



I need a PI: Who should they hire?

By John Lajoie, CLI

*Character is like a tree and
reputation like its shadow. The shadow is
what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.*

Abraham Lincoln

Though we are legal investigators, most of us have done work outside the attorney-client arena. What follows is my take on serving the needs of the private and business consumer; you know- the ones that usually need us most. The ones we sometimes turn away. I loath to turn them away. But who should they hire? Read on.

“Coming to your office is like having to go to the vet to put my dog down.” I’ll never forget these words. It’s what a client said after he hired me to conduct an investigation on a longtime colleague and valued employee. He didn’t want to do it but knew he had to.

And that’s how 95 percent of private clients feel and think when they are hiring a PI; the other five percent either don’t care or actually thrive on it. When I say private clients, I’m not talking about insurance companies, law firms, or lawyers. I’m talking about the average Joe or Josephine who calls you because they have a problem that needs

to be fixed. I’m talking about the small business owner who has a problem employee; the female college professor who is being stalked by her student but police are unable or unwilling to help her; the dad who is experiencing life with a 16-year-old son who is dealing drugs; the wife who knows her marriage is over because her hubby of 20 years is having an affair with her best friend; the father of two small children whose drug-addicted ex-wife is falsely alleging abuse and using that to secure custody of the children; the parents of a missing daughter; the a judge who has serious family issues; the man who is feuding with his neighbor; or the mother and father of a loved son who killed in a horrific auto accident or was a victim of an unsolved homicide.

I could go on forever with examples of vexing real-life problems. What’s not so shocking to me, and could some day come true, is I could be talking about you.

Most people who call or meet with a PI for

consultation are usually having a first-time experience with a problem they cannot solve themselves; or the problem is long standing and someone finally feels compelled to do something about it. These potential clients have probably never met with or talked to a private investigator about their particular problem in a business setting; no doubt they are perplexed. Sometimes they don’t know if they actually need a PI, an attorney, a shrink, or a combination thereof. They may already have an attorney, but many times they do not.

I find that there are three common denominators with potential private clients:

1. they need someone to really listen to them.
2. They need a plan
3. They need to be reassured.

They hope for the best. I prepare them for the worst. They expect miracles. I tell them

there are no guarantees. They want an end result. I tell them it may not turn out to be the result they want. They want one price for investigation. I ask them if they have thought about a budget. They still want a price. I give them a range. But what they want most, they almost never ask about; and that is peace of mind. Perhaps they know I can't really assist them in this area. But I still tell them I can almost always help them if an investigation is necessary; I give no assurance as to the outcome. And what about peace of mind! Well, it's usually heartache we're dealing with and not peace. If some semblance of peace is eventually realized then the client gains a psychological benefit from the successful resolution of the investigation; and that's great because they did something about it and felt like they were part of it. What I'm more interested in doing is solving the client's problem to help them make decisions. And so, more times than not, peace may not surface even though the problem is resolved or solved. Buyer beware.

The necessity of investigation. Some people have no idea as to whether or not their problem warrants an investigation until the PI consultation. Most people who have a problem that needs to be investigated know the investigation is necessary before the consultation because they themselves have decided private investigation is necessary or someone has told them it's necessary. In most cases, an attorney, friend, business associate, or relative has made the suggestion of hiring a private investigator to help solve the problem. The conclusion: "I need a PI." Then the initial consultation follows once a potential client figures out whom to hire.

Not every problem needs to be investigated though. For instance, infidelity in a divorce case in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is really not an issue in this "no fault" divorce state. No fault divorce means neither party blames the other for the breakdown in the marriage; thus the behavior of either party cannot be used in determining asset distribution. So, conducting investigation on infidelity to support or bolster a divorce action in Massachusetts is worthless and unnecessary for court purposes. Yet in Massachusetts, surveillance investigation followed by background investigation is entirely appropriate and necessary in issues of child custody where the opposing spouse is seeking custody of the children in a divorce

but thought to be keeping the company of an individual convicted of, let's say, some act of pedophilia. What judge would allow kids to be around a convicted sex offender? So an investigation would be considered reasonable and necessary in order to prove that the opposing spouse is allowing the children to be in the company of a sex offender.

In most private client cases, investigation is warranted if there is a legitimate legal or logical reason for it. If not, I tend to stay away from them. If there is a legal issue over and beyond any investigative concern, I always tell the potential client to hire an attorney and then assess investigation needs. PI's are not lawyers and should never provide legal advice. So the client screening process becomes an important factor as a potential client's need may dictate something other than you can provide.

Who to hire. Who do potential private clients hire? Of course I want them all to hire me! No... seriously, I want to service only those clients that want me to work their case, are comfortable with my staff and me, and can afford to pay me. I'm much too busy to wine and dine potential clients. Glad-handing is not something I do well; I'm terrible at it. Besides, if you have to wine and dine clients to get their business, including insurance company adjusters and attorneys, what does that say about the quality of your work? I let the quality of the work and my reputation do the talking. And so should you. If you're new in this business, establish your reputation through hard work, honesty, and integrity. I did. I'm still doing it. It's what separates and distinguishes you from the rest of the crowd. It forms your character and defines your unique talents and style. Private clients should hire a competent, cost effective, local PI. They should also feel comfortable with the selection. It's incumbent upon you to make them feel at ease with their decision.

The local PI is always better. The local private investigator with a good solid reputation in the area where the investigation will take place is the one private client's want to find. And you may need to find one if the investigation calls for it. Local PI's know the geographic area, the people, always have the better sources in their area, and are familiar with the local customs and traditions of the local people. They know the state and local court system, police departments, hospitals,

public record custodians, and politicians much better than the outsider PI. Look hard because competent, expert local PI's are difficult to find. They are out there and you can find them, but it takes hard work, research, and time.

There are at least four exceptions to hiring a local PI:

1) Very sensitive, extremely confidential, complex, and high profile cases might be best left with the specialist PI. For instance, even though the Holyoke, MA cop killer case (Commonwealth v. Eddie Morales) was outside of my local area in the County of Hampden, Massachusetts (I am more comfortable working in Worcester, Middlesex, Norfolk, and Suffolk counties), I was retained to conduct the defense investigation. The case was extremely high profile and sensitive. The defense needed a specialist in self-defense homicide investigation and I had the working knowledge and expertise in self-defense cases. Over a long period of time, I had consistently established a reputation as an aggressive, determined, practical, and hard working PI with the right expert connections; it's what the case needed. I was also well known as a competent case manager and organizer. I got the case, and I'm grateful it did.

2) If the preferred PI agency has a staff of investigators covering areas in addition to their home locality, it may make sense to the client to have a familiar case manager managing the investigation and a staff investigator local and accustomed to the geography in which the investigation is situated conducting the field work.

3) The preferred PI or PI agency has superior case management and organization skills. As an example, if there's a case in a state like Florida, for instance, or any other state outside my licensed area in which a client wants me to work because they believe I'm a competent, superior case manager, I'll take the case and find the most efficient local licensed investigator to do the fieldwork. This frequently happens in domestic and family related investigations. I've done cases all over the country and abroad by locating competent local investigators and sub contracting the field work while managing the overall case investigation. I've traveled to other states and countries and worked with local licensed PI's. It's great.



I get to know, work with, and develop friendships with competent local PI's all over the world. It also benefits my agency because I receive many referral case investigations in Massachusetts because I am known outside of my local area. When a familiar out of state investigator needs an investigator in Massachusetts, he or she calls me or refers a client my way. Networking...it does pay dividends. That's why it's important to attend seminars and conferences where you get to know your brother and sister investigators.

4) If the client cannot find a competent investigator in the area where investigation is needed, then it becomes necessary to hire a preferred non-local PI. It happens more than you think. Still, the hired non-local PI must comply with the local licensing requirements so a local PI may be hired anyway. The local PI can help out when needed, but usually does not play a significant role in the investigation. I flat-out refuse to hire an out of state investigator that cannot get the job done and do it well. I'd rather travel and do the work myself. Character and reputation play a rather large role in the selection process of local investigators in states, or other jurisdictions, where you need investigation. And competence is the key. Sometimes you can't get what you need so you must find the PI best suited to satisfy your needs with the ability to get the job done right, no matter where he or she is located.

The best is not always best. "I want the best!" I hear this a lot. And I see a lot of potential PI clients get caught up in trying to determine who the best private investigator out there is, especially people with money to spare. They want the best, even though the best may not be best for them. It's nearly impossible to determine who the best PI is; best in what? There are veritable, competent, expert PI's out there that specialize in various kinds of investigation. The client needs to identify and consult with one or two of them to determine who best fits their needs. They'll know when they have the PI that is right for them.

How to identify a competent local PI. It takes work. Research is the best bet. Check out state and national PI association websites (NALIOnline comes to mind) and local PI websites by internet browser searches, the phone book, attorney references, and the local courthouse. Ask around. Once you

get the name of a PI, make a phone call and screen the PI. A competent PI will always encourage the potential client to check out their credentials with local and state licensing authorities, member associations, local attorneys, the Chamber of Commerce, Better Business Bureau, the Small Business Administration, and verifying agencies such as the local police department and the local courthouse. Good, reputable, and competent local PI's have nothing to hide and a client to gain so they should be willing to point you in the right direction to check on credentials. If not, then it is usually a sign that something is wrong. Although I wouldn't rely on police to make a determination on the competence of a private sector investigator, I would check to see if a PI has had problems with local police or the public; a local PI might be known to the police and it's always worth a phone call to the chief or department representative.

Always check the local courts to see if the PI has a criminal and civil history. There is nothing more telling than a PI that has been sued a number of times or has a history of arrests. But also be advised that PI's can be sued for frivolous matters and wrongfully accused. If there is an extended civil or criminal history with a PI, I would tend to stay away from hiring this person to work for me or anyone else. A potential client should always ask the PI for existing client references and take a long hard look at the PI's website and office. It doesn't take much to determine who is financially successful. And usually, but not always, financial success has a lot to do with competence. Perhaps the best indicator of a successful and competent local PI is reputation within the legal community.

Calling a few reputable attorneys in the local area and asking about a particular PI may yield results. But it still comes down to comfort and trust. That's why PI's should have a working office in which to meet clients. Virtual offices and mail drops are second rate. Meeting clients at third party locations is not desirable either. It's just my opinion, but any client that turns over a few hundred to a few thousand dollars or more to a PI they just met in a restaurant or a bar is a fool. But it happens all the time. Then when the hired PI isn't making contact with the client, doesn't do the work as promised, or has taken the money and run, where does the client go? I'll tell you what - not to another PI. Yikes!

Business clients are looking for value. Although private clients are usually looking for competence, quality, and value, business clients are searching for mostly value in PI services. I have had business clients think they can get the same quality investigation done for \$45 per hour as opposed to paying \$75 or \$100 per hour. I have news for them: no way! The old adage "you get what you pay for" is especially true in the PI profession. There'll always be the overpriced PI as I've already discussed. But for the most part, the competent, well established PI can and will charge big bucks.

The client should be expected to pay the price for excellent services and superior competence. Good business clients will want to pay less per hour for loyalty to the PI agency, repeat business, and long-standing profitable relationships. There is nothing wrong with this kind of business. In fact, it's good business. Look to establish long lasting business relationships with local corporations, sole proprietors, and other business entities. Lower your hourly rate about 15 to 20 percent in exchange for steady work from these dedicated and loyal clients. They need PI's as much as we need them. Let there be no mistake about it.

I hope no one has had to put his dog down to get a feel for what it's like to visit my office and hire me. I assure you, I won't make any client feel quite that bad. And I doubt you will either if you are a caring professional. What this job is all about is the client. It's not about me, and it's not about you. It's about helping people; helping people make important decisions in their lives and in the lives of loved ones. Quality is what matters. Quality of life matters more. And it's vitally important to realize that you are part of defining the quality of life for people who place great trust and dependency on you and your investigative acumen. Never turn away a private or business client in need, even if you can't help them yourself. And if you can't help them, find someone who can. And always remember that truth is sometimes stranger than fiction.