**ARTICLE: How Do You Find Value in a Tenant Screening Company?**

By David Pickron - Licensed Private Investigator with Rent Perfect
Not long ago, I found myself shopping for a few new button-down shirts. After getting the right size and finding my favorite colors, I started to compare my different choices on the basis of quality. By paying attention to factors such as the thickness of the cloth, the quality of the stitching, and the stiffness of the collar, I was able to decipher which were the higher quality shirts. There were certainly cheaper options, but I knew the quality shirt would wash better, require less ironing, and hold up over time.

Paying for quality – whether it comes to shirts or anything else – is a more intelligent move because it’s a decision that ends up being increasingly better over time. But how do you find quality when you are dealing with products or services that aren’t tangible… how do you find value when you can’t actually grasp what you’re buying and feel it in your hands?

That question is incredibly relevant to today’s real estate investors and tenant background screening definitely falls into that category. It’s something property owners know they need for their own protection and peace of mind, but also a topic they don’t know much about or comprehend very well. With so many different choices, prices, and differences in coverage, how do you find value in background checks and tenant screening?

It’s easier than you might think to “feel the fabric” of a screening company; if you know what to look for. We have gathered a few questions you should always ask to determine the kind of quality and value you are getting:
  **Is the Screening Product Instant?**Most rental property owners don’t know this, but instant background checks merely compare first and last names with dates of birth to previously compiled databases. Those databases are made of formerly congregated court records and rarely collect any eviction information. In addition, most instant products only update and add records a few times per year! In other words, they are unverified, out-of-date, and unreliable. **What Counties Are Being Covered in the Search?**Many instant background check products are advertised as being “nationwide”. What is the problem with being “nationwide”? There is no database with national coverage! In fact, many information brokers focus on larger population areas and disregard smaller jurisdictions altogether. In their minds, the smaller jurisdictions will have less of a population, and they equate that to having less information that anyone will miss.

From the point-of-view of the instant background check company; Why bother searching Florida (for example) if your applicant has not said they have lived there? That thinking overlooks the fact that applicants with the worst criminal and rental histories often falsify their past and/or identities. You want a live investigator who can find out where the potential tenant has lived and worked, and then search those counties and areas for any information that might concern you as a landlord. **Does the Screening Include Identification Verification?**When poor data goes into a background search, unreliable information comes out. For that reason, it’s absolutely critical that your screening company begins any search by verifying the identity of your applicant. Remember, those with the most to hide are the likeliest to lie about who they are. Using information generated from County records and credit bureaus, you can use good verification information to ensure that your applicant is the same person you’ve been investigating.

It’s easy to convince yourself that different screening companies are separated only by price, the same way that all shirts look similar from a distance when they are sitting next to one another on a clothing rack. In fact, there are a lot of instant background check businesses that would like you to think exactly that. Don’t fall for it – the differences in background screening services do matter, and you need to have a legitimate company with private investigators on your side.
 Working with a screening company with live investigators is a good line of defense in itself.  When you ask an applicant to pay for their own background check, their response will often hint to you whether they expect to pass the investigation or not. And thankfully, that hint comes from the knowledge that you have from your licensed private investigator. The only thing better than having your applicants screened by a private investigator is having those unqualified applicants screen themselves and move their problems into a different rental property.  How is that for quality and value?

**About the Author**
David Pickron has been a licensed private investigator for over 20 years, specializing in tenant screening for real estate investment owners and property management companies. His company, Rent Perfect, an Investigative Screening Company,  helps clients from the initial background check to leasing and payment collection.