



**DMA**

DIGITAL  
MARKETING  
AGENCY

# **8 STEPS TO ACQUIRE PATIENTS FOR MEDICAL MARIJUANA PRACTITIONERS**

A proven, focused process to reach a new high in customer acquisition and sales without getting lost in the weeds

# MEDICAL MARIJUANA IS A FAST-GROWING INDUSTRY THAT FACES UNIQUELY THORNY ISSUES, BUT WITH THE RIGHT TACTICS, MARIJUANA DISPENSARIES CAN REAP A HEALTHY HARVEST OF NEW BUSINESS ONLINE.

Nationwide, the marijuana industry is blossoming in a so-called “green rush.” The market is worth billions, with nearly \$9 billion in sales in 2017 alone – and that’s before California opened its market.<sup>i</sup> Altogether, the market is expected to grow to \$21 billion by 2021; and as more states and localities legalize marijuana for recreational and/or medical use, these numbers will only continue to grow.

Indeed, the value of the medical segment is similarly substantial. Even just cannabidiol (CBD) based products, used to treat medical conditions ranging from epilepsy to chronic pain, are expected to hit \$1.8 billion by 2022.

However, the industry and the dispensaries and practitioners within it face a unique constellation of challenges:

First, participants in the market – such as dispensaries where cannabis is cultivated, prepared, and distributed – face the intense competition common to all fast-growing market segments.

Then, the market faces lingering confusion and reputational concerns among prospective customers. Huge numbers of consumers could potentially benefit from medical applications, but many hesitate due to misunderstandings and stereotypes around marijuana use.

Last, but certainly not least, legal questions and constraints, given that marijuana is still illegal on a federal level in the U.S., cast a dark shadow over the industry and limit what dispensaries and others can do to market themselves and grow.

However, these challenges present great opportunities, particularly (1) to differentiate, by being smarter about online activities; (2) to build business, by grabbing a sizable chunk of that green rush; and (3) to expand market share, by convincing a wider audience of the benefits of medical marijuana.

But how? Here’s a step-by-step process to consider.

## In This Paper...

1. Understand the legalities
2. Favor SEO
3. Pick the right keywords
4. Create compelling content
5. Dispel myths
6. Get listed in directories
7. Manage reviews
8. Get help as needed





# Understand the Legalities

**Marijuana, even when prescribed by a licensed physician exclusively for medical purposes, is subject to a range of disparate and often conflicting laws. Further, many of these laws govern specifically what dispensaries and medical personnel can and cannot say when marketing their services and products. It's a thorny tangle, and the first step for any dispensary to acquire new patients is to understand the legal minefield in which they're walking.**

## Verify local laws.

Before anything else, ensure your business is covered by state and/or municipal regulations that explicitly permit some form of marijuana production and sales. At present, medical marijuana is legal in 33 states and the District of Columbia (10 of these also allow recreational marijuana use).<sup>ii</sup> However, the laws governing marijuana may differ in scope. For example, they may differentiate products containing Cannabidiol (CBD) from Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the two major compounds found in marijuana. CBD is typically non-psychoactive, or at least less psychoactive than THC. Some areas allow products with CBD but not THC; others allow products with low amounts of THC (e.g., less than 0.03%).

## Understand federal law.

Federal law is straightforward: marijuana is illegal; and under the Controlled Substances Act, it is listed as a Schedule I drug alongside heroin and cocaine. That makes it a felony offense to advertise for the sale of cannabis. This immediately raises the question of how a dispensary can promote its services and products, even if it's legal locally. In turn, this makes certain online lead generation avenues treacherous for dispensaries, as we'll discuss further in the next section. "The whole industry is under a cloud because no one knows to what extent [the Department of Justice] is willing to interfere with the states," says Keith Stroup, co-founder of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws.<sup>iii</sup>

# Favor SEO Over Paid Search

Facebook and Google do not allow drug-related promotions on their sites. Google, for example, bans advertising on its platform of any substance that alters "mental state for the purpose of recreation" and specifically names marijuana.<sup>iv</sup>

"You would think that Facebook and some of these online platforms [would be] the ideal platforms for these products because you can target only legal states, target only people over 21," says Aaron Smith, executive director of the National Cannabis Industry Association.<sup>v</sup> Most likely, such policies are the platforms' attempt to comply with federal law and entirely side-step the uncertainties around "locally legal, federally illegal."

This makes paid search an uncertain means for a dispensary to promote its services, though it may still be possible to use them if your advertising is oblique and very carefully worded. Regardless, you run the risk they will take your ads and business pages down at any moment, and your resources would likely be better dedicated to focusing on a good search engine optimization (SEO) program to cultivate organic search traffic. Google and other search engines won't stop its users from navigating to your site if they find you after they've performed a relevant search. And SEO leads offer a superb 14.6% average conversion rate, versus a scant 1.7% close rate for print ads.<sup>vi</sup>



# Pick the Right Keywords

If your dispensary is going to target an SEO strategy – and you should! – you need to start by picking the right keywords. Your website will appear only if you’ve chosen and used the same keywords and key phrases that your customers use to search for you in the first place. That

might include terms like “buy cannabis” or “medical marijuana dispensary.” Because most of your customers are likely local, it’s usually smart to incorporate geographic indicators into the keywords, like “cannabis dispensary san francisco” or “buy medical marijuana colorado.”

<b>USE THE RIGHT KEYWORDS</b>	<b>USE KEYWORDS IN THE RIGHT PLACES</b>	<b>FOLLOW BEST PRACTICES</b>
Dispensary + (your city or state)  Medical cannabis + (your city or state)  Medical marijuana + (your city or state)  Buy cannabis / marijuana	Page URL  Image descriptions  Headers on the page  Main body of the content	Don't overstuff with too many keywords  Use 1 to 3 keywords per page, max  Use keywords naturally in text  Incorporate geographic indicators

# Create Compelling Content.

The most important place to use those keywords is in the content on your site. Content offers multi-layered benefits: (1) it's one of the most powerful factors affecting search rank; (2) excellent content creates "linkbait" that attracts organic links naturally, further boosting search ranking; and (3) it presents an excellent opportunity to provide genuine value to customers. For example, if you can provide content that answers common questions and

provides useful education about the medical application of cannabis, peppered with your chosen keywords, Google will reward you with a higher ranking in the search results; and potential customers will flock to your site just to consume the high-value content you're offering. Through this mechanism, dispensaries can use content to establish themselves as reliable, credible, and trustworthy experts and sources. Consider the following success factors.

FACTOR	RESEARCH SAYS	BEST PRACTICES
Length	The wordcount of the average first-page result on Google is 1,890 words. <sup>vii</sup>	In-depth content is more likely to rank higher in search results.
Keywords	70% of marketers say that content with visuals assets performed better than without. <sup>viii</sup>	Incorporate keywords into the content, but don't overdo it.
Accessibility		Provide content your customers genuinely want or can use.
Quality	Businesses that publish 16+ blog posts per month get up to 3.5 times more traffic. <sup>ix</sup>	Some content will be sales-y by nature, but most should be informative rather than promotional and legitimately helpful.
Quantity		Google rewards frequently updating sites.
Freshness	HubSpot has doubled monthly leads by refreshing old content. <sup>x</sup>	Go back and update old posts every so often.



# Use the Content to Dispel Myths and Build your Brand.

In fact, the educational aspect of good content has even more benefits for dispensaries. More than in other industries, you may encounter hesitation in prospective customers due to reputational issues, e.g., some customers want the medical benefits but fear becoming associated with “pot culture.”

However, modern medical marijuana use-cases are well-established and researched. Medical applications aren't about getting high, or even solely about managing chronic pain (which is itself an excellent use-case). Cannabis has been used to successfully treat – or at least shown promise in dealing with – epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's, Crohn's disease, nausea, and more.

**MODERN MEDICAL MARIJUANA USE-CASES ARE WELL-ESTABLISHES AND RESEARCHED.**

Present science-backed evidence of medical outcomes and de-construct negative stereotypes. For example, cannabis company “MedMen” created a “Forget Stoner” campaign intended to specifically break down the “stoner” stigma.<sup>xi</sup> They showcased respected figures who use marijuana to deal with a variety of conditions. Similarly, you can use web content to dispel myths and promote education.

## Get Listed in Directories

So far, we've discussed how paid search on platforms like Google is a risky venture; SEO represents a much more reliable means of generating web traffic. Another powerful step you can take is getting listed in relevant directories.

Adding your dispensary to appropriate directories offers multi-layered benefits. For one, it makes your business discoverable online to people who might not find you through a direct search. For another, it creates quality links pointing at your website that can strengthen your own search ranking. Further, each of those links serves as a doorway into your site, boosting traffic.

Start with Google itself by adding a listing for your dispensary to Google My Business (GMB). Then move on to industry-agnostic directories, like Yellow Pages, Yelp, FourSquare, etc. Finally, use cannabis-specific or -friendly directories like those listed in the sidebar.

When adding your business to these sites, take care to ensure that your “NAP” (Name, Address, and Phone Number) match exactly across all platforms and sites, e.g., don't put “Road” on GMB but use “Rd” everywhere else. You may compromise the SEO benefits with Google otherwise.

<b>DIRECTORIES FRIENDLY TO MARIJUANA DISPENSARIES</b>	
<i>Note that many of these sites also allow paid advertising, unlike Facebook and Google.</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 420 Nation</li> <li>• All Bud</li> <li>• Cannabis.net</li> <li>• CannaPages</li> <li>• Ganjapreneur</li> <li>• Hail Mary Jane</li> <li>• Leafly</li> <li>• Marijuana Business Daily</li> <li>• Medical Jane</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medical Marijuana</li> <li>• Merry Jane</li> <li>• MMJ Doctor Online</li> <li>• PotGuide</li> <li>• THC Business Directory</li> <li>• THC Finder</li> <li>• The Cannabis Industry</li> <li>• Weedmaps</li> <li>• Weedy</li> </ul>



# Manage Reviews

Reviews can make or break a dispensary. They are always prominent in search results, and why would someone choose you over a better-reviewed competitor? Indeed, 92% of consumers read and utilize online reviews when looking for a local business, and 88% trust online reviews as much as a personal recommendation.<sup>xii</sup>

And the truth is, good reviews have a tangible impact by boosting business: Positive comments online from happy customers produce an average increase in sales of 18% and, further, those consumers are likely to spend 31% more because of positive reviews.<sup>xiii</sup>

The flip is also true: bad reviews legitimately drive business away: a single negative review can drive away approximately 22% of customers, while three negative reviews can drive away 59% of the customers.<sup>xiv</sup>

Bear in mind, this is perhaps even truer of in the medical field than in general. In 2018, almost 72% of patients used online reviews as their first step in finding a new doctor.<sup>xv</sup>

HOW TO GET REVIEWS
Ask. Many patients will leave reviews simply upon request.
However, make sure you make it easy on them to actually do it.
Send them a direct link to the review site (like Google My Business) when you ask.
Or, if making the request in person, ask if they had a good experience, and then give them specific step-by-step instructions about where to go and what links to click.

HOW TO MANAGE REVIEWS
Your job isn't done when the review has been left. You need to monitor review sites continuously.
Respond promptly to negative reviews.
Avoid combative or aggressive responses (even if they're warranted) – you risk driving off other customers.
Or, if making the request in person, ask if they had a good experience, and then give them specific step-by-step instructions about where to go and what links to click.



## Get Help.

At last we come to final step, and it may be the most important. Everything described so far in this paper is a lot, and it's not even everything. We barely even mentioned link-building, for example, despite it being a major component of any successful SEO initiative.

Effective digital marketing requires its own expertise separate from medical expertise. Many dispensaries are expert in the application of cannabis for medical relief from a variety of conditions, but their knowledge falters

when it comes to diagnosing and treating online customer acquisition problems. If nothing else, they may struggle to find the time and personnel to invest in a successful patient acquisition strategy.

Absolutely, cannabis dispensaries can do a lot to promote themselves online without outside help. But to really stand out in an increasingly crowded field, consider outsourcing to those who can quickly, knowledgably, and deftly help your website shoot to the top of the search results.

### About DMA

We are passionate and experienced digital marketers influenced by a growing and thriving digital economy. DMA is fully dedicated to learning about and understanding your business. By building a relationship with each of our clients, we can ensure our marketing strategy is built with the sole focus of solving the problems your business faces. Each of our marketing campaigns are built with the client's needs in mind to solve the greatest marketing problems.

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- <sup>i</sup><https://money.cnn.com/2018/01/31/news/marijuana-state-of-the-union/>
- <sup>ii</sup><https://medicalmarijuana.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=000881>
- <sup>iii</sup><https://money.cnn.com/2018/01/31/news/marijuana-state-of-the-union/>
- <sup>iv</sup><https://support.google.com/adspolicy/answer/6014299?hl=en>
- <sup>v</sup>[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/04/05/even-where-its-legal-to-sell-marijuana-its-hard-to-advertise-it/?utm\\_term=.d27bada6e2e5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/04/05/even-where-its-legal-to-sell-marijuana-its-hard-to-advertise-it/?utm_term=.d27bada6e2e5)
- <sup>vi</sup><https://www.searchenginejournal.com/seo-101/seo-statistics/>
- <sup>vii</sup><https://backlinko.com/search-engine-ranking>
- <sup>viii</sup><https://contently.com/resource/libris-visual-content-report/>
- <sup>ix</sup><http://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/blogging-frequency-benchmarks>
- <sup>x</sup><https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/historical-blog-seo-conversion-optimization>
- <sup>xi</sup>[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/04/05/even-where-its-legal-to-sell-marijuana-its-hard-to-advertise-it/?utm\\_term=.d27bada6e2e5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/04/05/even-where-its-legal-to-sell-marijuana-its-hard-to-advertise-it/?utm_term=.d27bada6e2e5)
- <sup>xii</sup><http://searchengineland.com/88-consumers-trust-online-reviews-much-personal-recommendations-195803>
- <sup>xiii</sup><https://smallbiztrends.com/2017/04/importance-of-online-reviews.html>
- <sup>xiv</sup><https://www.brightlocal.com/2017/03/15/the-impact-of-online-reviews/>
- <sup>xv</sup><https://www.softwareadvice.com/resources/how-patients-use-online-reviews/>

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