

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AGENTS:

Finding One

"It's important for an actor to know that an agent is a partner. That the new actor is seeking a mate as actively as the agent might be. So do not be cowed by the procedure because the actor is selecting as well. It is a partnership."

Philip Adelman
Agent
The Gage Group

Finding an agent is rarely a one-time occurrence in an actor's career. Agencies flourish then founder. Agents retire or life retires the agent. Actors become restless and drop an old agent for a fresh perspective. Actors are signed then dropped, either because of poor performance in getting jobs or poor behavior as a person. Whether it's the first agent, second, third, tenth, or last, the search is never easy. The actor is seeking a professional partner. The relationship must be mutually compatible as in a marriage.

This hunt is one that many actors tentatively approach with a fear of agents, an anxiety about individual compatibility, and a hope for finding mutual respect in a relationship with a professional partner. Actors would do themselves well to play more on the hope than the anxiety and fear. Agents are not deities to be placed upon pedestals and revered. They're just people. People pushers with phones (like Cyd LeVin of Independent Artists). People with a strong desire to assist actors. Anyone who has a desire to assist others can't be all that bad...can he?

"You have to remember we're all just human beings," agent Lynne Jebens reflected about her representation colleagues. "There are so many diverse personalities when you talk about agents. There are some agents out there that I really adore and I think are wonderful individuals and are caring agents. And there are others that I realize they're just ugly human beings. It's about them. It's about power. It isn't about the actor."

The best agent an actor can have is the agent who is all about the actor. You want an agent who'll champion you before they champion themselves. Our friends from the Group of Eight have all had to do the search for their

champions. When asked what worked best for them individually in finding their first agent, most of the Group of Eight couldn't recall (what does that say about their feelings toward their first agent?!). For Robert LuPone, finding his first agent, like for most actors, was a struggle. "I tried any number of ways to get attention. 'Please?! Hello?' knocking on doors. 'Hi! Nice to meet you, I'm available.' Any number of ways to try to get attention." When I asked if LuPone's approaches for attention were of benefit, he responded with a laugh: "Not at all."

What did work for LuPone was one of the common backdoor entries into an agency. "I bought my first agent," LuPone admitted. "I got a job as a dancer and I went to an agent and said, 'Here's my commission.' And he took it and I stayed with him for ten years." If you're an actor without representation, having a lucrative contract to be negotiated is the quickest way to get an agent. Money often speaks louder than talent. Like LuPone, I had a similar agent-finding journey. I was in search of representation for one of my creative careers and continually hit brick walls. When a contract for work came my way, and negotiation for monies was needed, within one hour of receiving the offer of employment, I had an agent.

For Darrie Lawrence, finding her first agent came from another common scenario: The agent saw her work. "My first agent had a number of clients at the Denver Center, where I was working," Lawrence recalled. "He came out to Denver to see the shows and saw me and was interested. He called me into his New York office and I went in and he had me do a monologue. But actually the real story is he didn't follow up. I didn't put any pressure on him because I had a job at the Denver Center, so I wasn't too worried. I saw him on the street one day and he said, 'Oh, what are you doing? How're things?' I said, 'Great, I'm working out at the McCarter.' Then he said, 'Have I signed you!!?' I said, 'No.' He said, 'Well, that was a mistake. Come in and talk to me tomorrow!'" Lawrence's example is perfect demonstration that agents are not the personification of perfection or deities of talent. They're just people doing business. It's your business to connect to them.

NINE IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS WHEN LOOKING FOR AN AGENT

1. Matching Actor to Agency

Think of yourself and an agency in terms of product-brand matching. You're the product. The agency is the brand. The two must complement each other. Before doing a scattershot mailing of your P&R, followed by annoying postcards, shop the available talent reps in the agency market. Finding talent representation that's right for you and vice versa is like shopping the cereal aisle at the grocery store. Which brand of cereal matches your taste? The matching of your brand (you) and the agency isn't about the level of visibility for an actor or the agency. It's about matching two sensibilities: yours and the talent rep's. A good match

will result in a successful relationship. You wouldn't match Weight Watchers with Dunkin' Donuts.

2. Brand Matching

Brand matching does not mean that you physically have to resemble the talent representative's clientele. In fact, that would harm you more than assist. Talent reps share a strong belief of less is more in client homogeneity.

Agents regard representing two or more people who fall into the same look and type as a cardinal sin. Actors, when approaching an agent for representation, often hear the response, "I like you, but I've got someone like you already." Sometimes the statement is true. Sometimes it's a polite white lie used to brush the actor off.

Branding of a client list can extend to physical type and age. Some agency client rosters maintain a twenty-something age range. Similar to the movie *Logan's Run*, when a person (client) reaches thirty, he or she is dead and gone. Forgotten. Young, fit, and attractive bring in the revenue from film and TV. But hope is not lost for the forty-plus-somethings. Some agencies prefer clients forty and beyond. With age comes an emotional maturity. Hopefully. Agents prefer emotional maturity in clients (of all ages) as opposed to the headaches brought upon by green, insecure, "Where's my TV series?" fame-driven actor-brats.

Branding for an agency is more than the look of the clients on the list. It also highlights what the office is best known for in regard to their clients' abilities. Some agencies gain a reputation for supporting a strong theater client base. Broadway and regional theater casting directors will target these agencies when casting, while TV and film casting directors will generally ignore them. There are agencies that are weak in theatrical clients but are strong with TV and film actors and so the TV and film casting directors go to those agencies first when scheduling appointments. Not every agency can be pigeonholed. A number of them have strong client lists for all three mediums, theater, film, and TV.

When seeking an agency, look for those that excel in the medium of entertainment in which you get most of your work. Now you may be a theater actor who desires to expand into film or vice versa. Too many actors think they can jump between mediums. Cold water splash here: Only a small percentage of actors can successfully cross between work on stage to screen or screen to stage. Your talent, training, and the industry (the most significant influence) will determine the medium for your career. Your desires are of little relevance.

To get an understanding of agency brands, ask friends who have representation about their talent rep's client list. In many cases they won't know who else their agent represents. Agencies don't host client weekend Kumbaya campfires for their clients. There's little opportunity for a client list to join as one in peace, harmony, and s'mores. If you're fortunate enough to have developed personal or close working relationships with a casting director, ask for his or her opinions and recommendations as to what agencies would be a match for you.

And finally in the branding department there is the quietly referenced issue of an agency's standing within the industry, based in part on client list quality and agency power. When I worked with Mary Colquhoun on several films she had me separate agency submissions into three piles. Pile A for the designer name agencies (such as CAA, ICM, Morris, UTA, Gersh, and Innovative). Pile B for agencies respected by industry (and Mary) but which lacked designer name cache. And then Pile C, containing submissions that were rarely, if ever, opened. As Mary once said of an agency in pile C, "She gets her clients from the Port Authority Bus Terminal." You can get an idea of the type of talent/agencies that made up that particular stack.

This kind of attitude toward and recognition (or lack thereof) for agencies by industry remains prevalent today. However, there are occasions when the C agency talent can gain ground on the to-be-seen list. Not all agencies work on all projects being cast. Many agencies decide whether to respond to a casting call based on the project's prestige and/or money (actor's salary and the resulting commission). And so, often regional theater and lower salaried screen projects are ignored by the A agencies while casting receives a smattering of B's and a whole lot of C's. Suddenly B's and C's become A's and B's, respectively.

How you, as an actor, can discover the level of respect the industry has for the talent in an agency is to bluntly ask casting directors and plus inquire of agents (when meeting) who some of their current clients are. Most important, ask your actor network about agency reputations for the offices you have an interest in. They may not know all or any of the clients on an agency's list, but actors who have been at their trade for a while are often aware of an agency's reputation within the industry.

3. Size

Yes, size does matter. Agency size should matter as to the level of attention you, as an actor, require. Small and medium-sized agencies (of which there are A's and B's) can wield the same power with casting directors as do the large law-firm-like monster agencies. If you prefer personal contact and attention, a smaller agency may be better for you. If you're into big name brand names like ICM, CAA, William Morris, and Gersh and have no qualms about being one among many, then the big agency is the way to go...if they want you.

Large-Size Agencies

The large law-firm-like agencies invest only in talent that is instantly marketable and who generates copious, continuous caravans of cash for the agency. If not a box office star or an audience recognizable actor or a talented-beyond-belief, more gorgeous than any Greek god or goddess actor who just graduated from an industry-approved school, there's little to absolutely no hope of being with a monster agency like William Morris, CAA, or ICM. And if you're not a box office star, why would you want to be with the law-firm-like agency anyway? Hand-

holding attention by agents is given only to those actors who produce multiple Mount Everest mounds of money. Whether you're the newly graduated, brilliant MFA actor or the sexier-than-a-magazine-cover actor, or the working actor, if the commission you generate for your agent in a year falls below what the agency desires or if you don't generate any commission, you will likely be dropped into the black hole that is the assistant agent's voicemail or...dropped from the roster. When an actor doesn't meet the large agency monetary expectations within six months to a year, that actor becomes a nonperson. Money (lots of it) generated by an actor earns fickle love and temporary devotion from an agent at a large agency.

Medium-Size Agencies

Medium-size agencies are the backbone of talent strength to the industry. They generally have great reputations while maintaining a client list with both the recognizable actor and the developing actor who is new to the business. Medium-size agencies often have offices on both coasts or affiliates. The level of personal attention agents give their clients is far better than at larger agencies, but don't expect your agent to be a chummy companion. He or she will be your champion not your best friend. The actor-agent relationship is business with courtesy. If medium-size agencies were retail stores they would be Macy's. Respectable without the attitude and the high price of Gucci.

An actor will often get an appointment at a medium-size agency through a casting director's recommendation, or a referral by an actor already signed with that agency, or by an agent seeing him or her in a project featuring someone on the agency's talent roster. The odds of getting a meeting with an agent at a medium-size agency through an unsolicited P&R mailing are extremely low. Unless the résumé of the inquiring actor has credits that are high-level and recognizable, or the actor is a graduate of a great school (preferably industry approved), or the actor is sexier than a '69 Ford Mustang, there are only two other ways to get into a medium-size agency through an unsolicited P&R. First, buy your way in like Robert LuPone or I did with a profitable contract that needed to be negotiated. The second way in is the back door. Agencies do have back doors; they're called the Commercial and Voice-Over departments. If you can get in as a signed or freelance client with one of those departments of a medium-sized agency, then you may eventually be able to get into the Legit department. Getting into a commercial department of an agency is generally easier to get into than the Legit department because commercial casting is primarily all about the look of the actor, not the talent.

Small-Size Agencies

The small-size agency, sometimes referred to as a boutique agency, provides the best opportunity for an actor to get representation. The client list is generally filled with actors who work in regional theater, fill out the ensembles of

Broadway and tours, and do the walk-ons in film and television projects. Small-size agencies welcome the new actor who displays promise and working actors who care more for the work than their visibility. The personal attention at small-size agencies is generally high and much greater than the agent-to-client relationship found at medium- and large-size agencies.

Small agencies are more willing to meet actors who send them unsolicited P&Rs. Their agents attend showcases and paid auditions and are willing to take greater chances with unknowns. All of this doesn't mean that small-size agency agents are easy targets or less discriminating. While a small-sized agency will still provide challenges for the actor seeking representation, the opportunity to get a foot in the door will be far more available than at a medium- and large-size agency.

The small- and medium-size agencies develop and maintain an actor's career with loyalty. The larger agencies take the developed talent from the small and medium-sized agencies. When the talent is no longer profitable, the large law-firm-like, big-name agencies toss the talent back out onto the street for the smaller agencies to pick over the remains. What a lovely business.

4. Mailings

Before spending lots of valuable time and money on a mass-mailing agent hunt, where a fair amount of earnings and much needed cash go to waste on misguided marketing, know to whom you're sending your materials and why. Be selective. Choose targets. Match the product (you) to the brand (the talent rep). Know your image and the image of the talent rep.

When sending out materials, keep everything looking sharp and clean. Clutter and amusement are your two worst enemies here. What follows are some reminders for mailings, including what to send and how:

Headshot

Send one, high-quality headshot that accurately reflects you at present. Don't overkill with the amount of photos you send. One headshot is plenty. You must look exactly like your headshot when going to agent interviews and auditions. This doesn't mean wearing the same clothing; it means your face, hair, and body match the picture. No exceptions.

Résumé

Always have your résumé stapled, not taped, to your headshot. Seems obvious right? No. Many agents I know receive résumés that are "pasted" to the headshot with toothpaste, or bubble gum. One sticky, malodorous substance I received in a mailing was near HAZMAT material.

The résumé should look clean and be easily readable. Leave white space. It's okay to have white space on your résumé. Ask any marketer with worth their direct-mail-marketing skills and they will say that the eye needs open space to

read content. Use the standard, three-column approach. Separate your areas of performance by Theater, Film, and Television.

Cover Letter

Always include a cover letter. Use clean letterhead. Clean lines. Keep it brief--four to five sentences or two very short paragraphs. Leave out the cute and humorous. Tell the facts. Give some history (less is more). Name-drop any names you know personally that the agent knows personally. Name-drop industry and box-office names with whom you've worked closely (appearing as a background actor for one scene in a Brad Pitt film does not equal a close working relationship about which you can boast).

Envelope

Use a white envelope. Rise above the millions of actors who use the standard Staples yellow envelope. Look professional and stand apart. Businesses use white. Don't use the clear envelopes. A clear envelope is rarely opened and usually tossed into the trash along with the unviewed contents.

When it comes to addressing the envelope, you have two choices: Use a label that you created through your database of agents, or brush up on your penmanship and make the outside address appear personal. Stay away from the pre-addressed agent labels for sale online and at performing arts stores. Why? The information is not always up-to-date. Also, don't clutter the envelope with warnings like "Fragile," "Do Not Bend." Seventy-five percent of the envelopes agents and casting directors receive with (or without) the insecurity warnings to the postal carrier land on industry desks in a toss-and-tumble condition.

VHS Tapes, CDs, and DVDs

Research, via The Ross Reports, if the agent/agency you wish to contact accepts or does not accept recorded material. Most don't. Why? Because the agents are extremely busy with current clients and have little time to stop and review the hundreds of examples of recorded material they receive. When an agent wants to "see your tape" they'll let you know. Many of my agent and casting colleagues and I publish in The Ross Reports that we do not accept recorded material but still the items come, and into the trash they go without viewing. I used to feel guilty about this, but I have no room to keep the deluge of tapes, CDs, and DVDS. Nor do I have the money and time to send back material I didn't request.

Scope of the Mailing

Don't limit your mailing to just the agent. Send a mailing as well to the agent's assistant and associates. Why the assistant? Assistants often become franchised agents.

5. Film Agents

If your hopes are on an agency that works predominantly in film, then you had better have something on tape/DVD to back up your desires. Before presenting yourself to an agency known for film and TV clients you'll need to be both young and hot or have experience in the screen media. If lacking experience, get involved in quality student films and low-budget independent features. With patience and persistence, your desires will begin to be fulfilled. If you're not young and hot, there's hope. Bea Arthur had a great career.

6. Paid Auditions

Paid auditions are an effective way to get attention, brief as your time is (three minutes or so) in front of your industry person of choice. Paying thirty-five to forty bucks to be seen by industry is worth the gamble that the person you're meeting with will like you and take an interest.

7. Showcases

I've said it before and I'll repeat my belief again: New York showcases, initially a good idea proposed by AEA as an outlet for member visibility, have become nothing greater than AEA's infamous version of really bad community theater. Agents rarely, if ever, attend a non-client showcase.

If you should be able to get a prospective champion of your talents to see you in action upon the stage in a showcase, make damn sure that the level of all production elements (you, your fellow cast mates, the script, the direction, and design) are nothing less than stellar. Don't invite an agent, who has worked an exhausting ten-hour day, to a showcase that is an endurance test for both the audience and for those on stage. Before sending out that postcard trumpeting your latest showcase, ask yourself, "Would I subject my mother to this?"

8. Professionalism

Image. Image. Image. Finding representation should be near parallel in mindset to seeking civilian employment at a Fortune 500 company. So be professional! Mailing gimmicks that you find fun and unique can be unnerving and foolish to the stranger who doesn't know you. Being relentless with an agent is not viewed as perseverance but as cause for a restraining order. If you want respect as an actor from an agent, then you must respect the agent and be both professional and dignified in seeking your professional partner and champion.

9. Being Positive

Be positive when meeting with prospective representatives of your talent. This doesn't mean you present the giddy exuberance of *Up with People*. God no; then you'll be quickly pushed out the door. When meeting with an agent, be honest, be yourself, be open. No pretenses.

Don't bash or gossip about anyone during your interview with the talent rep. The warning might seem obvious, but once a person gets either nervous or comfortable, the filter on the mouth loosens. Censor yourself. The industry is small. Very small, near incestuous. If, during your meeting, you were negative about anyone, the talent rep you just met may phone or e-mail their friend who you flamed out on. Then you're really screwed; you'll become known as a negative gossip.

Highlight and emphasize the industry associates who know you and your work, but don't be a braggart. One of the first questions asked by an agent in an interview is, "So tell me, what casting directors or directors know you?" And by "know," the agent means that the casting director or director has seen your work, knows your personality to some degree, and can recall your name without difficulty.

A talent rep is looking for honesty and marketability. Most important, talent reps seek someone who is well adjusted as both a person and as an actor. To know if you're agent ready, examine those three aspects of yourself (honesty, marketability, being well adjusted) before reaching out for a champion of your talent.

AGENTS ON ACTORS FINDING AGENTS

Here's a rare opportunity: agents candidly offering insight into how actors can best approach an agent for representation. Our quorum of agents is also blunt as to what an actor should not do in seeking an agent for representation.

Before I interviewed the members of our agent foursome I approached over one hundred actors, asking them what questions about finding representation they would want to ask an agent. The actors replied with plentiful inquiries. What surprised me was that many of the actors approached didn't understand the actor-agent relationship, and many did not know what a talent agent did! There are a lot of unformed, unrepresented actors and represented actors with mistaken assumptions or perceptions about agents. Our quorum of agents was eager to enlighten.

Contacting an Agent

What are some of the most effective ways actors have reached out to you in getting your attention for a meeting?

LYNNE JEBENS: What I pay attention to is when actors use someone's name as a recommendation, but it has to be a true recommendation. Because when an actor uses somebody's name, I call and check it out. It better be truthful, and it better be honest.

CYD LeVIN: It's hard to get a meeting with me. The biggest way an actor gets a meeting with me is through a casting director's recommendation; especially a casting director that I respect. The other way is through seeing the actor in a show. Work bequeaths work.

JACK MENASHE: I love when the actor lets me come to them instead of trying so hard to force me to like them. I feel that so much about this business is letting people get excited about you rather than begging to get excited about you. Nobody really wants to be begged.

When an actor contacts you for representation, what about the actor's picture and résumé peaks your interest so that you invite him or her in for a meeting? What makes you keep an unsolicited picture and résumé?

JEBENS: The first place I always look is the eyes. There has to be something active going on. The eyes are a reflection of who the actor can be as characters.

LeVIN: I'm not big on unsolicited pictures and résumés. I need to see the work. But if the picture and résumé is of somebody really attractive, because unfortunately this is a visual business, I may take a second look at that picture to see what that person's training is. What, if anything, they have done. I will give that person an extra chance.

MENASHE: If somebody is in a Broadway show or understudying in a Broadway show or has really good regional credits and has gotten all this work on their own plus a good, marketable look and a nice clean presentation, I will absolutely call them in for a meeting. I do look at the training if the actor doesn't have a lot of credits.

PHILIP ADELMAN: It's very rare that I will respond to ANY unsolicited headshot except if it's somebody I know or somebody remarkably beautiful. What I need, what I become interested in potentially in an actor, has so little to do with the two-dimensional info I get on a picture and résumé. Occasionally somebody will be so undeniably beautiful that really what they're selling is on that piece of paper, if this is going to be a soap opera boy or girl or some seventeen-year-old sitcom beauty that I know can help pay the rent. So that I can afford to agent for my scarily brilliant and virtually unmarketable forty-year-old, who is unlikely to get the good paying jobs but who enriches my sole for agenting. But somebody's got to pay the rent for me to do that, and sometimes that's the soap opera girl and sometimes I can tell that from a picture and résumé. I can't tell if she's

- To read more about finding and keeping an agent, actor marketing, the most effective ways to get auditions, the best audition techniques that get actors jobs plus how to negotiate a contract, information on the “Industry Approved” schools and much, much, more; get your personalized, autographed copy of *ACTING: Make It Your Business – How to Avoid Mistakes and Achieve Success as a Working Actor* [here](#).

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