



[Online magazine Civilized aims to ‘elevate’ cannabis culture](#)

EMILY BARON CADLOFF

SAINT JOHN — Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Dec. 30, 2016 2:11PM EST

It started beside a dumpster.

Derek Riedle was hunched next to the garbage bin, tucked behind the back of an upscale Italian restaurant in Venice, Calif. Riedle had taken his wife, Terri, out to celebrate her birthday – and while she sat at the table enjoying a glass of wine, Riedle was in the back alley, taking hits of marijuana off his vape pen.

“The inequities of cannabis, the prohibition, occurred to us numerous times over the years, but there was something about that night. I was really moved to do something about it,” Riedle said.

Riedle, 45, is clean-cut and fashionable, with curly brown hair. He studied public relations at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax before starting his own marketing firm. He and Terri became so successful with the firm, Revolution Strategies, that they moved to the United States to look at opening a California office of the firm. He has received accolades for his work and philanthropy, and in 2004 he was named one of New Brunswick’s 21 leaders of the 21st century. And he also smokes pot.

“On the weekends or in the evening, after the kids are in bed, I’ll choose to enjoy a little bit of cannabis just like my wife might have a glass of wine,” Riedle explained.

Thus began [Civilized](#). Riedle had the idea for the digital magazine that night, on Jan. 24, 2015. Nine months later, the site was live. The site aims to “elevate cannabis culture” by providing news and entertainment to a more sophisticated cannabis user.

As the Canadian federal government moves toward legalizing recreational marijuana use in 2017, the demographic of a settled, sophisticated cannabis user has opened up. But so has the market vying for that audience’s attention.

At least five new print magazines have launched in the past three years, including [MG](#) and [The Clever Root](#). Civilized has joined their ranks, but the challenge is to get noticed.

“What are they offering that you can’t find any other place?” asked Samir Husni, a professor at the University of Mississippi and the self-proclaimed [Mr. Magazine](#).

“For a few years, we had nothing but High Times and Skunk,” Husni explained. “Now, the more we see legalized marijuana ... we’ve seen a growth in these activities.”

According to Civilized staff, the website averages more than one million unique page views a month, up from just a few thousand when it launched. More than 50 per cent of the audience is in the United States, but Riedle sees the platform as “international.” It covers everything from politics to technology to lifestyle, a pseudo-Time for the cannabis crowd.

Top articles this month range from how Canada's legalization of marijuana might affect its relationship with the United States, to a listicle titled "The 12 Strains of Christmas" (the strain known as Permafrost is apparently helpful for those looking to de-stress).

Riedle hopes to expand the brand, venturing into television and marketing partnerships, and he has expanded quickly to reach that goal. There are six staff in the Venice office, and 13 at the head office in Saint John.

Riedle even owns the office building in Saint John, living in a loft on the top floor when he is visiting from the California hub, about a week every month. "We like to say we live above the shop."

The Saint John office is in a heritage building, featuring exposed brick walls and stark, modern lighting. The staff of writers, videographers and social media experts have adorned their spaces with cartoon characters and Mason jars of tchotchkes. There are couches and bubble chairs, and in one editing room, a lonely looking Ping-Pong table.

While about half of the staff are self-proclaimed marijuana users (and quick to point out that, in line with current legislation, they are using the drug medicinally). The only nod to pot culture in the office is one editor who walks around without shoes on.

No bowls of cheese puffs, no Rastafarian flags, no references to Bob Marley. Over and over again, staff emphasize that while Civilized is aimed at people who smoke marijuana, that's merely one facet of their personality.

"This is a place that writes about cannabis, but none of us define ourselves by cannabis use. It's just something we do," Riedle said. "We are trying to develop the voice for motivated, productive people who choose to consume cannabis, and our editorial is a reflection of those people."

But this ethos is somewhat at odds with the magazine's content. Top stories under the "Food" heading detail cannabis-infused coffee pods, and a how-to on pairing joints with your favourite meals.

While cannabis is just one facet of a reader's life, a look at the Civilized home page suggests it's a big facet. However, the subjects of the articles – from gourmet meals to expensive home-growing equipment – is on track with Riedle's data.

In April of 2015, Riedle hired Environics, a polling firm, and polled people across North America. According to his data, the largest group of people who are sparking up for the first time? Seniors.

"If you were to put a young teenager and a 45-year-old business executive in front of me and asked me which one would be more likely to be a cannabis user, I would bet on the clean-cut business person every day," Riedle said with a chuckle. "Many people in this demographic still remain in the cannabis closet, and we knew that we would need to raise our voice and provide a bit more of a welcoming environment."

As warm a welcome as they can provide, being a digital-only refuge from the "cannabis closet" could be a challenge for the startup.

“[Marijuana] is still in some areas a taboo subject,” said Husni. “A printed magazine will always be safer for you to get and read, rather than going online and telling the whole world you are a cannabis user.”

But Riedle has some heavy hitters to help him avoid those pitfalls. Former Vanity Fair publisher Mitchell Fox joined the board early on. Fox was publishing director for Condé Nast Publications for 18 years, and found himself charmed by the idea of Civilized.

“It was a beautiful site. Very well-edited, very well-written,” said Fox.

Fox advises the Riedles on directions for the site, but he also has his hand in the day-to-day operations, working with editors on crafting stories.

“What makes a good cannabis story is not different from what makes anything a good story,” Fox said.

While Fox is not a cannabis user himself, he can’t deny the growing audience. “This new way of relaxing and enjoying ourselves is valuable for people. My father used to have a martini after work, and now people come home after a hard day of work and they have a puff or two to relax.”

Riedle hopes that with legalization on the way for Canada, the doors will open for a more urbane, upscale stoner to emerge from the haze.