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Matt 00:00:21 To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape, brands must move at an ever-increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder and CEO of Suzy. Join me and key industry leaders as we dive deep into the shifting consumer trends within their industry, why it matters now, and how you can keep up.

Welcome to the Speed of Culture. Up today in the Speed of Culture podcast, we are thrilled to welcome Louis Carr, the President of BET and founder of Waymaker Media. Over nearly four decades at BET, Louis has helped shape one of the most influential media brands in the world for Black audiences, driving culture, community impact, and brand innovation while helping redefine how major companies connect with multicultural consumers. Louis, so great to see you today. Thanks so much for joining.

Louis 00:01:04 Thank you for having me, Matt. It's a pleasure.

Matt 00:01:06 Absolutely. So I've been looking forward to this. You know, you spent nearly forty years at BET, and you recently stepped into the role of President. What would you say some of the biggest shifts are in how you've witnessed Black culture influence mainstream business? And where do you think maybe people are still underestimating its impact?

Louis 00:01:23 Well, I think more and more people are realizing the influence and the impact of Black culture. And because of that, I think businesses are now starting to understand how they must embrace it, how they must engage with it, and how they must look at it for future growth. So it is an exciting time in our business, and how you navigate those waters decides how you survive or how you thrive.

Matt 00:01:52 Yeah. And, obviously, BET is known as a television network. I know it's a multimedia platform. And just given how long you've been at the business, how has BET evolved over time, and what are some of the parallels to how the media industry at large has also evolved?

Louis 00:02:08 That's a great question, Matt. But I think most B2B people look at BET as this cable network, but our audience looks at us as a brand. And we know that by things that we do in digital or live events or just even our social media. People have this great expectation of this brand, and that is to serve them, to engage with them, to understand them, to support them. Sure.

Matt 00:02:38 And you mentioned some of these pillars, but what are some of the, I guess, evolutions of BET over time that have been successful in connecting with audiences? Because you're right. Like, the cable network kind of run has kind of, I guess, flattened off to some

extent because consumers have so much more choice now. Right? They can get information on YouTube and everywhere else. There was a time where when I was growing up, probably when you were growing up too, where cable TV kinda ruled the day. Right? And at first, you had three channels on TV, and then all of a sudden, you had ESPN and the Golf Network and BET, and you had all these other kinda more niche programming. But now you have this massive long tail. So, I guess, how has BET reacted to that in terms of its overall media pillars where it really invested and focused on?

Louis 00:03:21 Well, in the first thirty days, when I got into this job, I knew, number one, we had to get deeper in serving our community, and we established this pillar of community. And I think any brand in this particular time has to get deeper into their audience. Through us, it's gonna be through community, and that is something that I think we can easily do. I think it's an expectation that our community has of us, and we're headed down that path.

I think the other thing is culture. We have been a brand that has been on the cutting edge of Black culture from the very, very beginning. I think now that we're going to get deeper into that, I think it's a little more complex than it was twenty, thirty years ago, but I clearly know that we can figure that out. And then the final C is connection. We must be able to connect our consumers. We must be able to connect our affiliates. We must be able to connect our marketers altogether so it serves the good of the business and good of our community and our culture. So those are the sort of pillars that we're operating. Everything that we do has to touch at least one of those pillars. Every press release, every piece of content—all of that must make sure that we're at least serving one of those three C's at all times.

Matt 00:04:54 Yeah. And, of course, the business itself is supported by advertisers, and you've helped generate over—I saw \$10,000,000,000 of advertising revenue throughout your career. How has the conversation with brands changed when it comes to kind of investing in multicultural audiences? Because America is so much more diverse than it used to be even 20 years ago. And investing in a platform like BET may have been seen as niche in the past, but now it's definitely core and the central pillar to the American consumer. So has that changed the way that you have conversations with brands, and what are brands looking for from your platform?

Louis 00:05:30 Well, I think what's common among all brands in all industries is one word called growth. Everybody wants growth. I don't care what you're selling, what you're offering. Everybody wants growth. And when you look at our marketplace and our consumers—whether we are number one in that category or whether it's our impact or influence on those who are outside the Black community—it's still about growth every single day. And I think we see that based on the data, and it's in all categories. Whether it is in beverages, technology, or even politics, people still want our consumers to show up, have an opinion, use that opinion for influence and impact. So those are the types of conversations we're having today, and we are just showing them the data that supports those things.

Matt 00:06:27 Yeah. And speaking of brands, like many companies, I find, they talk about purpose and inclusion, but I think consumers have really grown skeptical over time because I feel like brands increasingly just throw any label against themselves to try to appease the population at large whether they mean it or not. But, of course, there are some brands that do genuinely connect with Black consumers per se from just checking the box. I guess, what do those brands have in common, the brands that really are committed to supporting this community?

Louis 00:06:59 The things that they have in common is that one thing: they've done the work and said, "Where am I gonna get my growth from?". Am I gonna get my growth from international? Am I gonna get my growth from the Hispanic audience? Am I gonna get my growth from the Black audience? They've done that work, and they know what type of contribution each of those areas needs to—to deliver in order for them to grow. So when we find brands who come in and say, "You know, Louis, we have to grow 10%, 12%, 14% within the Black community in order for us to hit our overall growth goals of 5%, 6%," those are the people who you know are gonna be engaged. Those are the people who you know are going to be committed. So that's who we sort of rally around. That's who we serve the most, and those are the brands that we are very confident in. And they are confident in us that we can be an advisor to them to guide them to the next level.

Matt 00:08:00 Yeah. And, of course, for these brands that capture growth, a big part of capturing growth is the new consumer, the youth. And, obviously, you've had a front-row seat to the rise of multiple generations of consumers through your ride at BET, and now the new consumer is Gen Z. Of course, that's the generation that grew up with the iPhone in the households. They are mobile-first, and they're consuming your content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok all day long. And now there's Gen Alpha who's gonna be known as the AI generation—they're the first generation to grow up with AI in the household. How does a platform like yours and the brands that you serve, I guess, effectively evolve to be able to connect with this new generation? Because MTV is no longer, right? Like, I was shocked when that happened. It was a big part of our upbringing, but it's gone. And probably one of the reasons why is they didn't evolve fast enough. They didn't embrace social media and digital fast enough. You guys, you know, obviously, have, but how can you continue to do so moving forward?

Louis 00:08:57 I think we have this advantage of when we embrace our community, we embrace young people. Young people are very, very, very vocal about what they want and what they don't want. And my leadership to my senior leadership team is all about being young, staying young, being relevant at the end of the day. That's why we have the host of the BET Awards that we have today, Druski, because we understand his impact on culture. We understand that he is young—he's, matter of fact, the youngest host that the BET Awards has ever had. That didn't happen by accident. That was very intentional on how we approach and what we're gonna deliver on.

When we look at the people who perform in the BET Awards, you've got those who are iconic, and then we've got those who are on their way to be iconic. Young people, whether it's people like the international superstar Tems, we understand the influence and the impact that they are having on our culture and our community. So we understand we gotta be young. I mean, that's no choice. That's something that has to be very intentional in everything we do. And we have another program called NextGen where we're working with college students and making sure that they can participate around some of our big events like the BET Awards, like the NAACP Image Awards. So we get them engaged. We try to teach them business acumen at the same time, but we're also learning from them. They are teaching us. So it's a two-way street.

Matt 00:10:37 Yeah. And—and speaking of youth, you created Waymaker, which is a platform that intentionally focuses on mentorship and growth and leadership. What was the impetus behind you starting that, and what are some of the benefits that you hope to personally get out of it as well as the community that you serve?

Louis 00:10:54 Well, I had started the Intern Foundation twenty-some years ago. And during COVID, I said, "How can I take that to the next level? How can I have greater impact on young people? How can I have greater impact on my community?". And we started this Waymaker brand to inspire, motivate, and educate people on what their best life can look like. Because if you are sort of in just one area of your life or one community of your life, you don't know how big the world is. So we wanted to sort of show people how opportunities and how hard work and how commitment can really lead to what your best life can possibly be. And we do that by highlighting people who came from the same backgrounds, who had the same struggles, and how they overcame those things in order to be leaders in our community and our industries today.

Matt 00:11:54 We'll be right back with the Speed of Culture after a few words from our sponsors.

So let's shift gears a little bit and talk about you, because you've obviously overcome that yourself. And we'd love to hear a little bit more about your story over the span of your career, and what are some of the challenges you faced and maybe some of the key learnings that you are imparting on tomorrow's leaders.

Louis 00:12:14 I would say, Matt, that the number one thing that always comes back to me is I was an All-American track athlete, and I didn't wanna go to college. I had offers from every major university in the country. And I said, "That's not for me."

Matt 00:12:31 Why was it not for you?

Louis 00:12:33 My family was poor, and we needed a check, like, right now. I didn't have four years to delay. I wanted to help my mother. I wanted to help my grandmother right now. And it took a community of people—coaches, neighbors, teachers—to convince me to go to college for free. And I'm just like—when I look back on it, I'm like, "How crazy could I have been?",

alright? And I went to college for free. I went to Drake University, and those things stayed with me as I knew other people who had college debt.

So when I look at some of the things that I do now—the support of education, the support of—you know, I serve on the board of directors of Drake University. I used to be on the board of directors of Chicago State. It's because I never forgot the opportunity that I had to go to school for free. And I can tell you this—it's something very personal that my mother said to me. Said, "Son, we don't know what you would have been without a college education, but we know what you are with one." So I understand the importance of waymakers—people who see something in you, Matt, before you see it in yourself, and they decide to do something about it. So that's what this Waymaker brand stands for. That's who I am as a person. When I got in this industry and I look at where I'm at today, it wasn't because I just worked hard and I had some success. It's because people saw something in me. People were intentional about trying to put me in the positions and the rooms that I am today. That was very intentional, and that's what waymakers are, and we need more of those for everybody.

Matt 00:14:21 And, of course, once you're set on your way and you get over that initial friction, of course, it's not always roses. Right? You do hit challenges personally and professionally along the way. When you look back at your career, what is one or two moments that you look at where it was very challenging for you and you had to overcome obstacles? And how were you able to get past that? What comes to mind?

Louis 00:14:44 Well, I'll tell you one that was here at BET. It was in 2009. We had a horrible mishap in our sales service department. And that mishap, mistake, whatever you wanna call it, cost the company about \$7,000,000. And I was so devastated that I told, at that time, Viacom leadership that I was resigning. I was embarrassed. I thought it was the right thing to do as a leader—it happened on my watch. And I said, "I understand. I'm out. Just tell me how quickly you want me out the door, if you want me to leave immediately."

Matt 00:15:28 You're trying to take accountability for it.

Louis 00:15:30 Yeah. And they chuckled at me. They said, "Louis, you're so crazy. You're just so crazy." They said, "Things happen, but it doesn't wipe away the tremendous career and commitment and success that you have had. It never has crossed our mind that you would not be here. Never. Through all of this, the investigations, it never crossed our mind. It happened. We all learned from it. We'll move forward. You'll be a better leader because of it, and get to work." So that sort of commitment that people have had to me and for me through thick and thin, through good and bad, is the reason that I do the work that I do today.

Matt 00:16:21 Yeah. I mean, I think one of my takeaways from that story, and thanks for sharing it, Louis, is that doing the right thing's always the right thing, and your first inclination was to take accountability for it. Like, what you said—it happened under my watch. I feel like so many people would say, "Well, they messed up. They should get fired, but I didn't know anything about it. There's nothing I could've done." But I think you took the high road, and I do think that

more often than not—and there's no guarantees they could have accepted your resignation—but you're putting yourself in the position where you're approaching it with accountability and integrity. And I think when you do that over time, the right things will happen to you. And it's hard to swallow that pill, but I think it's something that we need to do sometimes.

Louis 00:17:01 That's what leadership is all about. Now, Matt, some people did get fired, but I was willing to put myself as part of that group because of the mishap.

Matt 00:17:11 Yeah. Absolutely. And when you think of tomorrow's leaders and people who are just starting off in their career—which we have a lot of listeners that are younger here in the podcast, especially younger Black professionals that are entering the workforce—what's some advice that you have for them to set themselves up for success so they can end up in the seat like you're in one day?

Louis 00:17:32 Well, the things that I think are very important are, number one: understand the business and understand your partner's business, which requires tremendous commitment and study and continued learning. Have a big dream for yourself. As they say, think big, and go after that. Oh yeah, you're gonna get pushed back. You're gonna get people who tell you no. You're gonna get people who tell you, "That's not for you." Have a big dream and be committed to achieving that. That is one thing that I think has taken me a long way is being able to say, "It is for me. It's not just for people who may not look like me, who may not come from the same background as me, who may not have the same beliefs as me. I can contribute in a major way." I am very intentional about that. And the next thing: find somebody who believes in you. Find that waymaker, because sometimes people wait and try to stay—

Matt 00:18:40 How do you find your waymaker?

Louis 00:18:42 I think you find your waymakers by being accessible, by showing up in different places, by making yourself uncomfortable. I can't stress that enough—that you've gotta go into rooms where you're not comfortable. You've gotta show up in places where people don't look like you. You've gotta be able to push through that uncomfortableness in order to be successful. Because as you know, Matt, in order to have growth, you have to be uncomfortable because you gotta do some things differently. You've gotta make some changes. You've gotta do all those types of things that kinda make you kinda squeamish. And it's like, you know, "Is this for me? How will they accept me? How will they view me?". You've gotta push through that uncomfortableness. And I—

Matt 00:19:31 —love that, Louis. And what's interesting is if you look at the way culture has evolved, especially here in America, there's been all these technologies and conveniences that essentially allow you to avoid being uncomfortable. Like, there are online dating apps, so you don't have to approach that girl or guy because you could just swipe, right? You don't have to reach out and introduce yourself; you could just basically copy and paste an email on LinkedIn, even though we both know it doesn't always work. But I think you don't even have to hail a

taxi—you hit a button and an Uber shows up. Or order food—you hit a button, food shows up. So I think everything has kinda been conditioned to save people time and make life more convenient, which is sort of the opposite of being uncomfortable. And I think there's a risk there for younger people of conditioning their brains not to go into that discomfort area where I think all the benefit is, like you've said.

Louis 00:20:19 But, Matt, I do tell my interns: all of that technology, all of those processes and procedures make things easier, but then there becomes the moment of truth. And that moment of truth is when you have to show up—the real person you are—and you have to face that music. We do this exercise in our internship program: interns, before they leave at the end of the summer, they have to talk about themselves for five minutes straight. Not four and a half, not five and a half—five minutes straight. Because when they get out of school for a job interview, most of them—they'll have some internships, but they won't have a lot of experience. And they're gonna have to sell themselves to that person on the other side of the desk. And what they say in their opening five minutes determines whether that person continues to listen, or that person says, "This is a waste of time and this is not the one for this particular job or opportunity." So we practice that. And I can tell you, Matt, most of the interns don't get through that five minutes correctly on the first try. Most of them have to do it a second or a third time because most people, to your point of technology and the ease of how we navigate through our environment, have not become accustomed to telling their own story.

Matt 00:21:48 And that's so important—you have to be able to tell your own story. You have to be your own best advocate, and, really, you have to carve out your own path. Like they say, like everyone else is taken, you have to just be yourself. And I think it's a great exercise, frankly, Louis—one I might steal from you for some leadership that we do.

Louis 00:22:05 Please do.

Matt 00:22:06 So to wrap up here—and as I knew it would be such a fantastic discussion—we always ask our guests when we wrap up if there's a saying or a mantra that has helped sort of encapsulate their professional journey to date. I'm just wondering what comes to mind for you.

Louis 00:22:19 Well, the saying and the mantra is: think big—so big that it makes you uncomfortable at the end of the day. And that is something that whether you are 18 or whether you are 75, I think people have to really continue to drive and think about the future. I'm gonna tell you a quick story, Matt. I was in Florida, and I was at a furniture store. And me and my wife, we make our purchase, and at the end, you know, they're getting all your information for deliveries and everything. And we give the guy our address, and he goes, "Um, oh, you're my neighbor." This is the guy who's checking us out, right? We stare at him, "We're your neighbor?". He said, "Yes, you're my neighbor." And, Matt, we still arrogantly said, "Oh, I don't think so." And he said, "Oh, no. Uh, no, you're my neighbor for sure." I said, "Okay." He said, "Have you seen the big yacht? It's about a 175-footer that sits right there on the Intracoastal. It says *My Lady*." I

said, "I have." He said, "Yes, in front of the house that was just finished a couple of months ago." I said, "Yes."

And he started to laugh at us, Matt. He said, "So you're wondering why I'm working at a furniture store with a house that big and a yacht that big?". He says, "Because I'm learning. I'm thinking about buying this chain of furniture stores, and I'm learning the business from the ground up." Wow, it took everything out of me. He said, "I come from a custom that learning is continuous. And if I'm going to invest a lot of money, I've gotta make sure I know what I think I know." And that was many years ago, Matt, but it's a lesson that I learned that I'll never forget: keep learning.

Matt 00:24:21 Yeah. And that's probably why he's been so successful to begin with—he has this curiosity and thirst for learning.

Louis 00:24:26 Absolutely. Great.

Matt 00:24:27 Well, Louis, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to share your story and your insights with us today. It's been fantastic, and I can't wait for our listeners to hear our conversation.

Louis 00:24:36 Thank you, Matt. Appreciate it, and the best of luck to you.

Matt 00:24:39 Likewise. On behalf of Suzy and the Adweek team, thanks again to the great Louis Carr, the President of BET and founder of Waymaker Media, for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review the Speed of Culture podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Till next time, see you soon, everyone. Bye-bye.

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