

Small Business Monthly



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When heirs aren't apparent, attorneys call in search team

There was a homeless man in San Jose who'd inherited \$40,000. And there was a house painter who didn't know he had a \$1.8 million trust fund.

Finding missing heirs is what Southfield-based **Assets International** does.

Since 2001, the company has tripled in size and revenue, with 16 employees and \$1.4 million in sales in 2008, said Michael Zwick, company president.

"We definitely find enough to keep us all busy," he said.

Cases are typically referred by attorneys or other professionals, Zwick said. Assets International's fee is a percentage of the missing heir's bequest, a fee that can be authorized by a judge probating the will, an attorney for the estate or some other personal representative of the deceased.

Assets International locates the missing heir in 94 percent of cases, Zwick said.

"Every case is different," he said. "Some cases are a matter of locating someone simply by using proprietary databases. ... In other cases we go out to do research, like walking through a cemetery looking for tombstones or who might be related to whom, or looking at records in courthouses around the country."

The company also works internationally.

Sometimes searching for people can be a hard slog.

"Some people go missing because they want to be missing," he said. "We have some cases where we'll have to find someone with a very, very common

name — though we have had some success with finding a 'Mary Smith.' "

The more information, the better — but if finding the heir was easy, Assets International probably wouldn't get the job.

"It's a case where any information about a person can help us, but we can work with a lot less than the average person," he said.

Skepticism, Zwick said, is the company's biggest obstacle.

"We understand that if we were to get a call saying, 'We have something for you, sign this contract,' we'd be suspicious too," he said. "But we have done a lot in this area to gain people's confidence. We have a licensed private investigator that is bonded, we're a member of the **Better Business Bureau**, we have professional genealogists, we have two attorneys on staff and we have an office in Southfield where we're willing to meet with people to show we're not a boiler room operation."

It's a research-heavy profession, Zwick said.

"We don't have the type of business where we're staking out someone's home at 2 a.m. or going on some kind of 'French Connection'-style chase through the city," he said. "We have a lot of what we call 'library geeks' here."



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