

Louis Zmich: The Art of the Sale – Season 1, Episode 6

Amy: You're listening to Beyond 1894, a podcast where we hear from Louisiana Tech University scholars, innovators, and professionals on their personal journeys and the impact they are making in the world around them. I'm your host, Amy Bell, and my co-host is Teddy Allen

Amy: So, Teddy, have you ever worked in sales?

Teddy: I couldn't sell a fried pie to a fat man. I would be terrible. But, as Louis will explain, sales is about relationship, it's about problem solving, and it's about customer service. And people kind of look at sales as I did. It's a bad point of view. When I look back the people that have really helped me, when I'm trying to buy something, they're about relationship they're about.... They're not helping you, they're not selling you something, they're helping you buy something, and that's the diff.

Teddy: A good one will make you feel, you know, they're solving our problems. They're taking care of me, they like me. They're trying to help me. So, that's why I enjoyed listening to Louis, who's from Chicago. Or around Chicago. But somehow, he ended up down here.

Teddy: He's an example, to me, of somebody who kept plugging away, didn't know what he wanted to major in; he had ideas. So, if you feel like that, and you're in one or two, or now you're in your fourth major. That's okay. You're trying to, this what this part of your life is about: trying to figure out what I want to do. So, he exposed his self to a lot of different things, and a lot of different majors, and then fell into something that he liked and now is a doctoral student.

Amy: Okay, so I have another question for you. Have you ever bought something you didn't know you needed until a salesperson persuaded you to buy it?

Teddy: I would have to think about that. I know that Louis did, and it's a terribly interesting story that he's going to tell you in this podcast.

Amy: Yeah.

Teddy: About something as innocuous as a coffee mug. I'll tell you what I did buy Sunday in Troy, Alabama, spontaneously, was Girl Scout cookies. They were selling them.

Amy: Girl Scouts know how to sell their cookies.

Teddy: They were selling outside the ballpark. And one of these little girls looked at, just innocently walking in, would you like to buy, and before she got through, I was already reaching in for my wallet. How much? I just handed it to her. Go buy however much I need to buy. I took them up to the press box.

Amy: But Girl Scout cookies are a prod, it's a product that sells itself, really.

Teddy: Yes. Oh, Lord. Oh, people light up. I walked in there with those boxes like Santa Claus. I felt like Santa Claus; everybody was my best buddy.

Amy: Well, I got to interview Louis Zmich. He's a second-year marketing doctoral student, minoring in psychology and is the current president of the Doctor of Business Administration Association.

Teddy: He's a stud. You'll like Louis.

Amy: Like you said, he talked about how he decided to study sales and marketing, why he chose to come to Tech, how to make a good sale and his areas of research. So, we're gonna jump to that interview now.

Teddy: He also talks about coffee.

Amy: He does.

Teddy: Don't leave that out.

Amy: Yeah.

Amy: Okay. So, tell me a little bit about yourself. Where are you from?

Louis: I am originally from the Chicago land area, so it's easy for me to just say Chicago, but I'm from the suburbs of Chicago, maybe like a half hour or so outside the city. And then I did my undergrad at Northern Illinois University, in marketing.

Louis: So, out of high school I told myself I wanted to be an engineer. Mainly because I was good at math, at least I thought I was good at math, and I liked tinkering with things. That was, that, that was my 18-year-old brains saying like, "You're going to be an engineer because you like playing with Legos and doing math."

Amy: Yeah.

Louis: And so, I took a physics calculus course, and that immediately told me I'm not going to be an engineer. Mainly because the instructor that I took the course with was very off-putting, very demanding, kind of made you feel negative about not understanding things. Which thinking back, you know, your educators are so vital. Right? Like that one person changed my career path but then fast forward all the way to NIU, and then I had a professor that changed my career path in a positive way. So, after that whole engineering thing, I went to a private school because I played golf for a year and I was on their golf team. I became a psychology major and I was minoring in sociology. And so, the academic coordinator said, "You're, you don't want to get into psychology unless you're going to get your doctorate, or like a graduate degree."

Amy: Yeah.

Louis: And I said, "I don't want to do that." Look at me now, right? "I don't want to; I don't want to do that. That's way too much school." So, I left, I left the private school and then I went to community college for about a year and a half. And then I said, "You know what? I want to be an engineer, but I didn't like the math part. So, let's take out the math and add the Legos, and I'll just be a designer. Right?" Like an interior designer or whatever.

Amy: Yeah.

Louis: So, I was doing that, and I really liked that. And then I said, "You know what? I, I'm just going to go into business, and I'm going to start my own business. I'm just gonna, I'm going to go to a business school. Cause that's where you go when you want to start a business." This is my head. This is what I was thinking, right? "And I'll just figure it out." I moved, I moved from Schaumburg, which was the city I'm in, I was in, to DeKalb, which is where NIU is in the Chicago land area, and was just a plain old business major; business administration.

Louis: And so, we had this huge class that was marketing management, finance, and information systems, all in the same class. It was like three hours, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, so nine total credit hours. And in that class is when I realized, okay, if this is my dec-, if these are my choices, I'm going to pick marketing, because I didn't really like the other ones.

Louis: I got into marketing and didn't really know what I was doing. And all of a sudden I joined a couple organizations, and in that they said, "Well, why don't you concentrate in the sales?" And then, so, I remember going to that same, that first sales class, and going around the room saying like, what is sales to you? And everyone's saying the stereotypical thing of like used car salesman and everything. And then the professor goes, "Well, for me, it's more about creating relationships and solving problems." And that's when it really clicked for me. I was like, "Oh cool."

Louis: And then I got my master's in information systems, and it was about that time that I was working in a sales internship and decided that instead of doing sales, I'd rather teach and research sales. So, I started working with some professors in the marketing department there. That kind of primed me for doctoral life a little bit. And then through their connections, found Louisiana Tech. And through those connections, applied, interviewed, and here I am. So... 13 hours down south.

Amy: So, why Louisiana Tech University?

Louis: So, Louisiana Tech was actually my number one. Reason being, was because at NIU, the professors there were saying Louisiana Tech has phenomenal faculty, but at the same time, they have the same culture that NIU does. Meaning, um, very laid back, approachable. You need to go see a professor, just go knock on their door. There's none of these formalities of, you know, you have to make an appointment. How dare you, you know, knock on me, when, during my research time or whatever. The department head at the time was Dr. Barry Babin; he was a world-renowned researcher. He has since gone to Ole Miss, but now we have Dr. Bill Locander, another world-renowned researcher. So, really phenomenal talent in a more homey feeling university, which was exactly what I wanted.

Louis: And so, when I heard that, applied, of course Chicago to Louisiana is a really big shift. And at first, I was just a little nervous about change, but... Then when I had the interview, then things kind of started falling into place. Because, I didn't have the highest GMAT in the entire world. And I was very upfront with that, and I said, "Look, I am not a good standardized test taker, but I'll outwork anyone that you put in front of me." You know, like all that kind of stuff. But I was just like, "Hey look, look at my track record." Right? "Like, my ACT said that I shouldn't have succeeded in college and here I am Cum Laude of all these accolades and whatever achievements, and I finished my masters. And, and then my GMAT was predicting the same thing and I think that you're going to be making a really good investment in me." Like just being

really upfront with them. And they were upfront with me, which I thought was really great, too, of, "Hey, we're just looking for good talent who can get through the program and produce high research level." And I had already kind of shown some of that research beforehand. So, it just seemed like a really good fit.

Louis: So, it's very rare for a university, and NIU had this, too, and so I'm grateful for that, where you can just talk to the Dean in the hallway and just have a full-on conversation. The Dean is willing to work with you. I mean, being president of the DBA association, I, I work fairly closely with Dr. Martin, um, Dean Martin, and just how willing he is to help out with the program. You know, financially, resources. How many, like we got the crawfish boil, the chili cookout, um, all the holiday festivities. All the, like Timeout for Tech and all that stuff. The fact that the university is so integrated with the downtown, it all feels like it connects. All that from a student's perspective, really does make it feel like you belong here, and that the community is, is on your side. And that helps when you're 13 hours away from home, you know, like that, that really does help. It helps kind of bring it all together and, and kind of make it feel like you're not just a number on a spreadsheet. You're not, you're not a, a bottom line on, on a budget item. You know, you're an actual student here and we want you to succeed.

Amy: Yeah. So, you said that when you were in sales, you decided that you'd rather be researching it. What ignited that idea?

Louis: Mm, so, I changed majors a whole bunch of times, fell into marketing, fell in love with it, fell into sales, even more fell in love with it, kind of breaking down stigmas of salespeople. And I remember talking to my professors saying that I just wish that one little piece, I loved the sales aspect of it. I love how it's, sales is a craft in and of itself. It's like a personal craft of how you speak to other people and how you connect with another individual. But there was just that one piece of like making a difference that was just kind of biting at me.

Louis: And then, the one professor at NIU, um, Dr. Maya Groza, she sat me down and said, "I would kind of feel remised if I didn't at least bring up the idea of you teaching sales and researching. Because I feel like you have, um, you know, the ability to do that, and you're good in the classroom," and yada, yada. And then that's when the light bulb just kinda went off. So, I was just about to graduate when the light bulb went off, of, "Hey, this is actually what I want to do," race to apply for my master's, and then stayed after graduation. Like I was prepared to sign a, sign a contract and get into, you know, the big boy job, if you will. And, it kind of just all fell into place.

Amy: What gives it meaning to you?

Louis: The research aspect?

Amy: Or sales in general and, and deciding to teach sales?

Louis: So, salespeople tend to get a bad rap because you think about the used car salesman, the snake oil salesman, the Wolf of wall street type of person, right? And, in reality, salespeople are just creative problem solvers of there's a need, a problem, of some kind, and the salesperson is the subject matter expert in that product category and can help you solve your need.

Louis: It's interesting, um, I haven't taught a sales class yet, but I've guest taught in sales classes here. And right when I walk in, the first thing I had asked in the, the last time I did this, was, "Who can give me a bad sales story?" And everybody's hand goes up. You know, like the car salesman that calls me to this day, even though I said I bought another car, the, the people in the mall kiosks that sha-, that chase you down with lotion or hit, you know, a hair curlers or whatever, you know, and like the little kiosk people, the hard sells, right?

Amy: Yes. I know. My parents always told me, "Just don't look them in the eye. Just keep walking."

Louis: Yes, exactly. We all have a bad sales story. And so, my response to that is: That's good because that means, that if you're a good salesperson, then you're just going to be way above. Because people are going to say, "Oh gosh, this person's great." Right?

Amy: Mm, hmm. So, what would you say is an example of a good sales story?

Louis: So, it's a very rudimentary example. So, bear with me, but I'm a really big coffee drinker. It's just, it's such a beautiful craft. I was at, I was at a store, I don't remember exactly the store. But the Ember Mug; have you heard of that?

Amy: No, I have not.

Louis: It was at Starbucks. That's where it was. Cause they sell them there. It's a mug that has a little saucer, and it charges the mug. And then the mug has an app, and it keeps your coffee at whatever temperature you want between a certain range. So, you can have the perfect.... From first sip to last sip, it's the same temperature. It's phenomenal, but it's really expensive. So that's, that's, that's a problem.

Louis: This person, this barista, completely sold me on the mug. Because, we were chatting about coffee and, um, I had made some sort of off-handed joke of, of saying, you know, I have to drink the last third of the coffee really fast because it starts getting too cold and then, you know, you're drinking cold coffee and that's not good. And he just kind of questioned me and was saying, "Well, have you ever heard of this Ember Mug?" I said, "No, I haven't heard of it. What is it?" And he said, "Well, you had mentioned," so here's the problem. Right? "You had mentioned that your coffee gets too cold at the end of, you know, drinking this mug. Right? Or drinking your cup of coffee." And I said, "Yeah, yeah." And, and through other questioning, he had reinstated that like it's a problem. Right. And I also, in the conversation, had mentioned that I hate the paper cup problem. You know, and I like bringing reusable mugs and things like that. And so, then he had brought up, "Well, you know, this would be a reusable type of thing, right?" Another pain of mine is that....

Amy: Yeah, so he's solving two problems already.

Louis: And then there's a third problem that he solved because, I'm very much a minimalist in terms of the things I keep around the house. And so I was, um, you know, we're, we're kind of just chatting about this and you know, I brought up, I brought this up in the conversation was, I was, "Oh, this could be the only mug I have in the house. I can get rid of every other mug." Right?

Louis: And so, the way that, the way that he framed it was that you have this mug, keeps at the perfect temperature all the way through; that solves problem one. Problem two is, it's reusable,

you can use it wherever. No more paper cups, right? That's number two. Then number three is, now it's my only mug. Now he's solving three things. Now for me, when I found out what the price was, I mean it's like they're like \$80 or something. It's crazy. Right? So, when I found out what the price was, um, he had solved so many of my problems, that the price, it almost didn't matter. It didn't matter because I didn't buy it right then and there. I had to save up for it. But I ended up going back and buying one. So, he like inadvertently sold me just by having a conversation. That's a good sale.

Amy: So, he listened to your needs and then met them. Basically.

Louis: Exactly. And it wasn't, it wasn't this whole hard-pressed of, so you're telling me that right now you would buy this mug because I just solved problem ABC? No, he wasn't. They don't, I don't, at least I don't think they make commission off of those things. They might, I'm not sure. But just through the conversation, the sale was made.

Louis: Now, in a business setting, there'd be more of asking for the sale of: What do I have to say to you or do to kind of get over these hurdles? Like what's stopping you from signing right now? Like asking those questions is okay. And if he would've said that I'd been like, "Dude, it's too expensive." You know, and that comes down, a lot of people come down to price. But that would be a good sale. I was kind of going into it already sold because if I would've known that product existed, I would already been on my map, on my radar. But....

Amy: So, tell me, did.... You bought it?

Louis: Yes.

Amy: Do you love it?

Louis: I use it every day. It's phenomenal.

Amy: Did you get rid of all your mugs?

Louis: I didn't get rid of all the mugs. My, my girlfriend and I have, we, we really love to travel. We travel quite a bit and so we have like the, You Are Here mugs from Starbucks. And so, can't get rid of those. You know, around Christmas time it's nice to drink out of a holiday mug. So, I think we have like five coffee mugs and then The Ember Mug.

Amy: That makes sense.

Amy: So, tell me about your work with the farmer's market. How did you get involved with that, and what's your experience been like?

Louis: So, a little bit of a crazy story moving here. My girlfriend and I drove down here, we had two days to find a place. We arrived and, um, we went to the coffee shop of course, and I was asking, we were just kind of asking people like where to live and whatnot. And then, we had seen a sign for the farmer's market, and immediately thought to myself, "That is, that is awesome." Cause we had farmer's markets, um, up North. Chicago started getting, getting into that a little bit. We had the local farmer's market and my minor was social entrepreneurship, so all about like small businesses doing social good. And farmer's markets really fall into that.

Louis: And so, I, I immediately started asking questions, um, one of my colleagues at the college of business, his wife was on the board, and it just so happened that a position had opened up. I initially got on and accepted the finance position. And made a sale, if you will, that we needed a marketing person and give that finance position to someone who knew finance. And, so, then we kind of made this marketing position on the board and then that's what I'm filling now.

Amy: Okay, cool deal. And how, what's your experience been like?

Louis: Phenomenal. The, the farmer's market, it's, it's grown quite a bit. It started in 2008 in a parking lot, just three vendors in a parking lot with, you know, a couple of tents and that's it. Now we have, um, over 25 vendors every week in our own dedicated building on Mississippi. That, you know, we rent out from the city. And we're removing the barrier between where your food come from and what you put on your plate. That's, that's really such a powerful message of your money stays in the community. You know what's in your food. You know, what you're putting in your body. You know the farmer that, that harvested that food.

Amy: Yeah. You like create a relationship with them.

Louis: Exactly.

Amy: Just the other day I wanted some more soap from one of the soap vendors and I could just find them on Facebook, message them and they actually delivered to me here at my office.

Louis: That's amazing.

Amy: So, yeah.

Louis: That's amazing. What customer service. That's phenomenal. That's phenomenal. I love, I like hearing that. That's, that's great. Because, having something like that in the community has, makes the community grow. It allows small businesses to thrive. And it encourages creativity and innovation, which I love.

Amy: Yeah. So, tell me about your research. What do you, what are your research interests? What are you currently researching?

Louis: So, my general research topic is: What is the future of salespeople? So, 2020 digital era; do we need salespeople anymore? If we do, what does that look like?

Amy: Oh yeah. Cause of AI.

Louis: Right. Yeah, seriously. I mean, if you want to order a Tesla, you're not going to go to a car salesman. You're going to go online, you know, you can order the model three, get on the waiting list. There you go. Right? So, what does that, what does that look like? Right.

Louis: So, I've, I'm a coauthor on this, on this project. My colleague, Amin is the head author on it. And then Dr. Babin was working on, is working on this project as well of touch in salespeople. So, if, if a waitress or waiter touches the person that they're waiting on, do they, do they tip more or if a consultant touches the person, do they tend to buy more? Or more, you know, everything from like.... Nurses, believe it or not, have to kind of sell the fact of taking prescriptions, like for people in nursing homes. Because now they don't always want to take

their medication. So, it's kind of this open selling of, you have to do this because it's for your health and everything. So, touching the, the patient on the shoulder, do they end up taking their medication?

Amy: Are they persuaded?

Louis: All that kind of stuff. Right. Yeah. Seriously. And so, it's really getting to the, the, the crux of human touch. Cause we're kind of losing that in everyday conversations, right? I walked in and we shook hands, but we could have done this remotely. You know. And, and I could have been with a webcam. When you go to, when you, like the, the cliché now is you go to Best Buy to see it in person and then order an Amazon, right? So, no salesperson involved.

Louis: And so, what we found, we did something called a meta-analysis. And resoundingly, we're finding that touch is beneficial in almost every instance. I say almost every because there are some instances where, if aisles are too close and people bump into each other, that tends to be negative. Cause that's not, that's not the touch people are looking for. But, um, but it's just emphasizing what I find so interesting is that it's just emphasizing that human to human contact. So that, that's, that's one aspect of my research.

Louis: Another aspect is then looking from the manager's side of: How do you motivate salespeople? Like how do you motivate a sales team in this digital space? And looking at like transformational leadership of inspiring communication, inspiring intellectual stimulation. Having salespeople provide more value from an intellectual level instead of the just this bare-bones tech-, uh, just ordering online. You know, ordering online is just real-click, real-quick one-click, is what I was trying to say. And having managers inspire innovation and having salespeople be able to think on the spot and come up with new ideas for their customers.

Louis: We saw, actually, so there is such a thing, especially now, of too much innovation, so, so salespeople can be too innovative with their customers, can turn their customers off. What we're finding is that managers have the ability to intellectually stimulate their salespeople to innovate in a direct matter and not just be all over the place. Cause you can have too much innovation, which I thought was really interesting.

Amy: Like you're doing something that's too off putting because it's too different?

Louis: You got it. You got it. And so those two projects are something that, I've worked on....

Amy: Does the best sales strategy require people?

Louis: That's an interesting question. I mean it really is because you could, I could name any product for you right now and you could probably tell me how it could be automated, And I don't know if.... In the touch article, in the touch piece, we allude to the fact that robotic touch has the potential to stimulate the same effects that human touch does.

Amy: Okay. Is that why, like, they're making robots seem a lot more humanlike?

Louis: Sure. Yeah.

Amy: Yeah. Just even their voice, like I've noticed that. So, nowadays you don't really even know when you're talking to a robot on the phone.

Louis: Absolutely.

Amy: They've gotten so good at mimicking, I guess, human speech.

Louis: What you just described is called the Turing test. Alan Turing was a British engineer or scientist in World War II, and he helped make the enigma machine to crack the German

Amy: Yes.

Louis: Codes. Right.

Amy: There is a movie.

Louis: Yes. Yeah, exactly. Great movie. Ben, Benedict Cumberbatch. Right?

Amy: Yeah.

Louis: So, there's this term called the Turing test, which basically says that if a computer can simulate a human being so well that the person on the other end can't decipher if it's a robot or a human being, it's passed the Turing test.

Amy: Okay

Louis: And only recently with Google's latest assistant has the topic been brought up again saying we think that Google's passed the Turing test.

Amy: Wow. That's monumental.

Louis: Yeah. I mean, you can, you can look on YouTube or whatever of, of that latest AI conversation and the person or the AI makes a phone call and sets appointments and you can hear the other end of it. Of the person making a reservation saying, "Oh, no, this time's not going to work. What about this time?" And then the assistant saying, "Yeah, I think that'll work, 10 AM's okay." You know and having pauses and mannerisms and that person on the other end had no idea that it was just the AI. So, so what does that, what does that look like going forward?

Louis: And will people, will people get fed up with AI and say, "You know what, all of this is great, but I miss just speaking to someone that has facial expressions, and is unpredictable and, and is, you know, warm to the touch and all that stuff. And again, just me saying that I can think in my head, well, you can, you can simulate warmth. You can, you can have facial expressions on.... So, I don't know, and that, that's kind of the, and I liked that I don't know. I want to kind of go into it without a definite goal in mind and just kind of do a whole literature review and just kind of see an offer up questions of, you know, what does this look like?"

Amy: And things change throughout time. So even, like the best tactics for the next coming decades are probably not going to be the best tactics in, you know, a century from now, you know, like as, as things change within society. So, yeah.

Louis: Yeah. I have no doubt that in the near future, we will be operating alongside technology way more than we are now. I mean, just the rise in technological integration with human life is,

is just incredible. And so, I hope that a lot of that advancement comes in the medical field of, you know, micro-technologies um, helping with cancer or whatever. But, in terms of like person to person interaction, I mean, who knows.

Louis: So, you know, that's kind of like the dissertation flow if you will. I'm a little early on the dissertation side, so that'll be refined. I know I'm going to have to reign it in a little bit, but that's kind of my broad topic right now. What is the future of salespeople in the digital era? And taking that transactional relationship between salesperson and employee, or in customer, and turning it into a more transformational, of helping solve problems and helping, um, be innovative on the job in a learning organization, meaning that everyone's growing together, but with an emphasis on this digital era.

Louis: Because if you think about it, social media influencers, so take your, your famous, your famous YouTube personality. They push product way more than any sales force can. I mean, so PewDiePie's, the biggest YouTuber, right over a hundred million subscribers. Each video gets over 6 million eyes on it. Every video.

Amy: That's crazy.

Louis: Now, he doesn't do product placement anymore because he sells his own merchandise. But when he did, I mean, I don't know, how many salespeople would you have to hire to get in front of 6 million people multiple times a week? I mean, the scale at which some of these social media influencers can influence purchasing behavior is enormous. And so, I'm very much interested in seeing what that, what that looks like. You know, is it more profitable to have a whole sales force with one person than hire a whole sales team? I don't know.

Louis: Now that's, now that's just regular consumer products like Dollar Shave Club or Hello Fresh or whatever. Right. But, when you get into like medical equipment and things like that, you would hope that the salesperson would be more than just a, a YouTube personality. So, it would depend on the product category, but it, it's, it's coming. I mean, it's there, it's already there. Like, we're already there in terms of like that kind of sales behavior.

Amy: Well, Louis, it was great having you on the podcast. Thank you, so much, for talking with me and telling me a little bit about your story. I hope you have a good rest of your day.

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