

Where every image gets its credit

Monetising photography on the Internet is the primary goal of PicScout CEO Offir Gutelzon, says Zahid H Javali

Many experts believe that Polaroid photography was ideal for intimate artistic visions. No other kind of photographs can be quite so tactile in their appeal, so strangely fleshy about their surfaces. Yet, digital photography has killed the Polaroid, as well as the traditional technique. And worse still, photography itself is under constant threat of misuse. To fix the image copyright issue in the Internet era, when anyone can pick any image and make it his own, Offir Gutelzon's goal is to ensure that 'every image gets its credit', which also happens to be the tagline of his company – PicScout.

It is said that religion reduces corruption and acts to enhance respect for the law in ways that boost economic growth in societies where it is present. In much the same way, Gutelzon nurtures a missionary zeal to identify the rightful owner of a photograph and help him/her market it well. "Today, digital images are tagged in some way or other and shared in many different ways," he clarifies. "It is PicScout's intention to create a new Web layer that will expose the image ownership and associate the relevant metadata with all images – wherever they are found online and whatever changes have been made to alter the photographs beyond recognition. Our goal is not to index every image on the Web, but to list any photograph which has a known owner or which is defined as orphaned – so that those who want to use the image can easily access the original image source for quick and hassle-free transaction."

Easier said than done, you may assume. But Gutelzon has a plan. To provide access to all images with copyright, PicScout is working on integrating its Image IRC platform with other image platforms and photo-sharing sites like Flickr, pro-photographer platforms like PhotoShelter and photo-editing applications like InDesign and Quark. "To ensure that the metadata always accompanies an image, that photograph must be fingerprinted," explains Gutelzon. "PicScout has proprietary fingerprinting technology. You may not realise it but other methods will not allow an image to retain its metadata. So it requires fingerprinting to retrieve the metadata and associate it with the particular image wherever it appears and in whatever way it may have been altered for use."

As multiple platforms integrate with PicScout's Image IRC, it can become very easy and convenient for photographers to gain more visibility and public access for their images without uploading them again on a different platform. This is because a photographer's favourite platform can be integrated with the Image IRC. However, for all his passion towards photography copyright, Gutelzon knows no more about lensmanship than the average person does. "I knew very little about photography and copyrights when we founded PicScout," he confesses. "In fact, I have purchased my first DSLR camera only a few months ago. It's a Canon, by the way, and I mostly use it to take pictures of my family or event photographs."

The concept took shape in 2002 when he co-founded PicScout with Eyal Gura. "At that time, Eyal's girlfriend (now his wife) was working for a stock agency and her job was to search for image infringement on the Web in the old-fashioned way – manually," recalls Gutelzon. "That is, searching online for images and then looking for attribution and ownership both online and in the real world – in order to determine if licensing had been done for the online use of images owned by the stock agency."

This proved to be a challenging task, if not an impossible one. During that period, both Gura and Gutelzon were studying to earn their advanced degrees from IDC Herzliya. And their business acumen, honed by the professional training, helped them realise that the highly potential market must have an automated system, which could track, protect and monetise images in the ever-exploding Web domain. "So I took the responsibility of taking our vision from an idea to a product operation model, to R&D and then into reality," says Gutelzon. "We also knew this would require a seamless infrastructure, capable of serving millions of images globally."

With PicScout's proprietary and highly scalable image recognition technology in place, Gutelzon and Gura created the image copyright protection marketplace. And ImageTracker, one of their most innovative products, had actually brought millions of dollars back into the industry. "From the outset, we have envisioned our goal: Image commerce must become a legitimate Internet economy," Gutelzon says. Also, this is where his previous experience as a hardware engineer at the Israel-

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based Tundo Communication & Telephony came in handy.

“At that time, I was travelling across the world, installing beta site systems. The Tundo VoIP was similar to what companies such as Vonage do today. We installed Tundo systems in some of the world’s largest call centres; in fact, the elegant fit of HR workflow and technology was something to experience. At Tundo, I had certainly learnt the value of focus and emphasised on what I do best. At PicScout, I followed the same track and managed to corner success.”

Digital image fingerprinting is the key to his success, but how does it work?

“Every image has unique patterns similar to those in human fingers,” Gutelzon explains. “Also critical is the construction of an absolutely unique database, capable of storing and retrieving results quickly and accurately whenever there is a query. In order to constantly monitor the media, such as the Web content, you also need a massive crawling technology. These are the fundamentals required to protect and promote visual assets. And of course, you need great people who can carry out the vision. The complexity begins with the robustness of the fingerprint, which indicates the maximum distortion level that can be tolerated in the

image fingerprint in order to match and retrieve it fast from a database containing millions of images.”

The stock photo industry was among the first few to embrace the Internet in the late 90’s, as the content was digitised and made searchable on the Web. Then PicScout introduced ImageTracker, a breakthrough concept that allows stock photographs to be tracked wherever they are used online although watermarks are not embedded on those images. However, that is not the ultimate. “The industry requires further innovations such as an object recognition technology that will enhance auto-tagging and thus make the images easily searchable on the Internet,” says Gutelzon. “Strong similarity-based searches can also help this object recognition process.”

Gutelzon’s strength as a CEO lies in his dedication and fanatical attention to details. “I believe that the only way to make a great company is to bring great people on board who really know how to perform and who can exceed my expectations, which are usually limited to how I might have tried to do the same job,” he says. “I like watching this occur... it’s very satisfying.” However, he has one weakness.

Although Gutelzon has the ability to deal with multiple tasks at the same time, he finds it a bit difficult to document them. Nevertheless, he has found a solution and it serves his purpose well.

“I depend on different tools to organise myself and my plans even better. And one of the best tools that I have found till date is mind mapping. It builds actions and plans as branches – so that you have a clear vision of the entire scenario.”

His technological acumen has a history of its own. “I grew up with my brother and sister in a suburb near Haifa, in Israel. The place is called Kyriat Motzkin and we stayed in a very modest apartment,” he reminisces.

“For as long as I can remember, I have always been attracted to new technologies and my parents strongly supported me. They gave me every opportunity to access the latest technology, even though it was not easy for them. I always liked helping people when they had trouble with their computers or struggled with other tech-related issues. And this became a very nice source of income for a 10-year-old boy.”

In high school and college, Gutelzon majored in Electronics and Computer Science. At the same time, he pursued his technical ambitions and avidly played table tennis. In fact, he was so good in TT that he joined a professional team. “I think I manifest the same dedication and competitive skills today – in my work and in my life,” he reflects.

So what are the challenges that he faces today and what has made success possible?

Even today, a great business model has to ensure that it is win-win for you and your customer. And Gutelzon knows it all too well. PicScout broke even within two years of its inception, as its

ImageTracker service did phenomenally well. Today, the company is seven years old and consistently generating big revenues for more than five years. No wonder the company was ranked No. 4 among the fastest growing firms in the Deloitte Fast 50 in Israel and No. 44 in the Deloitte Fast 500, EMEA. “Right now, our challenge is to put in place the right business model for the new ImageExchange service which assures that every image gets its credit,” says Gutelzon.

But all these would not have been possible if there were no turning points in Gutelzon’s life. And a couple of them spring to his mind almost immediately. The first was when he got his first computer – an Atari XL 800. “That was the day when I first touched a keyboard and it wasn’t just a toy to me,” he remembers. “I was always trying to explore things that I could do with my computer.”

That was a significant realisation and one that probably set him on course towards business, rather than engineering. “When I realised that I had helped my classmates throughout my school years, that I had listened to their problems and explained how things could be done, I knew that I had business skill. And the same skill served me well in my first job at Tundo.”

During his stint at Tundo, Gutelzon had to meet clients and discuss the technical perspective of their requirements. It turned out that clients felt really comfortable communicating with him and through him, and that definitely brought the best results. “This really worked well and I realised my strengths in this area,” he recalls. “So, I decided to go to business school instead of staying on the engineering track.”

Another turning point was when he met Eyal Gura, his business school classmate. Together, they founded PicScout and history was made. “And I don’t think I would have been here without my wife Michal. She is the perfect life partner who has always supported me and the family. That really helps me to work devotedly and do my best to make PicScout a great company,” he confides.

Going by the schedule he outlines, Gutelzon’s average day is pretty hectic. He wakes up at 6 in the morning, briefly checks the mail from his iPhone, drops off his son at pre-school and reaches office by 8 am. He will then spend an hour, trying to catch up on news and mail. Between 9 and 11, he meets local managers even while tweeting and reading RSS feeds on a 22 inch computer monitor, comfortably housed on his usually messy desk. Keeping him company at work are family pictures on the office shelves, and

books on operations & marketing such as *4 steps to the Epiphany of Steve Blank*, *From Good to Great* and *The Goal*, among others. Later in the day, Gutelzon makes calls to his clients and prospects in Europe and lunches at 1. At 3 in the afternoon, it is back to calls again, this time to East coast prospects and clients. And two hours later, it is the West Coast’s turn. He is back home by 7 in the evening and spends some quality time with the family. From 9.30 pm, he starts calling US clients and it continues till 11 in the night. In spite of his busy schedule, Gutelzon also plays tennis, at least once a week. “I am constantly connected to the world via my iPhone and unless I am sleeping, I always answer my mail as soon as I get them,” he says. “I have two white boards, one for sketches and product thoughts, and the other to remind me of things that I need to do. Usually, I explain my thoughts best when I am drawing on a white board.”

Gutelzon wants PicScout to emerge as industry leader when it comes to technical standard for image credit, as well as online image monetisation. “The challenge, of course, lies in indexing all those images,” he admits. “So, we are working with groups who have access to image content and making sure that the index can be accessed through any application or device.”

Recognising that every image is useable, sellable and trackable, PicScout has made a crucial and foundational change last year. It has moved up from the scalable platform of ‘one-product’ to a new model that provides multiple applications and services. “The Image IRC platform offers a plethora of enhanced services and the ImageTracker business has, therefore, grown significantly. We have made foray into new countries of operation – Asia and Latin America, for example,” adds Gutelzon. “Image IRC, along with ImageExchange, is the innovative model that can straight away connect image owners and buyers. In fact, Image-Exchange plays a key role in this process as it is fundamental to bringing credit to every photograph where it resides and those searching for images on the Internet can immediately view the image rights information.”

According to Gutelzon, if you are a photographer with loads of stock images, the best way to make money is to share them online, even if you feel that there is risk of infringement. “The key lies in the widespread visibility and availability of your work. Of course, there has to be credit line for each image and one must use SEO tools to promote the work. While considering protection and promotion, it is essential to retain the image credit and the Metadata.”

That is why PicScout has recently allowed photographers to participate in the PicScout Image IRC through PhotoShelter – so that interested buyers searching for images online can instantly get in touch with owners and transactions can take place immediately. The advanced platform is, indeed, a boon, as one can easily find out who owns a particular photograph and where it can be licensed, while the photographer makes more sales in less time.

Now that is manna from heaven for any photographer. And Gutelzon seems to be just the right person for the job. ■

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