non-facts—has presented itself. Women in creative design and marketing fields are poised to successfully execute this campaign.

## **So, You Have an Image Problem**

*Hi, can I get a rebrand please?*

When you take into consideration the projected emergence of the older more financially stable Canadian marijuana user, we can expect to see a similar shift in the United States as attitudes change. Sally Nichols, President of Sales, Distribution, and CBD of San Francisco-based Bloom Farms, speaks anecdotally about her experience with today's image of the

marijuana industry in the United States: “I learned quickly that what we imagine as the face of cannabis was only scratching the surface. I assumed maybe writers or artists were open to cannabis, but what I found is the banker down the street loved it more than anybody” (Garber-Paul). Alison Gordon, member of the Board of Directors at Canada-based company, 48North Cannabis Corp., experienced her own wake up call about marijuana when a close family friend was diagnosed with stage IV ovarian cancer. As this person in her life began using marijuana for sleep, anxiety, and pain management she realized that the cannabis industry had an image problem (Won). Gordon, speaking of her career transition into the industry said,

*“Someone needs to rebrand this. Why does it always have to be just about hippies and rappers? I realized that I have this perfect storm of experience with marketing and fundraising and working with patients, physicians and government, so I jumped into the industry” (Won).*

As the Canadian cannabis industry matures, we are beginning to see a change in today's perception that pot is only used by ambitionless teenagers to instead be associated with professionals. It has been speculated that “much of this shift is being driven by women” (“Female Cannabis”). As a result, an additional opportunity exists to incorporate more elegant design into the marijuana industry. Wendy Borman, Colorado-based

filmmaker, in her documentary “Mary Janes: The Women of Weed”, states that the cannabis industry must attract a new older, more sophisticated type of consumer to continue a path of growth (Bohrer). With women stereotypically at the forefront of decisions made within a familial unit about health and wellness, there is an overwhelming opportunity for women to design cannabis-related products that fit their needs (Bohrer). Borman states, “We’re not necessarily interested in the largest bong ever built. We need products that fit into our lifestyle that are more discreet and they’re not going to be covered in Jamaican flags and big pot leaves and things like that” (Bohrer).

Changing the negative image surrounding pot isn’t something that can happen overnight and must be done with tact and awareness. Designing cannabis related products that fit a sophisticated lifestyle must be secondary to rectifying the criminalization of black and brown people regarding marijuana. Yet, the opportunity for innovative design certainly presents an additional appealing factor for creative women to consider a transition into the cannabis industry.

### **If She ‘Canna’ Do It, So ‘Canna’ I** *Breaking the Glass Ceiling*

So, the question that remains – why should women be pivoting to enter the marijuana industry? Though in recent news we’ve seen some satisfying takedowns of powerful men behaving badly, the current economic landscape still shows that women still have a lot of ground to make up (Won). In 2018, women only accounted for 18.6% of executive officers at TSX-listed companies, and only 17.2% of board members (MacDougall).

In 2019, the cannabis industry reported women accounting for 36.8% of executives, demonstrating the market’s progressive nature by comparison. In addition, young and quickly growing marijuana-related companies that initially filled key positions in marketing or sales with friends and family members are now looking to bring in those with more experience and expertise. The perfect candidate to fill these positions could be women outside the cannabis industry that are looking to advance their career or feel frustrated with a lack of mobility in their current positions (McVey).

Alison Gordon, who had been a Marketing Officer for 3 years before making the switch to 48North Cannabis Corp., was appointed to CEO within a year. Gordon thinks that that due to the young and quickly moving nature of this industry, women who can get in now—and get a few years under their belts—will be leading the way in no time. Gordon says, “I’m considered a veteran because I’ve been in it for 5 years” (Won).

For Mary Janes of Marketing, the path ahead is clear. Nationwide legalization in the United States will be knocking at the door any year now. Entering the cannabis industry as prohibition declines will allow these women to usher in a positive and realistic impression of the future of marijuana. Women in creative design and marketing fields will have opportunities to not only take an active hold on their career trajectories, but to make a difference in the way the world perceives marijuana for years to come.



