MARKETING & SEO

The Business Of Getting High

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Introduction: Inside the Booming Cannabis Economy

In recent years, the phrase **The Business Of Getting High**has evolved from a counterculture joke into a serious economic reality. What was once relegated to illegal markets and underground entrepreneurship has blossomed into a multi-billion-dollar legitimate industry spanning cultivation, manufacturing, retail, technology, and ancillary services. From seed to sale, the legal cannabis sector now employs hundreds of thousands of people, generates significant tax revenues for states and countries, and attracts investment from Wall Street to Main Street. Yet, behind the glossy storefronts and branded edibles lies a complex web of regulation, stigma, banking restrictions, and ever-shifting consumer demands. This article takes a deep dive into the business dynamics of the legal cannabis industry—exploring how entrepreneurs, investors, and policymakers are navigating the highs and lows of this rapidly maturing market.

The Economic Scale of the Cannabis Industry

To understand the scope of **The Business Of Getting High**, one must first look at the numbers. In the United States alone, legal cannabis sales exceeded $33 billion in 2023, with projections suggesting the market could surpass $50 billion by the end of the decade. Canada's legal market, which opened in 2018, now accounts for roughly $5 billion in annual sales. Emerging markets in Europe—especially Germany, the UK, and Malta—are also beginning to contribute, while countries like Thailand and Mexico experiment with legalization. This growth is not merely recreational; medical cannabis programs are expanding in regions where therapeutic use is gaining acceptance, adding another revenue stream.

The economic impact ripples far beyond dispensaries. Licensed cultivators, extraction labs, packaging manufacturers, security firms, marketing agencies, and tech startups all rely on the cannabis ecosystem. Ancillary businesses—such as software platforms for seed-to-sale tracking, compliance consultants, and specialized law firms—have become essential. Real estate markets in legal states have also benefited, as retail and cultivation facilities command premium leases. However, this growth comes with unique challenges, primarily because cannabis remains federally illegal in the United States, creating a patchwork of regulations and barriers to interstate commerce.

Key Revenue Drivers

- Adult-Use Sales: The largest segment, driven by states like California, Colorado, Washington, and Michigan. These jurisdictions often see higher per-capita spending than medical-only states.
- Medical Cannabis: A stable but slower-growing sector, often with strict patient registration and product types limited to low-THC or high-CBD formulations in some regions.
- Derivatives and Concentrates: Vapes, dabs, edibles, and beverages offer higher margins and appeal to experienced consumers seeking convenience or potency.
- CBD and Hemp-Derived Products: The 2018 Farm Bill opened the door for hemp-based cannabinoids,

creating a separate albeit fragmented market for wellness products.

Navigating a Complex Regulatory Landscape

No discussion of **The Business Of Getting High**would be complete without addressing the regulatory minefield. In the US, cannabis is still a Schedule I controlled substance under federal law, meaning that licensed operators must comply with both state rules and federal prohibition. This contradiction creates operational nightmares: banks often refuse to service cannabis businesses for fear of federal prosecution, forcing many to operate in cash. The result is a safety risk for employees and a lack of access to traditional loans, credit cards, and investor capital.

State-level regulations also vary wildly. Some states mandate vertical integration—requiring a single company to cultivate, process, and retail—while others allow a more open market with separate licenses for each stage. Packaging and labeling laws dictate child-resistant containers, health warnings, and even restrictions on branding that might appeal to minors. Testing requirements for potency, pesticides, and mold differ per state, sometimes leading to product recalls or supply shortages. Internationally, countries like Canada have federally legalized adult-use, but they face strict marketing bans and high excise taxes. In Europe, the patchwork of medical-only laws and pilot programs means companies must adapt to each nation's unique framework.

Licensing and Compliance Costs

Entering the cannabis business is expensive. Application fees for a retail license in competitive markets can run tens of thousands of dollars, and winning a license often requires detailed social equity plans, security protocols, and financial disclosures. Once licensed, ongoing compliance—such as seed-to-sale tracking using state-mandated software, regular inspections, and tax filings—requires dedicated staff or outsourced consultants. Small operators often struggle to keep up, leading to consolidation as larger multi-state operators (MSOs) acquire smaller players. This concentration raises concerns about monopolistic practices and the erosion of the craft cannabis culture that early legalization advocates envisioned.

Marketing and Branding in a Restricted Space

One of the most ironic aspects of **The Business Of Getting High**is that while the product is legal in many places, traditional marketing channels are mostly off-limits. Facebook, Instagram, and Google’s ad platforms prohibit direct promotion of cannabis, citing their own policies even in states where it is legal. Dispensaries and brands must rely on organic social media, influencer partnerships (with careful disclaimers), email newsletters, and search engine optimization (SEO) to reach customers. Even then, platforms may shadowban or remove accounts, forcing businesses to rebuild their digital presence repeatedly.

Branding also faces tight constraints. Many states ban imagery that might appeal to children—no cartoon characters, candy-like depictions, or bright colors. Terms like "marijuana" or "stoner" are often avoided in favor of more sophisticated, lifestyle-oriented language. Premium brands emphasize wellness, craft cultivation, terpene profiles, and sustainable practices to differentiate themselves. Some have found success through event sponsorships (where permitted), educational content about cannabis science, and loyalty programs that collect customer data in legally compliant ways.

Packaging and Product Differentiation

With thousands of strains and product types available, packaging plays a crucial role. Glass jars with airtight seals preserve freshness, while mylar bags reduce costs and allow more vibrant printing. QR codes that link to lab results and grow histories add transparency. Edibles must be clearly dosed and often include child-proofing. The rise of "craft cannabis"—small-batch, sun-grown, or organic—has created a premium tier that commands higher prices, while budget brands compete on volume and accessibility. Brand loyalty is still low in the industry,

so companies constantly try to innovate with limited-edition strains, seasonal products, and collaborations with musicians or artists.

The Dark Side: Black Markets and Tax Burdens

Despite the growth of legal sales, the illicit market remains a formidable competitor. High taxes are a primary driver: in some US states, the total tax burden on cannabis (including excise, sales, and local levies) can exceed 40%. Consumers seeking lower prices often turn back to unlicensed dealers, especially in regions where legal dispensaries are scarce or have limited hours. The black market also thrives on product variety—illegal growers can offer strains that are not available in licensed shops, or extracts with higher potency. Additionally, interstate smuggling from states with lower prices (like Oregon) to prohibition states is rampant, undermining local legal markets.

Businesses also face financial fragility. Because they cannot deduct ordinary business expenses on federal taxes due to Internal Revenue Code Section 280E, effective tax rates for cannabis companies can be as high as 70%, slashing profit margins. This tax penalty, combined with high compliance costs, means many dispensaries barely break even—or operate at a loss in the early years. The industry has seen a wave of bankruptcies and consolidation, with well-funded MSOs buying out smaller competitors who can no longer afford to operate.

Workforce and Social Equity Challenges

The workforce in **The Business Of Getting High**is diverse, but not without issues. Many employees come from backgrounds that were previously harmed by cannabis prohibition—people with prior convictions for marijuana offenses often face barriers to entering the legal industry they helped build. Social equity programs in states like Illinois, Massachusetts, and New York aim to provide licenses and financial assistance to these individuals, but implementation has been slow, and many equity applicants struggle to secure capital or compete with established players. Cannabis businesses also face high turnover due to low wages in entry-level roles, though budtenders and trimmers in some markets can earn a living wage.

Training and Professionalization

As the industry matures, the demand for professional training grows. Community colleges offer certificates in cannabis cultivation and business management. Private training companies teach extraction safety, laboratory techniques, and retail compliance. The need for experienced executives—especially those with backgrounds in consumer packaged goods (CPG), pharmaceuticals, or regulated industries—has increased, driving up salaries for top-tier roles. However, the stigma still lingers: many cannabis workers report being reluctant to list their employer on LinkedIn or discuss their job at family gatherings. This cultural shift is gradual but accelerating as cannabis becomes more mainstream.

Future Trends: Federal Legalization and Global Expansion

Looking ahead, the biggest unknown is whether the United States will eventually legalize cannabis at the federal level. The current administration has made modest moves, such as rescheduling cannabis from Schedule I to Schedule III, which would ease the tax burden and open the door for more research and banking access. True legalization would ignite a wave of investment, international trade, and standardization. It could also allow interstate commerce, collapsing state boundaries and creating a truly national market. In Europe, Germany’s move toward full adult-use legalization (expected by 2025) could serve as a catalyst for other EU nations to follow, creating a unified market of over 400 million people.

Other trends include the development of cannabis beverages as a social alternative to alcohol, the rise of minor cannabinoids like CBG and THCV, and the integration of cannabis into wellness routines—from yoga studios to

beauty products. Sustainability is also becoming a differentiator: energy-intensive indoor cultivation faces criticism, pushing growers toward greenhouses, renewable energy, and carbon offset programs. Meanwhile, hemp-based alternatives are carving out a niche in textiles, construction materials, and biodegradable plastics, though these markets are still nascent.

Conclusion: The High of a Maturing Industry

The Business Of Getting Highhas transformed from a fringe curiosity into a legitimate, regulated, and rapidly evolving sector of the global economy. While the legal cannabis industry faces formidable obstacles—regulatory fragmentation, high taxes, black market competition, and financial exclusion—the underlying demand is unmistakable. As more jurisdictions legalize and societal attitudes soften, the path forward will likely include consolidation, innovation, and increased professionalization. For entrepreneurs and investors willing to navigate the risks, the potential rewards are substantial. But beyond dollars and cents, the real success of this business may ultimately be measured by how well it reconciles the legacy of prohibition with the promise of a new, responsibly managed market. The high is real—and so is the business behind it.

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