

Diane Eberlein and SōRSE are helping cannabis grow up



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Diana Eberlein, Vice President of marketing at SōRSE Technology, is helping the company drive cannabis products into the mainstream.

SōRSE

Diana Eberlein says she's not a rule breaker and never was when she was a kid.

The 36-year-old vice president of marketing at Seattle's SōRSE Technology was brought up during the DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) era, when the federal government poured millions of dollars into youth-targeted campaigns characterizing cannabis as a hard and dangerous drug.

"I grew up thinking there was a stereotype and a stigma associated with cannabis," Eberlein said during a recent interview.

All of that changed, though, when she left Los Angeles and moved to Seattle about five years ago. "I had this kind of odd experience," Eberlein said. "Everyone I knew

consumed cannabis in some form. They were doctors, lawyers, musicians, creatives – all across the board.”

In an indication of the potential for Washington’s burgeoning legal pot industry, she said she noticed many of those people increasingly forgoing alcohol for cannabis.

“There must be something to this,” she recalls thinking. “There’s a reason everyone I know and respect and care about is using these products for various reasons, whether it was pain relief, anxiety or just to relax.”

Eberlein, who previously worked in marketing for entertainment businesses, is now helping to lead the nation’s growing legal cannabis industry into maturity. SōRSE, which specializes in the water-soluble ingredients used to create cannabis edibles and drinks, brought in nearly \$8 million in revenue last year.

SōRSE has grown from serving a handful of cannabis food companies to more than 65. And it’s continued to grow, like so many other companies, during a pandemic that has forced businesses to get creative, improvise, reinvent and hope the new plan works.

In 2021, SōRSE expects to more than double its 2020 revenues to \$17 million.

“This isn’t your mom-and-pop industry anymore. It certainly started that way, but it has matured,” Eberlein said. “This is a professional space. This is real food science. And once you look at it that way you will never look at it the same.”

SōRSE’s team is 70% women, she said, in an industry where men have historically controlled brands. Most of SōRSE’s managers and project leaders are also female. Eberlein calls SōRSE “a brand powered by women.”

That, she said, is key to SōRSE’s role in driving the cannabis trade into a new, advanced and thriving phase.

“When I first entered the cannabis space, I felt it was ... rough,” she said, pausing to decide how best to characterize the industry’s image in those early days. “There was a missing warmth to it. ... All people saw were bright-green marijuana leaves and that old stigma that’s associated with cannabis.”

Women, Eberlein said, “have a huge part of changing what that face looks like from the outside. Now cannabis is more approachable. And I think women really did have a huge impact on that.”

One reason, she said, is “naturally we’re a little bit more nurturing. Our motivation for working in this space absolutely comes from the need to make people’s lives better.”

Since the pandemic began, Eberlein said, she’s heard more than once from consumers, many of whom use products SōRSE helps manufacture to treat pain, anxiety or to simply relax.

“We’ll get an email saying, ‘Hey, just wanted to let you guys know this is a really great product. And we’re a huge fan. ... It’s really helped me get through this.’”

“Working in marketing for the last 10-15 years, I’ve never gotten emails like that,” Eberlein said. “And the only time someone reached out to customer service was that they were angry about something.”

One of SōRSE’s customers is Mad Tasty, a brand of hemp-based sparkling water founded in Santa Monica three years ago by OneRepublic singer and record producer Ryan Tedder.

Leila Khoury, Mad Tasty’s director of marketing, said that as the pandemic shut down live events and other marketing opportunities, Eberlein worked closely with her to make her brand visible.

Mad Tasty participated in online discussions and events, including a forum about myths about hemp. (For example: Hemp doesn’t get you high.) Khoury, who lives in Los Angeles, said Eberlein also helped Mad Tasty participate in a virtual roundtable discussion about a number of topics, including team building and industry regulation.

Eberlein, who was in new territory herself, guided Khoury and Mad Tasty’s team through setting up and pulling off the events. It was a crash course in marketing cannabis during a pandemic.

Eberlein recalled telling SōRSE’s staff, “I know you can do this.”

“It was kind of a sink or swim sort of atmosphere,” she said.

By the end of last summer, she said, “there were tears, laughter, hugs – socially distant hugs, obviously,” Eberlein said. “It was a great year. And I actually feel like my team feels very unstoppable right now because we’ve had to take on so much that we weren’t used to before.”

Diane Eberlein

- **Company:** SōRSE
- **Age:** 36
- **Residence:** Wallingford
- **Hometown:** Huntington, New York
- **Education:** B.A. in marketing, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles

- **Family:** Single, with parents in North Carolina and a brother in North Hollywood, California
 - **Interests outside of work:** Hiking, SUP (stand-up paddleboarding), following football and baseball
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Lesson learned

“The phrase, ‘I can’t’ or ‘we can’t’ has really been removed from my vocabulary,” Eberlein said. “I think my team was really proud of themselves at the end of last year as well as our whole company. Today, we no longer really say ‘no’ or ‘we can’t.’”