

Lone Investigator Helps Indict Group Accused of a Decades-Long Scam, Armed Only with a Software Program



Overview

Location: Naples, FL

Industry: Private Investigative

Customer Profile:

Oracle International provides investigative support to law firms nationwide and internationally as well as to other investigative agencies.

Business Situation:

Bill Branscum of Oracle International needed a better way to organize and work with the hundreds of thousands of documents associated with major investigations.

Solution:

Branscum turned to CaseMap® and TimeMap® software products from LexisNexis® Litigation Services.

Benefits:

- Reduces the amount of time required to locate documents from days to seconds
- Enables faster insight
- Supports casebooks, presentations for other counsel, judges, juries

Product Summary

Litigation Services

- CaseMap
- TimeMap

It wasn't just a fraud. It was a series of frauds that had gone on for 20 years, bilking hundreds of victims out of tens of millions of dollars. It was a series of frauds so big that its true dimensions had never before been grasped by the federal or state authorities who caught glimpses of it here and there—until a single private investigator, armed with a unique software program, took on the case.

The Situation

Bill Branscum sensed the scam—the training and experience he'd developed during his career as a federal agent, plus ten years of experience in the private sector, hadn't failed him—but perhaps he could be forgiven for not immediately grasping its enormity: tens of millions of dollars from hundreds of people over 20 years, stretching from Maine to Minnesota.

What Branscum—the owner of Oracle International, an investigative agency based in Naples, Florida—knew at first was that his clients weren't the usual fraud victims. More than wanting their money back, they wanted justice. They wanted what no other victims of these scams had been able to achieve: to put the culprits out of business so that they couldn't harm anyone else. Their mission became Branscum's mission. Usually, Branscum only needed to gather enough evidence to win back a client's money. In this case, he would need to put together a case that would seal the criminals' fate in a court of law. It was a far higher standard. And Branscum was no longer working with a team of fellow U.S. Treasury Agents on fraud and drug-smuggling cases in south Florida. He was just one man.

As his investigation grew, the limits of being just one man would seem to have been insurmountable. There seemed to be no end to the documentation Branscum was collecting on this group of suspected con-artists. In all, it would total hundreds of thousands of pages. Reviewing all that information was challenging enough. Making sense of it and then being able to lay his hands on any needed piece of information seemed a downright Herculean task.

Was there any way that Branscum could meet his promise to his clients?

“With CaseMap, one click and I was reminded of all the background for that to-do item.”

Bill Branscum, Oracle International

The Solution

What he needed was the equivalent of a machete to get him through the rainforest of information filling his office. Fortunately, Branscum had the informational equivalent of that machete: CaseMap® and TimeMap®, software products from LexisNexis® Litigation Services. CaseMap is a central repository for case knowledge, used to organize information about the facts, documents, individuals, issues, and law in a given case. Information can be entered directly into the CaseMap tool or sent to it from any of 25+ other programs, from general-purpose software such as Microsoft® Word and Adobe® Acrobat® to specialized software such as Applied Discovery®. The TimeMap graphics program is designed to create highly visual and intuitive timelines—in as little as a few seconds when the information is imported automatically from CaseMap.

“Index Cards” for the 21st Century

For Branscum, CaseMap became the 21st-century equivalent of the private investigator’s trusted index-card system. Each fact he obtained was entered into CaseMap, sometimes as a typed entry, sometimes as a piece of a document from somewhere else and sometimes exported directly from other programs. But unlike any paper-card system, each fact could be directly linked to the document from which it came, giving Branscum one-click access to documents that might otherwise have taken hours or days to relocate.

“There’s a tremendous amount of work involved in any major investigation, just in processing all the information you will have to use throughout the case,” says Branscum. “The problem with traditional methods is that once you’ve processed the information manually, you still have to take a tremendous amount of time to retrieve information as you need it, and there are no shortcuts to help you see patterns in your information. With CaseMap, there is. It’s very easy to retrieve data and there are tools that facilitate analysis of the case.”

Branscum found he could shuffle the facts entered into a CaseMap file like a magician working a deck of cards. The result: with a few clicks, he could see every fact related to any individual, place or event in his CaseMap file, enabling him to probe his data to explore patterns in a fraction of the time it would have taken otherwise. CaseMap also provided discrete sections for storing his research, questions, and to-do items—all with links to relevant items anywhere else within CaseMap.

“When I used sticky notes, I might make a note to myself to make a particular phone call—and when I encountered the note later, I had no idea why I wanted to make that call,” recalls Branscum. “With CaseMap, one click and I was reminded of all the background for that to-do item.”

“What I accomplished in five minutes with CaseMap would have taken days of hunting through bankers’ boxes to pull out all of the financial records”

Bill Branscum, Oracle International

As he probed his growing case file in CaseMap, the complex web of false companies and transactions gave way to an increasingly clear picture of the underlying scams.

The “A-ha” Moments Come Quicker

“My ‘a-ha’ moment came a lot quicker than it would have otherwise,” says Branscum. “Once I had all the data entered, in the space of about 10 minutes I was able to do what would have otherwise taken days of calculations. For example, I began to see not just the subject’s role, but also how much money his associates were pulling from the scams—I think the numbers surprised all of us.”

It wouldn’t be the only time that CaseMap delivered that “a-ha” moment to Branscum. He recalls how, in an unrelated case, he investigated a subject’s finances after the individual in question had supposedly turned all of his financial records over to the court. CaseMap allowed Branscum to quickly pull out all of the man’s alimony payments, which enabled Branscum to detect something odd: Some monthly payments were just missing, and not made up later. On a hunch, Branscum used CaseMap to pull up the man’s car payments, and he found the same pattern: some payments simply were not made. Branscum’s conclusion: the man had a hidden bank account from which he occasionally paid his alimony and his car loan. The hunch was right and the missing finances were revealed.

“What I accomplished in five minutes with CaseMap would have taken days of hunting through bankers’ boxes to pull out all of the financial records,” says Branscum.

Charting a Course to Victory

To decipher the maze of transactions related to this scam, Branscum exported the transactions to TimeMap so they could be automatically charted on a timeline. “Once I used TimeMap to create a chronology of the transactions, it was perfectly clear that this was a complete fraud,” says Branscum.

“That wasn’t just useful in explaining the fraud to the attorneys and the authorities—it was also great evidence to show to the judge and jury. Not only that, you would have to pay someone a fortune to create the presentation that TimeMap allowed me to create almost instantly.”

Branscum used color-coded flags to track the deposits and withdrawals made to and from accounts. What at first was a flurry of financial statements now looked like a connect-the-dots diagram: \$10,000 was wired into the account, allegedly for investment—and then withdrawn via cashed check the next day. When a series of small cash withdrawals were made over a two-day period—

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sized to evade currency declaration requirements—Branscum could use color coding to show that those withdrawals matched almost to the penny with the size of a deposit made just the day before. Transaction after transaction was coded in this way, to show how every so-called investment was immediately pocketed.

In addition to the timeline graphics created by TimeMap, Branscum used CaseMap to create a 584-page guide to the case that any attorney, prosecutor, federal authority, or judge could use to understand the case and immediately identify any name, event, or transaction. The report laid out the entire cast of characters in the case and provided a clear explanation of the facts in each scam. Icing on the cake for Branscum: He didn't have to spend the days or weeks that creating such a report would otherwise require. With just a few clicks, he identified the report components he wanted and CaseMap went to work, automatically building the report from the existing case file.

Branscum turned his investigative report, produced through the use of CaseMap and TimeMap, over to the FBI and the IRS. The group has since been arrested and its assets seized. Branscum's promise to his clients has been kept. And Branscum attributes that success, in large part, to what the LexisNexis® software enabled him to do.

“A case like this could never have been handled in the private sector using traditional investigative tools,” says Branscum. “It would have cost more than a million dollars and required a team of 10 or more investigators working for a year—or for many years.” Instead, with CaseMap and TimeMap, Branscum completed the case on his own, in a year, costing his clients just one-tenth of the cost of a traditional investigation.

Working in an Intuitive, Natural Way

Branscum is quick to note that the tremendous productivity that the software enables is just part of a more elemental advantage. “With CaseMap and TimeMap, you simply don't get sidetracked because you have to do things in a certain way—the software enables you to work a case in a completely intuitive, natural way,” he says. “You acquire information and CaseMap enables you to store that information where it makes sense, where you can always retrieve it, and where you can relate it instantly to other information. You get an idea about how pieces of information might relate to each other, and you can check out that relationship instantly.”

For that reason, Branscum sees CaseMap as more than just a tool for seasoned investigators like himself. “I think CaseMap is the best training tool for someone wanting to do investigative work,” he says, “because it lets you learn the proper way to do an investigation.”

“My business has never been better, and I’m able to work a 40-hour week, maximum—which enables me to have lots of time with my family and to be a dad.”

Bill Branscum, Oracle International

Benefits

Making Branscum the “Go-To” Guy

CaseMap and TimeMap may have been instrumental in putting the group out of business, but the software’s impact on Branscum’s work has gone far beyond that. The software has helped him take on more complex cases than ever before. He has also been able to more than double his hourly rate while continuing to grow his business. And he’s become the go-to guy both to handle fraud cases anywhere in the world—he recently completed a case out of New Zealand—as well as celebrity cases.

“I’ve developed this reputation as a guy who can take an enormous amount of information and make sense of it,” says Branscum. “I don’t have any secret grail. I have CaseMap. It’s enabled me to take on cases I wouldn’t have otherwise. I can get a handle on the facts far quicker. And, even with my higher rates, I can bring in a case more cost-effectively than others can who charge a lower rate. My business has never been better, and I’m able to work a 40-hour week, maximum—which enables me to have lots of time with my family and to be a dad. It’s not bad, not bad at all.”

Note: As the criminal case referred to in this case study is awaiting adjudication, all names and other details of individuals have been removed. This case summary is presented by LexisNexis with the permission of the firm or organization participating in the case study and all opinions or views expressed herein are those of that particular individual, firm or organization contributing to the case study: www.fraudsandscams.com.

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