



Prime Cuts: Building sales, customers and public trust

FCC Knowledge Podcast

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Interviewer: Marty Seymour (MS)

Guest: Emma Butler (EB)

MS: From FCC, it's the FCC Knowledge Podcast, a show that features real Canadian producers, real stories, and real good conversation about the business of farming. I'm your host, Marty Seymour.

EB: Our retail aspect has given us the opportunity to take those heavier animals, and now we're able to get the most value out of those animals that we can. A little bit more work, but the result is so much more fulfilling for everybody. And then we're also really playing into that narrative of connecting people with their food. That's sort of the whole point of what we do.

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MS: Today on the show we've got this really cool story about a farm turned storefront located in Southwestern Ontario. Emma Butler joins us from J&E Meats, which is what you might call a farm to table business. You know the kind where you grow stuff on your farm and retail straight to consumers? And she's got some really cool, innovative ideas on how they drive sales. J&E Meats was founded in the fall in 2018. Since that time, the business has grown at a rapid pace, even during the pandemic. I don't want to give away too much, but Emma's going to share a little bit about her story and how they approached the marketplace to gain public trust, while navigating some of these difficult times. I believe you're going to find Emma's story super inspiring and relatable. Don't go anywhere.

Welcome to the show, Emma Butler.

EB: Hello.

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MS: Emma, I open all these podcasts with a couple of the common questions. Why don't you tell our listeners where you are in Canada?

EB: I am in Ontario. And I am sandwiched in Southwestern Ontario which is right between the two Great Lakes. So, we are located right between Lake Huron and Lake Erie, right down in the southern point of Canada almost. They always refer to it as the banana belt because it's a very mild climate, very warm temperatures. And our winters, like I said, we had that previous conversation, we don't have a lick of snow outside right now.

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MS: What's your town? Put your town on the map.

EB: We are in Croton, Ontario, which if you don't know where that is, don't worry, nobody else does either.

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MS: Croton, Ontario is located in Chatham-Kent County. And like every small part of Ontario, they all have a cool story that put them on the map. Emma told me that they're the number one producer of tomatoes, carrots, pumpkins, cucumbers, and seed corn, in all of Canada.

Okay, so if you've got all those high-value crops, you must have high value land. What does land trade for down that way?

EB: It's really funny. We are located, kind of sandwiched ... because of the Great Lakes, we're located in a really weird area in terms of soil mix. So, we have a lot of marsh bottom, and then as you go north more into our county, it goes into really loamy sand, and then right into clay bed. There isn't a whole lot of mix in the middle. Right where we are in particular, you can drive on the same road straight and flat. And at one end of it where that really nice marsh bottom ground is, you're looking at upwards of \$30,000 an acre. And then up in that clay bed with maybe a little bit core tiling, etcetera, maybe a little bit of bush on it, you're looking at \$12,000 to \$15,000 an acre.

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MS: Oh, you can't see my face. My mouth is open. I'm from the prairies where we're a long ways from hitting those land prices. Yeah, that's insane.

EB: I could not believe it either when I was listening to some of your previous podcasts, when they were describing this in their area. I was like, wow, we should go buy some farmland out that way.

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MS: Yeah, I'm expecting as this podcast catches on where there's going to be a big exodus of people from Central Canada out West when they realize for \$3,000 you can buy a lot of

land out here. I've got to hear about farm. Tell the listeners. You're in the cattle business. Why don't you tell us about the farm?

EB: I married into this farm here, but I was born and raised on a farm myself, so I am no stranger to the industry. On our farm, we do have cattle. So, we have a cow-calf operation that's sort of one tier, and then our secondary tier is we do finishers. We have stocker cattle and the majority of our cattle are start-to-finish as well, so birth to beef. And we also, my husband and I, have a sheep flock. We have about 100 ewes that we breed and raise and sell the lamb direct to consumer. And then we also, of course, grow cash crops as well. We have the big three: corn, wheat, and soybeans. We also grow cover crops such as rye, sorghum, peas, and oats. And we run a little bit over 1,000 acres.

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MS: Emma lives on the farm with her husband Josh. They've got three kids all under the age of three. And she also works with her in-laws. Now, she describes the farm to me as this basic replica of a lot of family farms. But I'd have to say that her family's approach to selling their livestock is not like a lot of other farms. And I mean it in the best kind of way.

It kind of sounds like you're into a little bit of everything. You're doing something special on your beef side. Why don't you tell us about that?

EB: We have an on-farm retail store that we built in the summer of 2019 here on our farm. It's known as J&E Meats. And what we do is we sell our beef, lamb, chicken, and farm-fresh eggs directly to the consumer from right here on our own farm.

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MS: Now you've got my attention. I haven't talked to a lot of people doing, what I'll say, farm to table retail like you're doing. So, let's talk about this. You're selling more than I thought as far as your ingredient mix. Do you have a formula in terms of, you're trying to move 60% beef, and 20% lamb? Walk me through what you're marketing maybe is as a proportion of your business.

EB: It kind of varies as well on demand. So, for example, we do have a large beef operation, so in terms of our supply of beef, it's sort of endless. Same with our sheep operation. We do have 100 ewes, so they are producing anywhere between one and three lambs per ewe. So, that gives us the ability, too, to market directly to our consumers our beef and our lamb as well. The chickens we started on just doing the small groupings throughout the year, so we raise them in 200 batches multiple times throughout the year. Because it was just sort of an add-on for our customers, give them something a little bit more as well too. And our business model is very much, we do not sell anything that we don't raise here ourselves. We are sort of a destination out here, so we want to be able to provide them with as much variety as we can, while keeping it here on farm.

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MS: Yeah, wow. There's an old line I love. If you want something done just ask a busy person, right? I've got to get my head around this relationship between the price of land and how you make it all pay. So, was the birth of the store a way to add more margin to the business to help make your farm viable? Or how did this store come to be, the retail business?

EB: In terms of viability, the retail aspect actually came from just a super honest run of the blue conversation that my husband and I were having. The cattle market here in Ontario fluctuates so greatly. And at the time we were only contracting cattle to one of the largest companies in Ontario. And you really just get knocked around with that. There is no steady price that you get paid. So, as a producer, we always kind of felt like we were playing this losing game of, you raise this animal for 18 months, beautiful animal. It gets on the truck, it goes to its destination, it's going to feed all these families. And then you get the cheque back and, that's it? And then we get docked check off fees for even just raising them. If you get a per head fee, you get docked. If you're overweight of what they're looking for, you get docked per pound. And all these kinds of things just started adding up. And it really makes you wonder, as a producer, what are we doing?

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MS: You can tell that Emma's done a lot of thinking about the cost analysis. And I think it's a conversation lots of farmers have. She saw an opportunity here to shake things up, and decided to sell her beef direct to consumers. And it didn't take her long to put the wheels in motion.

EB: So, we just decided one night, as I said, an honest conversation that, let's change it. Let's start selling directly to our consumers. Why not? We have friends and family that already buy from us. Any other producer, I'm sure, can relate to this. You have friends and family that want to buy maybe a half or a quarter cow from you, etcetera. And we just decided, we can do more than that. So, in December, actually 2018, we just were talking about it. I whipped up a logo at midnight, made a Facebook page, and away we went.

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MS: So, how did Emma's social media launch of her new venture go? I'll let her tell you.

EB: Within four months of launching our Facebook page, this thing was getting away from us. Demand was instantaneous. And the support from our community was instantaneous. And maybe part of that is because I'm a marketing genius. But also, part of that is it definitely contributed to, we just hit a niche, and we filled a need that we didn't even know was there in our community. So, it just snowballed from there. Within four months of launching our Facebook page, we were building our on-farm retail store.

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MS: Paint a picture for me of the store. What's it laid out, look like. Tell me about the store.

EB: It's still our store. It's perfect. It has served every single purpose that we have asked of it. It is right out front of our house, right across from our main cow barn where our cow-calf pairs are. So, it overlooks that. Our farm is actually gorgeous. It's situated right along the Sydenham River. We're on a paved, meandering road. It is literally the perfect recipe for a consumer to, let's go to the country, let's go to the farm, let's get out of town, let's go buy some locally raised product. It's the perfect recipe.

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MS: Emma describes a really scenic picture that truly makes the farm a destination. She also went a little bit further and created a store that was welcoming and worth visiting. And she did this with the intention of creating a place where she could connect the public to their farm story, but also play into the importance of public trust in her products.

EB: So, our farm store itself was built by a really reputable Mennonite-owned business here in our community. And they did a fabulous job. It's pine all on the outside, and all on the inside, dressed pine. It's very warm. It's very welcoming. It's very cozy. We didn't want our customers to be overwhelmed. We didn't them to walk in and it be freezers, and freezers, and freezers full of stuff. We really wanted it to be intentional for our customers, and for our customers to have confidence when they came out to see us that they were going to be able to find their product, they were going to feel welcomed. And our farm store is an extension of our home, and that's what we always wanted our customers to feel like. Because you are coming to our home. They're coming to a fully operational farm, and this is how it gets here. Our animals go through an entire journey to get to your plate.

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MS: So, are you running just meat? I envision stand-up coolers, or look-in freezers. Or are you starting to expand your offering to spices and other dry goods?

EB: We do feature local products as well too because, of course, Chatham-Kent, as I previously mentioned, is just so rich in produce and different various agriculture. So, we do feature local products, maple syrup, pickles. Because in Chatham-Kent we grow a lot of cucumbers, so there's locally grown and made pickles in our store as well too. We only offer complimentary products to our products. So, for example, when you come to our store, you're not coming to a country market. You're not going to find home décor or anything like that because I feel like that's kind of a saturated market in and of itself, and you can go other places to get that. So, when you come out and see us, it is food driven, and you'll find items that are complementary to our products. So, for example, we have a locally made hot sauce that really compliments our lamb really well.

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MS: Now keep in mind, while Emma's running a successful store front, she's also out in the field, in the barn doing chores, and, of course, she's got three young kids. So, I kind of consider her a Jill of all trades. What I was having a hard time wrapping my head around was, how does she manage her store hours in the middle of all this, and what about all the people coming out to the farm? It sounds like a total recipe for disaster, especially during a global pandemic.

EB: So, two days a week was what we could handle prior to COVID. When COVID-19 happened initially, and we had the first mandatory lockdown here in Ontario, I laugh at myself, because I was seven months pregnant with our third child when everything happened. And we got flooded that weekend. There was people driving in here, busloads of people, it was insane. And I got completely cleared out of product which was amazing. But all of a sudden demand went from being a steady, rapid growth, to just an instantaneous launch into the future. So, we decided to, for the health and safety of everybody, and what was needed at the time, and the best decision was just to close our store. One, we were cleared out of product. We had beef hanging and aging, and, of course, more beef coming. But the process, you don't just go out in the barn and drop a cow, and away you go, and it goes home with you. There's a whole bunch of stuff that happened in between that. So, we had beef aging at the time when everything happened. I, personally, can say that I was getting a little bit burnt out, and I'm always getting a little bit tired. This all happened. And then as well too, health and safety number one, as I had mentioned, I was pregnant. With our sheep flock, sheep are really susceptible to diseases. I'm sure other producers that have sheep know this. So, you don't know what happens. What if this virus comes home with? What if it got to me? What if it got to the sheep? What could happen? Let's just shut her down. So, then we were closed for five months. While we were shut down, we were able to better manage our inventory. We were able to better our marketing. We switched to doing all online orders and transactions through our website. We just enhanced all these other channels that we already had. And then I had my baby, everything went great. Inventory management started to pick up, it was awesome. And then we decided to reopen our store, and now we've been open one day a week because it has been better on a management side of things right now. We know it's not convenient for all consumers, but it's definitely what we have to do for us, and our customers understand that.

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MS: So, this kind of take us to your customer base then. Who's the person driving out to the farm to buy this local story farm-raised meat, for example? And I've got to think that might not have been the person that you set out to serve that you're serving today.

EB: Yes. Not at all. So, when we first started this business in this industry, we thought that we were going to be selling to ourselves. We were our own target market. So, we only do Instagram, we only do Facebook advertising. We have an online store and a website.

And therefore, I thought that I was the demographic. I thought a young family. Just to put it in perspective, I'm 27 years old, my husband is 34, we have three children under the age of 3. I was like, perfect, that's who we need to get out, to come out here to see the farm. The younger generation, the younger people, that's who we need. So, that's who I thought we were marketing to. And then when we opened the doors of our store, it was very apparent that that is not at all the case.

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MS: I have to admit, when Emma described to me who her target demographic is, I was a little bit surprised.

EB: A large portion of our demographic is boomers. It is your mom and dad, looking to go out for a Sunday drive. They're the ones that really want to invest in their health, and really want to support local. And more oftentimes than not, the comments that they are making to me is, I was raised on good beef. This is good beef. This is what I remember growing up on as a kid, is what they're always telling me. Because keeping in mind that a lot of them were raised in a time where their parents would fill the freezer with a half a beef and that's what they would eat all year. Once that became apparent to me that that is our demographic, is boomers, I targeted our marketing accordingly. And the direction that I took things was kind of in a way more that they could better understand. It's your mom and dad just getting on Facebook, just figuring out how it works. It's your mom just casually getting Instagram so she can keep up with the grandkids. That is my target market and that is my number one consumer that comes out on a weekly basis, or every two weeks, to purchase from our store. And when it comes to our custom orders, so, our quarter beefs, our half beef, our whole beef, or our half and whole lamb, some of that is skewed. A lot of that is maybe younger families now just realizing the value of having all those cuts in their freezer, the convenience, better budgeting, etcetera. And some of it too is families splitting. So, you've got maybe Mom and Dad wanting to split with their grandkids, etcetera, or their kids, so that's a little bit mixed. But as far as coming directly out to our store, the boomers are where it's at.

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MS: So, everything that I've learned about the beef industry in my 40 years in this space is that boomers wanted different cuts of meat, and it was going to have a huge impact on the industry. So, what are they buying?

EB: When you visit our on-farm store, the one thing that I always wanted to be able to do was to offer variety. Because ugh, I hate the G-word, but we're going to talk about for a second, the grocery store has really groomed an entire culture of people. They want to see things like, your stew beef, and your braising ribs, and your fancier cuts of steak. Whether they like the price tag on it or not, they still want to see it and they want to have those offerings. So, in our store, we do offer all of those individual pieces. I keep things packaged smaller and convenient. One-pound packages of ground beef, single-packaged steaks, etcetera, because I do have that target market of boomers where it's maybe only a

two-person household. So, I definitely tailor my packaging, and even just my cuts, quantity, and the cuts that I get done, to that target market.

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MS: It looks like you've responded really well to what the market's asking in terms of packaging. What's going on in terms of margin?

EB: At first when we were growing our business back in 2019, we were definitely priced too low. We have had to increase our prices because of demand. Because of overhead expenses too. Everything has changed. There's added fees that have come up and added things that we've needed. So, therefore, on the consumer end of things, they are feeling a little bit of a price increase compared to where we were. However, we are offering a premium product, so premium product comes at a premium price, and that's just the fact of it.

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MS: I kind of want to explore the business of what you're up to. Are you basing your pricing model off of your cost of production and adding some margin? Or are you basing it off of what the market will bear? Or do you base it off a formula from grocery? How have you structured the business?

EB: The G-word, the grocery store, is completely out of the question because there is no competition in this space. That's one thing that I really tell my customers a lot is there is no competition in this space because it is dependent solely on the consumer and what the consumer is looking for. Everyone is different. And I might not be the right farmer, or the right fit, for everybody. So, I'm not looking to appease everybody. I'm not looking to cater to every single customer. I'm just looking to put my product out there and do my thing, and the customers will come. And they do. And the people that we have, and the people that we serve, and the families we are able to feed, are definitely there for us. And they are here for a reason because we're a good fit for them, but we're not necessarily a good fit for everybody. So, the grocery store isn't even in this space at all, that's for sure. But when it comes to pricing, initially what we were doing was, yeah, kind of figuring out our cost of production and what we had into it, and then doing a little bit of markup. Again, now, just to set the scope as well too, in our area here in Southwestern Ontario, there is a lot of abattoirs in the area. So, I also have to stay a little bit on par with their pricing, especially considering that I am the producer.

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MS: It's kind of hard to compare year over year the old system to the new one, but do you have a sense of how your net income has changed by doing this farm to plate model? And clearly there's, as you said, a lot of expenses. There's clearly way more work involved. But is it worth it?

EB: It is worth it for us because like I was saying too, we're kind of old veterans at this game, at the livestock game. And for example, to put it in scope, the last piece that I took into the abattoir, live weight was over 1,900 pounds. So, dressed weight, my halves were 575 per side, hang weight, on that animal. So, harvested, this is the weight before it ages. So, an animal like that, I am able to get the absolute most value from that animal. I'm not taking a loss on that. If I were to put that animal on a truck and ship it on one of our contract loads, they're looking at anything over 1,000, you're getting docked. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, right off the top. So, you're losing money going that way. And nothing that we do is about money, it's all about intention, it's all about integrity. But when it comes down to it, money is what makes the world go round. So, our retail aspect has given us the opportunity to take those heavier animals that, if we were to put on a truck, we were going to get slammed with fees basically, and lose money on. And now we're able to get the most value out of those animals that we can. So, this way we're actually not taking as much of a loss. It's a little bit more work, but the result is so much more fulfilling for everybody. And then we're also really playing into that narrative of connecting people with their food. That's sort of the whole point of what we do.

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MS: What part of Emma's farm story is resonating with their customers the most? That's coming up after this.

EB: And when you take your phone number and your address public, you are, in a sense, opening up the floodgates to, hey, we're here, where we're making ourselves a target. That was something that we discussed.

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MS: If you're listening to this and you're involved in agriculture and food, February 23rd is right around the corner. So, don't forget to share your love for the industry. This is Canada's Agriculture Day, and it's our day to shine. Post your pictures, get your videos, share anything you can on social media. And use the hashtag #CdnAgDay.

If you like what you hear, be sure to subscribe to the FCC Knowledge Podcast, and never miss an episode.

Your whole movement of your story is also really anchored around public trust too, and you can feel it in your language and your description. And if you think about the messaging you're using from a public trust standpoint, what do you think is resonating with your audience the most?

EB: I think that we are real people, and we're here, and we're working, and we're doing it. And I have so many customers comment at, I can't believe how busy you are, I can't believe how you do it all. This isn't a job. This is not a 9:00 to 5:00. We don't work for anybody else. We don't go to work Monday to Friday. We work 365 days a year to put

food on our own table, and your tables. So, that is the message that we always are pushing, and showcasing is, we're not trying to be showy, we're not trying to be, look at us. We're definitely just trying to show, this is our farm, this is what we do. And we're unique. We're out here serving the customer directly. We're marketing right to you. You can take home a piece of us, essentially, when you take home that ground beef and you make a meal with your family. You can have that confidence of knowing what you're putting into your body. And knowing that you're eating good, locally sourced food, which we think is so important. You're supporting your local economy. You're supporting us, and our family, and our farm, so we can keep doing what we are doing. And that messaging, and us being grateful, and being humble, and having that level of transparency too with our customers, has just been a really, really great recipe for our business.

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MS: You're reinforcing what the Centre for Food Integrity's work continues to tell us that farmers are trusted when it comes to food. And so, putting you and family up in front of the product you're selling is just brilliant marketing. I'm interested in maybe what you learned. I think lots of people have an ambition of doing off-farm retail, but it's not all roses. And what would be the one or two things you really think people should know before they start down this journey?

EB: As a producer, if I was going to speak with another producer that wanted to do this, is do your research. Not even when it comes to consumers, or how do I set up my store, how do I get a website, or anything like that. Do your research in terms of what is available out there to help me fund this thing? Because I didn't do that. We flew by night on this whole project to get it up and going, to get it off the ground. We paid for our store out of pocket, we paid for everything else to go into it out of pocket, etcetera, and we just got rolling, and that's how we did it. Because we had to do it. It was either, we were growing so fast that we couldn't really scale it, and before we had our retail location, it got to the point that we either need to shut this down, scale it way back, or we need to just go right for it. So, we did that. Which doesn't give you a lot of element of time to get government grants, to get research done as far as what's available out there. It doesn't really give you a lot of time, when you go from a Facebook page to a retail location in four months. So, somebody that is looking to get into this, do your research, and figure out what's out there in terms of grants. And go broad. What I think a lot of people don't understand about agriculture is we fall under so many different sectors when it comes to provincial funding and provincial grants. There's lots of business resources out there. Because you're a business owner. You're a small business. There are grants out there even for women-led businesses. There's so much available out there that I would just employ somebody, do your research as to what is out there that can help you.

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MS: Yeah, that's great advice. And you've talked to me before about some hidden expenses that pop up. Did you have a couple surprises along the way? Like, oh, man, I didn't expect I had to pay for that, or this thing cost way more than I thought it would?

EB: I think, well, when you don't what you're doing, every expense is a shocker, right? Like, what, you have to pay for that? No way. But one of the things that I would definitely say is something like a website, for example, that your customers can order and securely pay from. You have to pay a yearly subscription for that. And then you usually have to pay another fee on top of that to give your customers added channels of payment. For example, on my website, I accept PayPal. I had to pay, and I do have to pay, to have customers have the ability to pay with PayPal. But it's convenient, it's quick and easy. It's no thought process at all, you just go ahead and make your payment. Some other unforeseen expenses would be, like I said, I advertise only on social media, so I do a lot of boost posting on Facebook and on Instagram. And I target to different geographical regions, and different age ranges. And that costs money. It costs money to see ... every time you see a sponsored ad pop up on your social media when you're scrolling, that is paid for by a small business sometimes. There's just lots of things in terms of that. Or when it comes to packaging and product labelling, that's a whole other expense that I didn't really understand how much that was going to be. But the end result is for the customer to have a better experience. So, everything that we do in our business – and our driving force is our customers – so I'm going to pay that price because I want our customers to have the experience that they are anticipating, and that they expect, but that they don't know that they're expecting, if that makes sense.

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MS: Yes. There's obviously an infinite amount of surprises along the way. What's the biggest rip off?

EB: I'm pretty sure all of my media friends are going to laugh at me, but I would personally say, in terms of marketing your business, you have to be online. The things like radio and print, those are great for certain businesses. Or if you're a large corporation and you have \$100,000 a year to throw at that, you go for it. You're going to see that return on your investment. As a small business owner, I can't stress enough how being online, and being on social media, and being in front of your customers, is going to add value to your business and to your reach. So, as far as rip off goes, I wouldn't discourage anybody for going either way. You really have to just put your pen to paper and figure it out. But there's definitely some things that are going to give you more instantaneous ROI than others.

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MS: It's pretty clear that Emma puts a lot of value in the internet and social media as her tool for engagement. Not only does she use it as her sole advertising platform, and really creates engagement on Facebook and Instagram, she also gets to tell the story of her farm while selling her food. I think this connection plays into her transparent approach to

gaining public trust in the products she's growing and selling, and really helps people understand the story behind their food. Now, as our interview has gone on, it's becoming really clear to me that Emma has done a great job on her social media presence, and she's driving people to the farm. Clearly, her business is booming. She's done a great job navigating all the complexities around the economics and marketing challenges. I'd say she's rolling pretty good. This is typically when I get curious about, what was the hard part, or the roadblocks, or what got in the way?

So, you're a few years into this now. You've got some scars, you've got some wisdom. What was the hardest part of the whole thing?

EB: The hardest part of the whole thing, and I would also say the most rewarding part of it, the hardest and the most rewarding is time management. And being able to balance everything that we have going on. Right now, and because of COVID-19, as I had previously mentioned, our demand has really grown, and my customer database has really grown. And all of that is so amazing. But what it comes down to is, yes, I can have all these cattle out in the barn, and I can have all these sheep out in the barn and ready to go. But right now, I don't have the capabilities to harvest them. I don't have the capabilities to age them. I don't have the capabilities to cut them. I don't have the capabilities to package them. So, that is where, for that aspect of our business, for J&E Meats, that is where we're finding it more frustrating because we don't have control over that end. We know that one day we potentially will, but that day is not here right now. But the demand is there. So, for us, we question, will the demand be there in four or five years when we can get there? Because nothing happens overnight, and especially in this industry. And I think that's one thing that COVID has really taught consumers, is that your food doesn't get here overnight. There's a whole thing that goes into it. And we saw that, initially when COVID happened, there was a lot of empty grocery store shelves. And people were sort of panicking, wondering where they were going to get their supply. Well, the Superstore doesn't raise pigs, so there's no pork here. There's no beef on the shelves because the Superstore just buys it from somewhere else.

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MS: So, I'm interested in planning a little bit. There's obviously lots of risk in any business. And I'm wondering how important a business plan, or a plan, has been. Because you strike me as somebody that, well you said, that, you kind of came up from the basement and I've started a brand-new company, the website, and off we went. Started in the house, now we've got a whole infrastructure model, and investment. How important has planning been?

EB: Planning has been, if you asked me in 2019, I would say planning's not even a thing I've got time for right now in this aspect of my business. We were just kind of going with it. And now that, as I've mentioned before, we've had this gift of time during COVID and lockdown, and the world pausing, this gift of time has been so rich for us. Because it's been able to give us time to sit down, and hash things out, and look forward to the future

and what we want to do. Planning for this business from the get-go looked a little bit like something to the note of, what are we going to do about safety?

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MS: Ahh, the elephant in the room, safety. There's a lot of logistical challenge involved in bringing customers to the farm. Emma has a lot of valuable experience here to share.

EB: You know, safety is the new number one. We are a fully operational farm. There are tractors, and trucks, and moving parts happening all the time. We have livestock. What if somebody brings their little kid over to see the cows, kid reaches in, cow bumps them, broken arm. What are we going to do? And that's something that worries us because people just don't know. So, in protecting our customer, we definitely had to put in measures, and put in plans of, what if this happens? And our first call was to our insurance company being like, this is what we're doing, can you help us out? Because we definitely want to protect our customers for sure. Because they are coming to a very unfamiliar place. A lot of people have not been to a farm before. A lot of people think, farmers, we're out just chewing on a piece of straw, looking at the crops. That's not happening around here.

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MS: As Emma shares, a lot can go wrong on the farm. But remember that Emma's store is also on her farm along with her family, her machinery, her animals. When you throw random customers into the mix, clearly the liability risk goes up significantly. But there's another inherent risk that you may or may not have guessed. And she's proactively planning for it.

EB: Our second wave in this planning stage, when we started our business, was what if activists show up? Because we are in close proximity to Windsor, and we are in proximity to London, Toronto, etcetera. It could happen. You can have a busload of people that weren't invited show up at your house, and maybe start pushing their opinions around. I don't even know. I don't even know what that looks like. I've heard of other places, it happened to them. My husband's sister lives on a dairy farm. It's something that they also have to consider. So, when we were going through our motions of that, in terms of, we have to protect the integrity of our farm, we have to protect the integrity of our family, of our home. The minute you take your phone number and your address public, you are, in a sense, opening up the floodgates to, hey, we're here. Were we making ourselves a target? That was something that we discussed. So, putting in the proper plans for that, and the proper avenues. And then even just, on that note too, the way we operate our farm. And we never did anything sketchy before, of course. But any livestock producer knows that there are certain things that not everybody can see happen. Not everybody can see a cow in the chute, getting a needle, or something like that. So, just the way that we operate has changed in the way that we've thought. And we've also had to re-teach ourselves. And then also, because we do work hand in hand with Josh's father, he's in his 60s, he's from a whole different generation. So, when we decided to

start this, we really had to sit down as a family and say, hey, look, these are the factors all involved and all the moving parts. And we need a plan to deal with them in case.

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MS: Yeah, I can appreciate the activist piece. And there's some industry associations in agriculture that can help those people listening that want to save some steps in terms of how to approach that. There's some regulations that we're moving forward in some provinces on trespassing, etcetera. But still, you have huge exposure at your place. How did your insurance people respond? I've got to think this is an emerging market for companies, as we move to a buy local, and there's more people in all kinds of regions serving stuff off the farm. What should I even get for liability insurance, and what does it cost?

EB: I think that's definitely something that ... I'm just speaking from Ontario, so that is something that you'd need to talk to your insurance company about. First and foremost, you need to approach them, tell them clearly what you're doing, and what you're getting into, and the road you're going down, and put those measure into place. Fortunately, on our farm, I don't if this is a good thing or a bad thing, we have a really good relationship with our insurance broker. They are very farm, agriculture-based, and they're right here local to us. So, they are able to protect us, and they're familiar with the verbiage we're using, and they were familiar with our intention and what it is that we wanted to do. So, they were able to almost create in a sense a new policy for us. Of, we're going to do this, and these are our intentions, and we're going to help protect everybody.

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MS: The policy of awesome. Picked all the best parts, covered you for it, that's cool.

EB: Yes.

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MS: I guess this is the time in the podcast where I start to think about the future. You've got some momentum in your business. If you looked out, what's your dream for this on-farm buy local vision that you have?

EB: Our dream for this and our direction has always been to feed our community, connecting the consumer to their food. And we've always thought big, but small. We've always thought here in our area. I personally, like I said, we're three hours from the GTA. I'm not concerned with the GTA at all. I'm not concerned with feeding all of Ontario. I'm not concerned with shipping my products across the country. That has no interest to me, whatsoever. I want to feed my neighbours. I want to feed my neighbouring towns. I want to feed my family, and I want to feed my friends. There's enough right here in my own backyard. I don't need to think that big in terms of, let's splash this thing all over the place. I can be the brand right here at home. And I can live my life with intention,

and I can produce my products with intention, and I can feed my community. And that's where it lies. And that is where I want to serve. So, looking into the future, I want to better serve my customers. I want to give them the flexibility that they're asking for. They want us to be open more days. Sure, no problem. Once my babies are all in school, I will have more time to commit to this. In truth, we've outgrown our store that we initially built which is absolutely amazing and our customers have done that for us. We know that they support us in whichever way we lead. They've proven that to us time and time again. So, we want to give them what they're asking for. We want to be able to do that for them. And we are going to do that for them in the very near future. So, without, I don't want to give away too much because we're going to be doing this and we're obviously going to be sharing our whole story on what it is we're going through and everything over on our social media pages as well too. So, that's where people are going to be able to follow along on our entire journey.

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MS: It's clear that even with all the successes that Emma has experienced in her short amount of time running this business, she's still really focused on feeding and serving her local community. This actually aligns really well with her transparent approach to food distribution where her customers are well acquainted with the people behind their food. So, how acquainted is she with her customers? You might say that Emma's become a little bit of a social media influencer.

EB: One of my proudest entrepreneurial moments is when my customers see us, well me, on our social media page, and they come into our store, and they just praise. Not that I need it. I'm not the type of person that needs it, but it just feels so good that they're following along, and that they're understanding. They come to my store and they say, oh, I feel like I know you because I follow you on social media, and I see you on your Insta stories, and I see you on your Facebook page. They feel like they know me, Emma Butler, before they've even met me. So, building that level of consumer trust, it ties back to that. That my customers feel comfortable coming out to see me, and coming out to purchase my product, because they know me. And I'm an extension of my product, and I'm glad that if in selling myself, I'm not shooting myself in the foot.

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MS: Oh, that's great. That's such an energizing story. And for such a young family, you guys have achieved a lot. I think you have lots to be proud of. Thanks for being my guest today, Emma. It's been a real pleasure getting to know you.

EB: Thank you so much. This has been so exciting. I'm really grateful for the opportunity. And yes, if anybody listening wants to get in touch with me, get a hold of me, you can find me on Instagram on @mrsemabutler on Instagram. We're also @jandemeats on Instagram and Facebook. And you can also check out our website too. Our website is www.jandemeats.com. And you'll find the real story on us all there. You'll find lots of

videos, lots of interactive content, more about our store, our online store as well too, and all my contact information is there.

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MS: Today, we spoke with Emma Butler from J&E Meats. And I'd have to admit that I sure learned a lot. She's got a really exciting story, and it clearly shows how an opportunity to innovate and think different can really make a difference on your farm. I was totally blown away by how thorough and motivated she is. It's pretty cool to talk to a bonified internet ag celebrity. So, what did I learn from Emma? First thing I learned is transparency is the best way to gain public trust. I think Emma's openness, and her willingness to share and pull people into her farm, is part of her recipe. Her storefront provides a direct link to customers, between the food, and how it ends up on their table. She's also using social media to tell her farm story. So, when people show up at the farm, they already have an idea what they're going to get. The second thing I took away is that farmers continue to be trusted with food production. And there's lots of data to support this from the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity. But Emma is living this. That Emma's farm story showcases how much trust people have in farmers. And her overnight success is largely due to the fact that there's a demand for high quality local products. So, kudos to you, Emma, for leaning into the opportunity. Thirdly, cover your butt, and plan, plan, plan. Emma went to great lengths to cover all the details and look at all the risks. Her alone building a plan around activism was a great sense of foresight, and helps protect her farm from unforeseen risks. It's not hard to find her and her family, so it comes with an extra set of risks that she has to be supersensitive in how she manages her social media presence, and the social media of her on-farm business. And lastly, be brave. I think this is a classic example of looking at the entrepreneurial spirit of somebody who has a lot on the go. Starting a family, running a farm, and trying to get a business off the ground, and just going for it. So, at a minimum, if we could take anything away from Emma is maybe the inspiration that sometimes it's just okay to take a chance. Do your homework, manage your risks, and just go for it.

If today's talk made you think about your own operation and what you would do in the event that activists show up on your property, check out the article [How to Be SMART About Animal Activism](#) on our website. We'll include the link in the show notes.

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