How to Create a Case File Number: Part of the PI Education Series

At InfoQuest, we're always here to help you with the business end of running your business.

In reviewing numerous private investigation case management software packages, we're constantly amazed at the number of over-priced packages that have "*automatically creates a case number*" high on the list of features as if it's a difficult thing to do, or even impressive as a package feature.

To make matters worse, most of these packages simply create a 6-digit number and start at 000001 then go to 000002 and so on and don't allow you to customize.

We suggest that case numbers should be codes that tell you much more than a simple number does, but at the same time, should have a simple format so you can easily create them and read them on the fly.

Let's look at a simple case file number:

20100310-SI-WC-109

Let's break this down a bit:

1. **20100310** is the date. Use a **descending date format** starting with the year, then month, then day. This automatically organizes your cases by date which makes it easier to review invoices and pay status of cases. Newcomers to the profession tend to like to organize cases by client. However, as any accountant will tell you, the business of running your business revolves around hours, billing, invoicing, and taxes. All of these center on time and dates. Base your case numbers chronologically. (Though definitely cross-ref by client!)
2. Using the **client's initials** as part of your case number is optional depending on the sensitivity of the case and the client's desire for anonymity. In our example, we made up the name "**Smith Insurance**" and used **SI**. We certainly do <u>not</u> recommend using the client's <u>name</u> in the case number.
3. Next, is a **two-letter code** of your choice that indicates the **type of case**. In our example above, "**WC**" stands for "Worker's Comp." Here are some code suggestions: MP – Missing Persons, WD – Wrongful Death, DS – Domestic Surveillance, BC – Background Check, AI – Asset Investigation, EP – Executive Protection, SA – Security Analysis, TI – Theft Investigation, etc.
4. If you have a client that may provide multiple cases, put the actual **number of the case** for **that client** at the end. In this example, this would be our 109th case for Smith Insurance. If this is a single case with little chance of repeat business from this client, you won't need these numbers.

Hints and Tips:

A. When creating a case file number, use it when naming **wordprocessor or spreadsheet files** so everything can be searched and/or called up using the case number. Also, write the number on any folders and use it on stickers that might go on CD / DVD cases, cassette tapes, evidence boxes, etc.

B. To help with looking up cases by client, put Microsoft Outlook ® (or your contact manager of choice) and create an entry for each client. Enter each case you take and cross-reference by case number.

C. Naming your computer files also makes it easy to search since most systems will let you **search** for part of the file name using some sort of "wild card" such as the asterisk *****. For example, if you wanted to see a listing of all Worker's Comp cases in 2010, you'd enter the search string 2010*****WC*****.doc (if you were searching for Microsoft Word ® files). Not only that, but listing them by file name will automatically show them in **chronological order** by virtue of their case number alone.

D. Rather than buy complex and over-priced software packages, you can easily use the software that probably came with your computer such as your wordprocessor and spreadsheet mentioned above (this is how The Case File works), and a calendar / contact program such as Microsoft Outlook ®.

E. Create a single **"reference" file** listing all your 2-letter case type codes and have your staff familiarize themselves with the list.