

Entrant company name: **Third City**

Entry title: **What Are You Smoking?**

Category: **Healthcare and/or Wellbeing Campaign**

Summary

The UK's illegal cannabis-using community exceeds 2.5M, with around 1.8M using it for health issues like chronic pain. Despite this, many continue to buy from dealers rather than source it legally from medical cannabis clinics such as Curaleaf.

To uncover what's really in street-bought cannabis—ranging from mould to E. coli—we lab-tested samples and went straight to the source. Billboards in drug hotspots and QR code stickers on lamp posts flipped an innovative dealer tactic against them.

The result? Over 700 media hits and an 18% spike in new patients for Curaleaf Clinic after launch.

Brief, objectives and budget

Of the 2.5M illegal cannabis users in the UK, it's estimated 1.8M (72%) use the drug for health conditions such as chronic pain, when many of these patients could be eligible for safe and legally prescribed medical cannabis; however just 48% of UK adults are aware that it is legal in the UK.

As a result too many people are purchasing cannabis illegally from unregulated drug-dealers to manage health conditions, which, as well as being illegal, often contains contaminants- putting their health at risk.

At the same time, drug dealers are getting canner, with 'Deliveroo' type delivery services and innovative QR-code stickers enabling anonymous drug purchases via encrypted apps and the dark web, exploiting the many grey areas in regulation.

Our brief from medical cannabis clinic Curaleaf Clinic was to highlight the dangers of street-bought cannabis—both as a wider health campaign to cannabis users, but especially those who qualify for medical cannabis treatments.

Specifically, we needed to:

Communicate difference versus illegal cannabis

Disrupt cannabis users who purchase the drug for health reasons out of their default behaviour of buying it illegally
Increase Curaleaf Clinic patient numbers
Budget: £90K including agency fee

Strategy

Our approach was simple— with most cannabis users (72%) using the drug for health reasons, let's show them what's really in street-bought cannabis in the most arresting way possible, prompting the question: what are you smoking?

This meant:

Proving the issue with robust, multi-layered research, via respected independent partners to both build consumer awareness/trust and add credibility for media
Translating the findings to a consumer audience (i.e. the cannabis using community) in a way that would get their attention— tackling the issue at source (drug dealers) Offering a viable solution via medical cannabis, creating a platform for people to get the facts and myth bust

Creativity

Our idea? Let's turn the dealer's own tactics against them.

Via a freedom of information request to police forces we were able to identify the UK's hotspots for illegal cannabis seizures and then took out billboard ads on these drug-dealing street corners revealing the findings of our study.

In addition, we created our own 'get the facts' QR code stickers and placed them next to the drug dealer 'get it delivered' ones (QR code stickers are the latest tactic used by dealers, which link to sites on the dark web or encrypted Telegram chats to buy drugs, usually sent in the post within 24 hours).

Implementation

1. Dramatising the Danger First, we needed to understand what's in illegal cannabis. This was easier said than done. To stay within the law, we couldn't purchase illegal cannabis ourselves, so we partnered with Manchester Metropolitan University—one of the UK cities with the highest illegal cannabis use—to test samples seized by police in Manchester and Northumbria.

The results were shocking: over 90% of the samples were contaminated, including mould, salmonella, E. coli, and lead—substances that can cause respiratory issues, neurological damage, and gastrointestinal infections. Independent testing also found dangerous synthetic cannabinoids like Spice and K2 in 27% of the samples.

2. Reaching the Right Audience with Impactful Messaging We needed to communicate these alarming findings in a way that would make people think twice about buying from drug dealers. With many hotspots not aligning with available billboard space and strict advertising regulations preventing us from using the word “cannabis,” we turned to ad-vans—digital billboards on wheels—to reach high-use areas.

Two versions of the ads were created: one showing a real image of mouldy cannabis, and another listing key contaminants in “mouldy” lettering. This provided a back-up image for media reluctant to show actual cannabis. The ads, along with QR stickers designed to look like drug dealer promotions but with “get the facts” messaging, linked to a dedicated page on Curaleaf Clinic’s site that detailed our findings and offered legal alternatives.

3. Leveraging Media and Social for Maximum Impact

We captured photos of the ads and QR codes in Tower Hamlets, London—the UK’s top cannabis hotspot and packaged this content with a press release detailing the contaminants study and consumer data on cannabis use for health reasons.

On launch day, we sent an ad van to Manchester Piccadilly and Merseyside for media interviews with experts Dr. Simon Erridge (Curaleaf Clinic), Dr. Oliver Sutcliffe (Manchester Metropolitan University), and case studies who switched from illegal to legal cannabis due to the side effects and legal concerns.

Social media analysis showed that content highlighting illegal activity, such as police images or the word “illegal,” garnered higher engagement, so we tailored our posts accordingly to maximize reach.

Measurement, evaluation and impact

700+ media hits generated, including 200+ broadcast interviews. Featured across national media including The Mirror, Express, Metro, and FT.

All coverage reinforced key messaging and maintained a positive tone. Social success: A TikTok collab with Greatest Hits Radio hit 225K views, 10K likes, 800 comments, and 1.2K saves. Instagram Reels saw 95% more impressions than average posts. 18% jump in Curaleaf Clinic patient numbers in the three months post-launch—well above the 2024 average.

Post campaign analysis revealed that of those who saw the campaign and have previously bought illegal cannabis, almost a quarter (23%) said they would never do so again and a fifth (18%) would now be interested in exploring medical cannabis for health issues (Opinium, sample: 2,000 adults)

The UK regulatory framework means it’s really difficult to educate people about medical cannabis in consumer-friendly language—we can’t even say ‘cannabis’ in most channels. This necessitated out of the box thinking and led to our disruptive ‘ad van’ and QR code creative, tackling the dealer issue at source, while robust lab testing and FOI

research helped overcome media reluctance to cover cannabis in any form. As a result we successfully engaged the UK cannabis community and those who would benefit, leading to a huge uplift in patient numbers.

The text in this case study is presented as submitted in the original award entry. Where necessary, entrants have removed or redacted information considered sensitive or confidential.