

Through a Butcher's Lens - An essay by Andrew M. Sedlak

Two cutting boards, a boning knife and a handsaw were set out as I placed another carcass wrapped in cheesecloth on to the stainless steel table at the front of my cutting room. As people look at me through the wall-sized window of the butcher shop I looked back at them, with blood on my hands. The Number 4 bus approached its stop as I cut the cheesecloth away from a lamb exposing its flesh. Death was on display and it caught the curiosity of a woman stepping off of the bus. Entranced by the spectacle she reached into her pocket. I originally thought nothing of it, continuing on with my work, as always, sawing until the head fell to the table with the satisfying final crack of cut bone. Then I noticed the woman had her phone out and it was pointed at me, recording. I picked up the lamb's severed head and looked into its lidless eyes truly feeling the realities of my chosen profession.

My name is Andy and I am a butcher.

Growing up in rural Ontario I never dreamed I would be speaking at an organic farming conference in Alberta. I'll admit here that I didn't realize the importance of organic farming and never thought about holistic focuses until I was in my late twenties.

During my adolescence I was one of the herd. I believed that both government and society were looking out for everyone. It wasn't because it was easier walking blind. I thought this because like many people I didn't have anyone to inform me of what was really happening. The rosy coloured, everybody loves everybody sunglasses that keep your head down and employee card punched were put on my eyes by both my parents and peers. They are not aware of what it costs not only the environment, but also their health to live in an "I want everything for as cheap as I can get it, especially when it comes to food" lifestyle.

There are millions of Canadians who are only focused on their own town, their specific job and their way of living. I'm bringing this up because when it comes to marketing organic holistically focused livestock these are the obstacles we must overcome, people who are set in their ways and people who have been eating one way for their entire life.

I'm not going to say it was the Internet more so than my thirst for knowledge that opened my eyes, but the information online is growing rapidly on what the results of our food choices really are.

Daily, people are moving towards not wanting to be hassled other than for work or play and that's not going to change. Online ordering is here and it's not going anywhere.

We are at a tricky time in regards to what is possible for butchers because people want the trade to go back to the old school style, but they don't always want to pay the price it takes to do the old school work. People are also uncovering the facts that they should be eating less meat not only for health but also for environmental reasons.

I look at money as a created value we put on spending our time. We all spend time on food not only in purchasing it, but also in making and eating it. If the marketing of all food said what it does to both your body and the environment I wonder who would spend their time purchasing a box of something that says I'm cheap, but I am also poison?

I wonder if someone would spend time on, you can eat me quickly but you're destroying the rainforest and if you eat too many of me you risk becoming obese?

What about I live in the ocean where mercury and other poisons run through my veins?

Instead, nice labels, slogans and logos make us crave these toxic products so I must ask how did we make poison so damn sexy?

I guess the better question is why?

I'm not perfect and I don't expect anyone to be. I love a fast-food burger but I only love them because I fell in love with fast foods before I understood their addictive properties.

The schools, their cafeterias and parents are who will make the difference in this movement.

If we infiltrate the school system with some sort of legislation forcing courses to explain what food really is, how it is made, how you can make it taste good and how to ensure you waste as little as possible I wonder how much more money sustainably minded businesses would make.

I'm not talking about the bullshit information of my childhood that was sponsored by corporate chains of mass production, I'm talking about the local farmers and butchers stopping by the classroom to explain the practices they work with and making connections.

The biggest problem we face with this movement is that we are competing with billionaires who currently own everything and don't want to see their profits dip.

Another problem is that not everyone on this planet cares about this movement.

We need to help not only ourselves, but also the person next to us. It sounds easy enough but all of us sitting here know it is anything but. We have our own bills to pay and segregating our personal lives from our work lives has only grown in importance.

People are not very trustworthy these days.

I've seen it first hand. The only reason I'm here and not running the butcher shop I helped open and ran for four and a half years is because of the stupidity of one man. His foolish actions destroyed an entire company.

This is possible in every working relationship so I realize how difficult it is to join forces with other people for your work and investments. It is a risk, but I also think now is the time when the reward will substantially outweigh the risk compared to going at it alone.

This brings me to a very important word. Neighbour, the person you live beside. If you don't speak to them I hope a kind smile or wave is part of your daily routine. I fear it's not for everyone because the current society has its head down, phone out and ears constantly filled with noise. I'm not going to attack this style of life. It's here to stay. The point of stating this is to give an example of how our purchase cycles do not reflect what our core beliefs should be.

We go to big chain stores and disassociate everything that goes along with food consumption. We don't think about the blood, sweat, tears, emissions, hydro, water, equipment and lives that supply our ability to sit down for dinner.

How did our bank accounts become more important than our life vessels?

The proof is coming out and it will only continue to about what eating junk food really does to you. It's like smoking. The battle will likely take fifty years before our society believes the proof, but they will one day and hopefully it's not too late.

How did we become so arrogant that we decided the earth's season for a certain product is not long enough for us?

The thing I love about honey crisp apples is that we can't get them everyday. They have a season and I look forward to it. Am I disappointed when the season is over? Absolutely, but I get over it. Honey Crisp apples are special and we need to keep food special. That is our best marketing tool. Explaining the uniqueness and importance of how and why a product is better for the consumer than another.

Knowing the science that is coming out and being studied today is so important and although it pains me to say this, both Netflix and YouTube specials are affecting people more than books. The current industry negativity needs to be thought of and discussed.

I might as well start off with the most powerful documentary that is attacking the meat industry, Earthlings. It was sad and borderline painful seeing how some livestock operations run around the world and not only in food consumption but also in clothing, pets and entertainment. It's just more proof of how we've always done things is not a good enough answer anymore.

In Cowspiracy, water usage and methane emissions in the beef industry are attacked heavily. I hope every beef farmer in this room has watched this film because this is what the new generation is learning and absorbing. That eating one hamburger is as bad as leaving all of your lights on, brushing your teeth with the tap running and driving your car to and from work.

The people quitting the beef industry are not coming back unless we find proof of regenerative farming not only for carbon, but also for the water supply and methane emissions.

The industry needs to expect more of these films to come out and if the beef market doesn't have adequate ways to fight science with science by returning the cost of emissions back to the earth then I would fear an eventual market crash. When and how I'm not certain, but being open to change and having proper responses to these issues is so important for the butcher of today.

Cracking these codes will be essential for marketing beef in the future.

Lucent, is an overly long, painful visual of the pork industry in Australia. It shows the uttermost disgusting lives of pigs forced to lie stagnate in filth and the farmers caught on camera really come across as violent villains. I personally don't believe any of the farmers in this film went to work planning to be violent or villainous. They were likely taught, watched or were told that what they were doing was okay.

These people are likely struggling to get by in life like so many of us are.

I praise this movie for having the nerve to get behind the scenes and expose this nasty part of our culture because once we know something is a problem that is the only way we can fix it.

If anyone figures out the key to farming the most sustainable livestock on the planet and let's just say it's not one of our animals we currently raise here in Canada, we need to think about it and be open to raising it. Marketing such a product would take care of itself if the sustainability can be proven.

The worry over carcinogenic properties of smoked and cured meats is growing. There are studies that indicate a statistical correlation between the increased occurrence of cancer of the intestinal tract and the frequent intake of smoked and cured foods. I have had to substantially cut down eating these meats because after reading the research done in Hungary where they are heavily leaned on for diet and other research that states although smoked meat is a good anti-oxidant and anti-microbial agent, over-indulging in smoked meat can cause unwanted health effects.

If you really think about it it's not hard to connect the dots. Smoking cigarettes is bad for your lungs so putting something you eat into a chamber surrounded by smoke for hours on end must do something not exactly healthy to it. Nitrates are also carcinogenic and common in most smoked and cured meat. Smoked and cured meats usually have high sodium content because they often involve brines, curing and rubs. While over-indulging in processed meats can be detrimental to your health, enjoying the pleasures of this world is important. I foresee marketing the cleanest smoked and cured meats becoming a major industry focus in the coming years.

Marketing for the boutique butcher is how you're better than a grocery store. For the grocery store it's all about quick and easy purchasing while being as affordable as possible. If the major chain grocery stores turn to a holistic approach for their meat sections I believe the boutique butcher shop is at risk of becoming extinct.

Butchery is unlike any other business in the world. It is death on display, marketed as fuel for humans. Each piece of death has an expiration date and each loss hurts both owner and environment. Food waste especially in livestock is unacceptable.

The risk is high and the profession dangerous. I believe with all of my heart that every human who consumes livestock should have to watch what actually happens to the meat we eat from farm to plate. If they did, they would support either the butcher shop or grocery store that has the most respectable and sustainable practices in mind. That should be the industry's marketing goal.

Systems of efficiency are another answer to the butcher's plight. Each employee's value must be understood and enforced. Time and expectations of work value must be recorded and justified. There is no specific program for all butcher shops but every butcher shop needs a program of expectations. I bring this up because your employees are your marketing as much as your social media.

Every single detail and conversation must come across as educated but not pushy, confident but not desperate and the number one thing to focus on is forming personal relationships.

Almost every butcher shop I walk into has their employees circling around like sharks ready to attack on every sale. I understand the enthusiasm of in-and-out as fast as possible service but I know first hand that a slower more comfortable and caring experience is what brings a customer back and more importantly has them spending more money per visit. Your customers are spending their time on you and it is up to your shop to make sure the customer's hours worked that week gives them a true value for their time. An experience, not a dollar sign loss is what each customer must feel when leaving a butcher's counter.

The fresh factor is important but a butcher shop must have cooked, smoked and frozen sections not necessarily on display but available. If you have the space to sell fresh meat, deli items, bread, vegetables or sides and a fast casual dining experience then you are covering all of your fronts.

If you can define a minimalistic case with items that always sell you will be able to market the fact that you waste nothing. A lot of butchers have been waste saving for years, but they haven't added this fact into their marketing. Saying that glands, membranes and inedible organs are the only things we waste builds a bridge into what environmentally focused customers want to be a part of.

A Butcher's case is like building a puzzle. Not every piece fits at first, but once you find the right piece it stays in place, if not seasonally for the entire year. Each shop only has so much available

space and each square foot must provide a certain amount of dollars in the bank per week. With the costs of rent, transportation and the growing and killing of animals all rising rapidly coupled with our society's want to spend less on meat, it is becoming difficult for butcher shops to operate without a strong secondary marketing plan.

Having a fast casual dining experience like a sandwich, taco, burrito or meat and veg bowl with a to-go focus will bring another element of marketing. I see a lot of places half assing this model and it's because it is expensive to set up properly. For anyone thinking about opening a shop out there, make sure you look into doing this. Make sure it has it's own focus. A lot of places have cooked food just to get by and not waste anything but when done properly having a fast casual experience creates more buzz and it can also make your shop decent money.

Some butchers are trying to make their business solely online and the reviews I've received have been mixed. If you're going to do this I would recommend a preorder online service like a pizza shop where it explains how and exactly what is possible in every situation you're willing to sell. Teaming up with other already running home-to-home delivery experiences has the potential to bring in a decent return. Delivering one day or night a week during times when most people will be home could be a focus for the future of a brick and mortar butcher shop.

Another great marketing tool is teaching courses to customers outside of working hours. You can give your customers the shop's entire run through and if they leave with meat that they personally butchered they will share with it with others and tell the story of their experience.

When it comes to butchery there are thousands of ways to tie, trim and serve each muscle. The key to success is finding a theme for your neighbourhood. The unified idea must go through the entire shop and the farming practice is as important as the shop's waste management cycle when it comes to marketing. I'm here today because I believe each person in this room has the power to bring an idea or a personal effort that will change our livestock market into a positive and profitable experience. Blood is on our hands in every choice we make in this industry so lets make sure we only spill what is absolutely necessary.

My name is Andy and I am a butcher.