

News

Image Locations Seeks to Streamline a Clunky Industry

On a cloudy November day six years ago, Paul Kim drove his silver Porsche Boxster up to the gate of a multimillion-dollar Malibu beach house just as the owner was leaving. Motioning for him to stop, Kim, the founder of Image Locations, asked to use the property for a Land's End catalog photo shoot, explaining that a deal for a nearby home had just fallen through. The owner waved Kim in to talk with his wife. The shoot took place the next day, with the Pacific Ocean shimmering in the background. Three months later, Image Locations scheduled the house again for a TV commercial for Honda, and Kim plans another there for Marshalls in early January.

Los Angeles-based Image Locations is one of about 150 location agencies across the country that time-crunched magazine editors, TV producers, and filmmakers hire to secure locations for their productions. Unlike location scouts, who solely seek out locations, location agencies help manage the entire shoot, work with property owners, and often provide scouts themselves with portfolios of properties. It's a tiny, informal industry, and no numbers exist for the size of the market. Many location agencies are one-person operations, and even established players — such as Universal Locations and Cast Locations, both founded in the early 1980s — have only four full-time employees each. With 12 employees and plans to hire three more in 2011, Kim is trying to become the industry's go-to service. "I never really said, 'Hey, these are my competitors, let me beat them.' I just made us more streamlined, more technologically advanced, far more visual and accessible," says Kim, 39, with characteristic confidence.

Now, as TV commercials — a leading indicator for the locations business — bounce back, Kim's robust presence is paying off. He says Image Locations has handled more than 120 deals so far in October. He's on pace, he estimates, to hit \$4 million in revenue this year, up 10 percent from 2009, and he predicts \$5 million in 2011. Universal and Cast, meanwhile, report only about 75 deals so far this month. Universal says its revenue is down 10 percent since 2008, and another competitor, Real to Reel Locations, says its revenue fell the same

amount since last year. "[Image Locations] had great revenue growth. They are extremely fortunate because the level of work has gone down over the past few years in Los Angeles," says Lori Balton, president of Location Managers Guild of America.

FASHIONABILITY AND CREDIBILITY

For Kim, who worked in agencies for eight years before launching Image Locations in 2002, the industry was in "dire need" of an image upgrade, given its often style-conscious clientele. "If you don't have that nice website, that nice business card — if you don't have that nice office, to me your company loses credibility. You gotta show your clients that you deserve their confidence," he says. He secured an office in a downtown landmark that doubles as a shooting location, bringing in such clients as Natalie Portman for Dior and Rachel McAdams for Vogue magazine. Kim also bought a hybrid Escalade to shuttle talent and hired an art team to design branding and marketing materials.

Clients say Kim's extensive connections, knowledge of photography, architecture, permitting, and property rights help shoots go smoothly. He's also willing to lose a job rather than force the wrong location on clients. "He's not afraid to say, 'I don't have that kind of location, but I know someone who does,'" says photographer Jim Wright, who has worked with Kim on more than 1,000 shoots. Recently, Image Locations connected the owner of a Los Angeles production company with Christina Aguilera for an Out magazine shoot by German model-turned-photographer Ellen von Unwerth.

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While Kim notes that perceptions of his agency's professionalism and prominent clients are crucial, much of Image Location's success is due to his marketing strategy online. Until a few years ago, most location services taped pictures of properties into manila folders and overnighted them to clients. In 2007, Kim invested \$80,000 in his website, creating a



Paul Kim, founder of Image Locations Inc. Photographer: David Heisler/Image Locations Inc. Via Bloomberg.

vast library of properties that allows potential clients to scout locations and make decisions from afar. Today the library features more than 35,000 pictures and 1,000 properties broken down by style, theme, and location. All the shots are taken by a team of professional photographers. To maintain the site and add new features, Kim hired a full-time software developer this summer.

Katie Schad, photo editor at O, The Oprah Magazine, says the tear sheets of magazine work that Image Locations keeps on its site were influential in persuading her to hire the agency. "They show they work with high-caliber clients. We want to be working with the best locations, the best people, as well."

To expand the company's footprint, Kim regularly scouts upscale properties in San Francisco, New York, and Miami and plans to open a satellite office in Beverly Hills in 2012, which he hopes to use as a production studio for TV pilots. Meantime, he's working on becoming the most visible location service company in the U.S. "If one of my competitors calls a potential client and says, 'We want to show your house,' I want that person to respond and say, 'Oh, like Image Locations?'"

By Greg Spielberg

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