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Tech Trending with Retailers

by Jessica McKeil

Courtesy of THC Canada

Running an in-person store in 2024 requires a growing tech stack of integrated systems. Cannabis retail is a tech-heavy sector, with a surprising number of technologies and platforms responsible for day-to-day operations.

We spoke with cannabis stores to find out what's in their tech stack and which elements are integral to their business. From point-of-sale systems to e-commerce to marketing, here are the technologies trending with cannabis retailers.

Developing a Tech Stack Strategy

From back-end security systems to customer-facing SMS marketing, retailers rely on an increasingly complex network of technologies to keep their stores open, operational, and profitable.

What's the best tactic for incorporating another new element into your own tech stack? In speaking with store owners and managers, three elements were clear:



Courtesy of Calyx + Trichomes

1. Understand the Larger Goal

Before signing up for yet another platform, ask yourself what's driving this decision. Whether you want to grow your customer base or increase staff efficiency, don't just chase the next shiny object because everyone else is doing it. Assess whether the new system will genuinely work towards your larger goal and if it will mesh with your customer demographic, geographical location, and budget.

2. Perform Careful Research

As the CEO of Elevate in Edmonton, Joshua Vera, explains, "When it comes to tech, just do your homework; make sure that you're making the right decision for your company."

Obvious preliminary research like cost comparison is just the start. Schedule several product demonstrations with competing brands. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions, including whether the platform allows for customizations and the average tech support wait time.

3. Conduct Ongoing Reassessment & Pivot as Needed

Just because you've signed on the dotted line doesn't mean you are locked in forever. If a piece of technology no longer works, you can (and should) pivot. Teija Gladson, general manager at THC Canada in BC, is in the middle of such a pivot.

THC Canada built a custom platform to manage their deliveries in the past, but they just decided to switch to a third-party option to improve

the customer experience and expand into Whistler. Whether it was about e-commerce or POS systems, every retailer we spoke with reported pivoting between platforms—often several times before they landed on a solution that best fit their business.

Digital Marketing Tech: SMS and Push Notifications

Retailers rely on technology to navigate cannabis marketing and its restrictions.

Elevate relies on the digital marketing platform Springbig, which helps collect customer information, segment that information, and then send out targeted SMS or email messages.

"Since it's such a digital world, we're so connected," says Vera. "Everybody has access to the entire world in their pocket via their cell

phones, so it's very easy to communicate directly with your consumers basically anytime you want to." Vera integrates SMS into his larger marketing strategy quite carefully, as he wants to keep Elevate top-of-mind while respecting customer time and privacy.

However, SMS isn't always a slam dunk in Canada. There are challenges with cell phone carriers filtering messages with cannabis-related keywords. As Jennawae Cation of Calyx + Trichomes discovered after using SMS marketing, while it did help move products, even her delivery communications to customers were getting blocked. In the end, she had to roll it all back.

If a piece of technology no longer works, you can (and should) pivot.



Courtesy of Calyx + Trichomes

With cell phone carriers a constant frustration for cannabis retailers, there may be an alternative: Sticky Cards. Gladson explains, "Our store name is THC Canada, so we can't even use our store name without getting filtered out. So Sticky Cards has been amazing for that. I can send people push notifications and because it's a thing installed into their phone, I don't have to go through the phone provider. If you're anywhere near my store, it'll show whatever message that I want it to show. And then when I double-click my phone, the THC card comes up."

E-commerce Integrations: Not Perfect but Improving

Cannabis-friendly e-commerce platforms are still a sore spot. Many of the big players serving more traditional industries are still hesitant to work with cannabis-touching companies. Even in Canada, where it's been legal for years, the policies south of the border dictate who these companies choose to work with.

With few options, Cavion ended up becoming a part-time web developer to build her own custom online shop via WordPress. She recognizes that she's in the minority here: "Most cannabis retailers have no idea what they're looking at and have no idea how to build a website."

As mentioned, Gladson at THC Canada also relied on a custom-built, in-house platform for their e-commerce and delivery needs. But THC Canada just inked a new deal with Breadstack, a platform that offers e-commerce and fulfillment, driver tracking, customer driver messaging, and real-time notifications. While they are in the process of rolling this out to their stores, she's very hopeful that Breadstack will solve a few of their current pain points.

A Perpetual Trend? The Value of Tech Support

Trends come and go, but what makes a retailer stay with any platform for the long term? Resoundingly, everyone we spoke with agreed it was customer service and tech support. Whether they were speaking about POS or e-commerce platforms, the number one reason why each retailer was so loyal to these platforms is that when issues did arise, as they inevitably will, the companies behind the platforms were active and responsive.

The Retailer Tech Stack Continues to Evolve

It's clear that technology is a critical component of a cannabis retail store. It's essentially impossible to run a brick-and-mortar store today without a strong tech stack beyond a POS system. This increasingly includes an e-commerce site that expands a digital footprint and a compliant marketing service, like SMS or push notifications.

The connecting trend is the back-end support behind each technology. Hands down, no matter the specific platform in question, retailers see the highest value in companies that listened to their feedback and provided timely tech support. ▴

Courtesy of Calyx + Trichomes

