



By Carl Collen

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# Tech top of industry agenda

In her State of the Industry speech at PMA, Cathy Burns highlighted how technology, robotics and e-commerce will shape the future



**P**roduce Marketing Association (PMA) chief executive Cathy Burns delivered her annual State of the Industry address at the opening Forum for the Future of PMA Fresh Summit in Orlando, with the issue of technology high on the agenda.

Burns drew together insights across a broad range of areas, from robotics and automation to human talent management, from e-commerce to culture and society, to sketch a picture of an industry future that will call for a complex mix of both high tech and high touch to grow a healthier world.

According to Burns, the fresh produce and floral industry will look more and more to technology to meet its labour needs, with diverse and innovative examples of labour-saving technologies from both inside and outside the industry outlined.

At the same time, today's evolving marketplace will require increasingly personalised customer touchpoints, she noted.

"Robotic assistants help ease some of the challenges in finding both human, and non-human, help in the field," said Burns. However, she warned that "While high-tech experiences certainly provide a 'wow' factor, human employees play an important role in providing a personalised, customised experience for consumers. Technology won't be able to handle all of the skills people can."

Conversely, said Burns, "To keep our talented employees, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, employers should ensure they have meaningful work, career feedback, diversity, inclusion and flexibility. Most interestingly, these same employees are looking to their employers as a source of education and training to keep their professional skills in line with changing technologies."

When it comes to e-commerce, Burns explained how one food marketer is using artificial intelligence, image learning and interactive quizzes to study consumers' Instagram feeds to make recipe suggestions.

That said, she reminded the audience

that only 28 per cent of shoppers report they've purchased fruits and vegetables online. "For some, they find joy in picking their own fruits, vegetables and fresh foods in store."

Millennials, she continued, have only known a digital world, and also crave work in the real world that is meaningful and inclusive. That quest for meaning spills over into how they perceive food, and the businesses that make food.

"They expect that food and food brands will follow their needs – not the other way around," said Burns. "Businesses are increasingly being judged based on their relationships with their workers, customers, communities and impact on society."

That in turn must spill into industry values and culture, said Burns. "The industry's mindset around produce safety must shift from a cost centre to a cultural imperative."

PMA's recent experience at South by Southwest made it clear that other voices are currently leading the

conversation around food and agriculture, and to sustain and grow the industry its connection to the world needs strengthening.

“If we are going to grow a healthier world, we must continue to shape cultural influences and

share the incredible work our industry does every day with a global audience,” concluded Burns. “Our future depends on it.”

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<http://www.fruitnet.com/americafruit/article/1474/parts-of-san-diego-quarantined-as-psyllid-count-mounts>

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