



MY ACTIVE STUDIO

BOXX CUSTOMER
STORY
BY: JOHN VONDRAK

Steve Choo's boutique design, VFX, and animation studio, **My Active Driveway**, goes big with BOXX, creating national commercials for high profile clients.

Awhile back, BOXX Technologies' Inside Sales Manager Dustin Leifheit approached me regarding a customer named Steve Choo. "He has a company called My Active Driveway," Dustin said, "and I think it would make a great customer story." Dustin, like all of our performance specialists, occasionally feeds me the names of BOXX customers (or BOXXers as we like to refer to them) that other BOXXers, and those who wish to be BOXXers, may enjoy learning about. Since we try to alternate our customer story subjects to equally represent our different industry segments I'll confess

that my response to Dustin's suggestion was decidedly lackluster. I had just completed an architecture/construction customer story and was not keen to immediately follow it with another. "I just wrapped an AEC story," I said, "so I may hold off on this one for awhile."

"It's a VFX and animation studio in New York," Dustin replied. I was having trouble reconciling the name My Active Driveway. It sounded as if they were into concrete, building driveways or roads. "Interesting name, I know," he smiled.



So, when I first reached the perpetually busy Steve Choo, my first question was obvious. “What’s with the name?” I inquired. After first insisting that it was “really not a great story,” he relented. “When I first moved to New York,” Choo said, “I was trying to go to a friend of mine’s art gallery opening. I was driving around the Lower East Side just looking and looking for a parking space and every time I thought I had found one, there was a ‘No Parking: Active Driveway’ sign there. So I said to myself, one of these days, if I ever open my own company, I’m going to have my own active driveway.”

Making a Go

Steve Choo arrived in the Big Apple right after graduating with a BFA in painting from the Kansas City Art Institute. He went to work as a Flame artist, then a 3D Maya artist (prior to its existence as a power animator) in the production department at BBDO, the worldwide advertising agency. Yet in the wake of 9/11, he decided to start his own company.” It was a time when a lot of my friends were leaving,” he recalls. “They just left town, some going as far as to leave the country, but I decided to stick around. I was going to try and make a go at starting my own company in New York— try to rebuild a little bit here and keep the work local. It might have always been in my subconscious, but after that day, my thought was ‘You never know what’s going to happen tomorrow, so if I want to do this I should do it now.’”

So My Active Driveway INC. a boutique design, VFX, and animation studio, was founded in New York City in 2001. According to Choo, the past 15 years have seen the studio scale up and down in staff size, property, square footage, machinery, and equipment. “We’ve made ourselves adaptable to the industry’s climate, says Choo. “Having come from an agency background at BBDO NY, I had a solid understanding of the ups and downs of the industry. When business is good, we’re running on all cylinders, pumping out work as fast as possible. But when there’s downtime, you want to make sure you’re not just burning fuel.” Choo believes that this level of experience and understanding ultimately led him to BOXX. “It’s why,” he says, “after trying so many other products, we stick by BOXX as the backbone of our studio.”

At one point, Choo and his My Active Driveway team did what a lot of other studios have tried. In an effort to save money, they built their own systems instead of adding to or upgrading from their existing Dell computers and BOXX workstations (in this case, a 2008 model 3DBOXX 8404 and a 3DBOXX 4860 purchased in 2011). “Workstations, custom render farms, and custom servers,” Choo recalls, “you name it, we tried it. We always thought, we can save money by just doing it ourselves and that sort of worked for awhile—until it didn’t. Then we were in a deadline and panicking because there was no support for our custom-made equipment that broke down during the job.” To make matters worse, there were other mitigating factors that Choo had never really considered. “Honestly, in the long run, if you calculate all the hours and research, as well as enormous electric bills, we wasted a lot of time, money, and frustration,” he admits. “Not to mention, every freelancer that worked with us was always fighting over who got to use the BOXX workstations, rather than our custom builds, or even the Dell systems.”



BOXX Makes it Possible

In the beginning of 2015, My Active Driveway decided it was time to rebuild their office—and as a byproduct of that process, also made the decision to revamp their computer hardware.

First, they said goodbye to their massive 120 core AMD Dell render farm servers and replaced them with eight renderPRO nodes neatly stacked on top of each other. “We went for a clean sweep,” says Choo, “so we also started fresh with all-new APEXX 2 workstations for everyone.”

under a three week deadline. There’s no way we could have done that had we not just upgraded all of our equipment to BOXX. It was clear and seamless across the board. Everyone had the same system, the render farm worked beautifully, and we were able to ship and deliver under this crazy timeline.”



Choo selected the compact, liquid-cooled APEXX 2 Model 2401 featuring an Intel® Core™ i7 safely overclocked to 4.5 GHz and NVIDIA Quadro graphics cards. The end result of the hardware overhaul didn’t go unnoticed. “The performance boost was insane,” says Choo. “Using Autodesk Maya on the workstations and Arnold on the renderPROs, we were able to render a sixty second, all-character animation spot for the National Hockey League (NHL) in less than 48 hours. That was roughly four times faster than what we had before.”

The NHL commercial was actually the second spot My Active driveway had created for the NHL. “They approached us,” Choo recalls. “They were looking online, came across our website, saw the work, and reached out. They were extremely nice and super supportive—a great client to work with.” Undoubtedly, the League wanted another ad after Choo and company so quickly turned around their initial assignment. “The first one we did was insane,” he says. “I think it was a 30 we conceptualized, designed, animated, rendered, composited, and finished

Seemingly impossible timelines are often routine at My Active Driveway, but Choo recognizes that quick turnarounds, along with the outstanding quality of their work, are what keep the studio humming along. “That’s how small companies like us stay in business,” he admits. “We have to take on the crazy jobs that other people don’t want. They don’t want the headache of it all, so we get a shot at it.”

And the heavy hitters keep on coming. At the time of this publication, My Active Driveway was creating seventeen character animation spots for Lowe’s Home Improvement, another high profile client already on their reel. “But this type of work is new,” says Choo. It’s photoreal CG. I think you’re going to like it when you see it. The spots are trickling out. The first four have already hit the airwaves. We have another four weeks to finish the rest. Two more next week. For such a small shop to put out this volume of work says a lot about who we are and what we’re capable of.” Choo is quick to credit his BBDO history with making the Lowe’s work possible. “Having worked there,” he says, “I have

that connection. They've been one of our clients for years. BBDO is a great agency. They've been very supportive and we've done a lot of work for them. When they need us, we just take care of it—again, it's taking on the jobs that others think are simply not possible."

My Active Workflow



When asked to discuss My Active Driveway's workflow, Choo admits that he doesn't consider it unique. "I don't think our workflow is vastly different from anyone else's," he says. "You start with a concept, you get approved boards, you move into model rigging, pre-vis, animation, render, and then composite. We use the Adobe Creative Suite—mostly After Effects, Premiere Pro, Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign. Depending on the project, for composite we do either After Effects or Nuke. For 3D, we work in Maya and render out using Arnold. The biggest difference in our workflow is that we're a small shop. We don't have dedicated IT people, we don't have dedicated render techs, we don't have dedicated anything. We have a limited number of seats and we have to do the most with those seats, so a lot of our people are multitasking and wearing different hats."

In addition, those limited number of seats are installed on a limited number of workstations,

so if one system goes down, Choo says, "it's a pretty big deal." That's why he considers BOXX APEXX workstations and renderPRO render farm among the best business decisions he's ever made. "I don't like to name names," he confides, "but if you deal with a bigger company you have to go through this RMA process. Then they see if your support is really validated, if it warrants the claim. They definitely won't ship overnight. I love the fact that I can call BOXX, somebody will pick up the phone and I can tell them what's going on and you guys don't hesitate to ship out a new part that can be easily replaced overnight or even ship a new, complete workstation. My downtime is minimized. Just knowing that I bought systems that have that kind of support is invaluable. I'm the tech person here, so I'm the guy who has to fix a machine if it goes down. I'm also the one who's paying for it."

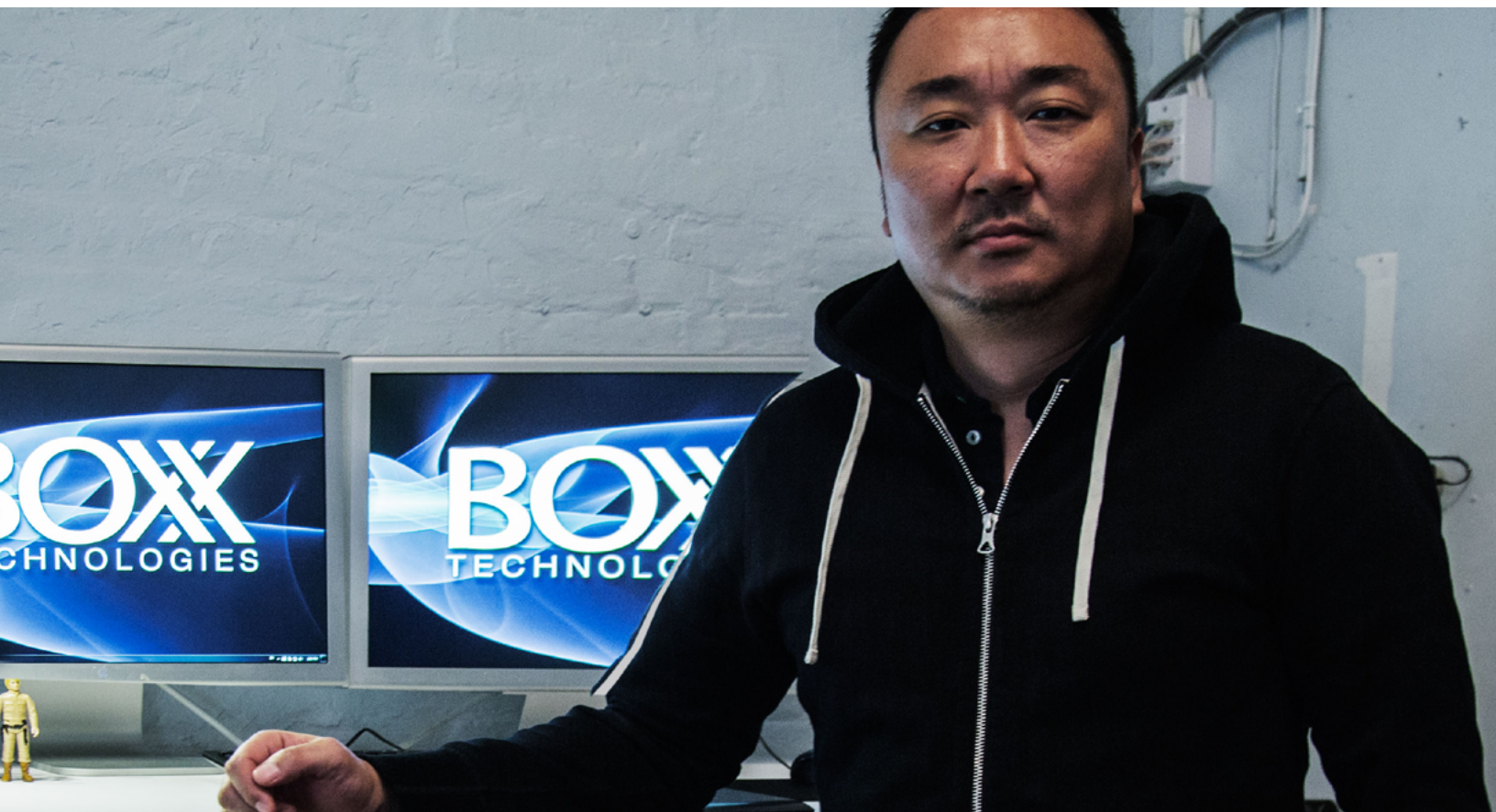


Customer for Life

Regarding the future of My Active Driveway, Choo admits that he would love to expand his render farm. Yet even with his compact renderPRO modules, studio square footage is at a premium. "We're in the middle of a space constraint right now," he admits, "but if I could have ten more renderPROs I'd do it in a second simply because everyone wants to use them all the time! Its one thing when you're creating a single spot, but when you have seventeen starting to overlap and they need to get these renders out, we're at a point where the render nodes are going day and night. They also make revisions on these spots, so it loads up. Then the Nuke artists want to use it to render the nuke comps on!" Despite the renderPRO render farm running "day and night" Choo points out another reason why a BOXX render farm was a brilliant business decision. He refers to it as "another beautiful side note." My Active Driveway's electric bill dropped from over \$4000 per month to under \$600. "That's how

much energy those old, slow, giant machines were wasting!" he exclaims.

Accelerated workflow, increased productivity, making deadlines, saving money, and . . . if it seems like Choo has covered all the bases, he circles back one more time to emphasize what made him a BOXXer—legendary technical support. "That was perhaps the biggest factor in choosing BOXX as the backbone of our company," he says. "I can't express enough how essential it is to feel like you matter as a customer. If I have a problem, I call BOXX support and they answer the phone—fast! They treat me like I'm their best customer. If there's a problem with the system, they take care of it immediately, no questions asked. I really admire and appreciate the fact that I get big company level support from BOXX when we're just a little shop like this. That's the kind of service that makes me a customer for life."



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