
Martin Keen On Becoming an Industrial Designer, Feet-first

Martin Keen grew up in a family that liked to make stuff—groovy 70s style furniture, custom clothing and conceptual art featuring found objects. He could macramé a nifty plant hanger, operate his dad’s power tools, and run his mother’s sewing machine all by the age of twelve.

A childhood of making things with his hands helped point Martin to The Ohio State University and their nationally ranked industrial design program. There, his German professors taught him about semantics, the Bauhaus movement, and the unification of art, craft and technology. They taught him the design philosophy he has adhered to since: form follows function. Martin loved the education. Still, with the distractions of the university’s Sailing Team (yes, OSU *has* a sailing team), Martin was hardly a model student. But graduate he did, and promptly landed a job...as a sailing instructor.

Martin didn’t set out to become a shoe designer, but he was good at it. Still, after one too many meetings on whether to introduce a shoe in eggplant or sky blue, Martin knew he couldn’t stay in the corporate world. He was watching the slow death of his creativity. With a pregnant wife and little money, he decided to move to Rhode Island, one of the sailing capitals of the world, and return to what he did best: designing for function. He opened his own industrial design studio in the red barn behind his house.

KEEN Design Studio was very successful and allowed Martin to re-focus on functional design. More and more, he was creating solutions that were useful and solved a problem. Realizing a personal need as a sailor, Martin designed for himself a pair of hybrid sandals that would protect his feet when he was racing. For two years, he wore them everywhere, in spite of his friends laughing at his “ugly” sandals. In 2003 he patented the idea and launched KEEN® Footwear. With its innovative product and unique corporate philosophy of consciousness and sustainability, KEEN quickly became the fastest-growing outdoor brand in the world. By this point, his friends weren’t laughing anymore.

All this shoe design was happening in Martin’s barn studio, where he had been struggling to get comfortable at his old height adjustable drafting table. He had been sitting on a high stool at the desk, which made him feel like a slumped-over slug. He tried standing, which was better, but found it was tiring after an hour or two. Finally,

from a corner of the barn, Martin dug out an old, rusting stool with a metal tractor seat. He tipped the stool forward and began leaning against the seat. Within moments he realized he was on to something. That place between sitting and standing seemed an ideal solution.

The new work configuration increased Martin's focus and productivity, but now more and more of his design time was spent sketching the ideal adjustable standing desk and standing seat that were taking shape in his mind. Twelve years, four hundred and fifty-six drawings, forty-two scale models and twenty working prototypes later, his next company was ready to change the way we work.

To that end Martin and his wife Mary incorporated Focal Upright Furniture. They introduced their first product, the Locus Workstation, an ergonomic standing desk and leaning seat, at the 2012 International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York City. Since then, the young company has received rave reviews and won numerous design and innovation awards.

Martin is a kettle of ideas, always on low simmer. He doesn't sleep enough. His room is a mess and he was supposed to call his mother yesterday. But he's doing what he loves to do: observing how we interact with our environment, and using his intuitive sense of what is needed with a designer's instinct for utility, material and form.

Martin lives in Jamestown, Rhode Island with Mary and an old Labrador retriever named Louie. They occasionally hear from their two children who are away at school. When not tinkering with his next idea, Martin can be found on a boat, in the pottery studio, or watching Ohio State win another national championship.

Q&A With Martin Keen

What came first conceptually, the adjustable standing desk or the standing seat?

The seat. That's where I saw the greatest need for design improvement, just based on my own experience with trying to be comfortable working in my own studio in a sitting position. As I honed the design for this new "standing seat," it became obvious that I needed an adjustable standing desk that would not only complement the aesthetic of my leaning seat in both material and form but was equally as functional. I was also

disappointed with the lack of robustness and stability of most standing desks. And, as a designer, I wanted the desk to be very functional, so the desk top is designed to be used flat, or it can be inclined up to 15 degrees to be used as a drafting table

Today's office chairs have very sophisticated ergonomic designs that include lumbar support, adjustable seat tilt, arm rests and height. But Focal's standing seats are stripped of what consumers have come to expect of ergonomic design. In fact you went retro, using a seat pan in the shape of a tractor seat. Are you saying a seat designed over a century ago got it right?

First, it's important to clarify the difference between a seat and a chair. A chair has a back and often arms. It can also have all those other features you mention, but the chair's historical primary function is as a place of rest that commanded respect and denoted authority. Think about the throne, or just the word chairman, or how it is rude to not offer your guest a chair when they visit you. Deeply embedded in our culture is the idea that sitting in a chair is authoritative and respectful. Sitting was for the rulers rather than workers. And yet, humans evolved to be upright beings. In my research, I came across early tractors on which the farmer was supported in a triangulated position with his feet braced. The Locus Seat pan is based on those tractor seats, so yes, that shape is good. But the real key is that the seat pan is lifted up and tilted forward. This allows for our leaning posture, which is ergonomically superior to sitting. Lumbar support, arm rests and all that are fine, so long as you still want to sit. But just Google the phrase "sitting disease" and you'll understand why I prefer Focal's leaning position.

You already have a tremendously successful track record as the designer of KEEN Footwear, shoe designs that went in a radically new direction. Did that experience emboldened you to trust that consumers would follow your lead as you re-imagined how a workstation should look and work?

I am very grateful for the success of my first company. That gave me the freedom to leave the footwear industry and work on products I'd been thinking about for years. I designed the Locus Workstation to solve a problem I saw, to address a need I had in my own studio. And I figured I couldn't possibly be the only one frustrated by the options that were out there. My first prototypes of the Locus Seat predate KEEN Footwear, though. The original Keen sandals were designed at a Locus Workstation, where I felt uninhibited enough to design a shoe that was so radical.

Are you going to continue designing ergonomic office furniture or is there another design area you want to explore?

I am fascinated by the concept of human centered design. Re-imagining the work place is a great place to start because we all spend so much time there, but I look around me and see so many objects that could be improved ergonomically. Human centered design can apply to any setting. I am interested in designing products that support the "upright lifestyle."

Who is the Focal Customer?

Well, me, for a start. In the same way I designed the first KEEN shoe to meet a need I perceived, the Locus Workstation was built to solve the challenge I had in finding a comfortable way to work. In the process I had faith I was also building a solution that other people would want. So far a wide variety of people have adopted our new way of working. There is the obvious appeal to architects, designers and others in the creative fields who have the option to use the desk as a drafting table, but our clients also include stock brokers, professors, medical doctors, physical therapists, scientists, ergonomists, lawyers, yoga instructors and CEOs. Our customers include people who are thoughtful about how they work and are trying to live a healthier life.

Where is the desk made?

Focal products are designed and assembled here at our Rhode Island headquarters from domestically and internationally sourced components. Our parts come from the United States, Germany, and China. Whenever possible, we source components domestically. We continually review our vendors with the goal of sourcing as much as possible domestically.