

How Gen Z's Buying Habits Are Reshaping Legal Cannabis Retail

Cannabis Operators Are Watching an Unexpected Consumer Shift Transform Retail

Cannabis retailers across the country are tracking a trend they didn't fully anticipate: Gen Z, the industry's youngest legal consumers, is buying more cannabis—and doing so with surprising intention.

These shoppers aren't walking in blindly, nor are they simply chasing the highest potency. They are navigating cannabis with purpose, mindfulness and far more selectivity than the generations before them.

As their buying habits diverge from the consumption patterns retailers have optimized around for years, Gen Z's preferences are reshaping everything from product assortment to pricing to staff education.

Their habits also challenge the assumption that because younger adults report using less cannabis overall, retailers should prioritize older consumers. Instead, the rise of intentional, lightweight use is offering operators a new avenue for growth—one that doesn't rely on waiting for high-volume consumption to emerge.

A Real Generational Divide Is Emerging in Cannabis Consumption

Recent consumer research highlights clear generational differences that matter for retail strategy.

Older adults particularly those 50 and up—remain one of the fastest-growing consumer groups. One in five now uses cannabis, most commonly for relaxation, pain relief, sleep or mental health support.

Millennials, in their prime earning years, continue to be the backbone of legal cannabis sales. Their shopping patterns are stable: they buy frequently, move across formats and gravitate toward practical, comfort-focused items like edibles, vapes, topicals and value flower.

Gen Z, by contrast, is coming of age in a cultural moment defined by wellness, heightened awareness of anxiety and a broader retreat from traditional intoxicants. National surveys, including from Gallup, show younger adults drink significantly less alcohol than older generations, favoring substances that feel cleaner, lighter and easier to integrate into daily life.

Cannabis fits neatly into that mindset.

Gen Z's Relationship With Cannabis Is Shaped by Stress, Cost and Culture

Financial pressure shapes nearly every purchase Gen Z makes. More than half of respondents in a recent American Institute of Stress poll reported being “extremely worried about not having enough money.”

With inflation, housing costs and student loan burdens squeezing budgets, cannabis falls squarely into the category of discretionary spending. Gen Z shoppers typically buy smaller quantities and visit stores less often.

But they still prefer cannabis to alcohol. Among adults ages 18–24, 69% say they prefer cannabis over alcohol, and 56% report actively replacing alcohol with THC—primarily through low-dose edibles and beverages.

Many use cannabis selectively, choosing specific moments or contexts and prioritizing predictability over intensity. These patterns stem partly from budget constraints, but also from cultural expectations within the generation.

Cali Sober, High THC and the Rise of Intentional Consumption

At The Higher Path, Airhart says the rise of the “Cali sober” lifestyle has changed what younger consumers view as socially acceptable.

“Weed is still cool, but smoking isn’t so much,” she says. “Intentional use is obvious.”

This mindset influences everything from product design to how young adults budget their purchases. They arrive armed with research. They ask questions about cannabinoids and terpenes. They look for specific effects.

Secondary cannabinoids are gaining traction:

- **THCV** for focus and functionality
- **CBG** as a mood-lifting, wellness-driven alternative to certain pharmaceuticals

Merchandising has shifted in response. The Higher Path recently added a dedicated low-dose section to meet rising demand for predictable, low-intoxication products—something unthinkable a few years ago.

Basket mix tells a similar story. Large-format preroll jars, like 14-gram “party packs,” sell well to younger adults seeking social ease, anxiety reduction or a light, functional boost.

And even though this generation seeks moderation, they’re not avoiding potency altogether.

Data Shows a Shift Toward Controlled, Routine-Friendly Consumption

Broad market trends reinforce what operators are seeing in stores.

Headset’s demographic data shows Gen Z:

- spends less per visit
- shops less frequently
- buys low-dose SKUs at higher rates than older consumers

Flowhub data, summarized in the Hybrid Marketing 2025 report, shows younger adults disproportionately favor beverages, gummies and wellness-forward formats, while purchasing inhalables at lower rates.

They also gravitate toward:

- discreet vape pens for controlled dosing
- low-dose edibles and beverages for microdosing
- tinctures, softgels and topicals for structured self-care routines

Branding matters, too. Gen Z tends to avoid candy-like, “party-forward” packaging, preferring products that resemble legitimate wellness goods.

And because only half of Gen Z is currently old enough to legally buy cannabis, these early trends may foreshadow the broader direction of future consumer demand.

How the Cannabis Industry Can Grow Up With Gen Z

Gen Z’s habits have created space for more informed conversations, deeper product education and a broader set of offerings that meet consumers where they are. Retailers that invest in effect-based merchandising, staff training and intentional product curation may benefit from steadier, more predictable demand.

And because younger adults still embrace high THC when it delivers good value, brands that design around purpose, control and cost efficiency may be best positioned as this cohort grows into greater purchasing power.

For operators like Airhart, the opportunity isn’t about waiting for heavier use patterns to return.

It’s about evolving the product mix and customer experience to meet a generation that prefers lighter, cleaner and more intentional consumption.

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