

Meet Cerno: Founder Q+A

Carefully balancing contemporary design, craftsmanship and innovation.

Cerno, a California-based designer and manufacturer of contemporary lighting, is grown out of the childhood friendship of its three co-founders, Brett Englander, Daniel Wacholder and Nick Sheridan. Building its company on lasting bonds and trust, Cerno finds a careful balance of contemporary design, technological innovation and craftsmanship.

360 recently sat down with Brett Englander to hear about how childhood adventures on Southern California beaches led to the company's beginnings, and how the co-founders' friendship still nurtures the company today.

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360: How did Cerno get started?

Brett Englander: Cerno was started 10 years ago last month by myself and two of my childhood best friends, Daniel Wacholder and Nick Sheridan. We all grew up in Laguna Beach, California. Nick and I have been friends since preschool and Dan came into the mix in middle school. So, long before Cerno existed, there was just a friendship. That matters because it's important to know Cerno grew out of a passion for building things and a belief in one another.

When you look back, Daniel, Cerno's Director of Engineering & Operations, was the guy fixing the engine of our boat. Nick, Director of Design, was always off daydreaming, being creative and drawing. And still, to this day, I'm definitely the least technically inclined of the three of us. But I was always getting delegated a job of some kind. If we were building something, Bret would say, "Go sand that board." I was also the one that always had a camera and was chronicling the things we were doing from an early age.

As our friendship evolved throughout high school, we got into bigger projects. We built our first boat, and bought and repaired some other boats. We built a stairway to the beach to memorialize a really good friend who had passed away. We built a palapa out of a thousand pound telephone pole that became the hangout for our crew for almost seven years. There was always this love for adventure, design and building as part of our friendship.

We had zero thoughts about starting a company back then, we never even talked about it. It just happened naturally and unintentionally. But when you look back, you can see the foundation being constructed. When we finally decided to start the company in 2009, we were very naive, but confident in our ability to do something great together. From day one, we all knew our roles and hit the ground running.

360: How did you get things off the ground from there?

BE: Our naiveté was a blessing. Cerno was started during a very disruptive time because the market was transitioning in response to LED technology and, at the same time, e-commerce channels were not yet established. We were launching our company into the unknown as far as channels go. And our use of LED technology provided us with an opportunity because the industry had designed a then-antiquated aesthetic around obsolete lighting technology. Our approach to design wasn't tethered to anything other than using LEDs. That liberated our design process rather than trying to retrofit design to new technology.

We had timing on our side. We also worked really hard. A lot of friends kind of wrote us off because we were just so tractor beamed. Failure wasn't an option. But we had the luck of coming into a market during a disruptive time right at the end of the recession. A lot of those factors played into our ability to grab some market share and create awareness with the novelty of our product and our story. A lot of the early press we got was enamored by the story of three friends deciding to start a 100% made in America manufacturing company. All of that really gave us momentum and made us stand out in the market.

360: When it comes to design, is it a collaborative process between the three of you?

BE: It definitely is. Nick leads the design team and is doing the real design work. But we collectively work on each new piece. We'll decide on a category and discuss market opportunity and price. We've always said "design dictates price and price doesn't dictate design." But we generally know what it's going to cost to build something based on the complexity and the materials. So, we give Nick some very loose parameters and then he goes off and works his magic usually in a sketch or Autocad. Then Daniel, Nick and I review those preliminary drawings. Usually it's unanimous and we all agree on the designs we want to see go into the next level of proofing.

At that point, it's still very much Nick going out into the factory and building a scale and form proof of concept depending on the fixture. Then, if we're all still on board after seeing it in 3D, it will get kicked over for formal engineering. That's when Daniel's team gets involved. They do more modeling, considering all the thermal management and electrical requirements. We also make sure what we've designed is actually buildable for the price we're targeting. Once that process is complete, we have another design meeting with the three of us, two of our engineers and the guy who runs our custom woodworking because he's a great reality check on the rest of us. He's the kind of guy who'll tell us to get our heads out of the clouds and make something that's actually buildable.

We have those meetings once a week. It's our goal—our ambitious goal—to deliver a new product every other month. One product could be 400 skews when you take into account different sizes, finishes and mounts. One product every other month doesn't sound like a lot, but when you've totaled the skews up it turns into a huge amount. We call it skew explosion.

The entire process is super collaborative and every time we do it, it breathes new life into the process and reminds us why we started this in the first place.

360: We know sustainability is very important to Cerno and you personally. Can you tell us about some of Cerno's efforts in that space?

BE: It's always been a passion to make sure we are building responsibly and sourcing responsibly. We were very intentional when we chose to build so much out of wood and stone. We wanted to put nature front-and-center. That's one of the things that makes people gravitate toward our products. It would be irresponsible for us to be exploiting nature and not caring for it at the same time.

Over the years, we've increasingly centered nature in our brand. In fact, very recently, we hired a Sustainability Coordinator because we have so many ideas and not enough time to make sure we're really doing things right. From the recycling and material optimization we're doing now to long-term goals around biodynamic farming, we're trying to make it a major component of who we are. Last year, we planted over 100 trees into a local creek that acts as a natural filter to the runoff that ultimately ends up on the South Laguna beach we grew up on. We do small acts like this, but I'm of the philosophy that we shouldn't talk about it, but rather, be about it.

Explore the Cerno's offering of contemporary lighting on Marketplace, and see how the Southern California company has turned a great story into a breathtaking product line.

EXPLORE CERNO

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