

Advertising Age

Weed-Smoking Gorilla Ushers in New Era in Pot Packaging

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Credit: Bloomberg News

One in five American adults can now legally eat, drink, smoke or vape cannabis however they please. For the fledgling companies fighting for customer attention, the game of differentiating their products through branding is on. And nothing conveys these emerging marijuana brands so clearly as the pretty packaging in which they're increasingly wrapped.

Rolling a crinkly, crooked joint by hand, the preferred packaging of an earlier generation of pot smokers, seems like a quaint ritual from a galaxy long ago compared with these new products. Exhibit A is Toast's marijuana cigarette packs, which are black with embossed art-deco designs. "Toast" is written in gold italics. The cigarettes, called "Slices," come 10 to a pack.

The filter tip is purple with a gold butterfly and gold text where the purple ends. The branding was inspired by 1920s cigarette cases, according to Gabrielle Rein, Toast's chief creative officer.

"The packaging had to be positioned as luxury," said Rein. "It had to look very chic and upscale, it had to be unisex."

Packaging is one way companies are making money from the Green Rush without the legal risk of actually touching the plant. The marijuana industry was worth \$6.7 billion in 2016 and is expected to reach \$50 billion by 2025, according to Cowen and Co.

Ed Kilduff, the branding guru who created the Rabbit wine opener and an Oprah-endorsed herb saver among many other products, is now getting into cannabis with his company Pollen Gear. Kilduff saw an opportunity when he noticed how cannabis is typically packaged: cylindrical tubes with pop-tops that largely lacked character.

Girl Scout Cookies

Cannabis retail stores were selling different qualities of weed -- bottom shelf, middle range and premium -- all in the same boring packaging. So Kilduff designed a stylish child-proof glass cylindrical container to differentiate premium weed products.

"There's no way right now for them to distinguish their top-shelf flower that costs them more to make," he said, referring to pot retailers. "Now they finally have a package for it."

The New York-based company has customized packages for companies including Colorado-based Seed and Smith. It also joined forces with Marvel comic illustrator Adam Pollina to create labels for famous marijuana strains. The label for Gorilla Glue depicts a jaded-looking gorilla wearing a top hat smoking a joint with a burger, fries and a pet cat.

The container for Girl Scout Cookies, another popular strain, shows vest-wearing girls tagging a brick wall with a marijuana leaf.

Childproof bags

Pollen Gear makes childproof bags, called exit bags, for weed packages that don't meet state safety standards. These bags are increasingly branded. It also makes rectangular containers with tops that pop off only if you squeeze on two specific points. The field is wide open for innovative packaging, Kilduff said.

"If you [Google](#) weed packaging, the whole front page of Google is just all companies importing the same exact product from China and they're just competing on pennies," he said. "As a product designer, that's the coolest opportunity. It's like a green field."

Not that Kilduff doesn't have competition. Kush Bottles Inc. has been serving the weed industry since it was founded in 2010, before any state had legalized recreational cannabis use. As more and more states ended marijuana prohibition, the Santa Ana, California-based company expanded.

Kush, which is publicly traded, started out supplying the utilitarian items in demand for the fledgling industry. It now sells pop-tops, exit bags, concentrate containers, gloves for dispensary workers, rolling papers, lighters, glass bongs, pipes and more.

"We want to be more professional, we want to be pushing the industry," said Chief Executive Officer Nick Kovacevich. "There's a cannabis culture as well, so it's about blending."

Increasingly, though, Kush's clientele is asking for more custom branding. The company recently created a wide-mouthed container with a push-in, lift-up tab to better accommodate edibles and larger quantities of cannabis flower.

"People buy their booze based on the marketing and the advertising and the shape of the bottle," and cannabis' time has now come, too, said Pollen Gear's Kilduff. "There's so many things to make."

-- *Bloomberg News*