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Pot conference touts professional approach to hot topic

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No bands. No tattoo booths. No autograph sessions with Cheech or Chong. Heck, no counterculture indicators at all.

Instead, Seth Ginsberg wants to bring a more professional approach to the world of medical marijuana. So, he's invited physicians, marketing experts and dispensary owners to participate in his Plant Medicine Expo & Healthcare Provider Conference on Sept. 25-26 at the Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel.

"We're not putting a festival together," said Ginsberg, president of TGI Healthworks in Upper Nyack, N.Y. "Clearly, we've brought the adults to the table here ... That's what it's going to take to get the poor woman with stage II breast cancer to walk through the doors of a dispensary and say, 'Will this help me?'"

TGI Healthworks has organized national disease-management conferences for 11 years, and Ginsberg wants his event to lend the industry an air of legitimacy lacking at similar ones focused on medical marijuana.

Growth of dispensaries in Colorado has skyrocketed in the past year, despite critics who argue that many purveyors of medical marijuana seek clients of questionable medical need who can convince shady doctors to write them a prescription. Colorado's Legislature passed laws this year to allow cities to ban dispensaries and to mandate a bona fide medical relationship between doctor and patient. Also, the Denver City Council is considering rules limiting areas where marijuana plants can be grown.

Ginsberg believes medical marijuana could be an important drug for patients with certain diagnoses. But as he watched the subject being discussed in Colorado, he became convinced that marijuana's air of illegitimacy scared away people who could be helped by it.

The system alienates potential customers, such as senior citizens or baby boomers who won't ask their doctors about medical marijuana because of the drug's reputation, and it scares away good doctors who won't prescribe it for the same reason, Ginsberg said. If events such as this conference can help cannabis find mainstream acceptance, it not only could help the patients for whom it's intended, but also could lead to a boom in businesses that build dispensaries, market the drug and create jobs in related fields, he said.

"Why aren't those people engaged in this conversation? Because the venues in which those conversations exist are things they want no part of," Ginsberg said. "When we look at the medical marijuana industry, we feel we are provoked to do something."

The conference, which can be accessed for a \$49 online ticket (<http://www.plantmedicineexpo.com>) or \$69 at the door, is an attempt to reach adults who are suffering from cancer, chronic pain, post-traumatic stress disorder or other diseases and explain the potential benefits of cannabis. It's structured like most medical

conferences, with breakout discussions and an exhibit hall where people can meet with doctors, dispensaries or other patients to discuss their experiences with the drug.

The expo also features seminars to help dispensaries legitimize their operations. These will offer advice about basic business practices such as marketing and communications, and discuss the legal and real-estate implications that affect them, Ginsberg said.

The conference has a \$100,000 advertising budget, but the industry's reputation has made it difficult for Ginsberg to find anybody to take his money.

Radio stations from a variety of formats have turned down paid advertisements because of the topic, said Eilise Services, national operations manager for the conference, who places ads for other TGI Healthworks conferences as well. CBS Outdoor denied the group billboard space, and Westword told it that any ads would have to run in the back section, among the many dispensary advertisements that Ginsberg calls "pot porn."

Even Dynamic Chiropractic, the nation's leading chiropractic magazine, turned down the ads, calling the subject "too racy," Services said. The Denver conference has breakout discussions about the interaction of medical marijuana and chiropractic, Ginsberg said.

"We've never had a reaction like this before ... We just were turned down left and right and it's really hurt us," she said. "People won't take our money."

Robert Winnicki, founder and owner of event sponsor Full Spectrum Laboratories of Denver, which has tested the potency and safety of medical marijuana for about 100 area dispensaries, said he isn't surprised. When the industry picked up a few years ago, many dispensaries were run by 25-year-olds growing pot in their basement, giving rise to the reputation of the drug as a way to get high rather than to help medical conditions, he said.

But those "outliers" have been shutting down, giving way to legitimate businesspeople who turn to Full Spectrum. The company is building a 22,000-square-foot testing facility in southeast Denver to ensure that strains and doses are proper to help people, Winnicki said.

He sees the conference as the first major event promoting that change in the business and a chance to open doors to physicians and professionals who otherwise wouldn't give a second thought to medical marijuana.

"This is the first conference that I've been a part of where there is going to be a large number of doctors in attendance," Winnicki said. "This is starting to say, 'Hey, we're reaching out to the other aspects of the community, like doctors, and say ... 'Leave your preconceived notions at the door, come hear the talks and see what it is really all about.'"