

How Brands Build Cultural Competency to Reach Diverse Communities

Brands Must “Read the Room” to Connect Authentically With Diverse Cannabis Consumers

Cannabis companies looking to build genuine, lasting relationships with diverse consumer groups must learn how to “read the room” a skill that goes far beyond clever advertising or trendy messaging.

That’s core advice from Shawna Seldon McGregor, founder and CEO of Maverick Public Relations, who will speak at MJBizCon about how brands can authentically connect with the communities they hope to serve, whether they are soccer moms, retirees, Gen Z shoppers or multicultural consumer groups.

McGregor is a featured panelist on the MJBizCon breakout session “Cultural Competency in Cannabis Marketing and Branding,” taking place Thursday at 10 a.m. in room N110. The session aims to help brands move past surface-level representation and toward deeper engagement rooted in respect, empathy and lived experience.

Listening Before Speaking: The Foundation of Cultural Competency in Cannabis Marketing

McGregor stresses that cultural competency begins not with branding, but with listening.

“Reading the room is about more than marketing,” she explained in a recent interview. “It’s about understanding the cultural and social dynamics of the communities you’re trying to reach.”

Without that understanding, brands risk undermining their own efforts — or worse, alienating the very people they hope to appeal to.

The panel brings together experienced leaders who will share insights on building trust through cultural awareness:

- **Asya Hill**, Executive Director, Illinois Women in Cannabis
- **Rebecca Maestas Sincere**, veteran cannabis brand builder with experience at Dixie, LivWell and Bud & Mary’s
- **Shuang Han**, retail and cultural product positioning expert at Blazy Susan

Collectively, they reinforce that effective cannabis marketing requires more than messaging — it requires humility, observation and honest engagement with communities.

Moving Beyond Tokenism: Why Representation Must Be Real, Not Performative

A key theme of the session will be the distinction between representation and tokenism — a line that many brands still unintentionally cross.

“If you don’t have LGBTQ+ people in your organization, don’t just put up a rainbow flag for Pride Month,” McGregor said. “That’s not representation — it’s tokenism.”

Tokenism shows up when brands acknowledge cultural moments without meaningfully participating in them or supporting the communities those moments honor.

“Tokenism happens when brands participate in awareness months or cultural moments without having anything real to say,” she added.

Genuine cultural competency begins internally. Listening to a company’s own staff — its first community is essential.

“What do they care about? What issues matter to them? That’s where representation begins,” McGregor said.

Avoiding Cultural Missteps: Lessons From Cannabis Industry Failures

When brands fail to “read the room,” the backlash can be swift and damaging. McGregor highlighted several examples of high-profile missteps that underscore the importance of thoughtful cultural engagement.

The La Chingona Ownership Controversy

In 2020, the brand La Chingona was exposed after falsely claiming to be Latina-owned. The business’s male owner fabricated three fictional sisters as the company’s supposed founders — a move widely criticized as exploitative and disingenuous.

University of Colorado’s Racially Charged PSA

Another case involved a University of Colorado Anschutz anti-cannabis PSA that used racial tropes to depict the negative impacts of marijuana. When Wanda James — owner of Simply Pure dispensary and CU Board of Regents member — raised concerns about the insensitive imagery, she was censored rather than heard.

These examples illustrate how easily campaigns can reinforce stereotypes or inflict harm when they lack cultural awareness.

“It’s a reminder that visuals and messaging matter,” McGregor said. “If you’re using imagery that doesn’t reflect the reality of the community you’re speaking to, you’re going to get called out.”

Understanding Communities: The Starting Point for All Cannabis Branding

McGregor emphasizes that successful cannabis marketing always begins with understanding the community — its history, its values and its lived experiences.

“For any cannabis product to succeed, you have to read the neighborhood, read the community,” she said. “What works in one area might not resonate in another.”

Avoiding stereotypes requires intentionality. Brands must be willing to ask questions, listen to the answers and adjust their strategies accordingly.

“You can’t just assume you know what your audience wants,” McGregor said. “Listening is how you build trust.”

The Future of Cannabis Branding Depends on Cultural Humility

As the cannabis marketplace becomes increasingly competitive, cultural competency is no longer optional, it’s a strategic necessity.

The MJBizCon panel aims to give companies the tools and insights needed to communicate authentically, avoid common pitfalls and build deeper relationships with diverse audiences who expect more than transactional engagement.

Success in cannabis branding today hinges on respect, curiosity and the willingness to listen. For McGregor and her fellow panelists, authentic connection begins with one core principle: read the room and start by listening.

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