

DESIGN PEOPLE

Web design firm that develops custom sites for real estate agents who sell luxury homes. Founded 1999. (Marina del Rey)

Growth Rate 361%

Executives: Tiger Bitanga, chief executive officer and co-founder; Jon Krabbe, chief financial officer and co-founder.

Early Days/Financing: (Bitanga) We started with two computers back in August 1999. It was terrible timing; financing had dried up, and we were caught adrift at the end of the dot-com bust. What enabled us to survive was a tiny niche in the Los Angeles real estate market we had formed by leveraging our relationships with local Realtors from our previous advertising experience.

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Big Break: (Bitanga) Shifting production to Manila in January 2004. We had less than 15 people at the time and were chasing our tails because of our focus on custom design work. No matter what we did, we could not turn a profit without hiring expensive teams. Our Manila office broke that cycle. By October 2007, we had more than 6,000 customers, more than 70 sales and project managers in our Los Angeles office, 100 developers and designers in Manila.

Biggest Challenge:

(Krabbe) My godfather, who founded John Aaroe & Associates here in Los Angeles, always said, "You'll either have too much work and not enough people, or too many people and not enough work." If a great talent or a great office space was available, sometimes we just had to take the gamble and get it ahead of when we could afford it. Luckily, it worked out.

What's Next: (Bitanga) The plan is to move into various verticals: mortgage, restaurant, contractor, medical, dental and other small businesses.

Real Estate Market: (Krabbe) We haven't been affected by the shakeup in the real estate market. The customers are savvy real estate agents who deal with luxury homes.

Sage Advice: (Bitanga) Imagine you're a tadpole in a pond of bullfrogs. To survive, use the only advantage you have: your size and maneuverability. This will enable you to get into markets the big companies cannot, at a cost that few can compete with.



Krabbe, left, Bitanga