



SURVEILLANCE

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One of the most essential skills an investigator can have is surveillance. Surveillance is an art form with techniques limited only by one's creativity. There have been many articles written on the subject relating to method. The area that has in my opinion been lacking in information is in the public perception of how a surveillance operation is conducted. The mere mention of private investigations sparks images of Thomas Magnum in his bright red Ferrari following close on the bumper of a subject around an island community without the least concern for losing the subject or worse yet being discovered. It must certainly help to have a friend with a helicopter service that happens to be available at a crucial moment of a case. Of course this advantage must play into the fact that almost every case is solved within each 30 minute episode. The reality is not so simple.

The surveillance investigator has many challenges to overcome to be successful in the field. The first is usually boredom. I cannot count the number of cases I have worked that required several hours of patient waiting just to get less than a minute of crucial evidence for a case. Let your concentration lag at the wrong moment and the opportunity is missed. Environment is also a factor that plays a role in the way surveillance is conducted. A busy city street may be a place where you can remain for longer periods without drawing attention but you wouldn't want to try it on a quiet neighborhood street or near a school. Invariably you are always going to be noticed by someone. The trick is not to be noticed by those associated with your subject. Another factor to consider is traffic. The traffic conditions play a big role in the way a mobile surveillance can be conducted. If you follow too close you run the risk of being noticed by the subject. Follow too far back and it is easier to lose the subject in traffic. Of course you must obey all traffic laws. I once lost a subject in the city as she drove down a street with a series of stop signs that went on block after block. With each intersection we went through the gap just got wider and wider. As she would drive through I would have to stop and a car would turn in front of me or pass through making the stop longer. As more cars got in between, the wait at each consecutive intersection got that much longer until finally she was gone from view. On another occasion, I watched as a subject turned left at a signal light just as a lady with a walker entered the crosswalk in front of me. I shot some nice video as my subject disappeared into the distance. This is just an example of the many unforeseen factors that play into a field surveillance. Of course there are ways to overcome most of these challenges. With time and experience an investigator can anticipate certain pitfalls and learn to expect the unexpected.

There are two important factors to consider when planning surveillance. How much time do you have and what is the budget. If time is short and the client does not mind the expense, multiple vehicles and investigators can be deployed to minimize the risk of losing a subject or being discovered. Law enforcement agencies will deploy multiple



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agents in an area to maintain surveillance of a subject without the subject seeing the same vehicle or faces twice in the same day. For what it costs to hire private investigators, this is not likely in the private sector. In most cases an investigator will have to rely on creativity to get the job done. If there is time an investigator can learn the habits of a subject by conducting surveillance for shorter periods over several days to learn when the subject is likely to be at a certain place. Then it is simply a matter of being ready with a camera at the right time to get the money shot. This is especially true with domestic cases. Take the time to learn when and where the subject likes to meet the other person and be there with the camera ready when they show up. With subjects that are difficult to follow you can use a stepped method to determine where they are going. In other words you follow to a certain point when you lose the subject or feel that you may be pushing too hard and let them go. The next time, you set up your surveillance in that area and follow from there when the subject shows up. Repeat this process until you learn the places the subject frequently visits. By learning the habits of a subject in this way you will know where to set up with your camera to get the shot you are after. This works well with personal injury cases. We found that an allegedly disabled subject liked to play golf at a local course a couple days a week. Once that was established, it was a simple matter to get multiple days of video over a period of time that established a regular pattern of behavior. By using this same method we were able to learn that a subject with a debilitating injury to his shoulder liked to wash his car in his father's driveway at a certain time every week. All we needed to do was wait down the street from his father's house on that day every week and we were able to shoot video of the subject washing cars for several consecutive weeks. This is a popular method with the paparazzi. It does however require time to establish the habits of the subject in this manner. Most clients expect that you should just go out and catch the subject in a few hours. It is common for an investigator to have to plan and execute field surveillance with short notice and only a few hours to work with. The methods that can be used are only limited by the creativity of the investigator. Patience is the key to success. Remember, it is always better to let a subject go rather than get caught. If you pull back on a surveillance you are not sure about the client has the chance to try again. If you push too hard and burn a case you will not be able to get near the subject again for a long time, if ever. It is during these cases that the skill of the investigator is put to the test. Of course, a little luck doesn't hurt either.