

It's a strange mix of retail and science.

Hannah Hayes of Oregon Coast Cannabis in Manzanita says employee training is key to providing a space where anyone can feel comfortable asking questions.

"With our budtenders, we focus on education so anyone working here can talk to you about THC or terpenes and how these different things are going to affect you," she said, adding that employees of any dispensary must have a worker permit through Oregon Liquor Control Commission (OLCC), much like any bartender.

Additionally, all product in Oregon dispensaries must be grown in Oregon, adding to the all-important sustainability factor.

### The next great craft industry?

Izaak Hawkins of Hi Cascade Astoria thinks drawing tourist crowds with cannabis will help educate a larger section of the populace to the economic potential.

He also feels that tourists who come to Oregon specifically for cannabis can help dispel negative preconceptions.

"Having tourism use will really help people sort through information about the industry," he said. "I think it will do a lot of good for the normalization of cannabis use."

Marketing for cannabis tourism is reminiscent of beer and wine campaigns.

Portland's Kush Tours and Oregon Weed Tours specialize in cannabis group tours, while "Bed, Bud and Breakfast" packages are being offered in Ashland.

Each emphasize the use of a designated driver.

Publications are taking notice as evidenced by Willamette Week's "The Potlander: A Discerning Cannabis Consumer's Guide to Portland."

Hayes thinks tourism is an opportunity to help people shed notions about some of the taboos associated with cannabis and said her business promotes a healthy lifestyle.

"We definitely see cannabis as Oregon's next great craft industry," she said.

### Too early to tell

Clatsop County District Attorney Josh Marquis, a vocal opponent of Measure 91, which legalized the use of recreational marijuana, accepts that voters have spoken on the matter, but notes that it will take years to fully measure what effect, if any, widespread legalization has had.

"Marijuana is still a drug, albeit now a legal one for adults," Marquis said. "We are seeing more (automobile) crashes where marijuana is the primary intoxicant, but many of those crashes are poly-pharmacy — meaning more than one drug, often including alcohol."

Nan Devlin, Director of Tourism at Visit Tillamook Coast, says tracking cannabis tourism is still in its infancy.



COLIN MURPHEY/THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Local dispensary owners describe the pot tourism industry as one of untapped potential.

"For tourism, it's too early to tell," she said. "But Oregon did collect \$65.4 million in state revenue the first year."

Colorado, another weed-legal state, provides a case study for cannabis tourism.

"In Colorado, one survey noted that just 4 percent of tourism is directly related to travel for the use of legal weed," Devlin said, noting that Denver's tourism visitor counts increased by one million in the last year alone.

### Destination hurdles

Significant hurdles remain in categorizing Oregon a pot tourism destination.

Statewide, consumers cannot smoke in public places, unlike in Colorado, which has specific gathering spots, or "social lounges," set aside for users.

Another hitch for pot travelers: Cannabis purchased in Oregon must be consumed in Oregon. Crossing state lines, even to another weed-legal state, is a federal crime.

When it comes to individual advertising, stores like Hi Cascade Astoria and Oregon Coast Cannabis are faced with multiple restrictions.

Dispensaries must be able show that their audience is 21 and older, and certain product warnings must be prominent.

Hayes said that even the use of common ad boosting tools on Facebook or Google is not allowed.

Legal distribution has gradually become easier, but restrictions on public consumption and advertising remain at the forefront of the discussion.

There's also the issue of safety. An Astoria cannabis butane hash oil production

facility, which was legally authorized, exploded last year, badly burning an owner and an employee. That owner, plus a co-owner, recently pleaded guilty to felony assault in the third degree and misdemeanor reckless endangerment because of the incident.

Marquis has strongly criticized the Oregon Health Authority for issuing a license to the facility without first inspecting it.

### Illegal activity, policing problems

Marquis noted a January 2017 draft report issued by the Oregon State Police and High Intensity Drug Task Force that points to widespread illegal diversion of legally grown marijuana out of state and outside the U.S.

It states: "Oregon originated cannabis is trafficked to known distribution hubs across the Southeastern, Midwestern, and Northeastern United States. Specifically, the states of Illinois, Minnesota, New York, and Florida represent statistically significant destinations."

The argument of many Measure 91 proponents, he added, was that taxation and regulation would cause black market operations to vanish.

"That has not happened," Marquis said. "There is still lots of illegal activity but really no law enforcement ability to police it."

Considering these factors, Oregon travel organizations have not marketed legal weed and have no immediate plans to do so.

In a 2016 statement, Linea Gagliano of Travel Oregon summed up tourism ad campaign priorities: "For now, we're going to stick with those things that we know are compelling reasons to visit Oregon."

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### Jaw-dropping

Because cannabis dispensaries are required to check customer's identification, the ability to see who is coming from where is easy.

Like most retail operations on the Oregon Coast, cannabis sales spike considerably during the summer months, and Hayes said it's not uncommon to see out-of-state and even international IDs.

"The most fun is when you meet someone from a state that's still really deep in prohibition and seeing the jaw drop when they walk in," she said, adding that she has met many travelers who have planned their entire vacation around visiting multiple Oregon dispensaries.

Hi Cascade Astoria is part of a small chain that also has stores in Portland, Salem and Eugene with coastal outlets in Rockaway Beach, Depoe Bay and Waldport.

At the coastal stores, Hawkins witnessed a significant uptick in summer sales.

"The Waldport location was seeing 100 to 120 people a day easily," he said, noting that the winter visits dropped to about 20 or 30 a day, the majority being local.

Out-of-state dispensary customers are not unlike those you would find sampling the wares at a wine shop.

Instead of a sip, dispensaries encourage customers to have a good sniff.

Hawkins and Hayes think out-of-towners enjoy that aspect.

"It tends to be a really friendly, energetic, happy exchange," Hawkins said.

### 'When the walls come down'

Hayes notes it's not uncommon to see outdoor enthusiasts come through her doors during the summer months.

"We've had many hikers heading to Neahkahnie Mountain who are looking for a fun edible to try," she said.

As dispensary owners look ahead to what seems to be untapped potential for cannabis tourism, there is tempered optimism.

Both Hayes and Hawkins talk of consumer education leading to changes in legislation.

"If we pass something similar to Colorado in terms of legal consumption, you might see more tourist-based businesses becoming cannabis-oriented," Hawkins said, naming options such as cannabis-based hotels, spas, or campgrounds.

Hayes thinks defining what Oregon cannabis is and protecting is vital to the industry's future.

"Oregon has a history of cannabis and there's a culture of people who have been growing for generations," she said. "When the walls start coming down, Oregon cannabis will be highly sought after." 