

Danger of PI Apps: Counterpoint to ‘App Tries To Make Private Investigators Less Creepy’

Dean A. Beers, CLI, CCDI

June 12, 2015

This is in response to the following story, which is important to read to understand the context and concerns presented. This story was shared by friend and colleague, Ron Rugen (Team Investigations, LLC of Kansas City, MO). I also invite you to read Ron’s similarly thought provoking commentary at his agency blog - <http://www.kc-pi.com/2015/06/new-app-to-hire-private-investigator-not-good>. The author of this article, Tania Anderson, asked to publish my rebuttal by 06/17/2015; however, as of 06/20/2015 she has not. During this same week I have noticed a lot of online activity within our profession expressing similar concerns. I am not worried about losing business to an app – we don’t provide the services the app purports. What I am concerned about, as with all of our colleagues, is the damage this activity can do to our profession and consumers. It is our responsibility to not accept irresponsible, possibly illicit, activities.

“Picture in your head a private investigator. Does that mean trench coat, skulking behind a tree and snapping photos of a cheating spouse? A DC tech entrepreneur is trying to change that image.

Danny Boice, who left Speek last year as CTO, launched Trustify in March. After paying big bucks for a few private detectives (to keep tabs on his kids after his divorce), Danny never knew if they were actually doing what they were hired to do. Danny, who calls himself a “tiger dad,” started thinking about how to make private investigation more affordable and less skeezy. Trustify, based in Georgetown, is an Uber-like app that allows users in the DC region to hire a private detective for on-demand, one-hour jobs for \$59.

The jobs can range from catching a cheating spouse to finding out background on a soon to be hired nanny. Trustify has a network of over 2,000 private investigators in the DC region who are required to sign a contract and abide by certain policies and procedures. All customer interaction is anonymous and goes through the app. Danny, who has a team of 10 full-time employees, says Trustify gets 7-10 new customers per day. Eventually the app will be able to provide geolocation of a hired investigator and use a two-way chat app to exchange videos and pics. Danny also plans to hire 10 more people by the end of July.”

<https://www.bisnow.com/washington-dc/news/tech/app-tries-to-make-private-investigators-less-creepy-46767>

The time and space needed to address all the issues this app presents would be extensive, and perhaps for another time. However, I can address those points made in the article. First, the title is blatantly offensive and inaccurate. It states, not simply implies, that licensed private investigators are creepy and the app title suggests licensed private investigators are untrustworthy. Both of which are simply false premises. I suspect the developer felt he paid too much for professional services, with results that were not as he expected. Although with the best of intentions, I have some specific concerns, from this article for both my profession and consumers.

- **Hire a private detective for on-demand, one-hour jobs for \$59.**

DC is an above-average market and \$59 does not increase trust or reduce sleaze – it does cheapen our profession and creates false expectations. It does not provide the consumer any tangible benefit or guarantee, except cheap. I cannot think of a single assignment that would be completed in one hour - giving the consumer a very false impression and expectations.

- **The app has a network of over 2,000 private investigators in the DC region who are required to sign a contract and abide by certain policies and procedures.**

DC, like all but four states, requires licensing. To my knowledge there are not 2,000 licensed investigators in DC (expanding to MD or VA, or combined). Not only is unlicensed activity illegal, but the evidence is not

trustworthy, not admissible, and the unlicensed person (who is not an investigator) may be conducting illegal activity (such as stalking) and may violate a person's civil rights. Licensed investigators are bonded and/or insured; we are professionals. The purpose of licensing is to protect consumers and our profession from the untrustworthy and sleazy. Under licensing, the contract is required to be between the investigator and client – not a third party. This is also important to the Rules of Evidence (state and federal). Moreover, the policies and procedures of the app may not comply with licensing rules and regulations.

- **All customer interaction is anonymous and goes through the app.**

This is concerning. This does not create a licensed investigator-client relationship and does not protect the licensed investigator or consumer. This is likely not permitted under DC licensing. Moreover, anonymity does not foster trust and does not guarantee honesty, integrity or success.

- **Geolocation of a hired investigator and use a two-way chat app to exchange videos and pics.**

This is also concerning. If the intent is to assure that the licensed investigator is at the location doing as they were retained, it is false security. Licensed investigators must keep meticulous records, and also be in compliance with evidence, spoliation and confidential client communications. Geolocation, which is under high scrutiny at the state and federal legislative levels, may endanger the licensed investigator, clients and subjects. Moreover, it may interfere with productive work-product.

The services offered by this app – from surveillance (unlicensed may be criminal stalking) to nanny background checks – are regulated. These regulations include the activities and reporting by the licensed investigator. These include state and federal, and some can carry very high penalties and fines, as well as being worthless in any judicial hearing by the lay client.

Every state has a professional association, even those without licensing, to assure the best interests of our profession and consumers are met. There are several national, international and specialized associations. I am on the board of the national voice of our profession for legislative issues. In addition to statutes, rules, regulations and evidence – our profession has ethics. All investigators, including those in states without licensing, have a Professional Rules of Conduct, similar to those attorneys must follow. Our agency has developed a comprehensive ethics guide, as well as free course for investigators and consumers to better understand our profession. Our ethics are posted at <http://www.deathcasereview.com/ethics.html>; our ethics course manual is at <http://ethics.investigativecourses.com>. The course is free at www.InvestigativeCourses.com and all persons are welcome to learn from it. Reviewing these will give any person a better understanding of the serious issues this app presents.

Our profession has worked tirelessly, and will perpetually, to have the trust of our clients, and within the regulations overseeing us. Although this app has the best of intentions, I suspect the developer did not consult licensed private investigators, of which several very knowledgeable and trustworthy colleagues are in the DC area. This app may have financial success, it has demonstrated early success for the developer. It will not, however, be a success for the consumer and will be another bests of intentions that will jade the consumer with a bad experience against our profession; (and no recourse against the unlicensed person).

Consumer beware. Cheap is not better or professional, and it may be more creepy. It is certainly not trustworthy.

© June 2015 by Dean A. Beers, CLI, CCDI

Publication, copying, distribution or editing in whole or in part is prohibited without the expressed written permission of the author.

Dean A. Beers, CLI, CCDI began his investigative career in 1987. He is a Certified Legal Investigator and

Certified Criminal Defense Investigator, and expert consultant / witness in criminal defense homicide and civil equivocal death investigations. He is certified in Medicolegal Death Investigations and is a POST certified instructor, and experienced forensic autopsy assistant.

He is active in multiple state, national and international professional associations. He serves on multiple boards and committees, advocating for the investigative profession.

He has lectured extensively and authored multiple articles, peer-reviewed white papers, and provided expert testimony on Protocols of Private Investigation, and Forensic Investigations of Injury Pattern Analysis (including Blood Pattern Analysis) and Death Investigations (including Protocols and Standards), as well as consulted as a subject matter expert in Equivocal Death Analysis, Injury Causation, Time of Death, Crime Scene Analysis, Investigative Protocol, Evidence Protocol, and Forensic Photography.

Dean A. Beers, CLI, CCDI

Colorado Licensed Private Investigators PI2.0000019

Cheyenne WY Licensed Private Investigators & Security (No. OL-15-31146)

Board Certified Legal Investigator / Expert Consultant (national)

Board Certified Criminal Defense Investigator

Certified in Medicolegal Death Investigation / former Deputy Coroner

Associates in Forensic Investigations, LLC

A Rocky Mountain West Agency

Expert Consultants and Legal Investigator

Personal Injury, Negligence & Death in Civil, Criminal and Probate Litigation

www.DeathCaseReview.com ~ beersda@DeathCaseReview.com

CO - (970) 480-7793 Office / TXT and (970) 480-7794 Fax

WY - (307) 222-0136 Office / TXT and (307) 222-0138 Fax

'Quaero Indicium' - To Find The Evidence