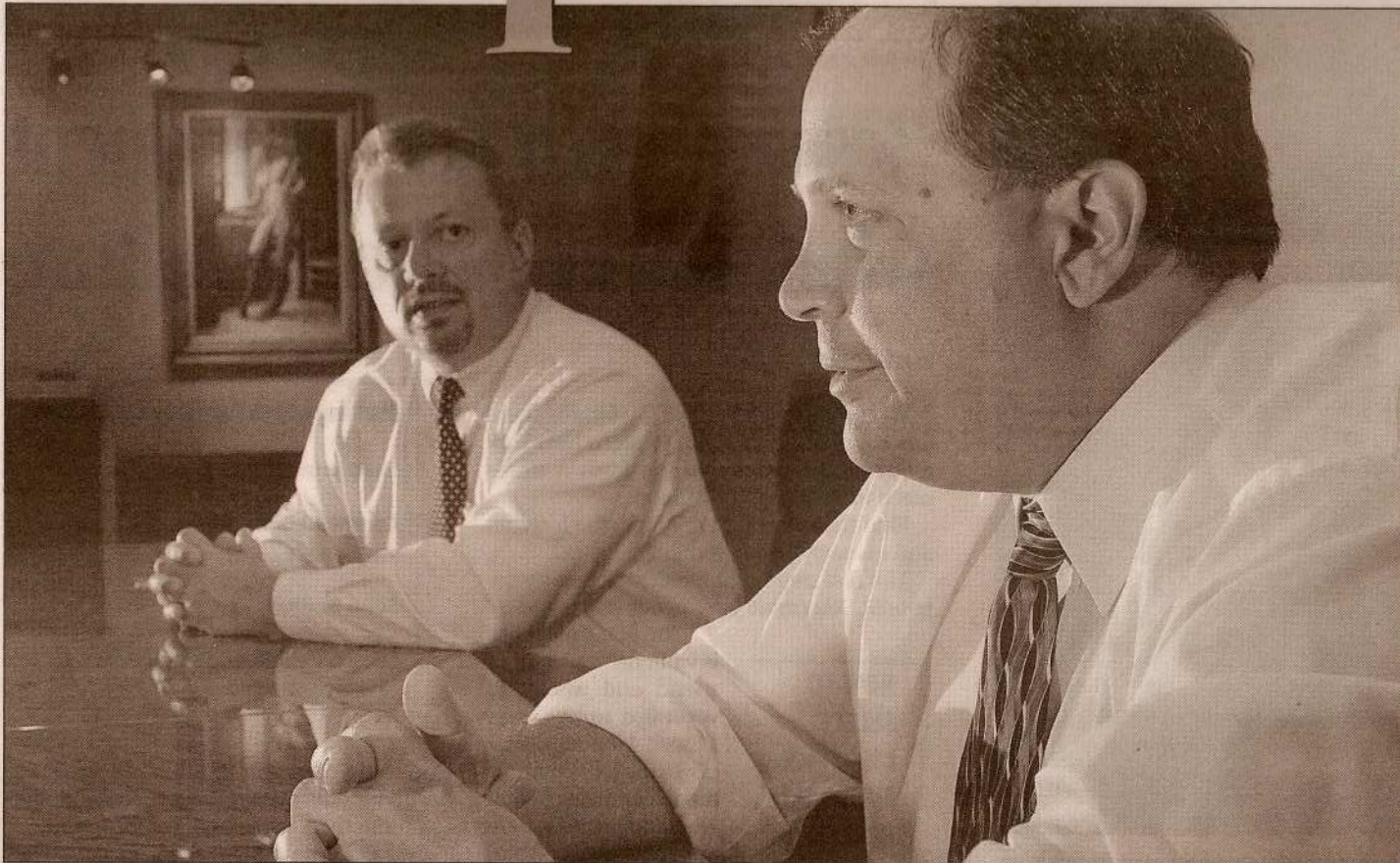


The private eyes



Kenneth Horton, left, and Mike Reitano have worked in private investigation for more than 20 plus years. The longtime friends were reunited in the workplace when Horton joined Probe Services, which Reitano started in 1997.

BY SHANNON O'SULLIVAN | sosullivan@bizjournals.com | 716-541-1616

Mike Reitano's business allows him to channel his inner spy.

The founder and president of Probe Services Professional Investigations is a veteran of the private investigation world. For Reitano, the clients come first and he stresses creativity in finding the information they need.

Whether it's conducting surveillance with

a hidden camera or repossessing cars, Reitano's investigators are always looking for ways to get information quickly and effectively. He has even sent an investigator undercover to work at a business for a few months where employees were suspected of stealing.

"We'll figure out how to do it, if we haven't done it already," Reitano said.

Reitano is currently focusing on how they can better serve their corporate clients, especially through pre-employment screening. With offices dotting the New York State Thruway from Buffalo to New York City, Probe is positioning itself to be one of the largest private investigation firms in the region.

Who's who: Michael Reitano serves as presi-

Investigators obtain the information their varied clients need

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JIM COURTNEY/BUSINESS FIRST

INVESTIGATIONS: Principle players have deep backgrounds in the field

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with criminal justice degrees and did not have law enforcement or legal experience. After college, private investigation drew them in and never let go. Each now has 20 plus years of experience in the field.

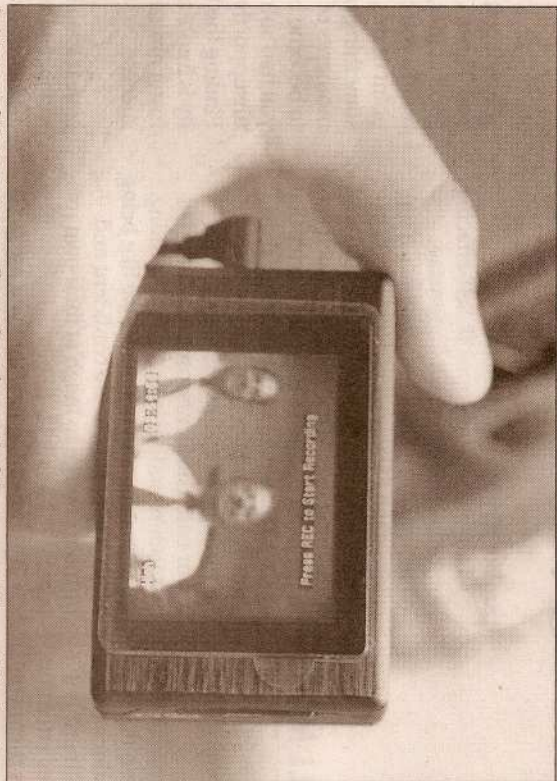
It was 1997 when they decided to start their own firms. At first, they went in separate directions: Reitano starting Probe, Horton starting another firm, Orion Investigation Service, and Hunger founding the Syracuse-based Nightingale Investigation Services. After several years of growing their own firms, Horton and Hunger joined Probe.

"Probe had already had an office in Rochester and Syracuse," Horton said, "that really worked into what my clients needed and I couldn't service that (without expanded offices)."

Joining forces with their old colleague seemed like the best decision and as Reitano says, "the rest is history."

The best part of owning a private investigation business: "Fortunately, we're pretty much recession proof," Horton said. Despite economic hard times, Probe has increased its revenues every year and has no problems retaining clients.

Revenues: \$3.8 million. Reitano estimates the company's revenues have increased



Reitano and Horton are usually on the other end of the camera. They said technology is one of the most important tools in private investigation today.

about 20 percent per year for the last seven years.

Clients: There are currently 165, most of which are insurance companies, law firms and corporations. Reitano noted there are approximately 1,500 open cases being investigated right now.

Employees: 82, including approximately 70 investigators. Typical investigators are former insurance claims adjusters and former law enforcement officers.

Biggest change: Technology. From the internet to digital video, private investigation has become a lot more sophisticated than the days of developing black and white photos

in a darkroom. About three years ago, an information technology company was brought in to help streamline the business. For example, clients can now submit cases directly through the Web site and it is then available at all locations automatically through a shared database. Managers also have access to the server from home. It has made the business more organized and efficient, which has improved communication with clients, Horton said. Dealing with less paper is also a plus.

Biggest challenge: Growing responsibly. "Expanding without overextending and keeping the quality of service where it needs to be," Reitano said. As clients increase and case loads rise, new investigators need to be brought in. Making sure their work is consistent with the company's standards is key to keeping clients satisfied and making expansion successful, Reitano said.

What's next: New Jersey. Probe plans on being

The best marketing tool is your current clients: When Probe began operating in Florida, they did it with zero formal marketing, Mike Reitano said. Their work there came out of existing clients who would recommend them to others and continue throwing cases their way.



Timely lesson

licensed in the Garden State by the end of the year. The firm is now licensed and working in Florida and they are hoping to continue growing that business. The rest of their offices are scattered throughout New York state with the most recent one having opened in Binghamton. Reitano hopes they will continue to grow regionally in the Northeast.

One of the difficulties with expansion is each state has its own rules and regulations for licensing private investigators, but the firm has established contacts in several states and even internationally. With the exception of a few states, they can conduct investigations through other firms without licensing issues, as long as the work originates in New York, Horton said. Horton explained clients can more or less subcontract work with Probe through another investigation firm that is licensed in that particular state or region.



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