

From [selling weed on the street in my early teens](#) to climbing the [retail ladder in telecom](#), I learned some valuable lessons about how to run a business and hire people to help run that business. The corporate model, in my opinion, could learn something from other industries, including not-so-legitimate ones.

Many so-called successful enterprises focus their hiring criteria on education and experience, disregarding the importance of personality, drive, ambition, loyalty and potential. I learned from a young age what to look for in potential employees, so when I opened the first Elev8 cannabis dispensary on April 24, 2017 in Eugene, Oregon, I had a team to run things that I could trust. And trust isn't just about ensuring nobody has sticky fingers. It goes well beyond that.

How I measure trust is different. If I hire people who see my vision and improve on it, who feel empowered to give me feedback, and who aren't content to remain in the job they were initially hired into, I know the other stuff—like minding the store in my absence—is a given.

I've known many business owners who fear the ambitious employee. "What if they use everything I taught them and one day open their own dispensary?" To that I say, 'bravo!' When I was quickly working my way up from trainee to store manager at T-Mobil, do you think that could have happened if I hadn't had a boss who encouraged me to do that? Who I am today is a direct reflection of who I was when I was selling weed on the street *and* working retail.

Almost immediately after I moved the Eugene dispensary (on May 25th), I walked Devin Jones. Along with being certified to work in a dispensary, Devin demonstrated ambition, tons of personality, an acute knowledge about the cannabis plant and ideas for how to take Elev8 from great to amazing. I couldn't not hire him!

Initially hired as a budtender, I loved how Devin interacted with customers. Not pushy, like a used car salesperson, but knowledgeable, patient and enthusiastic. I was immediately impressed with how Devin handled himself. I had just promoted my manager, Cassie, to COO, which created some openings. I believe very strongly in promoting from within, so it wasn't long before I moved Devin into a unique position that combines the roles of intake manager and inventory manager. Officially his title is intake manager.

An intake specialist is like a triage nurse in a hospital emergency room. This person is the first one seen upon entry to a dispensary. They receive deliveries, learn about customers' recreational and/or medicinal needs and makes recommendations. The intake specialist takes direction from the intake manager, who is generally more knowledgeable about the industry and the plant, ensuring inspections are carried out in a timely and organized manner, that deliveries are accurate, and stocked and inventoried appropriately, and that the strains and extracts are up to a high level of quality.

An intake manager is a critical position in a dispensary, particularly in a city like Eugene. As Devin explains it, "With a dispensary on every corner, it's up to us to keep consumers returning, which we do by offering a very different experience." He paused, "With 660

dispensaries in the state and probably 200 of them in Eugene alone, we have more dispensaries here than Starbucks and McDonald's combined, so we have to make every customer's experience unique and memorable."

This is where it's critical to have Devin in the inventory manager role as well. As an inventory manager, Devin makes sure we have enough product to meet the ever-growing needs of our customers. He also ensures our inventory is diverse, meaning that we don't have too much of one strain or extract, and not enough of another. And based on our marketing strategy, Devin makes sure we're anticipating the needs of future customers. This role requires a person to be responsive but also strategic, and Devin can literally provide both halves of the same goal, which in my experience, isn't someone who comes around often.

Because I saw this unique quality in Devin, I worked very closely with him the first month in his new role because I wanted to create a very clear job description based on the needs of Elev8, but also make sure it fit Devin's skills and talents like a glove. I also wanted to leave room for him to grow into the position because he is exceptionally bright and he has a lot of drive, and I wanted him to feel like he continued being challenged day after day. At 23, I know Devin is growing and changing and I want him to be as excited to come to work in a year as he is today.

The cannabis industry in Oregon is very unique because there's a surplus of weed grown. Plus, Oregonians know their weed. It's estimated that there are over [2.7 million pounds of cannabis currently available in Oregon](#), which means growers can be very picky about whom they sell to and at what price. This makes it incumbent upon each dispensary to distinguish themselves. And being Black-owned and new on the block, means we have to be strategic and creative.

As Devin phrases it, "because the cannabis market is still in its infancy, there's a lot there that hasn't been mastered or perfected, everyone is kind of doing it their own way. There are obviously rules and regulations from the OLCC ([Oregon Liquor Control Commission](#)), but beyond that, if a grower wants to keep that exclusivity in the market (selling to dispensary A and not dispensary B), they can. They can shut out some dispensaries while providing exclusivity with others."

One way we decided to distinguish ourselves fit perfectly with my belief that we need to elev8 the Black community is that while we're don't exclusively buy from Black-owned growers and manufacturers, we definitely prioritize them. We needed someone to help us source those Black-owned companies, even some outside of Oregon.

Over the summer I hired Alonzo "Zo" Medley as a budtender. Zo moved to Portland from Washington, D.C. Name a Black-owned business in the cannabis industry, and chances are Zo knows someone in the company who can help us source the best product, enhancing our customer experience. I'm now having him work both as a budtender and an assistant to Devin.

Like Devin, I'm aware that I have to keep Zo challenged. He's another very bright guy with lots of drive and ambition. Every time Zo establishes a relationship with a Black-owned grower or

manufacturer, it positions Elev8 as a dispensary that isn't content to just sell product to solely compete with other dispensaries, but to set itself apart from the rest. We're not trying to compete at the same game. We're trying to stand out, and with Devin and Zo, we're rapidly doing that.

"Remembering there are over 200 dispensaries in Eugene, Elev8 is currently the only Black-owned and operated one in Eugene. It's really up to us to create the model for a Black-owned dispensary prioritizing Black-owned suppliers. [Hashstoria](#) dispensary in neighboring Springfield is owned by Raekwon from Wu-Tang. We're working on a collaboration with them because they're in the same boat as we are." Zo continued, "This is one of the many things I love about working for Seun, he encourages us to just do what we do, meaning he doesn't restrict us or try to micromanage us."

What brought Zo to Oregon after finishing high school in D.C. was a sports management scholarship. He worked with the [Oregon Ducks](#) Basketball team. He was making jerseys and putting decals on uniforms. His goal, once he turned 21, was to come to open the first Black-owned dispensary in Oregon, helping athletes with pain and people who consume [cannabis to address substance abuse](#).

As Zo explains it, "Professional athletes can't walk into a dispensary and just buy their weed. My plan was simple: I could block off time for them to come in and do their wellness check, and give them CBD, which is 100 percent legal. And with addicts, rather than let them just languish or lock them up, give them high doses of THC, which is proven to help fight addiction to heroin and other hard substances."

Zo turned 21 on June 15th 2020, and on June 16th, he hosted the Juneteenth block party/parade, which I attended. It was the largest event with African Americans or people of color the city of Eugene had ever seen. Zo heard me saying that I opened the first Black-owned dispensary in Eugene and came up to me and introduced himself. He told me it had been his dream to open the first Black-owned dispensary. Zo came to Elev8 the next day. I introduced him to Devin. They hit it off right away, and as soon as he got his budtender license in August, I hired him.

"My biggest thing is the community. Devin and I are in the community, so we know what they like and what they don't like. Treating everyone like gold is our number 1 priority. We're known for our customer service," explains Zo. "And to that end, it's about forging these relationships with Black-owned businesses like [Cookies](#), so we can give our customers exactly what they want, while providing a quality product every single time they walk through Elev8's doors. We stock both high-end, expensive weed and high-quality weed that costs less, so we can help everyone at every socioeconomic level. This is the model Devin and I are trying to create. It may sound simple, but it's not as easy it seems. These relationships take time to build, but the rewards are so sweet."

And this is why I measure trust differently from other people. By continuing to hire people like Devin and Zo who get what I'm trying to do, but elevate it to the next level, everyone wins: the community—especially the Black community—our customers, suppliers we work with and the people who work for me. Because they're integral in building this vast network of Black-owned businesses, they take their roles so seriously that it goes far beyond just minding the business. Trust is a two-way street, and together we're not just making money. We're creating legacy.