

Swell AI Transcript: EIT Ben Ebbrell Communities.mp3

Matt Eastland:

Welcome to the Food Fight podcast from EIT Food, exploring the greatest challenges facing the food system and the innovations and entrepreneurs looking to solve them. I'm your host Matt Eastland. A few weeks ago, for our 2024 Trends episodes, we had Ben Eberle on the show, who is a chef, author and co-founder of the wildly popular YouTube channel and online community Sorted Food. Back then we chatted with Ben about reducing food waste in the kitchen, how to create and enjoy cooking restaurant-grade meals at home, also returning to tried and tested traditional styles of cooking. It was a really thought-provoking episode and I'd highly recommend you take a listen. That was episode 123. However, there's one aspect of Ben's work that we didn't touch on because we wanted to go deeper in a separate episode, and that's the importance of online food communities like that of Sorted Food, and the valuable role that data and insights from these communities can play in improving the food that we eat today. So, what if we used social media, for example, as an authentic source of consumer and product studies? What if AI software could be used to harvest all of the insights to create better food products? And ultimately, can then we, the consumer, have greater control over the food that's on our plates? Today's show is all about harnessing the power of online communities to make our food better. So let's get into it. Welcome back to The Food Fight, Ben. Hi, great to be back. Lovely to have you. So, Ben, I know for those people who've listened to the Trends episode, they'll know a bit about you already. But for those of you who haven't yet, can you give us a very brief refresher on Sorted Foods, what you do, who you are?

Ben Ebbrell:

Yeah, absolutely. So it's a lifelong friendship and we've known each other since we were at school together. But fast forward 25 years, I think it is, we run this amazing kind of cooking channel, cooking platform that basically has a huge ongoing dynamic dialogue with foodies all around the world. And honestly, our only point is to try and make food a bit more accessible, a bit more fun, to bring people together in that community and ultimately just to try and challenge, I guess, some of the food systems that already exist and think about how can we make it better, but not for the sake of making better, for the sake of this community and this movement that actually we probably can do better together.

Matt Eastland:

Amazing. Thank you for that. And you've had incredible growth. So, I mean, you've now got 2.7 million subscribers on YouTube, hundreds of thousands on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. So how did Sorted Food get so big? And I guess as your community has grown, what is it about that community that makes it so strong?

Ben Ebbrell:

I think it's the loyalty and the authenticity because yes, it has become huge, mega. I mean, it's scary sometimes to think about the number of people that watch and consume the content and then comment. If you actually put those number of people in a room, it's phenomenal. But It's been an awful long journey getting there. Like we've been doing this on YouTube coming up 14 years. Not once have we gone viral, but we have steadily grown and built this amazing community along that route. And I think what we've always done as a group of friends is put those friendship values at the heart of everything we do. So a good analogy we always say is that, you know, if everyone listening was thinking, let's go to the pub on Friday evening and I can have three or four people around that pub table with me, who would they be? Every listener would have different people, but they would all have the same values. of probably people that make you laugh or pick you up or support you. They're loyal. They're not going to let you down. They're honest. They're transparent. They're not going to sit there and try and sell you something. All of those values we put into our content. And therefore, we hope that people join us on this amazing journey, 14 years, 2,000 plus videos, an incredible learning curve for all of us, ourselves included, But people feel a part of it, and they feel like they are the fifth person at that pub table. And that's really important. So it's not about an overnight viral success. That can work. It has worked for others. But I don't think that's the way forward, because actually the authenticity and legitimacy of building this community the right way, with the right values in place, is far stronger.

Matt Eastland:

I love it. So it is of course an online food community but actually the kind of the silver thread through all of it is what, friendship?

Ben Ebbrell:

Yeah and food and drink actually is just the catalyst to the conversations and the dialogues we're having and the excuse to meet new people, new experts, to travel and to challenge what we're already doing at home. I mean we try and look at sort of home cooks mostly and try and translate what goes on in chefs brains and take it to a the level of a home cook because that's where it's most useful. But so much of that is about inspiration and exploration and travel and global curiosity as well. So it's a bit of everything.

Matt Eastland:

OK, great. And talk me through then, you know, because you must get so many stats about your demographics of your audience. So what kind of people are following you? And is your secret source then that kind of friendship element that we spoke about? So let's start with the demographics. What kind of people make up your community?

Ben Ebbrell:

Well, if we look at, and you mentioned at the start across sort of all the social platforms, but YouTube is really where we have the long form conversations, you know, 18, 20 minute videos that have time to deep dive on a subject matter or a challenge and add an element of jeopardy into that sort of 20 minute narrative. So on YouTube, it's an English speaking primarily community, UK, US, Canada, Australia, and it is. our demographic. We started this 14 years ago as students and our audience were very much students, young professionals, but as we've grown up, so have our audience. So what we now have is an audience that stretch, again, every age, but the real big chunk of it is kind of like 10 years younger than us and 10 years older than us, and we're mid-30s. So we've got a really nice spectrum of people now that are families, young families, young professionals, and they are all over the world, but primarily English speaking, and they have some interest in food, probably goes without saying, but I wouldn't say they're like huge foodies necessarily. And one of the best compliments we ever had was kind of the top gear of food. That is a compliment. The best compliment ever. It actually came from the VP at YouTube. And the logic there was you don't have to be a petrolhead to enjoy Top Gear. You watch it for the friendship and the camaraderie and the adventure, and you'll learn something about cars. And that's what we've always done with food. You don't have to be a foodie. You don't have to be a chef. You don't have to be obsessive about the latest new restaurant opening. You just have to come and be part of this friendship, and you'll be on the journey that means you would automatically learn about food.

Matt Eastland:

It sounds like quite a simple thing but I imagine actually in reality that's quite complex to have this community which is built on these friendship values and to have people engage with you in that way. Do you know if there's any people in the community who have literally been with you right from the start? You know, literally grown up with you all?

Ben Ebbrell:

Yeah, absolutely. And we have occasionally done physical meetups, or we've done events or supper clubs, or we did a live theatre show a couple of years ago, which was amazing. And when you get some of these people in the room, you get a chance to meet them, or you bump into them, often at food markets and food festivals and things, they'll come up and they'll say, I've been watching you since. And it's normally the name of a recipe. I've been watching you since your strawberry shortcake recipe. And then that pinpoints, that was the first experience they had of us and our channel. But we've had some phenomenal relationships form with those communities of people who, I mean, years ago, we were invited to somebody's wedding. Really? Of our community. And that was as a base. And we took along wedding favours and we turned it, we did it as a video. But they had been watching us in a long distance relationship where they would

both cook the same recipe and then eat it together in a long distance relationship. But it was a sorted recipe. Those kind of connections, that's what you mean about the pub table. It is a friendship more than it is a statistic of consumers or customers or audience. It is a community of people, a movement of people and it's incredibly special.

Matt Eastland:

That is incredible to know that you've actually had that kind of impact and power over someone that they feel they know you this much they want to have you at their wedding. And you obviously went and you all go and

Ben Ebbrell:

Yeah, we did. It was an Indian wedding in Wembley and we took along a thousand burfi as Indian favours. It's a video on the channel. It's still one that if you ever have a low moment, you go and watch that and you think this really does matter. This isn't just content that goes into an ether and is gone. This is really affecting people. And last year, we had a couple from the US who asked if they could come and propose, or she asked if she could propose to her boyfriend in our studio. And they wanted to unlock that opportunity, because again, sorted was such a key part of their relationship. They wanted us as part of what is arguably the most special, intimate, personal moment. And they felt that connected. to us. They trusted us to do that. And again, that was on the channel last year. And it's, it's so moving.

Matt Eastland:

That must make you feel so proud. You're like really proud of your community and what you're trying to do.

Ben Ebbrell:

And yes, there was cake involved. But honestly, that entire episode was about friendship. You know, the food and drink was so secondary to that.

Matt Eastland:

Amazing. Okay, I need to watch all of these things. So obviously, loads of power here in the community and what you're speaking about, you know, people really wanting to interact with you, but I imagine with growing a big community comes big challenges as well. So maybe could you sort of tell our audience some of the challenges that you face from growing the community? You know, for example, how do you keep catering to more and more people's interest and taste while also staying kind of true to your mission about, you know, sort of friendship?

Ben Ebbrell:

Yeah, I think the challenges also come with an element of responsibility. And it did come to a stage where we had such a large audience that there is a huge responsibility to make sure you're publishing the right stuff, the correct stuff. There isn't misinformation that, you know, we do due diligence on everything. But we also know that we have the trust two ways. Our audience trusts us to do that. But we also trust our audience to let us know if we missed the mark. And occasionally, and again, in 14 years, I'm thinking, you know, a couple of times where we've missed something and the audience have come up in the comments within, you know, 10, 20 minutes of launching a video. And they said, do you realize the backstory to the company that you've just spoken about and promoted because it was part of some sort of pyramid scheme in the US? We didn't know. We thought it was part of an interesting food trend to talk about, but we had completely missed the the negative press around it. And, you know, they were just letting us know. They weren't having a go. They weren't saying, you guys are the devil. They were just like, do you realize we were able to very reactively take it down, cut that down, put it back up. And then everyone can celebrate that because actually we were taught something by our community. So the trust has to be both ways. And I think that's where the responsibility comes in. But in terms of challenges, Trying to cater to everyone is difficult, because different people have different viewpoints on food. But that's, for us, the real strength. That's where it becomes healthy. And you don't have this polarized community of, and there are, don't get me wrong, there are some amazing food creators out there who do one thing and one thing really well. And their audience know them for that. For us, we do a bit of everything. And we're open to exploring everything. And we're not necessarily, all four of us, going to agree with everything. Again, this is the beauty. We've got four of us on screen. We don't all have to have the same opinion.

Matt Eastland:

Which I imagine probably helps also with your community to foster that trust, because as you say, you're not pushing one particular angle, you're actually having a debate and a discussion, which I suppose probably reflects some of the thoughts your community are having as well.

Ben Ebbrell:

Yeah, but with experts, and it's the option to bring other people in, and it's people we bring in with expertise who feel so comfortable in our studio as if they're around a pub table with us. And I think that's when we look at who we're going to collab with. It's not just this person because they are top of their game or have got loads of exposure at the moment and really positive PR. Are they going to fit into our world? Are they going to bring something? And are our audience going to like them? And I think if you've ever had a dinner party, like who do we invite round? You plan who you're going to invite and make sure they're all going to get on together.

And we're constantly curating that. It's like, what happens if we bring this person on to the show? Yes, they're going to bring their expertise and their added value, but are they going to fit into the ethos that is this community of fun-loving, accepting, sometimes challenging, like we will challenge each other, but in a very sort of constructive way.

Matt Eastland:

Yeah, okay. So I can see that that could be You're basically constantly planning like the best wedding ever, trying to make sure that everyone's kind of sat at the right table and catered for in some way. OK, love it. I was looking at your Instagram bio and you say you're inspiring people through food and being inspired every day in return. And I'd like to just focus on that second part. So how does your audience inspire you? You know, that kind of feedback that you get, you know, what's inspirational about that?

Ben Ebbrell:

I think it is those personal stories. And it is phenomenal. And we get countless messages, comments under this video in a public forum. We get incredible messages sent to us in DMs or by email through the site. We get literally letters, handwritten letters sent to us through a PO box. And all of these are so, so personal. And some of them go really, really deep. They open up hugely about challenges that people have had, perhaps with a relationship with food and, you know, eating disorders and how just a love of food can sometimes help with that. And there was a great example a couple of years ago where a girl wrote in and she said, you know, I've been watching for years when I was really struggling with food, just watching the fun and enjoyment you guys got out of it on screen was enough for me to realize that food wasn't the enemy. Right. And that helped in a recovery. And, you know, in that situation, I don't know if you ever truly recover. You're always on a path to better recovery. And she just said, if I could ever come and see you or the studio, that would be amazing. Her name was Gaia. And we were like, yeah, absolutely. Like your story and opening up and sharing this with us is amazing. That's what inspires us is knowing that it is making more of a difference than just X number of views on a video. I was like, yeah, come on down. You know, she said, oh, can I bring my mum with you? I was like, yeah, honestly, any guardian or whoever you want to bring, do so. It turned out her mum was day member Thompson. Oh, wow, really? And it turns out both of them only at that point do we realise, after we'd said come on down, she said, you know, we're Ambassadors for the Mind charity and it's all about, you know, food and mental health and the relationship between. And we were able to do an amazing video with Emma Thompson and Gaia in the studio that was able to also shine a light on the great positivities around charities like MIND. And it's that relationship with food that is so important and that's what inspires us. It's not just the, you know, we reach six million unique people in 90 days, so what? It's the individual personal stories of all of those six million that inspires us to keep going.

Matt Eastland:

Amazing. And I'm I'm really impressed, actually, you know, by what you've managed to achieve. And I say I love all this. You know, the fact that your audience trusts you so much and that you're so open to them being like reaching out to you, coming on the show. I can't believe actually people still write letters.

Ben Ebbrell:

The time it takes and the effort, it's just phenomenal. Yeah.

Matt Eastland:

Okay. Well, huge congrats. And you spoke about, you know, the interactions that you get, DMs. I'm just trying to break it down for audience in terms of how you interact with, so you get DMs, letters. Is it always one, you know, sort of one way from back from the audience or do you kind of, you reach out to them, you have, you know, you get the audience together at certain moments as well?

Ben Ebbrell:

Yeah, we do physical events and we do live stream events. Christmas 2022, we did a live theatre show. So Shoreditch Town Hall in London, we had 600 people a night, three performances, but we were also six cameras live cutting it and live streaming it to people around the world who'd bought tickets to watch it virtually. But we were also putting on a show in a theatre for a room full of people. It was two acts, there was an interval, and what we realised very quickly was in the interval we could not drag people back in from the foyer, back in to see the second half, because suddenly this was the first time this community had all met each other. And it was like a comment section underneath a video. They were all meeting. When you go to the theatre, you go to the bar, you get yourself a glass of wine, you stand in the corner and you chat. But everyone was talking to everyone else. And all they wanted to do was just be a physical community rather than a digital community. And eventually we're like, there are thousands of people waiting for this show to start. We need to get you back in. That was, for us, a bit of a wake-up call, is actually this audience and community, real people with real situations, and they want to have real conversations.

Matt Eastland:

And I suppose they feel not only do they know you, they also feel they probably know each other as well, which is probably why it's easy to spark up a conversation. Absolutely. Incredible. When we were talking ahead of the episode, you know, we're sort of getting into the meat of it now, so you said that the comments, engagements and opinions shared with content creators on social platforms is authentic from a hard-to-reach target market, which you said is far more valuable than the falsehoods provided by a panel of people paid

to partake in surveys and focus groups. Sorry, long quote, but I think it's important. Can you just explain what you mean by this and why you think those kind of direct engagements are so valuable?

Ben Ebbrell:

Yeah, I think you kind of have to look at what consumer research is that already exists. And I am now talking about new product development and the food industry and the brand awareness or topic awareness from NGOs and topics and charities and what do people already think about a certain thing. And there are lots of systems in place, whether it's questionnaires or focus groups or whatever. But if you've ever done a questionnaire, you know, people are often rewarded for doing it. And it's tiny amounts of money to go through a hundred questions. And you don't really give much thought to your answers. You just want to get through it and get it done and get your little reward. Or if you're in a focus group, are the people sat around a table in the focus group truly representative of the people you're trying to reach? I mean, sort of busy professional people, young professionals, people who run a focus group, perhaps have a bit more time on their hands to be able to do those, which is great and their opinions matter, but they're not necessarily representative of the reality. And we've always just thought, What we have, back to the trust and authenticity, is that conversation happening all day, every day. And back to the pub table, if your GP asks you how many units of alcohol you've drunk this week, you think very carefully before giving the answer. If your friends ask you around a pub table on a Friday night, you'd probably chuckle, you'd probably tell them the truth, and that is much more believable. It's that pub table conversation that happens under every one of our videos or in the live chat under any live broadcast that we have. And that's the really interesting space. When you ask people for their opinions, they want to talk and communicate. You don't have to pay them for their opinions. You don't have to hope they're going to give you the right opinion and we'll worry about it. You just listen. And actually, you know, now with the addition of sort of AI software, we're able to trawl through what is thousands and thousands of comments. You must be sat on a goldmine of information. So much information that a human would struggle to make sense of it. But then you can consolidate it. Actually, this is legitimately what this audience of this demographic in these countries think about this subject matter in food. And it's not therefore historic. Brand or company can buy an Intel report. And great, because that's legitimate research that's been done thoroughly and properly with excellent methodology. But by its very nature, it's old news. It is data. It's historic. Whereas this conversation is happening now live and we can ask them what they want rather than what they did. And therefore, we can begin to think about what what the truth of the matter is when it comes to food topics.

Matt Eastland:

And on that, Ben, so What is it that you're finding that people say at the moment really want? In terms of the food that they want to

eat and how they want to eat it, what are you learning from all this, from these data, this feedback and these opinions you're getting? And last time we spoke about enjoyment. And I'm really interested, for example, to understand from you, what is it that makes food enjoyable for people? Is it that it's easy? Is it that it's really stripped back? I'd love to know. What are you learning?

Ben Ebbrell:

I think it's exactly that. You have to take away perhaps the stereotypical image of enjoyment or joy. If you think joy, you think party, you think confetti cannons, you think great music, people bouncing around, smiles on their face, but actually there's real joy to be had about trying something for the first time. So exploring a curiosity around food or an ingredient or a cuisine you didn't previously know. There's great joy in just having an amazing meal and then looking over your shoulder and going, and the kitchen is clean because I only used one pan, one knife and one chopping board and I cleaned up as I went. There's real joy in that. And the joy can be in the simple things or knowing that you've got to the end of the week and you open the fridge and it's bare because you've used everything and you're not going to throw some stuff out which has cost you money. So the joy comes in lots of different forms and we try to tackle it all. We try to make things really practical and useful and cost effective but still inspiring because there's great joy to be had from sharing food experiences.

Matt Eastland:

Now thank you for unpacking that for me because when people say enjoyment that can mean so many different things to so many different people the fact you've managed to kind of unpack it and yet still make it practical for everyone in you know for a whole community is really impressive and so how have these insights steered your progression as you know from a YouTube channel so how have you, for example, over the decade plus, how have you changed and evolved based on what your community has been telling you? And have you pivoted in any weird ways that you weren't expecting maybe?

Ben Ebbrell:

I think it's twofold. So one is listening to those engagements, the comments, and we read them and we have an amazing team who, you know, between us, we're reading everything. So we kind of have our finger on the pulse of what they want and what their opinions are and what we've just published and how we can change it and twist it. But we also have excellent data. And that's, you know, if you look at the dashboard behind YouTube and all the analytics, we know where the retention is and where you get to a certain point of video and it starts to drop off, which means it's got boring or the pace has slowed down or it's too static and we need more different camera angles to keep people's attention or we've got all of that data as well. And it is the marriage and the team, our production team, do an amazing job of marrying both those things, which is the data.

with the creative kind of input. And then also sort of that final layer, which is and what do we stand for and what should we do? Because, you know, you could just chase and, you know, maybe 10 years ago, everyone was rainbow cupcakes and you know that it will perform well. But so what? That's not what we stand for. That's not going to help people on a Tuesday night, put nutritious, affordable food in their bellies. But we know that if you did that and we did a rainbow cupcake food fight, That would do really well on YouTube 10 years ago. The data would tell you that. But that's not what we believe in. And we know, actually, because our foodie audience is so connected to what we believe in, the moment we publish it, they would challenge it. Why are you wasting food? Why are you doing a food fight? Why are you throwing all these artificial colourings in it when you could use natural colourings or an alternative version? And we know that when we publish it, they would challenge us, because they believe as strongly in our mission as we do, because they're part of this movement. It's not us and them. Sorted is not four of us. It's not 20 of us working from a studio just down the road. Sorted is a global community of people, and we have to do right by them, right for them, and still make sure it works and adds up.

Matt Eastland:

Yeah, so it's not just chasing data. No. You've got to have that, you know, the principles and the values that you spoke about. So you won't, you know, it doesn't just become a thing about, you know, clickbait. It's actually you have a responsibility to your community to stay true whilst crafting, you know, your shows around it. Yeah. Okay, that's good. I'm just interested over the years, is there anything that's the feedback you've got from your community has really kind of surprised you or you just weren't expecting?

Ben Ebbrell:

I think sometimes you realise that the community. And so often, as is the case in the media world, you're just looking at reach, at views, at engagement, and it's all percentages and numbers, and you forget they're real people behind those. So I think the real sort of aha moments have been when members of our community work for charities or brands or organisations where they sort of say, can you help us with something? And it's kind of flipped it around and you have this kind of suddenly external validation of what the sort of community can do. And I think probably the best example of that last year was with the Earthshot Prize. So His Royal Highness Prince William reached out via the palace and said, We do the Earthshot Prize. We've been doing it for a couple of years. We'd love to work with you guys to wrap it up in a different sort of way. And we, I mean, obviously we said, that's amazing. We'd love to. And that was before we even knew we'd have any of the Prince's time. That was just like, what you're doing is great. We've got finalists or actually winners of last year that are already in the food sphere that we'd love to shine a light on because it's just genius. And I think that's when the external validation, when they come to us and

they trust us, to tell those stories. Suddenly it's not just about us messing around in a studio in East London in our own little bubble, it's that external validation and we can shine a light on it. And then when they said, and actually we think we can get some of the Prince's time, if that was possible, what would you do? It was then up to us to break the mould and we said we want to put him in a burger van. And it was like, hang on, you can't put the... And we said, well, we think that's the best way to tell the story. Do you trust us? And actually, that was so amazing about the whole Earthshot team and the family there, basically. It always has this kind of family values. It's like, oh, let's try it a different way. And the ability to tell those stories in our way on our platform to our community so that they also then celebrate the whole thing. And that was just incredibly special, as you can imagine, and such an honour to work not least with the Earthshot Prize and the winners. But the prince himself is just amazing.

Matt Eastland:

Yeah. And I can imagine that it's because of the values and principles that you have as a community, which has then attracted another community or another organisation who has similar principles to yourselves, which which again goes to show the power of the community. And can I just ask, was the Prince totally up for this? And he thought it was a, he was like, yeah, love this.

Ben Ebbrell:

I mean, it sounds like a cliché, but, you know, very charming and was very much like, if we're going to do this, we're going to do it properly. And, you know, he rolled up his sleeves and he was in the, in the van with us and yeah, absolutely brilliant. And then found all the time to speak to everyone, not just, we invited our community down to that event. So it wasn't, you know, just, just us in the studio and creating content. We said if we're going to have this amazing experience with His Royal Highness, then actually we'd like to share that with the people who've made it possible. And therefore we invited 30 odd members of our community down. They had no idea what they were coming for. All we said was you're coming for a secret brunch this day and we just needed some information for security checks mostly. But they didn't know that the excitement for them was they were coming to a sorted brunch and that was already they were excited. They had no idea who was going to turn around in that burger truck and again it was the ability to give those 30 people an experience because everything we do is like a tripod it has three legs it's sorted it's whoever we're working with brand charity organization and the third leg and the whole thing would topple over without it is the community and you make sure there's always something there that we're doing it for them and we're giving back to them

Matt Eastland:

And I was going to say, I think that's a takeaway for me from here,

is that what you've done really well with Sorted Food is that you are constantly serving your community in whichever way you can. I mean, how incredible to be, you know, to be invited to something like that. So I think that's really honourable. And yeah, it's something that hopefully people who are listening can take away from that, keep serving the community in different ways. And who knows, maybe you'll get someone from the royal family on your show. Going back to just talking about like insights, you know, insights are great, but it's about then what happens with them. And I'm always interested in how that translates back into the food industry. So how do you think major players in the food system, like farmers, manufacturers, retailers, could harness these insights themselves to get better food on our plates? So you're talking more about like that direct interaction. It's authentic. sometimes that authenticity gets washed out in the way that these insights are collected. So how can major players make better use of this sort of interactions communities?

Ben Ebbrell:

Some of it is perhaps a marketing exercise. A lot of the farmers and products are already doing the great things. They don't know how to communicate that or what kind of language and lexicon this community really relate to. So that can help with just how to package up something that's already brilliant in a way that showcases that better. And sometimes it's understanding it's all well and good that this particular thing, and this is the real challenge, that is hugely regenerative, it's the future, it's way ahead of the curve but it's missing on the fact that it's not convenient or it's not affordable or it's not as tasty as the original and then it doesn't really matter because people aren't going to put it in their trolley next week. So it's kind of knowing what really matters and I think we spoke before about the say-do gap of people saying that they want to be something but actually when they're purchasing food or cooking at home, they resort back to what is familiar, what is safe, what is convenient and what is cost effective. And all of these restraints are very difficult to break as kind of habits. But it is possible. But most of that possibility comes from just talking about it and the dialogue of change. But I think it's more about listening to what that community want and then working out how you reshape that into the products or the processes or the services that

Matt Eastland:

you provide. And we have to talk about AI because we just have to these days, don't we? So loads of data points, loads of insights. You yourselves have a huge community with loads of data insights. But I mean, big players in the food system, small players, they're going to have lots of data points. So how could we then use AI to kind of harvest all that goodness and improve the food that we eat? Do you think that's already possible, already happening?

Ben Ebbrell:

It is already. So we work with a company called Multitude. It's a plugin we put into our YouTube channel when we go live. And it basically monitors in real time all the comments. because sometimes you invite thousands of people to join you for a conversation or dinner or whatever it is that we're doing in a live environment as opposed to an edited video we put on YouTube but like in the moment and the comment section goes by so quick you can barely read it. So what this software does is pulls out the relevant bits, the bits that are being said by multiple different people so that we know which conversations to tackle. What's kind of surfacing? Yeah, exactly that. And where in the world it's coming from. So we can literally say, you know, put in the comment section down below where in the world you're dialing in from. And it populates that onto a Google map. All the pins. Thousands and thousands of pins. And you can see where they are, which you could never do that as you scroll past because we have human bias. We will read certain things and, oh, something will pop out because I went on holiday there last year. So that is more familiar to me. But what this does is just take away that bias and gives you the legitimate, this is what these thousands of people are all typing right now at the same time. And that is an amazing tool for us to be able to give a better broadcast, because suddenly we can talk directly to these people, and we know that what we're talking about is what they're asking for. But at the same time, once we've finished the broadcast, we can wrap that up and say, you know what, they're really interested in understanding X, Y, and Z. We'll make some videos on that next month. And that can shape the content. We know they want it. They've asked for it. It's just our job, almost as puppets, to have our strings pulled, and off we go to create it.

Matt Eastland:

But that's the power of the community then. The community that you've created has allowed you to be able to do these sorts of things. And I imagine for some bigger companies out there, that's quite difficult to have that trusted space.

Ben Ebbrell:

Hugely costly, because to do that, you'd need to get X number of people in a room. And that might max out at 20 or 30 in a focus group, where we've got thousands of people joining this conversation at the same time. And that is hugely powerful.

Matt Eastland:

So let's then think about kind of off that, how you create amazing communities like you've done. So for anyone who wants to maybe start or grow an online community, I'd like to get your kind of tips, tricks, guidance, advice. So imagine I'm just starting out. I want to create a food or another online community which has this kind of nice trusted space. Where do you start?

Ben Ebbrell:

I mean, it's not going to be quick if you do it properly. And I think that's the challenge. You can buy eyeballs, you know, you can do adverts and you can buy eyeballs, but people don't care. And I think it's that jump between advertorial and editorial. So we always said, and when we started 14 years ago, we started our channel because we had a cookbook. We did a self-published cookbook and then we printed a whole bunch and then we put them in a shed and went, how do you sell these before they get damp? And we started to create YouTube videos. But rather than create adverts to sell a book, we just created editorial. So we made a couple of the recipes in the book in video form. We made them in, well, I say entertaining. You look back, they're terrible. But in our minds, we were just friends hanging out, cooking together, the ethos of Sorted. And then at the end of it, having given away a huge amount of value, we've given away the recipe, we said, if you like it, there's a few others over here. But it has to be editorial first, not upfront. Buy this book, it's got 60 recipes in it, and it's going to do X, Y, and Z. Forget advertorial. Do editorial. And if you do that, you'll naturally grow an audience. And then all the other things we've mentioned about the friendship values, the trust, try and keep it authentic and real. Do your due diligence. All of those things matter. personalities at the front of it help, because actually I think that's where a lot of brands struggle when you think about all of our sort of grosses and stuff. There's no face to the brand. It's a name, it's a brand logo, and they might have faces for their adverts, but those adverts are just adverts. The only time they break the mould, and everyone talks about it, is Christmas. Christmas ads are editorial. They're not trying to sell you something, they're telling a story. And that's the only time in the year, with grosses in mind, that people actually talk about adverts.

Matt Eastland:

Because it's story first. Yeah, and it's weird, isn't it? Because I guess it's, I mean, I don't know, but I suppose it's probably because the investment required to tell those stories is so vast that you just can't do this unless it's like a, well, if like a big company like John Lewis in the UK, for example, that you have to do it in this period of time.

Ben Ebbrell:

Because that's when everyone is already tuned to... buy and therefore your ROI happens.

Matt Eastland:

Your community is sort of already there waiting.

Ben Ebbrell:

I think maybe that's the point for Sorted. It's not about ROI. You know, we talk about profit and we need to be sustainable as a

business to be able to keep creating, but we measure profit in so many different ways and that's how many people we've helped and how many thousands of meals have been cooked with our psychic app because that relates to Kilos and kilos of food waste that never materialized because they were eaten instead. That is profit. It's not a monetary thing. It's a value thing. And how many people have we helped? And it might be tens or dozens rather than millions. Have we helped through really difficult relationships with food because they've seen a joy of it? That's profit. And I think it's just, for us, we're not looking to make squillions of dollars. All we're looking to is make a community that can slowly shift behavior so we can all get out of bed in the morning and feel like we've done the right thing. in a responsible way. And yes, we need to make money to enable a team to do that, but it's not about making money.

Matt Eastland:

Yeah. And what I'm taking from this is you've got to go into it with a genuine, authentic purpose, and you've got to be there to serve your community. 100%. Yeah. And does that change as your community grows? So, okay, so starting off, you've got an editorial, serve, show the value, preferably have a face on it, great. If you want to grow your community and serve them better going forwards, does that need to evolve?

Ben Ebbrell:

Yeah, but again, for fear of repetition, it is that it evolves through creativity. In the food world especially, it's constantly dynamic and changing, but also using the data. And you'll see where the little pockets of what you should be doing are. There's lots of AI software already built into the likes of the YouTube dashboard that say, these topics are really popular on YouTube at the moment, have you considered doing this? Or your audience are watching this, but they're also, there's a huge, in the Venn diagram of overlap, huge of your audience are watching this kind of content. Have you considered a collaboration or have you considered moving into that realm? So you can use the software that's reading the data like that, but you you will expand and grow, but you kind of almost can't force it. Because it, I mean, 14 years, 2,000 videos, that's what it's taken. 2,000 videos. More than. I mean, that's the one public on our channel, and we've created countless for other channels and all sorts. But yeah, it's a lot, a lot, a lot of hours of content.

Matt Eastland:

Yeah. I think this is what I hear time and time again, you know, you just can't do these things quickly, not if you want that kind of trusted community alongside you. For you then, just looking forward into this year then, so what is it the audience have been telling you that you're now thinking, okay this year we're going to do these things? Is there anything you can tell us about kind of what's coming up?

Ben Ebbrell:

Well interesting, I think we just sort of realising that more and more people care about where their food comes from. So understanding not just the provenance but also the impact that that food has had or the things that perhaps smaller businesses are doing that they don't necessarily have the marketing budgets to shout about, where it'll be the same top 10 huge brands that have the big marketing budgets to shout about the wonderful things they're doing. Often it is the smaller businesses that get a bit overlooked and they've been doing good things right forever anyway. So I think our duty and what we know that people love is when we shine a light on those small businesses doing great things and constantly talk about, not because we say, this is great, go and buy it. We just say, this is a conversation that's interesting. And this is a great example we can use to talk about the conversation because we do video content. So we can't just sit there and talk. We have to have something physical to showcase what we're talking about. And that could be packaging, it could be seaweed, it could be nutritional, it could be gut health, it could be meat alternatives, it could be anything. But then we need a good example and a case study to wrap it around. So our audience love it when we do things like that. And I think we'll be doing more of it.

Matt Eastland:

OK, brilliant. So there's another tip for people out there. You know, you've got to have something to kind of craft your show and your content around to make it kind of more real and tangible. And then broader than that, maybe we touched on this last time, but what are your, what are your kind of your hopes for the Sorted community? Where do you want it to go? Do you, you know, I know that you're looking to kind of in some way change the world, but how far can your community go?

Ben Ebbrell:

I think around food waste, which is a big one we spoke about before, I think it's, you know, sometimes in this dark and gloomy world and all the food news, you can feel a little bit powerless on your own, but incredibly powerful as a community. And I think it's when you add up the collective group, when we know that that recipe pack has been cooked X thousands of times this week, and none of that food went to waste because the recipes were curated to use up all the fresh food waste so that it works, then we know that's two skip loads of fresh food and veg that didn't go to waste this week. Well, how do we double that? How do we find other amazing brands with other amazing audiences, customer bases, who would also benefit from that? Because it's as a product, a sidekick, it's something that pretty much sells itself. It's a no brainer once you've tried it because you realise it's delicious. You get joy out of it because it's easy and there's no washing up at the end of it. And it's quick. But at the same time, you feel good about the fact that you didn't contribute to the colossal waste that we have in this

country.

Matt Eastland:

Yeah, incredible. And I love that what you just said. Was it powerless as an individual, powerful as a community? Yeah. Brilliant. I mean, that that should apply to all communities, not just food communities. And what a lovely way to kind of wrap this up. So, Ben, Again, thank you for your time. Always a joy to talk to you. For those listeners who didn't listen to The Trend Show just yet, but want to know more about what you're doing, where can people find out more about you and about Sorted Food?

Ben Ebbrell:

Sorted Food, and you can find us everywhere, so on YouTube and on website, so S-O-R-T-E-D Food. Amazing. Thanks, Ben. Great to have you. Thanks. Pleasure as always.

Matt Eastland:

So that was Ben Eberle on the show once again. What an amazing guest, just the perfect person to have on the show when we're talking about the power of community. And I've learned a lot from Ben over the last two times that we've had him on the show about that. So some takeaways for me from the show. So Ben spoke a lot about trust, you know, you can only really have a powerful community who are willing to give you feedback and help you if you can build trust with them. And he said, you know, very specifically, that takes time. This is not something that you're going to be able to do overnight. Related to that as well, Ben spoke about serving the community. So, you know, this is a two way flow. And Ben shared some amazing stories about how actually he has given back to the community via, for example, a couple coming on the show and, you know, one of them proposing to the other. They've even been invited to a wedding. Such has been the power of that community and how close members of the community feel to Ben and his team on Sorted Foods. And I think one of the other defining themes, which I think is all related actually also to trust is about friendship. So Ben has done an amazing job with his team of having a show, which it is a food show, but it's actually a show about friendship. And I think that is the friendship is what really draws his community to him. So if you can create a community which is based on that principle of friendship, then I think that will set you up. very well. And then the final thing that has really resonated with me was something that Ben said, I don't know if it's something he says a lot or it was just an off-the-cuff, but powerless as an individual but powerful as a community. And I think that really shows exactly how, you know, valuable fostering an online community or any community really is. Thank you very much to Ben for coming back on the show and sharing all that with us. And I really hope that you, our lovely listeners, take some great insights away from the show with Ben. Thank you all for listening in. So this has been the Food Fight podcast. As ever, if you'd like to find out more, head over to the EIT Food website at

eitfood.eu. Also, please join the conversation via the hashtag EIT Food Fight on our X channel at EIT Food. And if you haven't already, please hit the follow button so you never miss an episode. That's it for now, everyone. See you next time.