

WHY WE FOUNDED
KETCHCOM DEVELOPMENT
By Eric Paul Engel



*"Where does the wind come from?" she asked.
"I do not know," he replied, "I only know that it fills my sails and carries me away."*

Building The Boat

In November 2003, Jowita L. Wysocka and I were visiting friends in Florida for a much-needed vacation away from the cold and the bustle of Washington, D.C. At the time, I was working for a subcontractor to the Department of Defense's Information Technology Agency (ITA) in the Pentagon. As a consultant providing communication training to every level of employee throughout ITA, I was often privy to movements of the organization well before the general population. It was in this capacity that I caught wind that my company's contract was questionably secure. As our time in Florida dwindled and our departure date quickly approached, my thoughts shifted from palm trees back to the Pentagon and my uncertain employment future.

The friends we were visiting had their own company. After many years with their noses to the grindstone (and countless iterations of their business model) the endeavor was finally turning a profit, and the timing couldn't have been better. They'd recently given birth to a son named Bill, and a steady income meant familial and financial stability. Throughout our time together, every minute was packed with energized conversation. We talked about family, work/life balance, values, and visions. We reveled in stories of our past and dreams of our future. By the time we said goodbye on our final day in Florida, our heads were reeling from the experience. We were physically exhausted but mentally charged.

As our plane gently pulled itself skyward and Tampa faded from view, I turned to Jowita and enviously commented, "I wish we could do that."

"Do what?" Jowita asked.

"Have our own business," I replied. We sat in silence for several minutes before Jowita turned to me and smiled.

"So why don't we?" she said, and in that golden moment a dream was born. By the time the plane touched down in Washington, I had a pocket full of napkins littered with notes and a general design for Ketchcom Development, Inc. We didn't call it that just yet, but the seed had been planted. Within a month I'd quit my job and begun working full-time on the company.

Setting Sail

A famous author once noted, "The cure for anything is salt water—sweat, tears, or the sea." Since childhood I have harbored dreams of sailing off beyond the horizon and circumnavigating the globe. Shortly after joining forces with Jowita, it became apparent that she too was powerfully drawn to the ocean and secretly harbored dreams of travel to far off exotic lands. As such, sailing and the sea play an integral role in our company's design—from our logo to our business model.

Any sailor worth his salt will find familiarity in our logo. The fundamental design is based on the flag for the letter K (kilo) from the International Code of Maritime Signals. International code flags are used to signal between two ships or between a ship and the shore. Also called signaling flags, they are a set of flags of different colors, shapes and markings, which used singly or in combination have different meanings. The flags include 26 square flags that depict the letters of the alphabet, ten numeral pendants, one answering pendant, and three substituters or repeaters. Each flag represents a letter or number and can spell out a word or message. Each alphabetic flag can also mean a common word or phrase. One-flag signals are urgent or very common signals. Holding true to our seafaring vision and our fundamental mission (communication development), we chose to employ the Kilo flag both for its graphic beauty as well as its inherent meaning, “I desire to communicate.”

To complete our logo, Jowita sketched a couple of sails that her father then converted into a useable digital image. Literally, the sails symbolize the “ketch” in Ketchcom Development. A ketch is a sailing vessel with two masts: a taller “main” mast forward as well as a “mizzen” mast aft (located fore of the rudder post). Thanks in part to its generous sail-plan, the ketch is ideally suited for long distance cruising and is one of the most beautiful boats afloat under full sail. For over 20 years I’ve dreamed of sailing round the world, and in my dream I’ve always been standing at the helm of a ketch.

Figuratively, the sails in our logo symbolize the voyage that is life, love, and business. In myriad ways, sailing provides the perfect metaphor. A voyage is not about being in port. It’s about being at sea under sail, at the mercy of the winds and the weather. It’s about strategic planning and tactical implementation. It’s about plying uncharted waters and occasionally running aground. A sailor doesn’t circle the globe by lingering close to shore.

Another way in which sailing and the sea have influenced our endeavor is in the realm of mobility. When the time comes to cast off our lines and set sail for Bora Bora, we have no intention of giving up the reins and calling it a day. We started Ketchcom Development to pursue our professional goals with passion, yet at the same time maintain serenity through work/life balance (values rarely associated with American business today). And we don’t think we’re alone.

Our business model is built on a foundation grounded in the effective and efficient use of communication technology. Thanks to the continuous stream of technological innovations that characterize the dawn of the 21st century, we are ideally situated to work with fellow travelers from across the country and around the world as we grow. Geographic mobility allows us to tap into a much larger experiential gene pool, in turn allowing us to be far more selective in our hiring practices. As a direct result, we are ideally situated to employ like-minded professionals with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds who are equally passionate about their careers, but who refuse to pay the price of family, friends, and sanity in their pursuit of gainful employment.

To paraphrase an ancient Chinese proverb, a journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step. Founding Ketchcom Development was our first step, and it’s proven to be the most significant step we’ve ever taken toward realizing our personal and professional dreams. We’ve invested our time, our money, and our passion in the vessel, and now that we’re under sail it’s all about making the most of the wind.