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THE ART OF THE PRETEXT:

Eliciting Information Without Raising Suspicion

BY **JODY O'GUINN**, CEO/FOUNDER
INVESTIGATOR CALABASH INVESTIGATIVE CONSULTANTS, LLC

In the world of private investigations, information is rarely handed over freely. Unlike law enforcement, private investigators operate without subpoena power, without custodial authority, and without the inherent pressure of the badge. What we do have, however, is the ability to engage, observe, and, when done correctly, elicit. One of the most effective tools in that process is the pretext.

Pretexting, at its core, is the strategic use of a plausible identity or scenario to obtain information from an unwitting source. It is not about deception for deception's sake; it is about creating

a context in which a person feels comfortable sharing information they would otherwise withhold. When executed professionally, ethically, and legally, pretexting becomes an art form, one that blends psychology, preparation, and disciplined communication.

UNDERSTANDING THE PRETEXT

A pretext is more than a cover story. It is a structured framework that explains who you are, why you are there, and why the person you are speaking with should engage with you. The difference between a successful pretext and a failed one often comes down to credibility.

Many investigators rely on surface-level explanations; quick, convenient stories that work only until they are challenged. A strong pretext, by contrast, is grounded in reality. It fits the setting, aligns with your appearance and demeanor, and makes intuitive sense to the person you are engaging with. Credibility is



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not just what you say, it's how naturally everything about you supports it.

BUILDING THE LEGEND

Every effective pretext is supported by a "legend," a believable identity with just enough depth to withstand casual inquiry. This does not require an elaborate biography, but it does require clarity and consistency.

At a minimum, your legend should clearly account for:

- Who you are and the role you are presenting
- Why you are in that specific place at that specific time
- Why it is reasonable for you to be asking questions

For example, presenting yourself as a prospective tenant, a vendor, or someone new to the area creates natural pathways for conversation. The context itself does much of the work for you, reducing the need for forced or overly direct questioning.

At the same time, investigators must remain firmly within legal and ethical boundaries. Certain representations, such as impersonating law enforcement or government officials, are strictly off-limits. The objective is to create plausibility, not to cross into unlawful or deceptive conduct that could jeopardize both the case and your professional standing.

THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENT

Pretexting is highly dependent on context. Where and when you engage someone often determines how receptive they will be.

An effective investigator evaluates the environment before making contact. A conversation that feels natural in one setting may feel intrusive in another. Timing, location, and social context all influence how your presence is perceived. The goal is to blend in seamlessly, so that your interaction feels routine rather than remarkable.

When your presence makes sense, people rarely question it. When it doesn't, even the best-crafted pretext can unravel quickly.

GUIDING THE CONVERSATION

Once engagement begins, the focus shifts from establishing credibility to eliciting information. This is where subtlety becomes critical. Direct, interrogative questioning can create resistance, particularly when the person has no obligation to speak with you.

Instead, skilled investigators guide conversations in a way that feels organic and unforced. They rely on tone, pacing, and carefully structured dialogue to move the interaction forward.

A few key techniques consistently prove effective in guiding conversations without raising suspicion, particularly when paired with subtle, real-world applications.

- **Assumptive statements:** Framing information as if it is already known encourages confirmation or correction. For example, instead of asking, "Does he live here?" an investigator might say, "He's usually home in the evenings, right?" or "I think I just missed him, he drives that dark SUV, doesn't he?" These statements prompt the subject to either agree or clarify, often providing more accurate details than a direct question would.

- **Open-ended prompts:** Inviting the subject to speak more freely often produces unanticipated details. Questions like "What's he like as a neighbor?", "How long has he been around here?", or "What's the routine like in this building?" encourage conversation rather than simple answers. In many cases, the subject will volunteer

additional context, relationships, habits, or patterns, without being directly asked.

- **Strategic pauses:** Allowing silence to linger can prompt additional disclosure without further questioning. After a subject responds, a brief pause, paired with a nod or attentive expression, often leads them to continue speaking. For instance, if someone says, "Yeah, he comes and goes a lot," and the investigator remains silent, the subject may naturally add, "...usually late at night, actually," offering valuable detail without any additional prompt.

When used together, these techniques create a conversational flow that feels natural to the subject while quietly advancing the investigator's objective.

These approaches shift the dynamic from interrogation to conversation. The subject does not feel pressured; instead, they feel engaged, and in that engagement, information naturally surfaces.

CONSISTENCY AND CONTROL

Consistency is the backbone of any successful pretext. Even minor contradictions can introduce doubt and disrupt interaction.

Everything about the investigator, language, tone, behavior, and knowledge, must align with the role being presented. If you claim to be unfamiliar with the area, your questions and reactions should reflect that. If you present yourself as experienced in a particular field, your communication should support it.

This level of consistency is not accidental. It is the result of preparation. Anticipating questions, rehearsing responses, and mentally walking through interaction beforehand can prevent missteps in the moment.

READING THE SUBJECT

An effective pretext is dynamic, not static. It requires continuous assessment of the person you are engaging with.

Some individuals are naturally open and conversational, offering information with little prompting. Others are guarded, cautious, or even suspicious. The investigator must adjust accordingly, modifying tone, pacing, and approach in real time.

Indicators such as body language, response length, and eye contact can signal whether the interaction is progressing or beginning to break down. Recognizing these cues allows the investigator to either deepen the conversation or disengage before drawing unwanted attention.

Knowing when to walk away is just as important as knowing how to proceed.

ETHICAL AND LEGAL BOUNDARIES

Pretexting occupies a space that demands discipline and restraint. While it is a legitimate investigative tool, it must always be applied within clearly defined boundaries.

Investigators should remain mindful of:

- Prohibitions against impersonating protected roles
- State-specific laws regarding recording and consent
- The need to avoid coercion, intimidation, or misrepresentation that could violate privacy laws

Equally important is the ethical dimension. The way information is obtained is reflected directly on the investigator and their agency. Aggressive or careless use of pretexting can damage credibility, harm client interests, and create unnecessary legal exposure.

Professionalism requires not only knowing what is allowed but exercising judgment in how and when to apply it.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Pretexting is particularly effective in situations where direct questioning would be met with resistance. Neighborhood canvassing, workplace inquiries, and interactions with service providers all present opportunities to gather information through indirect engagement.

In these settings, success often depends on simplicity. The more natural the interaction feels, the more likely it is to produce results. Overly complex pretexts tend to introduce risk, while straightforward, believable scenarios allow the investigator to remain focused on the conversation itself.

COMMON PITFALLS

Even experienced investigators can undermine their effectiveness by falling into avoidable traps. Over-talking, over-explaining, or pushing too aggressively for information can shift the interaction from natural to suspicious.

There is also a tendency to focus too heavily on the next question rather than the current answer. In doing so, investigators may miss valuable details that could guide the conversation more effectively than any prepared line of inquiry.

At its core, pretexting is not about control, it is about influence. And influence is achieved through patience, attentiveness, and restraint.

THE INVESTIGATOR'S MINDSET

The most effective investigators understand that pretexting is not about trickery, it is about human behavior. People share information when they feel comfortable, when the interaction feels routine, and when there is no perceived threat.

Creating that environment requires more than technique. It requires discipline, emotional intelligence, and the ability to remain

present in the moment. It also requires a willingness to adapt, to listen, and to accept that not every interaction will yield immediate results.

In many cases, the smallest details, offhand comments, casual observations, become the most valuable pieces of the puzzle.

CONCLUSION

The art of the pretext lies in its subtlety. It is a deliberate, thoughtful approach to gathering information without raising suspicion, built on preparation, credibility, and controlled communication.

When executed properly, it allows private investigators to access insights that would otherwise remain hidden. But with that capability comes responsibility. The true measure of an investigator is not just their ability to obtain information, but their ability to do so with professionalism, legality, and integrity.

Because in this profession, how you get the information matters just as much as the information itself. **PI**



Jody O'Guinn is a retired police chief with 34 years of law enforcement leadership, serving as Deputy Chief in Alton and Chief of Police in Carbondale and Freeman Spur, Illinois. A veteran SWAT and Regional WMD SRT Commander, he also held key roles with the DEA and MEGSI narcotics task forces. He is a certified Workplace Violence Threat Specialist and an Active Shooter Response Instructor.

A graduate of the FBI National Academy and LEEDS program at Quantico, he holds an MPA from Southern Illinois University. He pioneered the world's first board-certified cryptocurrency forensic investigator course and now serves as the Director of Law Enforcement Operations at Baker Group International.

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