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SKIP TRACING  
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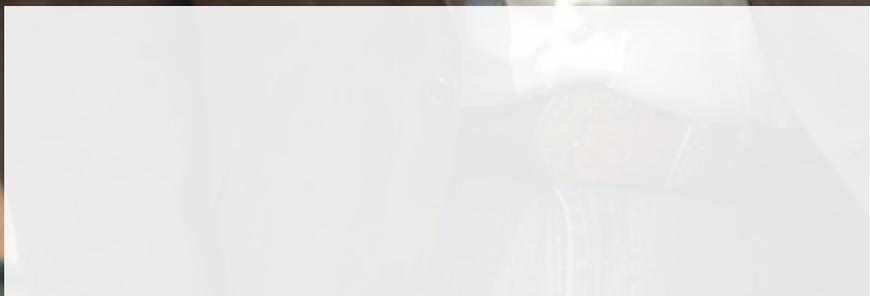
**SIGN OF THE TIMES:  
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**Bounty  
Hunters**  
**Skip Tracing  
for Success**

**PROBING  
IS MOST EFFECTIVE  
SKIP TRACING TOOL**

**BEYOND THE  
CAVEMAN STYLE  
OF SKIP TRACING**

Ron Brown  
CSI Group



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# BOUNTY HUNTERS

## Skip Tracing *for Success*

By Scott H. Cytron, ABC

**A**s most readers know by now, Collection Advisor will hold its third annual conference – Collection Advisor TECH'07 – in Las Vegas, Nov. 7-9 at the Bellagio Hotel. In putting together the topics for the educational sessions, the magazine team decided to have a session devoted to skip tracing – and even consulted our Advisory Council on the best way to present information to the audience.

We began with the concept of a panel presentation by vendors. This was followed with a panel of skip tracers who could find actual skips online and in real time, but this was shelved because the Advisory Council could not envision any truly “valid” information coming out of this kind of session except for some online fun.

This led us to establish a keynote speaker on Day One with **Ron L. Brown**, IFCCE, one of the participants in this month's cover story, who comes to TECH'07 with a reputation as an informing, yet highly entertaining speaker. Ron is president and

CEO of CSI Group (Collection Services International/Confidential Security Investigations/Combined Services for Insurance) in Oklahoma City, Okla.

One conversation with him and he'll use his down-home, Oklahoma drawl to charm you, no doubt. In fact, he's the cowboy on this month's cover.

Another “Ron” in this story is **Ron Cooper**, familiar to many readers as the face of our monthly “Skip Tracing Advisor” column. Ron spoke at last year's conference and always has as many intriguing stories about skip tracing as there are skips in today's collection world. Ron is owner of RC Info Services in Greenville, N.C.

Although our final skip tracer is new to the magazine, his style is unique. Through the concept of “field visits” and “door knocking,” **Brett Metcalfe** makes his mark by locating his skips in person. I have since learned that this is not necessarily a new concept, but one that is certainly out of the norm. Brett is a principal with



**Ron Brown**  
**CSI Group**

Global Field Services in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

**Collection Advisor:** Give me some history on how you got to where you are today. What led you to get into the skip trace/investigations line of work?

**Ron Brown:** My father was a "Professional Skip" – he robbed banks. I was able to observe first hand the techniques he used to avoid law enforcement, collectors and re-possessors. By the time I entered the 9th grade I had 21 report cards because we moved about every six months and had become very aware of the many techniques used to avoid being located. I was raised from that point on by very respectable and honest great aunts in Knoxville, Tenn.

I rode a motorcycle from Knoxville to Oklahoma City in 1963 to become a "cowboy," settling in Oklahoma and raising my family in Edmond, a suburb of Oklahoma City. I worked for a government entity during the Vietnam War era, and sharpened my interrogation and tracking skills. It was during this period that I discovered the science of Neuro-linguistics and the many applications of using this "language of the human mind."

After returning from overseas service, I did not work for about a year. One day, my wife, holding traditional values, told me I should get out and get a job or just get out; she really did not care which! I actually intended to go back to Vietnam, but needed about 60 to 90

days to get my affairs in order. I looked in the paper and saw an advertisement for a collector/skip tracer, and the rest is history. I went to work for CSI as a collector on Jan. 3, 1972, became a shareholder and general manager in 1977, vice president in 1982 and president in 1993. Today, I am the majority shareholder, president and CEO active in all areas of operations.

**Ron Cooper:** I got started in the investigative industry when I first got out of the Army. I became a bounty hunter. That is where I first learned the basics of skip tracing. I then became a collector (it was safer), again having a chance to increase my skip trace knowledge. After that I created a skip trace department for a local credit bureau. I tried to find skip trace education material and found out that there was very little available. I then learned everything I could about skip tracing; I guess you could say I became a little obsessed.

**Brett Metcalfe:** I spent 18 years in the third-party collection industry. As a result of countless calls to people resulting in no contact by phone, knowing full well they were at the location I was calling, I strongly suspected there would be a need for such a service. It wasn't until several years after leaving the industry that I decided there was indeed a market for field visit services. Today's telephone technology has done nothing to further the cause of telephone collections.

**Collection Advisor:** Give me up to five of your top techniques in finding a skip.

**Ron Brown:**

1. Understanding the motives and resources of your skip and getting into their "skin." If you cannot think and reason as much as the quarry you are tracing, you will not be able to get that one step ahead you need to intercept and locate the skip and his or her assets.
  2. Knowledge of the subtle questioning techniques used when questioning informants applying the use of Neuro-linguistics. You must be able to communicate with informants, gain their trust and get them to give you information they would not give to others. This is accomplished by a myriad of "mind
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# The Professional Tracer Must Know the Pros and Cons of Our Ever-changing, Evolving Technology Because it Can Work For and Against the Tracer

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manipulation techniques” without any deception or misrepresentations.

3. Knowledge of the technology available to tracers today in our world of cyberspace. Man’s ability to trace has always paralleled his ability to communicate. With today’s available technology, the professional tracer must know the pros and cons of our ever-changing, evolving technology because this technology can work for and against the tracer.
4. The ability to develop open and closed sources of information. Networking is one of the most important techniques available to professional tracers. In the tracing industry it really is “who you know.” Professional tracers must develop their own sources and resources to be successful.
5. The ability to use your imagination. This is the one most important technique a professional tracer must master. This technique allows the tracer to get outside the box, do a paradigm shift and go places others cannot.

## **Ron Cooper:**

1. Pre-emptive skip tracing would be my number one rule. If you can eliminate or at least reduce the risk of an account becoming a skip, the chances are it will be easier to satisfy the account.
2. Start with good information. Make sure you know if you are looking for, for example, a I, II, III, Jr. or Sr. Make sure that you have the full address to include lot or apartment numbers. It can waste a lot of money looking with incorrect information.
3. Scrub the account for deceased and bankruptcies. You won’t waste time and effort on an account you can’t collect on.
4. Have a predetermined procedure for the types of accounts you search. That way everyone stays within company policy and reduces the risk of legal actions. In addition, if someone else takes over the account, you can easily follow what has been and still needs to be done.
5. Each tracer should have some sort of education at least once a year to ensure he or she is aware of new laws, procedures, resources, networks and other areas.



**Ron Cooper**

## **Brett Metcalfe:**

1. Exhausting references on credit applications.
2. Databases – depending on how current their records are.
3. Telephone detective work – databases alone won’t get the right info.
4. Field Visits – a very definite way to confirm location of the debtor and make contact at the same time.
5. Intuition – you have to be intuitive to be a truly effective and successful skip tracer.

**Collection Advisor:** Why should a collection organization outsource its skip tracing to someone like you? What do they gain?

**Ron Brown:** Skip tracing is an art and a science better performed by a specialist. It is better performed by an agency that has developed open and closed sources of information, mastered the many resources and developments of today’s cyberspace technology, and employs tracers specifically trained to hunt with all the tools and weapons available. Obviously, you cannot collect, recover mortgaged property or seize assets to satisfy a judgment if you cannot find them. That is what we do for our living. We do find them.

**Ron Cooper:** There are only two times I believe agencies should outsource. First, they should outsource if they do not want to deal with training their employees, maintaining the resources and ensuring legal compliance. If an agency’s budget permits, it should outsource the accounts and let companies that specialize in that need do the work.

Second, outsource if they don’t have the time. Some of our clients have close to 1,000 accounts a month that need to be skip traced – and that can tie up a lot of man hours. If your staff gets paid to collect, skip tracing can eat up their time very quickly.

Before outsourcing to any company, I recommend researching the company that is right for you. Start off by giving them “test accounts” to see how well they perform in terms of price, turnaround time and accuracy.

**Brett Metcalfe:** The advances in today’s telephone technology have done nothing to further the cause of telephone collections. Collection agencies have all kinds of sexy databases,



**Brett Metcalfe**

software, dialers and other technology at their disposal. At the end of the day, it all comes down to making phone calls through whatever means they use. If someone doesn’t know who’s calling, or wants to ignore the call, the phone won’t get answered. Tens of thousands of accounts go uncollected every day as a result. But, as our tagline

says, “You can’t ignore a knock on the door.” There is a certain “shock value” when someone comes to your house in the evening to speak with you about a delinquent account. It gets a very definite response from the debtor. Across the board, it results in drastic collection increases.

**Collection Advisor:** We know there are standards for collection, but none for skip tracing. What do you think can be done to begin creating some kind of standardization for the industry?

**Ron Brown:** You will never be able to develop a “skip trace standard” for the industry as a whole because there are just too

many variables. Here are some: How much data was gathered at the point of sale, what type of demographics is involved, to what class of people was the product sold, how old is the account, and how much work was done by “skipguessers” prior to turning the claim to a professional?

All of these factors enter the picture when you try to benchmark tracing levels. Even if you try to develop standards for one specific client, there are still many variables, including the experience and training of the tracers, the thought process of the tracers, and the closed sources of information available to the individual tracers. My thought on the subject is, “Just let me do my job. I will find the ones that can be found exerting the maximum effort based on how much you are willing to pay.”

**Ron Cooper:** I have been on the soapbox for a few years on this very topic. You're right; there is no standardized skip tracing. From my experience, there are several reasons for this. Some companies do not truly understand the impact that skip tracing can have on their bottom line. The usual learning process is to learn from the person that you replace, so training is only as good as the person you got it from. The only way I see is for a group of skip trace “experts” to get together and create standards that are livable by a majority of companies. I don't believe it needs to be a grassroots effort, but to the contrary, needs to be a mass involvement of the entire industry.

**Brett Metcalfe:** There is absolutely no reason why the field chase industry cannot be regulated under the same laws and guidelines as the collection industry. All companies in this industry that I am aware of already adhere to the FDCPA guidelines, as well as state guidelines, either at the requirements of their clients or by self-imposed policies. There really is no need for misrepresentation or third-party disclosure to attain the desired results. Legitimate companies are good enough that they have no need to violate any regulations. The same laws that apply to collections can apply to field visit or skip tracing companies.

**Collection Advisor:** Our magazine reviews quite a few skip trace products/services. In fact, the August issue has the new set of reviews. If you had to name one key attribute that sets one vendor apart from another, what would it be?

**Ron Brown:** Accurate and current data in a clear concise format.

**Ron Cooper:** Accuracy of the information provided.

**Brett Metcalfe:** SERVICE – first and foremost. Personal service, talking with a real person who answers the phone, not a technological maze or voice mail when you call a vendor. A vendor who communicates with you very regularly, almost constantly, to keep you updated. A vendor who resolves the reasons for your call at the time of your call or, if that's not possible at the time, calls you back within 15 minutes with the resolution. At the very least, the vendor should call you back

to let you know they are working on the problem, and will follow-up with a call which addresses the issue the client has. Personal service has become almost non-existent as a result of technological “advancements.”

**Collection Advisor:** I want to know your absolute favorite (and outrageous) skip trace story from your years of experience.

**Ron Brown:** \$12 million of road building equipment, purchased from the manufacturer with a \$6 million counterfeit cashiers check with the remaining \$6 million financed by the manufacturer's finance company.

Sixty days of denial by the manufacturer and their management staff equals a cold trail to track. The assignment, if we accepted it, was to locate the perpetrators of the scam and recover the missing equipment, or collect the \$12 million. Our firm accepted the assignment and the challenge.

Using networking with closed sources of information, we were able to find that a shipment matching the description of our missing equipment had been sea freighted by the alleged purchasing company from San Diego to Lima, Peru.

Using networking, we were able to contact an employee of the American Embassy in Lima who, in turn, put our firm in contact with a colonel in the Peruvian Federal Police, “La Policia de Federales.” Our problem was explained to

the colonel, whose reply was that he would see what he could find out and advise as soon as he had any pertinent information.

Within five days, we were contacted by the colonel and advised that the property had been located and that he could assist us in recovering it – for a fee. The fee was agreed upon after consultation with our client and myself, and we were on our way to Peru via Aero Mexico.

Arriving at the Lima International Airport, we were greeted by the colonel who escorted us through customs and out to an old C-47 tail dragger, which we immediately dubbed “Adios Airlines.” Once on board, we were seated and each of us were handed a 45-caliber automatic handgun. Mine was marked “Ejercito Argentina” and was evidently a surplus Argentina Army pistol made by Colt in the late 1920s.

As we flew over the mountains, I advised the colonel that my men did not want to go into a possible combat situation with weapons we had not fired. “No problem,” he stated, and instructed the crew master to open the rear door so that we might fire our weapons at the mountain goats about 300 feet below the belly of the airplane. All weapons functioned flawlessly and we flew “over the hump” without incident.

We landed the old C-47 at an old airstrip in a beautiful tropical valley and were met by a squad of federal soldiers who accompanied our ragtag band upriver about 30 miles to the sight of a new resort area, which I might add, had excellent new paved roads. All of the equipment was there, including the drop bed trailers and trucks to haul the equipment. The

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# Using Networking, We Were able to Contact an Employee of the American Embassy in Lima Who Put our Firm in Contact With a Colonel in the Peruvian Federal Police

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keys were in the ignitions and everything was too good to be true. I asked the resort manager how all this came to be and he said he told the paving company employees that the federal police were on their way to arrest them and he assured them the last place they wanted to be was in a Peruvian jail.

My men and I mounted up and headed back across the mountains with the equipment. The colonel informed us that this is where we might need the weapons because there were bandits in the mountains. The trip back to Lima was without incident – the way we like it. The equipment was crated and shipped sea freight back to San Diego where the client agreed to pick it up and transport it back to the factory in Oklahoma.

The mission was accomplished. The client had its equipment back, the colonel was satisfied and the resort had nice roads at a fraction of the bid cost. I was well paid and even got to keep the pistol. As for the “credit criminals,” well, who really cares about them.”

**Ron Cooper:** A few years ago, a PI friend of mine in Oklahoma said he was in church and that an elderly gentleman was always at the altar when church was dismissed. His curiosity got the best of him and he asked his preacher why the elderly man did that. The preacher told him that the elderly man was dying of cancer and wanted to make peace with his son who he had not seen in more than 20 years.

He knew his son had struggles and stayed in trouble. My friend had taken it upon himself to help. He tried for several weeks in vain and asked me if I would try and locate the son. After two days of searching, I found the son living in a homeless shelter in Florida. I passed the information along. To my understanding, the elderly man died in peace. I never got a dime for that locate, but that was the biggest paycheck I ever got.

**Brett Metcalfe:** An auto finance client needed a field visit done on an account in a very remote area. This address, as it turns out, was about 10 miles down a dirt and gravel road in the hills. There was no power or running water to this house, to say nothing of phone service, and absolutely no cell reception,

even anywhere close to the location, which was way up in the hills. The last few miles of the road were covered in heavy snow, enough so that it was accessible only by snowmobile. I had to return to my residence (120 miles) to get my snowmobile and drive back up to the address in question. I rode the snowmobile the last few miles of the road to the house.

The “house” itself was nothing more than a two-room shack. The only heat was a wood-stove that had to be kept burning constantly since the weather was in the 20s during the day and down in the single-digits at night. They made a once-a-month

trip to town for groceries and supplies. The people did have a television that received a marginal signal, obviously without the benefit of cable or satellite. How, you might ask, was this powered if they had no electricity? The people had an old truck parked next to the “house” and had run wires from the truck battery through the wall and onto the television.

There was another need for this homemade electrical source. The man living in the house had emphysema and required regular use of an oxygen machine. The wires used for the television also had to be used to power his oxygen machine. In short, as his wife told me, he could either breathe or watch television.

The people could not understand why I had been sent there since they had already told the

lender that the debtor (their daughter) did not live there. She, in fact, lived in Seattle, which was 300 miles away! Her car, which was financed by the lender, was with her and could never have accessed the terrain around the house.

As I was getting on the snowmobile to leave, I looked around at what were very beautiful hills surrounding the house. I remarked to the people that it was a very nice area, and asked if they typically see a lot of deer or elk. The answer is one I will never forget. “Well, we would, but the dogs keep runnin’ them off.” The way it was said it sounded like they were watching their breakfast being chased off by the dogs. ☺

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**Ron Brown**