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## PMA's Fresh Summit energizes New Orleans

by Tim Linden | October 23, 2017

With an announced crowd of more than 19,500 industry folks at the Produce Marketing Association's Fresh Summit Convention & Expo in New Orleans, the town was overflowing with produce talk, signs and events Oct. 19-22.

Thursday, Oct. 19 was filled with educational workshops, as well as PMA Chief Executive Officer Cathy Burns' annual state of the industry address. It was Burns' first solo effort at the speech, which has become an annual look back at the top influencers of the year and a forecast of what's to come. For the last several years, Burns had assisted the former CEO, Bryan Silbermann, as he handled the task. The retired Silberman was on hand this year but only to give out a new award that carries his name — the Bryan Silbermann Collaboration Award — with the first recipient being Tim York of Markon, cited for his great volunteer work, collaborating with others to solve industry issues.

The three day event also featured the presentation of the Robert L. Carey award to a former PMA chairman, Bill Schuler, who is president/CEO of the Castellini Group, and 14 hours of show time as thousands of attendees conversed with thousands of exhibitor representatives. There were also a couple of other keynote address with the future being a common thread.

"We are thrilled that our industry continues to see Fresh Summit as an important gathering place for the global fresh produce and floral communities," said Burns. "I am incredibly grateful to, and humbled by, all of our volunteer leaders, exhibitors, speakers, sponsors and members who worked to make this a place of connections to people, ideas, products, services and more."

During her address, she recounted some of the huge changes that occurred in the last year, including the continued infiltration of technology into all facets of our lives. She said the rate of change is constantly accelerating and challenged the audience to stay ahead of the curve with regard to technology.

Burns said smart appliances are making life easier while a focus on healthier diets offers many opportunities for the fresh produce industry. She envisions a time when we will each have a chip embedded in our person that will gives us great information about our health and prescriptions for improving that health. She said the products the produce industry sells allows it to be in a great position to help society as this focus on health continues.



PMA CEO Cathy Burns

She asked the crowd how they are leveraging technology to help others. "How are you using technology to meet consumers where they are? And whether high-tech or high-touch, how are you taking steps to ensure your customers have exceptional experiences with your business? Does your people strategy provide talent with exceptional experiences to grow and make a positive impact on our industry?"

She predicted nanotechnology and robotics will have a profound impact on how the industry operates in the future, and predicted that genetic science technology will aid in the sustainability effort. She called on the group to embrace inspired marketing that goes beyond advertising and sales. She said it should include analysis, research, consumer understanding, business strategy, cultural exploration, benchmarking, innovation and creativity. "If we are supposed to be half the plate, we should be half the conversation. Ultimately our opportunity as an industry is to leverage our health halo while we reframe, repackage and reposition produce to meet consumer needs in more demand spaces and meal occasions."

It is our challenge as an industry, Burns said, "to make emotional, meaningful, inspiring connections with consumers that create preference and demand for fruits, vegetables and floral across cultures and conversations."

She also gave a full-throated endorsement of the industry adopting a more humane approach to its workforce. She said there is great value in the diversity in our society and companies should be exploring ways to use this diversity to the advantage of themselves and society. She noted that people with differences — specifically mentioning autism — can have a valuable labor role to play and employers should embracing those challenges. "Strength lies in our differences," she said.

On day two, futurist Brian David Johnson was the keynote speaker and challenged the audience "to look at the thing that comes after the next big thing." He explained that being a futurist means projecting beyond the current trend to the one after that. And then take that projection, look back to where you stand today and chart a path to get to that place.

Johnson believes that the future will be dominated by what he called "sentient tools." These are tools that have an awareness and intelligence and can communicate with their user. For example, he said robots will know their owners, know their personalities and be able to anticipate their needs. But Johnson was quick to note that these robots and technological aides are only tools — not to be feared but to be used to make life better, just as a hammer is used to build a house.

He tried to give the crowd the aforementioned blueprint that explained how they each can be futurists, with his overall message being that you must be thinking two steps ahead. If you are obsessed with the current "next big thing, you're ripe for disruption." Instead, he admonished, get beyond incrementalism, look down the road and become the disruptor.

He also challenged the people in the audience to change their future, don't just adapt to it. He advised that each of us create our own future by envisioning where you want to be and then take the necessary steps to get there.



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