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Assets
International

Assets Investigation and Location



Michael Zwick - President

Assets International was founded in 2001 as an assets location company. By poring over thousands of legal documents in the United States and abroad, we have successfully reunited over 1000 individuals and companies with cash assets (and occasionally real-estate) that were due them. Most of our clients had no idea they were entitled to the funds we located for them.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Mr. Zwick, what is the overall concept for Assets International?

Mr. Zwick: We are a licensed private investigation agency. We specialize in one thing, which is locating the owners of assets that they do not know have. Basically, we find assets, money or other assets that could be out there and whose owners are unaware of those assets. We then find the owners, bring them together and hope to make them happy.

CEOCFO: How are you finding assets before you find the owners?

Mr. Zwick: We normally do not take on clients where we go searching for assets for them. There is one exception and that is for very large companies. An example is that a regular client of ours is The Dow Chemical Company. The reason is that a company like Dow, which has 50 billion plus dollars in revenue a year, is always going to be misplacing money. It is worth it for us to take that on not knowing for sure whether we are actually going to find something because in most likelihood we will. In most other cases, the way we work is we first find the assets and then go find the people. We then approach them and tell them we have located assets that belong to them. In exchange for a percentage, we tell them where it is and get it for them.

CEOCFO: In general, do most people continue when you let them know you have had found something or are people skeptical?

Mr. Zwick: People are definitely skeptical, which is perfectly understandable. We always say that our biggest competition is skepticism. In this day and age of Nigerian oil scams, Bernie Madoff and all the other stuff, it is totally understandable that when we come to someone and tell them we found money they did not know about that they are going to be skeptical. That is why we have worked very hard over the years at establishing our brand and showing people that we are a legitimate organization. To show that it is feasible, we gladly will meet with people whether they come to our offices or we can meet with them wherever in the world they might be. That is what we are willing to do as part of our process of showing people that we are a legitimate organization. We are licensed as a private investigation agency in a number of states, we have a number of people who are licensed attorneys on staff, and we have A+ rating from Better Business Bureau. We have gone to great efforts to show people that we are a legitimate organization.

CEOCFO: Would you walk us through a scenario or two of how people do not know about the assets?

Mr. Zwick: A big area of what we do now is in the oil and gas industry. An example of that could be that someone owned oil and gas rights on a particular piece in land, say in Arkansas 100 years ago. There was no drilling on that land for a number of years, so all they had was rights to something but they did not actually materialize into anything. Flash forward 100 years and all of a sudden with the advent of some great technology in the oil and gas industry there has been much more drilling. Those rights that someone might have bought 100 years ago, which have been dormant all these years, all of a sudden here in the 21st century a company might drill and they have to pay everyone within a certain radius of where they drill. The person who bought the rights 100 years ago

obviously has long passed away, but his or her heirs are entitled to those rights. After that oil and gas company drills, they cannot just say they cannot find the person. They have to put that person's money into escrow. Through our research, we get hold of these escrow accounts and we do research to find out where the owners are or if they died, whom their heirs are. We then contact them.

CEOCFO: *I am guessing you have many places to look for assets, and I know you work internationally. How do you decide where to target and what to look at?*

Mr. Zwick: We have a vetting process for going out and deciding where we are going to work. Part of it is how good are the records we are getting and how reliable they are. Not all records are maintained with the same integrity as others. We like to have some level of certainty that if we see a listing of an account for say \$20,000, we know that \$20,000 is actually there and was not claimed three years ago with someone forgetting to remove it from the list. If a list of accounts has no integrity to it, then we are not going to bother. We also take into consideration other things like the cost of pursuing once we get a contract to someone and someone says to us that want us to recover their money. We have to take into account what the regulations are in place and what the costs involved are, especially if the person whose money it is has died and we are claiming on behalf of the heirs. What are the costs and other burdens of going through the process of say opening up an estate and what not. We bear all the costs and we bear all the expenses.

“I am kind of like the new Ed McMahon. I just show at people’s doorsteps with a nice big check that they were not expecting. We like to do good things and be a growing business at the same time.” – Michael Zwick

CEOCFO: *Many marriage situations are less official than those in the past; how does that play in and how much more difficult does that make it for you?*

Mr. Zwick: It can definitely make it more difficult for us. Sometimes it just relates to how common the name is, but that is definitely a factor that we take into account. When we look at someone who was born in the 1930s or 1940s, the strong assumption is that the person's parents were married to each other. We also learned long ago to not lock ourselves into any assumption because we have been around the block too many times and have seen too many unique family dynamics to take into consideration these factors. We have not really so much the effect on us in that trend that you mentioned of more out of wedlock births, but it can definitely complicate things. For example, we do a lot of work in the probate world where an attorney might call us and say they are handling estates or a bank might call us and say they are administering a trust and they cannot find the beneficiary. It can definitely complicate matters if the person they cannot find had a different last name because the birth mother had a different last name. It definitely can complicate things, but fortunately, we have some really great researchers and genealogists on staff who are able to overcome most of those problems.

CEOCFO: *How has technology helped in what you are doing, and are there areas that require more intuition? How do you match technology with experience?*

Mr. Zwick: The technology aspect is huge in terms of what we do now. The internet has put so much information at our fingertips. A few years ago, I read a book by somebody who was one of the early people in our business finding missing errors from probate cases. He wrote the book twenty years ago, which was not that long ago. He talks in his book offhand mentioning how he has a stack of phone books from around the country sitting next to his desk. I cannot remember the last time I opened a paper phone book. The amount of information that is out there is tremendous. Some of that information we have to pay for, and sometimes an attorney will say that they tried to find a person on Google. We will say that Google is free, and you get what you pay for. There is a lot of information and data out there. In terms of following intuition, I like to say that our business is part science, part art, part luck. There is definitely some methodology to follow to make sure that we are finding the right person. For example, if we are dealing in a probate case with missing errors, we are going to need to prove to the court's satisfaction that we have certain documents in place showing that the person we are presenting as the long lost heir of the deceased is really a relative. There is a certain chain of documents that we might have to bring, but there are certain times when you just have to think to yourself that something does not make sense. You might see a date on a birth certificate or census record that just does not quite add up. It is a garbage in garbage out scenario where you realize that a document might be good but you still have to overcome some recording areas and stuff like that. Sometimes it is just plain luck. I might be in a conversation with someone and I will mention that they might want to look into something. There is no one answer. Every case is different and has its own unique facts and own unique solution to it.

CEOCFO: *It is easy to know when to pull the plug or is that a struggle every time?*

Mr. Zwick: As every case is unique, there is no one litmus test. It is sort of like the Supreme Court's definition of pornography. I cannot define it, but I know it when I see it. We worked recently on probably the biggest case in American history of an individual who died with no known heirs. They had over 40 million dollars, and as of now, nobody has stepped forward to say that they are an heir. It has been a big story for The New York Times. We worked on the case for a while, and there was no point that we set in advance where we said if we reached that point, we would be done. We just worked on the case and got to a point where we did not know where else to go with it. We could have spent more time with it and could have kept digging and digging but we got somewhere and said it was possible that the person, who had escaped from the Holocaust with no family, just did not have anybody or any heirs.

CEOCFO: *That is when your experience comes in to play!*

Mr. Zwick: I think the sign of a good leader is to dream big but also apply a certain level of realism to a situation.

CEOCFO: *What is the competitive landscape?*

Mr. Zwick: There are a few companies out there doing what we do. We find that in different geographic areas we run into different competitors. It is kind of a unique business in the sense that the competition is in a very closed industry, but it is open in the sense that anybody in can in some manner get a license and a private investigator can get into it. However, it is a very tight-lipped industry. People do not really talk for the most part about what they are up to or their revenue. We are more open about it because we are proud of what we have done, and we do not mind telling people what we have accomplished.

CEOCFO: *Does one person in your firm typically work on a case from start to finish or do you have specialists who do technical research and people who work on other areas?*

Mr. Zwick: For the most part, a case starts with a particular individual doing the research in a more database online research way. When it starts getting more involved with genealogy or digging into archives as necessary, we have people who are more specialized in that area. The file will be handed off to them to identify who we should be contacting, and then it gets turned over to the sales person to make that call. In the area where we take on a large company to find the assets for them, such as Dow Chemical, we have one specific person who handles the entire relationship. They handle locating the assets, getting the claims set up, getting all the documents to the clients, filing the claims and getting the money to our clients once the company is signed up.

CEOCFO: *How do you reach potential companies that might want to use your services and banks or probate people that might want to come to you?*

Mr. Zwick: We do a lot of reaching out to people via internet. For example, I am a big fan of LinkedIn. I also participate in email lists that have the potential audience we have, such as probate attorneys. We go to conferences. We have been to a few conferences for probate attorneys where we have had a booth as a vendor, and that has brought us to some business. Like I said before, a big part of our business is the oil and gas industry, so we are going to a conference in Houston in February for people who are in the business of buying, selling and leasing in the oil and gas industry. A lot of it is establishing relationships. Sometimes we will meet someone and they will tell us we are a great business but they do not have any use for us now. They hold on to our name, and we might get a call from them six months, a year or three years down the road. They have a situation and they ask us to handle it for them.

CEOCFO: *Assets International on the Inc. list, so business is good. How will you continue on the same path?*

Mr. Zwick: I think we just keep looking for new opportunities and new ways that we can apply our trade. Our core competency is locating people and locating assets. It just comes into where else is there a use for our services. For example, four years ago the oil and gas industry was not even in our minds. An attorney in a probate conference that I attended in Texas told us that we should really look into this industry, and it has been a big part of our growth in the last two or three years. This opportunity just kind of landed in our lap, but we spend a lot of time looking at where else we can apply our trade in terms of different sectors in the business world or obtaining new clients like a large corporation that might want to do a better job at finding what money is falling through the cracks for them.

CEOCFO: *Your site shows that giving back is important for Assets International. Why and where do you focus your efforts?*

Mr. Zwick: Our employees are very giving of themselves. For example, the last couple of years we have had a toy drive for a local organization that is like the Make a Wish Foundation. We have a bonus system where every month if we reach certain levels, we give our employees bonuses and a like amount is set aside into the group kitty to be spent on whatever. It is for the employees to spoil themselves. It might be that we do a nice little outing one evening or that we go buy shirts. Every year, we take a few dollars out of the kitty and give it to an organization. It has usually been at a food shelter, food pantry or an organization to help sick children. That seems to be the thing that tugs at our heartstrings.

CEOCFO: *Was that always part of the corporate culture or has that developed over the years?*

Mr. Zwick: It has definitely developed over the years. My partners and I are all involved in our community already, so we get what we get from our company and then the three of us each dedicate our resources that we get out of the company toward the community in our own unique ways. As we grew, we took on more employees and the employees actually stepped up and said that they would like to do this as a group and a unified voice. It was also that when we were two or three people and we did not have end of the year holiday lunches, there was never really a thought. The first year we sat down for the holiday brunch, someone said that we should really make sure that other people are taken care of. That has definitely caught on and has been an important part of our culture. We are all about helping people.

CEOCFO: *Put it all together for our readers. Why pay attention to Assets International?*

Mr. Zwick: We are one of the good guys. We are helping people get money that they do not know about, and it does not come at any cost to them. I joke that I am kind of like the new Ed McMahon. I just show at people's doorsteps with a nice big check that they were not expecting. We like to do good things and be a growing business at the same time.

BIO: After obtaining his bachelors degree in economics from Yeshiva University and law degree from the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, Michael worked for Honigman, Miller, Schwartz & Cohn as well as for Shermeta, Chimko & Kilpatrick in the Detroit area. Michael started his own practice in 1996, and in 2001 he took on Assets International as a client, assisting the company in recovering funds for corporations and individuals. In 2004, Michael joined Assets International as a partner, becoming its President. Since then, Michael has been responsible for recovering millions of dollars for Assets International's clients, wherever they may be. Michael takes particular pride in assisting those clients who went missing from their families in recovering their rightful inheritances. Michael is licensed as an attorney in Michigan, Ohio and Florida. He enjoys spending his free time with his family.



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