

The Hawthorn Group

The Cannabis Industry Needs Public Engagement Now



The recent development of “mysterious” lung illnesses and deaths linked to vaping have exposed the mistrust that exists broadly regarding the tobacco industry. The irony is that at the same time, we are seeing more trust than ever for the cannabis industry, with state laws being opened up and CBD stores appearing on Main Streets. Unfortunately for the cannabis industry, it seems increasingly likely that a connection will be drawn from it to the deaths from vaping, casting a dark shadow on cannabis just as it is emerging into a more open environment. That connection will have an immediate and tremendous impact on the industry’s ability to gain market access and manage state regulation. Hawthorn has extensive experience advocating at the state level. That experience strongly suggests that cannabis needs immediate proactive public engagement strategies focused on key states, to build strong and sophisticated consumer pressure on policy makers. This engagement should be designed to educate policy makers about the facts and about the growing acceptance – and even strong support – for their product.

The good news is that as the use of the product has expanded broadly into a wide range of demographics, they have built ready-made supporters for legislative change. Those supporters can be identified, engaged, armed with information, and motivated to demonstrate to policymakers that voters care about this issue and want change. Federal and state elections present a ready-made opportunity for people to speak out and raise the awareness of this issue.

Elections for state governors, in particular, present an excellent opportunity. There will be a race for governor in every state over the next four years and governors are taking an increasingly public role on this issue. [A recent article in Politico](#) highlighted a meeting of five northeastern governors meeting to discuss legalization. Each election for governor presents a months-long opportunity for the cannabis industry to be visibly present at campaign events for any and all candidates. It also presents an opportunity for voter communication and engagement through all the usual mediums.

Returning to the comparison with vaping, that industry may have hoped to avoid much public attention until they were too big to take down. They are now at risk of being completely destroyed. The cannabis industry is fooling itself if they think that the explosion of CBD shops across the United States won’t eventually create a problem similar to what vaping is currently facing. Governors see the connection. The Politico article already mentioned said that part of the reason for the gathering was concern about the vaping crisis. If there is a serious problem, it will undermine all the progress cannabis has made to date, pushing the industry right back underground. Public engagement strategies are needed now or both industries face severe consequences from state and federal governments.

