

# The Challenge of Safety Metrics in the Cannabis Industry

## The Challenge of Safety Metrics in the Cannabis Industry: Why Measuring Success Is More Complex Than It Seems

The cannabis industry has grown exponentially over the past decade, evolving from a niche market into a multi billion dollar sector spanning cultivation, processing, distribution, retail, and wellness products. But rapid growth comes with growing pains, and one of the most pressing challenges the industry faces today is safety. Whether in cultivation facilities, processing labs, dispensaries, or distribution networks, ensuring that employees, consumers, and communities are protected requires more than a checklist—it requires robust, actionable safety metrics. Yet, as the National Safety Council (NSC) notes, even well-intentioned metrics often fail to deliver their full potential without strong leadership alignment and cultural integration.

## Understanding Safety Metrics in the Cannabis Industry: More Than Numbers on a Dashboard

At first glance, safety metrics might seem straightforward: track incidents, near misses, compliance violations, and regulatory adherence. However, in the cannabis sector, safety is multifaceted. Workers are exposed to chemical fertilizers, pesticides, solvents, and heavy machinery. Cultivation environments involve high humidity and repetitive manual labor, while extraction labs require strict handling of flammable compounds and pressurized gases. Even in retail settings, employees must navigate compliance rules around THC products, customer safety, and cash handling in cash-heavy operations.

Metrics in such environments must go beyond traditional OSHA recordable incidents. Leading indicators such as training completion rates, safety observations, hazard identification reports, and adherence to personal protective equipment (PPE) protocols offer proactive insights into potential risks. Yet, these metrics are often underutilized or poorly integrated into day-to-day operations.

## The Role of Leadership in Making Safety Metrics Effective

The NSC report underscores a critical principle: metrics only gain traction when leaders model expectations and align on goals. In cannabis companies, leadership plays a pivotal role in translating safety standards into operational realities. Without visible leadership engagement, employees may perceive metrics as a bureaucratic exercise rather than a meaningful tool to protect them and customers.

Leadership alignment begins with clearly defined goals. Are metrics designed to reduce workplace injuries? Improve regulatory compliance? Enhance product safety for consumers? Or all of the above? When goals are clearly articulated, companies can select the right Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and measure progress effectively.

For example, a cannabis cultivation facility may track the number of employees completing pesticide-handling training each quarter. Without leadership reinforcement such as supervisors actively participating in

training or rewarding teams that meet goals completion rates may stagnate, and the metric loses its value.

## Balancing Regulatory Compliance and Operational Safety

One of the unique challenges of the cannabis industry is the patchwork of state regulations and the ongoing absence of consistent federal oversight. Businesses must navigate rules from multiple agencies, including state departments of health, agriculture, and labor, each with distinct safety standards and reporting requirements.

For dispensaries and production facilities, metrics must capture both employee safety and product integrity. Tracking batch testing for contaminants, monitoring proper labeling of THC content, and ensuring safe storage protocols are just as important as preventing workplace injuries. This dual focus complicates metric design, as organizations must balance compliance reporting with internal safety objectives.

## The Pitfalls of Misaligned or Misunderstood Metrics

Even with the best intentions, safety metrics can backfire if misunderstood or misaligned with organizational culture. Common pitfalls include:

- **Overemphasis on lagging indicators:** Focusing solely on reported injuries or compliance violations tells leadership what has already gone wrong, but offers little insight into preventing future incidents.
- **Metric fatigue:** Employees may become desensitized to dashboards if metrics are too numerous, overly complex, or disconnected from their daily work.
- **Inconsistent enforcement:** Metrics lose credibility if rules are applied unevenly across teams or shifts.

Cannabis companies that fail to integrate safety metrics into the culture risk underreporting incidents, bypassing safety protocols, and ultimately facing regulatory penalties or reputational damage.

## Best Practices for Implementing Safety Metrics in Cannabis Operations

While challenges abound, industry leaders have identified several strategies to maximize the effectiveness of safety metrics:

1. **Focus on Leading Indicators:** Track proactive measures such as training, equipment inspections, and hazard reports to identify risks before they result in incidents.
2. **Integrate Metrics into Daily Operations:** Make safety metrics part of team huddles, shift reports, and performance reviews. When employees see metrics as part of their workflow, engagement improves.
3. **Leverage Technology:** Digital solutions can streamline data collection, monitor compliance, and provide real-time insights across cultivation, extraction, and retail operations.
4. **Communicate Metrics Transparently:** Share results with employees and leadership alike, highlighting successes and areas for improvement. Transparency builds trust and encourages accountability.
5. **Tie Metrics to Culture:** Align metrics with organizational values, reward safe behaviors, and model leadership engagement to reinforce their importance.

For instance, Cann, a low-dose THC beverage company, has implemented weekly safety briefings where near-misses, safety suggestions, and compliance observations are reviewed openly. This not only keeps employees informed but also embeds safety into the company culture.

## Safety Metrics and Consumer Confidence in the Cannabis Sector

Beyond internal operations, safety metrics play a crucial role in consumer protection and brand reputation. With THC-infused products, beverages, edibles, and topicals, ensuring product safety is paramount. Monitoring production conditions, ingredient sourcing, and batch testing enables companies to maintain high quality standards and minimize risk to consumers.

The integration of consumer-focused safety metrics also aligns with the broader trend toward wellness and transparency, appealing to a demographic increasingly concerned with quality, traceability, and responsible consumption.

## **The Future of Safety Metrics in Cannabis: Toward Industry Standardization**

As the cannabis industry matures, standardizing safety metrics across operations will be critical. Industry groups, regulatory bodies, and professional associations are beginning to develop frameworks to guide companies in measuring and reporting safety.

Standardization can:

- Facilitate benchmarking across facilities and states
- Improve regulatory compliance and reporting consistency
- Support insurance and risk management strategies
- Enhance workforce safety and consumer confidence

However, widespread adoption will require continued leadership commitment, technological investment, and cultural integration. As the NSC report notes, metrics alone do not drive safety—people do. The challenge lies in aligning leadership, employees, and operational practices around measurable goals that genuinely improve outcomes.

## **Turning Metrics into Meaningful Action**

Safety metrics in the cannabis industry are more than numbers on a spreadsheet. They are tools to protect workers, consumers, and the business itself. But their success depends on thoughtful implementation, leadership engagement, and a culture that prioritizes safety as a shared responsibility.

For cannabis operators navigating cultivation, processing, retail, and distribution, the challenge is clear: design metrics that capture the complexity of their operations, integrate them into everyday work, and use them to drive proactive change.

As the industry continues to expand and regulatory expectations evolve, companies that effectively leverage safety metrics will not only protect their workforce and customers but also gain a competitive advantage. In a sector where compliance, quality, and reputation are everything, measuring what matters and acting on it is the key to sustainable growth and long-term success.

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