

Conversation with food futurist Jack Bobo on innovation, technology and consumer choice

Description:

We speak with Jack Bobo, food futurist and the author of the book "Why Smart People Make Bad Food Choices." Jack talks about how we ended up with giant-sized food portions in the US and what can be done to redesign our food environment to make better food choices for healthier living. We talk about the role of innovation and technology in solving many of our problems and the imperative to get consumers on board.

Speaker:

- Jack Bobo, Futurist and Author

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Welcome to PMA takes on tech, the podcast that explores the problems, solutions, people, and ideas that are shaping the future of the produce industry. I'm your host Vonnie Estas, Vice President of Technology for the produce marketing association, and I've spent years in the ag tech sector. So I can attest, it's hard to navigate this ever-changing world in developing and adopting new solutions to industry problems. Thanks for joining us and for allowing us to serve as your guide to the new world of produce and technology. My goal of the podcast is to outline a problem in the produce industry and then discuss several possible solutions that can be deployed today.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Special thanks to PMA member Crop Track for their sponsorship of this season of PMA takes on tech. Crop tracks cloud platform helps companies bring their supply chain to new levels, enabling real time visibility throughout the organization. One technology platform for the entire raw supply chain. Go to croptrack.com/PMA to track what matters today and into the future.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Today, we have a very special guest, Jack Bobo. He's a food futurist and author of the new fascinating book, 'Why Smart People Make Bad Food Choices'. Jack has the exact background you would want and expect in a food futurist, 13 years at the U.S. Department of state, which I think is where we met. I think we met there around 2014 when I was working in some biotech issues. So he's steeped in global food policy and then he spent close to four years at Intrexon. So he steeped in commercialization of new technologies, and what that role can bring. He sits on a number of boards along with his current company and does a ton of speaking and wrote the book. So you're a very busy guy. Welcome to the podcast.

Jack Bobo:

I'm delighted to be here. Thanks for having me on.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

So why don't you tell us a little bit about what you're doing now and the type of clients you work with and kind of the value that you bring to the conversations with the companies that you're working with?

Jack Bobo:

Sure. So I started my consulting firm about two and a half years ago. Futurity. Sounds like a made up word, but it's not. And I thought that I'd spend a lot of time talking about communication and policy and regulation, things that I'd worked on for a long time. But what I really ran into is that a lot of organizations, a lot of companies, there's a lot of angst out there about what the future of food is and how businesses and products and brands fit into that future. And so I think I ended up doing a lot of therapy and, you know, that sort of the futurist aspect of it came in because it's trying to help organizations to think about, you know, what is the future they want, not just the future they're going to get.

Jack Bobo:

And so, you know, I tell people that I work with few tech startups, big food brands, helping them understand what does the future of food look like, where consumer trends and attitudes are going and how do organizations get ahead of trends, so don't get run over by them. And it's really about trying to look around corners, to look at the trends that other people are talking about. But to then think about what are the forces that are shaping those trends because that's how you get ahead of them. You figure out where it's going and then you position yourself there. And so that's been a lot of fun working with, you know, all the different parts of the food industry in order to think about how do we create a sustainable and nutritious future for all.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

So when you engage with your different kinds of clients, like who is the person that says, we need to talk to that guy. Cause that's someone who is very future focused and thinking about how do we get ahead? And I imagine that's not, you know, it's not just any person in the organization. Does it tend to be the CEOs or what type of people call you up and say, you need to come in and talk to my team?

Jack Bobo:

Yeah. So with the larger food companies, it's a lot of the executives. You know, I, as you mentioned, I spent 13 years at state department and at the time I used to say that big companies are a lot like children; they only call when there's a problem. And I had the opportunity to work with lots of companies to try to solve their problems. So I have, you know, pretty

enormous network of organizations and people that have risen to the top of the organizations that they now work for.

Jack Bobo:

But then on the other hand, you've got a lot of these food tech companies and sometimes I just reach out to them. I see how they're messaging, and I think, oh my God, you know, they're going to run into problems. I'm going to see if I can fix that. And fortunately, I also have a network who can make introductions in that happen, but often I get calls from venture capitalists who have companies in their portfolio, and they're like, could you please talk to the CEO of this new startup and, you know, keep help them to communicate in a way that doesn't antagonize where the traditional agriculture industry, while being true and authentic to who they are.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

That's so great. We'll dig into that a little bit more in a minute, but I want to talk a little bit about your book. So what made you decide to write it? How long did it take and how's it being received?

Jack Bobo:

So the book, 'Why Smart People Make Bad Food Choices', and it's not what I think about bad food choices. It's, you know, to help people who feel like they themselves are not making the choices that they want to be making for themselves. So I'm not passing judgment on other people. I'm not a dietician. You know, I'm not a doctor. It's about helping people to make the decisions that they want to make for their own health. And I spent about a year working on it.

Jack Bobo:

The first six months, I actually was writing a series of blog posts and those 10 initial posts are still up on my website, looking at consumer psychology. And I was really interested in like how the ways that our brains sometimes lead us to make bad choices and to help people recognize that. And then as I decided to turn it into a book, I realized that sort of the first third is the mind leading us astray.

Jack Bobo:

But then there's also our food environment that is also leading us to make these bad choices. And then the last part of the book is what would it take to redesign our food environment? So healthy outcomes where the default. And one of the things that really struck me when I started with the project was how can it be at a time when we've never known more about health and nutrition in the history of the planet, and we've never been more obese? We've never had more healthy food choices and options in a grocery store, and yet we've never been more obese. So it's not as if people in 1960 had a greater willpower than we have today. I mean, they were cooking with Crisco, need more lard? Yeah. Let's pour it on there.

Jack Bobo:

Somehow very few people were obese in 1960, 42% of Americans are obese today. 75% are overweight or obese and we're going to 50% by 2030, so just in another decade. So if we don't really seriously change the direction of society, you know, we're going to be entering a period in which every generation lives less and doesn't live as long as the generation before. And you know, that's never been the case. And so, you know, so that's what the book is hoping to tackle is helping us to think about that food scape in a way that's very different than how a diet book would approach the problem.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

So I know it took a whole book to explain all this, but give some examples or just some things that were surprising to you as far as like, what are those changes? Why is it different now than 1960? What kind of happened in the evolution of how we interact with our food?

Jack Bobo:

So, you know, I have one chapter on decision fatigue or mental fatigue, and, you know, we're all familiar with the idea that you shouldn't go grocery shopping when you're tired and that's because when you're mentally tired, you just don't make as good a choice. And when you have to make more choices in a row, the choice, the ability to make good choices gets worse and worse. And so, is there any place in our environment in which we have to make more choices than in a grocery store? And so you ask what's changed. Well, you know, there are tens of thousands more products in a grocery store today than there were in 1980. So if you think about it, you know, in 1980, you went to the grocery store and you had two choices for a pasta sauce. You could get Prego or Ragu or Ragu and Prego, and that was it.

Jack Bobo:

But a decade later you had chunky and spicy and meat sauce. And you know...

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

And some are low fat, and some are high this and low that, and yeah.

Jack Bobo:

Right. And just dozens and dozens of choices. And it was the same with salad dressings, barbecue sauce, and all these things. And having choice improves happiness up to a point, but then it begins to actually erode that happiness because then you begin to wonder whether you've made the right choice. And so what is sort of intended to make us happier and enjoy our lives more, can have negative consequences. And so then there's another chapter of the book in which I talk about something called the halo effect, which is just when a product has one positive attribute, we just assume it has more. And you know, this is actually with the plant based burger movement that 95% of people are buying them because they think it's healthier.

Jack Bobo:

When, of course, you know, they're no more nutritious and in some respects, less nutritious, than a conventional burger. Now the people producing it are doing it primarily for ethical and environmental reasons, but there's a mismatch between why people are buying it and what it's delivering. And so the halo effect really arose, again, back in the early 1980s when the dietary guidelines first came along. And one of the things that they recommended was lower fat diets.

Jack Bobo:

Well, that makes a lot of sense. You know, heart disease was a big contributor to illness and food companies did what we would want them to do. They started offering low fat options, you know, for the products they normally produce, but then the halo effect kicked in and people thought, well, if one low fat cookie is good for me and entire bag must be great. The low fat and low calorie are not the same thing at all.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Exactly.

Jack Bobo:

So all of these things that were sort of intended to allow us to sort of lead a healthier life, in many respects, have actually moved us in the other direction. And then that's the psychology of it. But then there are a lot of examples of the book of the environment. You know, we're all familiar with, you know, supersized portions today. But what most of us don't realize is that it all leads back to the mad genius of one man, back in the 1960s, David Wallerstein. And he was working for a chain of movie theaters and his job was to figure out how to get people to eat more popcorn. And so he tried two for one deals and all sorts of things to get them to come back, and people just would not go back and buy a second bag of popcorn. And all of a sudden it hit him.

Jack Bobo:

Well, what if the reason they don't want more popcorn is they're embarrassed. You know, people might think I'm gluttonous if I go and have two bags of popcorn. And so it hit him well, what if I offered to a bigger bag? And up until that point, food companies never offered larger portions because they saw it as a way of discounting and they thought it undermined their brand value by doing it. So there was a reason they didn't do it, but of course, you know, then the rest is history. Once he did it, soft drink sales took off everything in the concession stand grew. Well, he would work for McDonald's and he convinced Ray Crock that they needed to offer larger sizes than McDonald's, which also took Ray Crock a long time to acknowledge because these like, they'll go back for a second bag. Well, that's just not true.

Jack Bobo:

And it wasn't until 1972, that they finally introduced the large McDonald's fry.

And you know, that really began to, you know, the steam roll all of this. But there's stories in the book about those sorts of things. Most of us today don't even know what an adult serving of food looks like because if you were to buy a happy meal, well, a small kid's fry is a large fry from 1972.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Oh, wow.

Jack Bobo:

A 12 ounce soda, well, that's 50% larger than the seven or eight ounce soda you would have gotten as an adult in 1955. And so in the burger is bigger as well. So we don't even know, it's just not even in our conception, what an adult serving used to be. And, you know, that's part of the challenges that we don't even know how much we're supposed to eat or what would be normal because we eat our foods so quickly that our body doesn't have an opportunity to let us know that it's full. And so every meal we're eating 20 or 30% more calories than we actually need in order to satisfy us. And so you do that every day for 30 years, and that's when you get where we are.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

That's exactly right. And I remember one thing you said in the book was talking about the plate size at a restaurant. So they're putting more food on a larger plate. So it doesn't, if you put that on a regular dinner plate, you would think, oh my gosh, that's so much more than I would eat at home. But if you put it on a big plate, then it's fine.

Jack Bobo:

Right. And we reward restaurants though, that give us lots of food. You know, it's like, it seems like a good value, but if you less happy, less healthy and less wealthy, maybe it's not such a great deal.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Exactly. I was reading an article last year, so, and I think it was put out by someone at Google. And Google's done a lot of work on trying to figure out how to get their workforce to eat healthier because they want to keep them there for three meals a day. I mean, that's behind their madness, but they do want to keep them and they see the value of keeping them healthy, insurance premiums and that sort of thing. But one of the things that they were talking about was kind of the psychology around meetings, foods at meetings. And, and I've always complained about this because I'm not, I would much rather eat fruit and vegetables than eat a donut.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

But if I'm so fatigued in a meeting and there's a break and there's a big chocolate chip cookie, that's like, you know, two inches away from my hand, I'm probably going to eat it. You know, where I would never eat that normally. So they were talking about different ways of like setting snacks outside the

room or having healthier snacks, or how have you seen some of the people that are trying to figure out how do we change this behavior in people?

Jack Bobo:

Yeah. And there's an entire chapter in the book about the work that Google's doing. So I talked to Michael Barker who led that initiative, and Javan Hanson who's now running it right now. And we don't think of Google when we're talking about food normally, but what they've done is they've crunched the data on the 200,000 people they were feeding one, two or three meals a day before COVID came along and, you know, they did what they did best. They crunched all that data. And then they used it to figure out what could they do in order to nudge people to healthier food choices. And there are a lot of things that can be done. One of the things they did was they took the sodas, which were free, but they put them behind frosted glass in a lower refrigerator, so it wasn't as easily accessible.

Jack Bobo:

They took the snack station and they moved it just a little bit further away from the coffee station, because what people were doing was they were getting a cup of coffee and while it was brewing, they would just, you know, go three or four feet away and grab a snack. Well you put it 15 feet away, and all of a sudden you get a 60% reduction in snacking because nobody wants to leave their drink. And so, you know, redesigning the buffet lines, and changing the names of the servings, and working with the Culinary Institute of America to design new recipes for vegetables to make them amazing so that people wanted to eat the healthier food. So there's a lot that that company did. Compass Group is the company that, you know, does the food service for them, and they partnered with them.

Jack Bobo:

And so Compass Group then takes the ideas that are being generated at Google, and they're taking it to the hospitals and corporate cafeterias and schools and other things where they operate. So a lot of those ideas are being widely distributed. There's work that's happening in the UK where the grocery retailers are redesigning the layout of the grocery store in order to nudge more fruit and vegetable purchases. I think they've gotten like 16% increases over the course of a year just by redesigning the layout of the shopping experience. And so consumers don't even know that those things are happening, you know, they just end up with more fruits and vegetables in their basket and, you know, they would have no way of being able to explain why they bought it. They would just say, oh, I just felt like it. Well, you felt like because you were kind of nudged along the way, you know, as you went through the aisles today.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Interesting. So this podcast, I focus a lot on technology. So how can

technology help us develop better foods and help people make healthier choices? I mean, you kind of have a background in biotech. And so what kinds of things do you think could happen that will help us have a healthier, healthier people?

Jack Bobo:

Yeah. I mean, technology and innovation are playing a role at every step of the process. And, you know, helping us to tweak them and make them healthier. But they're also allowing us to use data and information ways that allow consumers to make more informed choices, to have better information. Often information, of course, doesn't lead to better outcomes because, you know, we often don't look for information that's going to help us. You know, if you put low fat or you put low sodium on a can of soup, people enjoy it less. Even if a blind taste test, it tastes exactly the same as the regular one. Once you add the low sodium people will actually respond and appreciate it less.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Huh, they think something has been taken away from them.

Jack Bobo:

Yeah. And if you were to do brain scans, I mean, there would actually be less enjoyment of that experience. So it's not that they're just telling you that they didn't like it, they actually experience it as less tasty.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Huh.

Jack Bobo:

And so that's why some companies are going to stealth health, where they're tweaking the recipes in order to make them healthier, but they're not actually advertising it. And, you know, I think, you know, that working with psychology. And I think when it comes to innovations, you need to figure out when can you lean into the technology and people love it, like their smartphone. And when do you not focus on the technology and let it sort of fall into the background? And, you know, my standard quote is people love innovation almost as much as they despise change. There's no place people despise change more though than the food they eat.

Jack Bobo:

Because food is what brings us together with friends and family. And if you mess with my food, you're messing with my family and people just don't like that. But if we don't change how we produce food, everything will change. So, and consumers just don't know how much innovation was already there. We produce twice as much food as we did in 1960 on more or less the same amount of land. And without innovation, we would have had to cut down a billion hectares of forest.

Jack Bobo:

And, you know, that would have a huge environmental impact. I mean, that's more than a quarter of all the forest left on the planet. And so innovation has played a critical role, but it often goes unnoticed. And one of the things that I find interesting is that consumers are much more accepting of innovation from startups than they are from big food companies. And so you see this all the time that, you know, innovations, you know, seem like they're only coming from the startups, but a lot of it's because that's where consumers want it to come from.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Interesting.

Jack Bobo:

And that goes to a lot of consumer psychology as well.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Yeah. I think that's really fascinating. How do we balance the, you know, you were saying consumers don't really know, and they just want better products. And we certainly, you know, consumers don't buy technology, they buy products. But how do we kind of balance that with transparency? So if you know you and I both worked around GMOs some, and but if you look at some of the newer technologies like gene editing or epigenetics, or some of the non-GMO breeding, new breeding technologies, do consumers want to know, do they not want to know how do we talk about it? How do we bring on new products? Kind of what do you see happening there?

Jack Bobo:

Yeah. So one thing you want to do is you want to be transparent before anybody's asking for transparency. So if you're responding to a request you've already lost. And McDonald's learned this lesson when some of the communication marketing people were pushing the company in order to put all of their ingredient lists on the website, and they finally caved and they said, fine, we'll put it all on there. And they did. And nobody visited the website.,

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

And it was there.

Jack Bobo:

And the executives were like, what's going on? We spent all this time and money and energy doing this, and nobody cares. And the marketing guys were like, yes, that's the point. That people actually responded in surveys as being much more comfortable knowing the information was there, even though they never actually checked it out. And so, you know, transparency, you know, should be something that's sort of part of our everyday experience. And when it works well, it's totally irrelevant. And you know, think about transparency and where we are today. Like people do care about

transparency, but eventually transparency becomes the norm in the same way.

Jack Bobo:

A hundred years ago, people cared about food safety because food was not safe. But today food safety is the floor. Everybody must be safe. So it's not, you can't say, oh, I'm safe for the next guy and get business. Today transparency's a ceiling that we aspire to, but 10 years from now, it'll be the floor. So as an organization, you can get credit today by being more transparent than the next guy. 10 years from now, you will be punished if you are less transparent than the next guy. And so, you know, I would encourage organizations that if you could be transparent enough, sometimes those things that you feel like they're real problems, can just disappear.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Yeah. One of the things that I've been working with some just within the organization is around gene editing. And so many companies not wanting to be the first because they're afraid that the, that people will go after them. And so the technology is not getting used in a lot of new breeding technologies. Aren't getting used because they're afraid to be transparent. But then they're afraid to not be transparent. And so I think we need that, you know, as we said, we need that product that people just love. And then, you know, you tell them how it was made. And they're like, great, I love it. That's what I'm going to eat. You know? So I think it's hard to get there.

Jack Bobo:

Well, but think about, you know, what would have happened if the impossible burger, which is a GMO burger. Had been created by Monsanto?

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

I shudder to think.

Jack Bobo:

So, I think we know that it wouldn't have been successful, but every newspaper article in the world would have said it failed because nobody wants a GMO burger.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Yeah.

Jack Bobo:

And that's actually not true. But everybody would have assumed the failure was on the product, the technology, instead of the fact that nobody wants a GMO burger from that large multinational company. Whereas almost nobody cared that impossible burger was, you know, made with GMOs. And even though, you know, many organizations did, you know, highlight that fact, because at first it was only offered in high-end restaurants. And so rich people

were perfectly happy to pay \$20 a burger in order to have this GMO ultra processed product. Now the big pushback came when it went into 18,000 Burger Kings and all of a sudden poor people could afford it. And so, you know, there's that socio-economic change.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

so people who had money were fine, as long as it was special. I mean, why were they willing to pay for it? Okay.

Jack Bobo:

Right. It was unique. It was exclusive. And, you know, we do this all the time with, you know, in society, you know, artisanal is just another word for saying something is poorly produced. You know, back in the early 19 hundreds, people wanted glasses that were made and factories because they didn't have bubbles and imperfections. Today we pay people to put imperfections into our products because it's more expensive to do it that way now. And so just understanding that psychology. So it's not just what product comes to market, but it's who brings it to market as well.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Yeah. I think that's really true. I've heard you talk about sustainability. I wanted to touch on that a little bit and how that just the whole area of sustainability is choices and consequences. So it's not good and bad it's choices and consequences and being aware of what those are. Can you talk a little bit more about that and what consumers think and how we should kind of think about it in terms of policy and how agriculture works?

Jack Bobo:

Sure. I mean, too often when I hear people talking about sustainability that they want to know, well, how do we define sustainability? And that implies that there is a sustainable agriculture out there that, you know, if we could define it, then we could describe it. But sustainability is not a destination; it's a journey. So we will never get to sustainable agriculture because agriculture today is wildly more sustainable than agriculture was 30 years ago. And it's wildly more sustainable. It will be wildly more sustainable 30 years from now than it is today. And so, you know, we shouldn't talk about it in those terms as if somebody is achieving it. And we need to change part of the conversation from telling farmers what they should do. And instead talking to them about what they could do, because nobody likes to be told what to do.

Jack Bobo:

And it's also suggesting to them that they're doing something wrong and yet, they're so much wildly more productive and sustainable than they were 20 or 30 years ago. So you're not giving them any credit for where they've gotten to. You're just blaming them for where they're going to going to be. And so how we talk about this is really important and, you know, our farmers, the problem to be solved, or the solution to the problem.

Jack Bobo:

And so we get into some of this problem with sustainability, because really consumers think of sustainability in terms of what I would call local sustainability, that if we can reduce the amount of fertilizer or insecticide and pesticide water and all of those inputs, then we have less of a local impact. And that's what they think sustainable looks like, you know, using fewer resources to produce food. But for many organizations, large multinational, agribusinesses, they think in terms of sustainable intensification. The more food I can squeeze out of a piece of land, the better it is because we don't have to cut down forest in Brazil and Indonesia and other places to do it.

Jack Bobo:

But, you know, the reality is that when you intensively farm, there will generally be more impact locally. So global sustainability, which is what I'm describing here, has a higher local impact, but a lower global impact. And local sustainability has a lower local impact, but it has a higher global impact. And the U.S. And the EU are sort of moving down these two different paths. You know, the U.S., I was on a webinar this morning with Dr. Chabata Jacobs Choung, the Administrator of the Agricultural Research Service, and she was talking about the importance of sustainable intensification. But that's something that us is focused on. In Europe the farm to fork strategy is very much about, you know, they want to be twenty-five percent of land to be organic. By 2030 they want to cut in half fertilizer use, cut by 20% pesticides. Well, if they do that, they will produce less food.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

So they will have to import, I mean, like, how does that play out?

Jack Bobo:

Right? So that they would have to import more food. And the country that sends the most food to Europe today is Brazil. In many ways, Europe has exported its environmental footprint to arguably the most bio-diverse country on the planet. You know, it takes a landmass the size of the agricultural land of Germany, to produce the soybeans for Europe. So, I mean, think about it, there's an entire Germany somewhere in the rain forest of Brazil sending soybeans back to Europe so they don't have to produce them themselves. And so it's a choice in a consequence. Europe is protecting the environment in Europe, and that's why forests are expanding in Europe. But it's also why forest are declining in Brazil.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

How do consumers deal with that dichotomy and those choices. I mean, that's too complicated when I'm standing there and deciding what product to buy in the grocery store.

Jack Bobo:

Right? So it's pretty much too difficult in that moment for people to do it. So

instead of trying to make the choice on a product by product basis, I think encouraging companies to have sustainability goals, see, it's hard to know what sustainable is, but it's easy to know if I'm more sustainable tomorrow than I am today or next year. Because if I can cut my water use next year from where I am today, I've done a good job. If I can reduce my energy use. So companies can track whether they're making progress, but it's hard to compare, you know, apples and oranges, as you guys know.

Jack Bobo:

What's sustainable for a farmer in the Northeastern on the Chesapeake, may not be for a farmer in New Mexico. So, you know, reducing water use doesn't matter if I'm on the Chesapeake, because it's all rain fed, but it really matters if I'm in New Mexico. Producing fertilizer doesn't really matter New Mexico because, you know, that's not the limiting factor, but sure does matter if I'm trying to avoid eutrophication of waterways in the Chesapeake. So, you know, you can't even talk about the concept of sustainability and compare those to producers because the challenges they face, what makes them a good farm or, are just not the same measures at all.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Yeah. Very true. Well, I'm going to try to get some free advice from you now. So at the produce marketing association, you know, we really want to have fruits and vegetables be a bigger part of the plate, and we really want to be the real plant-based diet with whole foods. What kinds of things can, you know, maybe not our association, but any association, like what can be done to kind of move this conversation forward around sustainability and healthier diets?

Jack Bobo:

Yeah. So I think that the produce association and its members, and the products they produce are very well positioned, you know, going forward, that while 2019 in some ways was the year of the plant-based burger, you know, because the IPO from beyond. The biggest diet trend was whole foods. And so again, consumers are inconsistent on one hand, ultra processed food is one of the two biggest trends, and whole foods is the other biggest trend. But I think that if you look at dietary guidelines around the world, they are all calling for less ultra processed foods and more whole foods. So I think that you've got that opportunity. When you think about consumers, you know, most consumers know they should be eating four or five servings of fruits and vegetables a day. 90% are not doing that. There's an opportunity there when most people know they're not doing something and they kind of want to do it.

Jack Bobo:

That's where, you know, the point of my book is how do we reshape our food environment to allow people to do the things they really actually want to do? It's not about convincing people to do something that they don't want, and it's

not about forcing, you know, through taxes and policy interventions and other things. But, you know, just one example would be with, you may be familiar with the double bucks program that the snap has, this supplemental nutrition assistance program, where you can go to a farmer's market, you get twice the money for your food. So if you spend \$10 in snap cons, you could buy \$20 of produce at the farmer's market. And that seems like a great way of encouraging people to eat fresh foods. The problem is it also cost twice as much to buy food at the farmer's market. So the consumers actually getting the same volume of food they would have at the grocery store.

Jack Bobo:

But the snap program is actually spending twice as much to get half as much food. But what they could be doing instead is just offering double box when consumers buy fruits and vegetables.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

Anywhere.

Jack Bobo:

So yeah. Because why shouldn't I be rewarded as a consumer if I buy frozen and buy twice as much, you know, for that same money, instead of going to the farmer's market and buying half as much. Now I'm fine if they want to go to the farmer's market, people should be flexible in what they do. And so there's a lot that one could do based on dietary needs that we have, consumer actual desires, convenience. How do we make all of those things interesting to consumers so that they're not sort of looking to avoid them? How do we convey that information in a way that reaches the right people at the right time with the right message?

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

So it sounds like it's a mix of policy, and psychology, and availability, and products, and all these complicated things. But do you think we're headed in a better direction in some of the things that you've seen over writing a book and some of the, you know, companies like Google and the different companies that of your clients that are really thinking about this, are you optimistic?

Jack Bobo:

So I am optimistic that more and more behavioral approaches are going to be applied. I'm convinced that that's going to be the case. We've got to figure out ways of scaling these interventions. We need to find ways of making it easier for communities to get the information they need in order to help consumers make the choices they want. But in terms of innovation, you know, I'm very optimistic. I have no doubt that science and technology can help us solve the problems that we have. The question is, will we be allowed to use those tools, you know, in sort of a regulatory pessimist and a science optimist.

Jack Bobo:

And, you know, we need to be able to communicate it in a way that consumers get onboard with it because the science tells us what we can do, but it's the consumer who tells us what we should do. And if the consumer doesn't understand that one choice is not going to get them where they need to be, then maybe they can begin to think a little bit more deeply. It's like, because they're choosing local sustainability because they want to help the planet. And if they can appreciate that nuance a little more, and if they trusted the company were trying to be better, than they might give them the flexibility to achieve that sustainability goal in the way they think is best.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

This fascinating interview with Jack wraps up the season of PMA takes on tech. A special shout out to the Crop Track team and Jennifer Goldstein from Ag Tech PR for sponsorship and helping with this season in many ways. Next season will start up in October, November focused on controlled environment ag. See you then.

Vonnie Estas, PMA:

That's it for this episode of PMA takes on tech. Thanks for allowing us to serve as your guide to the new world of produce and technology. Be sure to check out all our episodes at pma.com and wherever you get your podcasts. Please subscribe and I would love to get any comments or suggestions of what you might want me to take on. For now, stay safe, eat your fruits and vegetables, and we will see you next time.