Interview with Kai Pradel – CEO and Founder of Media Silo

Dave: Welcome to the Elegant Workflow Podcast - A member of the Tech Podcast network Today we are speaking with Kai Pradel – CEO and Founder of Media Silo. Kai, welcome to the Podcast.

Kai: Thank you for having me.

Dave: So, tell us a little bit about your background and career track in starting Media Silo.

Kai: Yeah, my background is definitely in software. I've been working as either a software engineer or a product manager for the last 15 years or so. Yeah, that's my passion. I went to school for Marketing. I have a knack for starting my own business and really always pursued that and over the years kind of honed that skill as software engineer turned entrepreneur. And that's what I've been doing over the last 15 years.

Dave: Can you tell us a little bit what Media Silo is and I guess as a software engineer what led you to starting Media Silo. Was there a need that you saw or you had friends in the media entertainment industry? What led to having just to start off, I should start this business?

Kai: Yeah so, I went to school here in Boston at Emerson College and even though I didn't major in film as any student attending Emerson was involved in a bunch of film projects and I've graduated right at the time when the web was really starting to turn to video. This is before the YouTube days but it was pretty clear that video was going to play a role online. And so, I started a technology company that essentially used video on the web and it was a commercial production company that just looked at the strengths of the web combined with video for marketing and sales purposes and so we built a successful agency model. But over the years we realized that as we were working clients especially big clients, banks and other financial institutions that there was a long delay in just the basic review and approval cycle. They were not setup to come into the office to review talent for shoots. They really weren't setup to you know, popping a DVD and look at rough cuts of edits so really it was always a dance to distribute many files in different formats to many different people, to the point where it really delayed projects and you know, took 4 to 6 weeks longer per project because we could not overcome these hurdles and that was that time when we developed a toolset in-house that start to cut down on the time which was so successful that we decided to pursue that further. And really within a short period of time it became apparent that this was an untapped niche that we could really pursue full time. So in 2008, 2009, we really switched gears from the agency model and spent our entire time on pursuing Media Silo. You can say from a production and commercial production background, we switched over to software as a service and that's what we're still doing today.

Dave: So, it sounds like you're kind of ahead of the curb; everybody's starting to do that because you've been around quite a while right?

Kai: We have. And you know, the tools have changed a lot over the years but I think it's really helpful is to have been in the shoes of somebody who really needed the toolset that back then was really very basic need review and approval, but having been in those shoes as a creative person having to work with clients and not being able to get responses quickly that ensure that we would always know what the driving factor for our toolset.

Dave: Yeah, I lived in that world for a long time when I was editing and I remembered when we used to drop the tape off of at their house and the DVD and you didn't know that they've got it where with technologies like these you can see, hey they looked at it or they haven't looked at it but the best part is they're accountable, when they say yeah, I looked at it at 7, you can look at the log and they looked at it at 7 or no they looked at it at 3am.

Kai: Right. Exactly. Yeah, I mean, the specific tipping point for us you know, we had a major financial company. They had 5 different offices and we did a town selection to which the, or we did a casting, a town casting to which the client did not show up. So, you know, we had to send DVDs to 4 different locations to 12 different people. Some of which had DVD players, others didn't. And those that received the files electronically you know, we're on Windows, they couldn't read QuickTime files and then those who are on version of Windows that didn't support the right codec. So it was just you know, it was a mess. We definitely lived in a different day and age now where technology has made this problem go away.

Dave: And I don't think people have the patience that they used to have. If they get a file, I think they used to try to play it, now they're ah, and, or because they're so used to everything being streaming and being so easy.

Kai: Yeah and that's what were set out to do I mean, initially our focus was on creating really solid review and approval tools and even today that's you know, that's sort of our core market. But Media Silo really does 2 things: It solves the now problem that is how I call it, which is review and approval. But it also solved the problem that ultimately comes up when you're uploading a lot of files into a cloud platform which is the organizational piece of it. So, most of our customers hear about Media Silo because they need to send cuts to a producer or to a client and then they realize, really the potential of the platform that collects all the information and stores your video and that's really where the value comes in.

Dave: And what you're speaking about, is that edit companion or is that something different?

Kai: Well, that's our core platform, so we have core platform that lets you upload, video store, video manage it, invite users and really maintain a collection of files online. We have a feature that's called Quick links and Quick links is really a very fast and frictionless way of sending a video file in high quality to a set of viewers. And the important thing about Quick links, is that it always works and that, it makes your look, your work look really good so we be spending a lot of time architecting that experience and when I review I would like to see and how they navigate, you know, through a gallery of clips. And so, it's really been Quick links as the core platform. We're actually about to announce another product which is called Quick sites which takes the idea of Quick links a little bit further to where it actually show, lets you build a micro site or a static website that is fed with content from Media Silo. So, if you know, specifically for dailies or if you have media collections for clients and you're constantly producing more content, you don't have to manually update that website anymore but it will automatically flow into that website and be accessible to anyone without the need to really you know, login to as imagine been to a solution.

Dave: You also said Edit Companion, can you describe what that is and can you give what efficiencies that can give to productions?

Kai: Yeah, so Edit Companion is a panel plug-in for various Adobe products. We released the first version at NAB last year which was for Adobe Premier and we've since updated that several times and we're also going to be targeting other platforms such as After Effects. And

what it does is that it extends Media Silo to where the editor actually spends most of their time in the NLE. So, if you're a Premier user, you know, you have access to Media Silo without having to login via web browser. And that's important for a couple of reasons, it really cuts down on time but it also means that if you accumulate media inside of Media Silo and as you may know, you can store you know, high resolution footage in Media Silo with no problem. You could be you know, in a hotel room, finding some time to work on a rough cut but unless you have the media with you can't do that. Well, with this plug-in its actually possible to access all of your cloud based media files and then start editing those directly in Premier and because Media Silo when you upload files creates great looking proxies, you can use those proxies as rough cuts because they're not as large as your source files but when you're ready to turn that rough cut into something more final then you would reconnect with the source media which is stored locally or download it from Media Silo. So that's the first workflow. The second workflow is about sharing. So, when you are working on a rough cut and you're ready to share that out to somebody, it's really a one click operation to select the current sequence and send a Quick link directly from Premier. And that means you no longer have to first export the file and then upload it manually to another system and then send someone you know, an email with a link to it but it takes care of all of that. It's really an elegant solution.

Dave: How long is Edit Companion been available for?

Kai: We started working with Adobe a year and a half ago and we released it in NAB last year right in the midst of Adobe releasing the creative cloud update and so we issued a new version in the fall and really, since the fall it's been a product that's been growing really, really rapidly. We're finding more people adapt Premier and the various Adobe tools. Prelude is a great tool as well as a rough cut editor or as an ingest tool and it's really been taking off.

Dave: Yeah and I imagined it really simplifies things a lot on these productions. You can see, other way I can see doing this other than the manual way or munching is something like Adobe Anywhere which although it's amazing requires a lot of servers and infrastructure and support. Some of the major functions that people want out of anywhere, it sounds like they can get it just with Edit Companion.

Kai: Yeah, we actually had a customer referred to the Edit Companion as the budget version of Adobe Anywhere which was very flattering.

Dave: That is very flattering because Anywhere is amazing. I've seen it in operation and it's a great product but it's kind of like you know, what Avid has with Interplay, it's something that you have to build some infrastructure around. You can't just go and buy a server and flop it in and click a button and everything's all set up so, I think it's more designed for larger productions than what a lot of people are doing. What other improvements can a production expect by moving more to the cloud? Because it sounds like Edit Companion alone gives them a lot of additional things that they can do but what else can they expect by moving to more of cloud based workflows?

Kai: Well, that really depends. That's kind of a, that's a big question. I think there's many benefits that can be gained from embracing cloud based workflows. One is simply you bickered a storage in access anywhere and we're seeing that, that's really been a driving force in the last 3 or 4 years where even big media companies are starting to expose their, you know, previously 4 walled system securely in the cloud. So, that's been the push over the last 4 years which just means you're democratizing media, you're making it much more accessible. We find this especially whenever there is a need to communicate between teams, marketing team and the

production team where the promo team and the production team and historically there's always been friction in the process because you have to move production assets or finish the assets to the promo team and that's been just error prone or prone with lots of friction. With cloud based tools, you just throwing down those walls and you're making it much more accessible for different people in the organization to access media. So, I think that's one of the advantages but from a workflow perspective, I think we haven't even scratched the surface of what's possible because there's so much powerful automation that the cloud can lend that is never available in a local environment unless you're spending you know, hundreds thousands of dollars. So, aside from, aside from making a, the supply chain of media production work much more seamlessly by using cloud based tools, you will also, you're going to see more and more technology around enriching video content and your understand of what you have in your acid library. We launched a transcription service several years ago but we've also been doing a lot of work with automatic speech-to-text recognition and more and more video and image analysis. So, those are all tools that I see moving towards the cloud more in the next 3 years. But it's really exciting if you think about uploading media and having a platform automatically analyze content for you so that you can make sense of it. And as you're accumulating content online, you can pinpoint actors, you can pinpoint locations, you can have cloud based software give you an indication of, is it a night shot, is it a day shot, is it a, there's a lot of information that can be derived automatically and that's I think where the cloud is going to play a much bigger role in the years to come.

Dave: Anything that can be done around metadata automatically is huge because people just don't want to go in and enter in that information. All these things that you can get location from GPS, day shot you can get from time, or you can get from analysis of the video. There's a lot of metadata fields that lend can automatically come in from the camera so maybe then the script supervisors and all these people on set who are so overloaded already with all these new technologies maybe we can take a little bit off their plate but most of all have the metadata flowing through the process.

Kai: Absolutely.

Dave: Are there areas you think the industry should be doing differently around cloud collaboration and asset management? There's still a lot of productions that do everything on local drives and don't use the cloud and like you said, they make a file and put in on a FTP site or use Dropbox or I even know one guy, he puts things on DVDs and he said to me, no matter what happens, I know when I ship the DVD somebody will find a way to play it. They can put in on their laptop, that everybody has a DVD player or Blu Ray player.

Kai: Well, you talked about a few important trends here. Dropbox is definitely a big player and I think what we're seeing is, is that vendors in the industry need to really look at what these consumer based companies are doing. I think that as an asset management company you really need to look at treating your software in the way your users interact with it, the same way a user would interact with an Apple product or with Dropbox, you know it needs to be that simple. And when I look around, a lot of the tools out there are you know, especially typical asset management tools, they're really not made for a normal end user so you're creating all these barriers to using a platform from having to install it to configuring it to using it really, you know. Anytime I hear that somebody needs to conduct a user training, I kind of cringe because I feel like the creatives that we are, we expect better from the software companies that whose products we consume. So, I, when I started new service with any company be it for you know, for billing or you know, for writing software or whatever it maybe, I just expect that its simple and self explanatory. And that's really where we're making a big push right now, we're targeting the creative pro, we're targeting ourselves, were targeting people that use Dropbox, or that use you

know, simple cloud based tools, we're targeting the YouTube generation and that's not a bad you know, that's not a bad thing or derogatory term at all. It's just that we as consumers have gotten so used to things being simple and quick and easy and I think that's where media management and collaboration tools need to go. We need to find better ways to make our creatives do less thinking about how to do a job and let them do their job more.

Dave: I agree. I like to call the iPad-ification of our industry because people expect that they click a button, it's easy they don't have to really re-instruct it.

Kai: Well on the other side of it, is that, it needs to be useable but I also contend that it needs to be fun. There's a reason why certain consumer brands are successful because it's fun to interact with their products. And as a software vendor in the space and dealing with media, I think it's really important that we need to consider that our products should also be fun to use. I think Companion is a really good example of where we're very successful with that because it is a really simple product. Anybody who opens up the panel sees right away that you know, what it does and how it works and what you can do with it and can explore the potential of that. And we're using that same mindset to either to revamp our existing toolset to make it simpler and to just remove more barriers to people using it and people enjoying it.

Dave: What new workflow solutions is Media Silo working on?

Kai: Well, the core workflow in Media Silo is sharing content and storing content right. Anymore specific and it becomes difficult to do things off the shelf. We've spent over the last year and a half an enormous amount of time to build out our API and even though talking about APIs gets a little bit more technical, it really is important when talking about workflow because there's not a single meeting that I've been part of where there wasn't talk about a specific type of workflow that was desired and that is always unique to that environment. Everybody has their own way of doing certain things and it's really difficult to force people into a particular workflow so the way we approach this is we have a very, very open and easy to use platform for storing content and accessing it and review and approval tools but we really have a fantastic API that lets you implement Media Silo in ways that we can anticipate. So, that's really where we're investing our resources. I'm not sure if you're familiar with Zapier or If This Then That?

Dave: I'm familiar with If This Then That.

Kai: So Sapier is the same thing and I think it's a great example of where this is going because Sapier and ifthisthenet are tools that let you essentially script your own APIs without knowing anything about APIs. You know, you could automate drop a file in Dropbox and then send it to an encoding service and then take the poster frame and tweet it. You can do anything, there's thousands of possible combinations of creating these links between different services and it blows my mind what people come up with and I think that's what we're tapping into as well. So, our API lets you implement something on premise, on site, so if you want to automate media being uploaded or media being processed, you can do that. If you want to encode media in certain formats you can do that through the API. In the future, we are adding other services that deal with video analysis so, if you don't have a need for a lot of video collaboration tools maybe you're just working within the office but something that you frequently need is you know, transcripts and you want to automate dropping a file into a folder and then it creates a transcript request and drops the file back out into your folder with the transcript. That's what our API lets you do.

Dave: Yeah, other interesting thing about APIs is this allows your product to scale to larger productions so, if it's a studio or a larger production company, they may have programming resources or they may have financial means to hire someone to come in and help build out some of these workflows and the more that they can get into your system through an API, the more powerful things can be because it feels like every production out there has some little tweak of how they like to do things. I'm always a big fan of anybody who's building a product to have a very, very robust API platform.

Kai: Yeah, I couldn't agree more. I think it becomes so important, I see more vendors in the space embrace that. You know, we were definitely at the forefront of our API. If you look at our API today, you'll see that we make it a point, to make it first of all, free for developers so you don't need an account that you pay for and you get full access to Media Silo as a developer and there's lots of examples of what you can do with Media Silo and API. So, I think there's exciting the times to come from that perspective.

Dave: What is your definition of an elegant workflow?

Kai: I think an elegant workflow is anything that lets you be more productive and then gets the tech out of the way. I think that's really the best way to summarize it. I think a good example is, we did this early on, but if you drop a file into Media Silo any which way either via FTP or through the web uploader, Media Silo creates various derivative file formats for you which are important if you're sending these cuts to people on the web so it creates you know, under the hood, it creates probably 10 different derivates which are different video file formats that are thumbnails and sprites that are all these things that you need so that you don't have to worry about being able to send this to somebody and that person being able to see it. So, even though it's a simple workflow, simply moving a file from your desktop that maybe Prores or that maybe you know, another specific codec, and then just knowing for certain that that will playback to anybody you're sending it to. I think that's a good example of a simple workflow that lets you be the creative and get the tech out of the way. No more manual encoding.