



COMMERCE: **UNIFIED.**

## THE MAN BEHIND THE CLOUD



Thoughts from Sam Kliger

*Sam Kliger*

President & CEO of KWVI, Inc.

## This Is What Happens When You Say “No” To Survivors

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We talk a lot about the technology that’s driving fundamental change in the retail industry.

I founded a technology company in 1985 called KWVI that has been at the heart of US retail for the past 32 years, and is still a leader in our market. If you ask any of our loyal clients, they would tell you that transformation isn’t new. Evolution is a given.

That’s the first thing I tell people that ask why and how I keep going as CEO after more than three decades. Life never stays the same for long. It’s fun. There’s always something new to learn.

When you get through your first grade at school it feels great that you’re about to graduate into the second grade. You’re not the youngest in the school or at the bottom of the ladder anymore.

Then one day you start in high school and you’re back at the bottom of the ride. But you climb up again and suddenly you’re a senior. Somebody should tell young students that this awesome cycle and sense of renewal will continue for the rest of their lives.

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Certainly in technology, in business and in retail; every single time you get to a point where you think you’ve got it all straight, you experience the dawn of another phase where you feel you’re almost starting all over again.

For example, six or seven years ago the word ‘cloud’ was coined and all of a sudden, what KWI had already been doing was no longer an alternative but mainstream.

There’s another factor that keeps me energized in leading this company and that’s my instinctive and visceral response to the word ‘no’. To explain I need to take you back 32 years and tell you what being a technology entrepreneur was like in 1985.

When Bill Gates started out, he was thinking about the world of mainframes and everybody was telling him: “Nobody’s ever going to own a personal computer.”

Similarly, Steve Jobs had a vision to put all the music you own in your pocket and worked for it even as everybody was telling him: “What you’re trying to do? It can’t be done.”

Richard Branson, and his vision with Virgin was the same. When these guys were out there trying to reimagine the future, everywhere they turned people gave them the same answer. That answer was ‘no - what you’re trying to do cannot be done’. Most people take that response and accept it. These guys went looking for another answer.

The word ‘no’ aggravates them. It makes them say: “I’m going to go out of my way to prove this person wrong”.

Around the mid-80s, I told my boss to ‘go stick it’. I’ll never forget it. I worked for two years at a company called Gould Computer Systems. We built simulators for the US Government for the space shuttle; for fighter jets. I got to fly military helicopters. I was a systems analyst.



The job came through a recruiter. As it happened, about a week before I took the recruiter's call for the role, I'd also met Dan Markowitz, a Benetton franchisee with stores out on Long Island, NY. He needed help due to having no retail system in place. Dan Markowitz would later become my first customer at KWI. For two years I was working at Gould and at night I'd go out to Long Island to meet Dan to listen to him talk about his problems.

As a young, visionary company, Benetton was looking for advanced technology to make their store operations as seamless and efficient as possible. Ideally, they needed a system that could be easily leveraged to accommodate their global expansion plans.

I saw that there were no technology solutions that addressed the specific needs of the retail industry. So, I invented my own. Benetton decided to keep its focus on retailing and not dedicate resources to running IT. So KWI was born. We were, and still are a retail technology solutions and total service provider.

Two years into my job with Gould I wrote a letter to my boss and told him I'm going to serve him better as a customer than as an employee. People told me I was crazy. That I was going to fall flat on my face.

Now, my father is alive and he's a Holocaust survivor. There's something about Holocaust survivors that even I can't explain as the son of one. They were people who had to figure out a way to survive every day. Maybe I have some of his DNA and as a result I've been able to survive in a business where for the first two decades of my company's life, people kept telling me: "Nobody wants to outsource. Nobody wants a SaaS business. You're never going to make it."

And the more people told me that I wasn't going to make it, the more fire it gave me to do what I do. To get Benetton as a first customer it required me to beat the competition from both IBM, then the leader in US retail technology, and Olivetti, owned by AT&T.

What both those companies wanted to sell Benetton was a system that the client would buy and run for all its franchisees. More than 30 years later, the strength of our full-service model is now being validated by a major industry shift towards SaaS, PaaS and all the other catch-phrases that are now in retail.

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## Sam Kliger “The Man Behind The Cloud”

A true entrepreneur of the computer age, Sam quit formal schooling (in computer science and mathematics) to pursue his vision. In 1985, observing long lines at the local Benetton store, he demonstrated the need for a computerized system for the franchisee. Unable to find one that met the retailer's expectations, he created his own. From his vision for an affordable, PC-based solution for specialty retailers, Sam went on to develop the single-platform, feature-rich technology that is today's leading enterprise-class, cloud-based system for the retail industry. Sam takes his clients' success personally. He is a hands-on leader with an obsession for excellence, who guides every aspect of KWI. Married, with four children, he is a deeply committed family man and is active in charitable foundations.



It's no exaggeration to say KWI began the retail industry trend towards SaaS. We were the first, and we're still the best. It's a simple matter of long-term experience, coupled with a personal obsession for totally responsive customer service.

So when you talk about people who are constantly being told 'no, your idea is crazy. Many times their ideas will indeed be crazy but sometimes they aren't. If you have the determination to do it, you just do it.

For some of us, the word 'no' is a powerful driver.