

While fruits and vegetables are "white hot" in culture right now, Produce Marketing Association (PMA) CEO Cathy Burns says the industry needs to "reframe, repackage and reposition".

Speaking at the PMA Fresh Summit State of the Industry brunch this morning in New Orleans, the executive reiterated that predictions around the growth of plant-based diets were coming to fruition.

"Now this ought to be right in our wheelhouse. I mean, aren't we the original plant-based diet?" Burns asked attendees.

"A year ago jackfruit moved into the mainstream as a meat substitute because of its high protein content, and some are predicting algae will be the next big thing in food ingredients and in plant-based diets because it's easy to grow and again, packed with protein."



PMA CEO Cathy Burns

While it's yet to be seen whether the algae trend will stick, Burns said it was now a reality that a wide range of retailers and supermarket chains were supplying plant-based burgers to great effect, or even blended burgers with mushrooms.

She cited estimates from the Plant Based Food Association that plant-based meat products would reach US\$5 billion in global sales in three years.

"This is driven primarily by Millennials and Gen X consumers who care more about the food they eat and are willing to spend a little more on those food choices," Burns said.

"Other research found that 87% of Americans eat plant protein; two thirds of them do it once a week or more and 59% of consumers said they eat a meatless meal once a week.

"In addition it is estimated that by 2020, so just three short years, plant proteins will close the gap on animal proteins. 47% of our protein will come from plants - what a shift.

"Earlier this year a survey of more than 1,000 U.S. consumers showed they are consuming more fresh products - including fruits and vegetables - than they were three years ago.

Much of this change has been driven by Millennial, Gen Z and multicultural shoppers, Burns said.

"According to the NPD Group, consumers under the age of 40 increased their annual eatings of fresh vegetables by 52% over the last decade.

"By contrast, baby boomers have decreased their consumption of fresh vegetables by 30% over the same time period. Now while boomers' consumption of vegetables has dropped off, multicultural consumers are actually filling that gap."

The PMA CEO also pointed to research from Nielsen that showed consumers were eating and purchasing more fruits and vegetables to address specific health concerns.

"Households managing diabetes spend more on stonefruit, cherries, tomatoes and string beans, while pumpkins, squash, apples and avocados are winning in lactose-intolerant homes," she said.

"And consumers with gluten-free conditions spend more on squash, pumpkins, carrots and produced vegetables."

But where many consumers struggle is convenience and the challenges associated with time-poor lifestyles. This has given way to a plethora of meal kit ventures in the marketplace.



"Consider this - one in four U.S. adults has purchased a meal kit for delivery or in-store in the last year," Burns said.

"75% continue to buy them after making their first purchase - meal kits actually address the

one non-renewable natural resource we have - time.

"They also have the side benefit of exposing consumers to new and healthy recipes, many of which include fruits and vegetables."

Burns urged industry players to consider current and emerging consumer trends while also finding inspiration outside the industry.

"Are you going where the trends take you, or are you following trends that bring your brand and organizational mission to life?"

"All of these trends have the potential to increase demand for fresh produce and floral, but the real question is how do we make this happen?"

She said through "inspired marketing", produce industry professionals as an industry would be able to increase preference for their great products, involving all facets of marketing like consumer understanding, cultural exploration, innovation and creativity.

"The burden on business leaders has grown but so has the opportunity. We have such an opportunity in front of us - our products are white hot in culture right now," she said.

"Consumers love to play with produce on social media, using fruit icons to display their relationship status or just have fun with a popular summertime fruit."

She also pointed to cultural icons' promotion of fruits and vegetables, such as Oprah's new food line that incorporates veggies as substitutes for other food products, Lady Gaga's deal with Starbucks on a limited edition fruit-inspired drink line-up, and Serena Williams' airing of her pregnancy cravings for zucchini, asparagus and artichokes.

"The fact is, our industry is receiving more attention from celebrities, shoppers and the media. We must use strategic marketing to capitalize on this momentum by stimulating purchases.

"Raising our attractiveness and cultural relevance with consumers and expanding category use, our industry can grow.

"Being a great product is not enough; we need to have a meaningful role in consumers' lives - we must have a powerful, resonating voice in conversations where trends and culture are being set."

She said preliminary studies undertaken by the PMA showed that while consumers were moving to plant-based diets, this didn't necessarily mean it would be an easy ride ahead for the fresh produce sector.

"We found the choice to consume or not to consume fruits and vegetables is saddled with conflict. People readily acknowledge they should eat more fresh produce but struggle at the point of decision," she said.

"Pressures such as changing lifestyle and eating habits, and an ever-expanding set of food choices have put fruits and vegetables at a competitive disadvantage in the consumer's mindset.

"We're still working through the implications of this research but the data thus far points to this - we cannot rest on the laurels of health messaging alone in grabbing the consumer's attention.

"Ultimately our opportunity as an industry is to leverage our health halo while we reframe, repackage and reposition produce to meet consumers' needs in more demand spaces and meal occasions."

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