

Would You Hire You? 10 Image-Boosting Tips for Private Investigators

The business of private investigations attracts folks from all backgrounds, walks of life and professions. Many private investigators started out as claims adjusters, police officers, bankers, bill collectors and even librarians. Somewhere along the way they moved into the field of private investigations.

The licensing requirements for private investigators vary from state to state. In fact some states have no requirements at all. Because of this we are left with investigators with diverse backgrounds and varying levels of experience. Most investigators are knowledgeable and very professional. Regrettably, others became investigators after watching an episode of “The Rockford Files.” Many of these folks would have difficulty investigating the disappearance of their neighbor’s dog. Increased professionalism is needed in the industry.

Let’s look at 10 ways to improve your image and your professionalism as a private investigator:

1. What Does Your Email Address Say About You? I know I am going to catch a lot of flak for this, but one of the first things you can do to improve your image is to get a real email address. Having words or phrases such as “007,” “SuperSpy” or “WeWatchYourOldLady” as part of your email address is simply unprofessional. It is amateurish. It makes you look like a guy sitting in your underwear at a laptop computer living in your mother’s garage. It makes clients wonder if you will be there when they need you and if they can trust you with their problems. The same goes for email addresses that end with “@Hotmail.com” or “@gmail.com.” It only costs a few dollars a month to get your own domain name. There is no reason to be Bob@Hotmail.com when you can be Bob@OhioPI.com. Jane@JaneInvestigates.com certainly looks more professional than Jane@yahoo.com.

2. Answer Your Phone! As crazy as it sounds this should be at the top of the list. I cannot tell you how many times I’ve received new cases simply because I was the only private investigation company that answered my phone. When you cannot answer your phone be sure to have a professional message for clients. After creating your message call yourself and listen to your message. Is the baby crying in the background? Does it sound like you’re underwater? Is there silence, pauses or static? When clients leave a message, return their telephone call as soon as you can.

3. The Association of Associations Private investigator associations are a dime a dozen. You’re an investigator. Do some investigating before you spend your time and hard-earned money on one. Many of them, such as TALI (the Texas Association of Licensed Investigators) and SFIA (the South Florida Investigators Association), are very well respected within the industry. The best investigator associations are concerned with

ethics, continuing education and improving professionalism within the trade. Sadly, there are plenty of other groups that amount to nothing more than you sending in your money and receiving their only benefit in return: a certificate saying you're a member.

4. Mama Said Be On Your Best Behavior (When You Meet A Client) Sales guru Jeffrey Gitomer in his book "The Sales Bible: The Ultimate Sales Resource" states, "All things being equal, people want to do business with their friends. All things being not quite so equal, people STILL want to do business with their friends." When you are talking to potential clients they are listening to you and deciding whether or not they will hire you. They are deciding whether or not they will trust you with their problems and their money. If you give them a reason not to like you, they will not hire you. This is especially important for investigators that serve the domestic market.

Here is my #1 rule for building rapport when I meet with potential clients: If a potential client likes you, they will trust you. If they feel like they can trust you, they will hire you. It's often as simple as that.

5. Clothes make the man (and the woman) I was once retained by an amusement park corporation. They flew me down on their company jet to one of their locations to conduct an investigation. I was not the first investigator they interviewed. In fact I personally knew the investigator they had first contacted. On the flight down I asked the company's director of security why they hadn't hired the original investigator. He simply stated "I knew within five minutes of talking to him that he was not the investigator for me." As it turns out the original investigator showed up for the meeting wearing shorts, tennis shoes, a sweat-stained cowboy hat and an earring. Fine attire if you're on the beach. Not good for corporate America.

The reality is people judge you by how you speak and how you are dressed. I met the great private investigator Jay J. Armes a couple of years ago in his El Paso, Texas, office and I can tell you he was dressed to the nines in a double-breasted Italian wool suit and impeccably groomed. He exuded confidence and professionalism. You can too. When you meet your clients you should be dressed professionally so that they will have confidence in you and view you as an authority figure.

6. Keep your clients informed! It's not that hard. Do not make clients call and email constantly asking for updates on their cases. Angry clients will not write testimonials, serve as references, recommend you to others or even pay you for your work. It only takes a minute to send an interim report or update by email or by telephone. Stay in touch with them every few days.

7. Certifications Many so-called "certifications" are simply not worth the paper they are printed on. Certifications such as CPP (Certified Protection Professional) offered by ASIS International (The American Society for Industrial Security) and CFE (Certified Fraud Examiner) offered by the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners are very prestigious designations and will serve you well in your career. Others amount to nothing

more than a diploma mill. Investigate your options. Talk to other private investigators before you decide to spend your time and money on certifications.

8. Listen The old adage “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care” still stands. A professional private investigator is part priest, part psychologist, part social worker. Listen to your clients. Allow them to go into detail about their problem. You will build more rapport and gain more credibility by listening to them then by telling them how wonderful you are.

9. Continuing Education (Emphasis on the “Continuing”) What business books are you reading right now to improve yourself? What audio books are you listening to? What is the last seminar or conference you attended? What is the last webinar you listened to? Physicians, attorneys and claims adjusters are all required to take continuing education. You should be continually educating yourself as well.

10. Testimonials The final step in any case is to ask for a testimonial. A testimonial is a short paragraph written by the client explaining how you came through for them, solved their problem, etc. How does gathering testimonials make me more professional, you may ask? I’m glad you asked. You can put these testimonials on your website or in your sales literature. Studies have shown that good testimonials can make you look more professional and boost your sales upwards of 30%.

There are many ways to boost your image and increase your professionalism as a private investigator. These 10 tips are only the beginning. Increased professionalism must be a daily goal if you are to remain competitive in today’s private investigation industry.

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