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Sweeney: Industry's future depends on embrace of change, technology

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Restaurants are standing at the brink of truly defining the

21st Century for foodservice, National Restaurant Association president and CEO Dawn Sweeney said during a special presentation during NRA Show 2014.

In a session titled “The Future of the American Dream,” Sweeney talked with Bernie Marcus, the legendary co-founder of [Home Depot](#); Eric Lefkofsky, CEO of online [couponing](#) site Groupon; and Jennifer Wesley, head of industry for restaurants at Google, about the future of restaurants.

Comparing the restaurant industry in 2014 to 1919, when the National Restaurant Association got its start, Sweeney noted that there were about 43,000 restaurants in America 95 years ago, or about one eating location for every 243 Americans.

Today, she said, there are 980,000 restaurants, roughly one eating place for every 32 people. The 2,000 percent increase in the number of

restaurants, compared to a 200 percent increase in the U.S. population, makes it a different world for restaurateurs, Sweeney said. Today's norm is not only a wide range of choices, but a world where consumers are actively educating themselves about their choices.

"In today's world, our customers have dozens of favorite restaurants -- not just one stand-by -- and they are actively looking to try places they haven't even heard of," Sweeney noted. "It's a world where the flow of information from consumer to consumer is so fast we are scrambling to keep up. Word of mouth is a lot faster than it used to be."

Restaurants are dealing with a barrage of instant information -- and sometimes instant misinformation. Legislative and regulatory red tape are increasingly common. "The government keeps its hand in -- often more than it should," she said. "We are drowning in regulations and new legislation."

Marcus agreed that the regulatory landscape for businesses is a battlefield. "Between the SEC, the FDA, the NLRB, you name it...they're just not helpful." He urged increased political activism to get the word out about what it takes to create jobs.

Groupon's Lefkofsky said restaurants need to embrace change. The mobile revolution "dwarfs anything that's come before ... You can't avoid it because too many consumers are going to be making pivotal decisions in real time on the fly. They'll either come into your restaurant or go to the restaurant next door based on what they see and how they interact with the information they get on that [phone](#)."

"Consumer expectations are completely different. They want instant gratification, infinite choice, customization and personalization," said Google's Wesley. "There's almost a tipping point happening. We need to think differently. Today I challenge you to take a 'moon shot' -- to know what your next big challenge is ... because things are changing. "

Pictured right, from left: Groupon CEO Eric Lefkofsky with the NRA's Dawn Sweeney