

Cannabis Operators Report Instagram Shadow Bans and Closures

Cannabis Operators Face Instagram ‘Shadow Bans’ and Account Closures Amid Growing Social Media Challenges

Despite the growing acceptance of cannabis across the United States, many state-regulated marijuana businesses are encountering significant challenges on social media platforms. Licensed operators, particularly those in states where traditional advertising methods like TV, radio, and print are restricted, have turned to platforms like Instagram to promote their products, engage with customers, and grow their brands. However, a rising trend of account suspensions, shadow banning, and post visibility restrictions has left cannabis businesses struggling to maintain their online presence.

Social Media Becomes a Critical Tool for Cannabis Marketing

Social media has become an essential marketing tool for cannabis businesses, especially in states where advertising through traditional channels is heavily regulated or prohibited. Cannabis companies rely on platforms like Instagram, owned by Meta, to promote their products, educate consumers, and build brand loyalty.

However, in recent months, many cannabis operators have reported facing issues with Instagram, ranging from account suspensions to “shadow banning” — a practice in which posts are hidden from followers without the business’s knowledge. In some extreme cases, accounts have been completely shut down, leaving operators with little recourse.

Meta’s Policy Update and Impact on Cannabis Accounts

The troubles began when Meta updated its terms and conditions for its platforms, including Instagram, about two weeks ago.

John Greene, co-owner of CMS Gardens, a cannabis cultivator in Rhode Island, describes the shift as a turning point for cannabis businesses on social media. “As soon as that email was sent to Meta users, thousands of accounts related to cannabis started going down,” Greene explained.

Previously, Meta’s guidelines had been somewhat more lenient, but the update seemed to tighten restrictions around cannabis-related content. Greene noted that many cannabis accounts saw a drastic decline in visibility after the update. To highlight the situation, CMS Gardens created a humorous video showing an employee in their grow room, with the plants blurred out. The video poked fun at Meta’s practice of censoring cannabis-related content, referring to cannabis as “avocados” — a term often used as a code word on social media.

The Rise of ‘Shadow Bans’

One of the most common issues cannabis brands are facing is “shadow banning.” This practice occurs when a brand’s posts are hidden or suppressed from its followers without the brand being notified. It can result in reduced engagement, making it harder for businesses to reach their target audiences.

Rusty Wilenken, co-founder and CEO of Old Pal, a cannabis brand based in California, said his company has faced shadow bans numerous times over the years. He explained that the practice often goes unnoticed until engagement levels drop significantly. Shadow bans can last anywhere from a few days to several weeks, depending on the violation and the response from the business.

Wilenken noted that cannabis companies face particular challenges when posting content that directs followers to purchase products. “If you’re going to be a brand and have an Instagram, it’s inevitable,” he said. “Overtly saying, ‘Go buy this here,’ is where we tend to bump into the most issues.”

The Role of Meta Verified and Subscription Fees

To avoid violations and the risk of shadow banning, many cannabis businesses are opting to obtain a Meta Verified blue checkmark, which offers some protection against account shutdowns. For a \$14.99 monthly subscription fee, businesses can obtain a verified badge on Instagram, Facebook, or WhatsApp, which provides clearer guidelines on what content is acceptable.

However, the need to pay for a subscription to get verified has created additional financial barriers for small businesses and startups in the cannabis sector.

Non-Plant-Touching Businesses Affected Too

The issues surrounding Instagram go beyond businesses that directly sell cannabis products. Even non-plant-touching companies in the cannabis space, such as review platforms and educational resources, are being affected by account deletions and suspensions.

Jocelyn Sheltraw, co-founder and CEO of Budist, a cannabis rating and review platform in California, faced a significant setback when Instagram deleted her company’s account. “We don’t sell anything through the app,” Sheltraw explained. “Everything is education-focused — educating consumers on the nuances of the products.”

Despite following Meta’s rules around cannabis posts, Sheltraw’s account was suspended, prompting her to reach out to her LinkedIn community for help. “This problem was one of the reasons we created Budist,” she said, pointing to the lack of education-focused resources for cannabis consumers.

Although Sheltraw was fortunate to have her account reinstated after just two days, many other businesses struggle to get their accounts back online.

Navigating Account Suspensions and Getting Reinstated

Businesses that have had their accounts suspended can petition Meta for reinstatement, but the process can be difficult and time-consuming. Without a Meta Verified blue checkmark, many companies find it difficult to get through to customer support.

Sheltraw shared that some brokers have capitalized on the policy by charging businesses a fee ranging from \$2,000 to \$6,000 to help get their accounts reactivated. She said that many of the largest cannabis companies have taken this route to resolve their issues with Meta.

Regulated Cannabis Companies Face Unique Challenges

Sasha Nutgent, vice president of retail cannabis at Housing Works Cannabis Co. in New York, shared her company's experience with Instagram shadow banning. "We make sure everything we post is within the guidelines and not offering cannabis for sale," Nutgent said. Despite these efforts, Housing Works Cannabis Co. received a vague notification from Instagram stating that the company's account had been suspended for selling marijuana illegally — a claim that Nutgent disputes.

"We've definitely based everything around community and education," she explained. "Such a major part of our business is on Instagram and social media, so it's interfering with our engagement."

Nutgent noticed a drop in engagement after the company's account was shadow banned, which she said has affected Housing Works Cannabis Co.'s ability to interact with its customers.

Psychedelic Organizations Are Affected Too

It's not just the cannabis industry that is being targeted. Ifetayo Harvey, founder of the People of Color Psychedelic Collective in New York, also experienced a sharp decline in social media engagement after her organization's account was shadow banned.

To circumvent the restrictions, Harvey's organization has resorted to using code words or replacing letters with asterisks or emojis. However, she acknowledged that this limits their ability to communicate clearly with their audience. As a result, the collective has begun shifting its focus to its website and email list, rather than relying on social media platforms.

The Need for Greater Clarity and Fairness

The challenges faced by cannabis and psychedelic businesses on social media platforms like Instagram highlight a broader issue: the lack of clear, consistent guidelines for regulated industries. While Meta and other social media platforms maintain strict rules about cannabis content, there is little transparency about how these rules are enforced, leaving businesses in the dark when their accounts are shadow banned or suspended.

As the cannabis industry continues to grow and gain acceptance, operators will need greater clarity and fairness when navigating social media platforms. Until then, many businesses may be forced to find alternative ways to engage with customers, invest in verified accounts, or even pay for third-party services to regain access to their accounts.

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