

SERIOUSLY, HOW DO I GET A DAMN AGENT?

By Jim Cirile

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Stop! Before you blast out another 150 e-mail queries, read this column! Here at last is the comprehensive guide to finding yourself a rep, all in 1,500 words. Learn well as our esteemed panel of motion picture lit representatives lays out solid strategies for finding representation that actually work.

ADVISORY BOARD		
Richard Arlook The Arlook Group	A.B. Fischer Shuman Co.	Jennie Frisbie Magnet Mgm't
Emile Gladstone ICM	Mike Goldberg New Wave Ent.	Nicole Clemens ICM
Graham Kaye CMG	Julien Thuan UTA	Jake Wagner FilmEngine

Seriously, how do you get a damn agent?

You don't.

Okay, that's the flip answer. We all know that finding representation is notoriously hard. While there were, at last count, 42.6 billion screenwriters out there, there are only a small handful of agents. They're generally hustling for their clients 10-12 hours a day and then have scripts to read at night. Generally, they just don't have the bandwidth to even *think* about reading unsolicited scripts. Think about it—if you are lucky enough to be represented, would you want your agent spending his time reading any old script that comes in over the transom? Heck, you'd want them to be spending their time reading your material and finding you work. So the next time you whine about how hard it is to get anyone at Boffo 3-Letter Agency to read your masterpiece, remember the reasons these barriers are in place. They're to keep you out until you are good and ready.

Good and ready? That's right, pardner, and that is Step One to finding an agent (and a step many people ignore.) Your mom may think your script is the shizzbombdiggit, but does anyone else? It is critically important that you develop your script to the point where it's good enough to send out first. Your script and your craft have to rock. Screenplay success is not random like a lottery. A bad script won't attract any interest no matter how many people you get to read it. "You have to have a group of confidants," says UTA's Julien Thuan. "In a perfect world, (these) are people who are actually in the business, and people who will be honest with you." Manager Graham Kaye agrees: "To grow as an

artist, you need to be able to accept the bad feedback with the good. You have to be willing to roll up your sleeves and rework your material over and over. That's how you develop your craft. Like anything else, it takes lots of practice. It takes years to become a good writer." Only when you start getting consistent raves from your friends, writing group, classmates or a reputable coverage service like www.coverageink.com, then load the rifle, and let's go.

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Now how about our old friend the query? Most of our panelists agree: they simply don't work. "Save a tree. Do not do unsolicited letters. Do not send out spam e-mails. They are irritating," says ICM's Nicole Clemens. Fellow ICM agent Emile Gladstone seconds that. "We don't accept query letters. I've never signed anyone off of that. That's not how you get an agent." Thuan says that rarely does a query pique his interest. "I can't say never, because I've responded to some before. Generally, if I respond, it's because the idea is interesting, or I think that the quality of the writing in the letter is really compelling. Sometimes people tell a story about themselves that gets your attention."

Of course, junior reps may be more receptive than established ones. Kaye tells us about how when he was first starting out at HWA Talent, a script came across his desk that no one else in town would bother with. He read it, loved it, signed the writer. Ten years later, the script got made as *I, Robot*. "My good friend John Davis—I was in a meeting with him, and I said, 'John, I sold that script.' He was eating a bowl of almonds, and he slid the almonds over and said, 'You did? Boy, you made me a lot of money. Here, have an almond!'" Kaye laughs. But he is a bit less receptive nowadays. "Not to be egomaniacal, but everybody who's on this panel—it takes lot of time and effort to break new talent. We don't necessarily have to do that anymore. It's extremely hard work, and we work hard enough. Why shouldn't we enjoy the success of the years of time and energy we've put into building our reputations?"

Where exactly does that leave a writer then? Nowhere until you realize a truism: It's all about the referral. You're never going to get an agent going in cold. Clemens advises writers to "spend your time taking advantage of the six degrees of Kevin Bacon in this town. Find someone who knows someone who knows someone—someone's cousin who knows someone's intern who knows someone's assistant. Get everybody to read your script. Cream rises." Clemens adds that if her assistant or intern recommends something, or a development executive or manager calls her about a script, it will make it to the top of her pile. "But if somebody cold-calls me, I'm not taking their script."

Gladstone says, "The most helpful advice I can give to a writer is not to be so fixated on finding an agent, but let the town work for you. Find a producer or find a champion." Instead of querying agents, he recommends buying the Hollywood Creative Directory (www.hcdonline.com) "Be a student of the business and find the producer that makes (the same type of movie that you've written,) and makes a lot of them. Then find the

most junior person, the bottom of the list – an assistant or junior CE. They WANT to read. They have to read, because they are looking for material that they can champion to their bosses and to the town.” And when those people something they like, Gladstone says they call him or people that work with him. “We get calls from those people, and they go to the top of the pile.” As proof this works, Gladstone signed two baby writers this year “with no credits and no nothing,” Clayton Surratt and David Johnson. Surratt’s script *342* sold to 2929 Entertainment, and Gladstone sold a pitch of Johnson’s to Paramount. “Clayton Surratt came to me from a lawyer and manager, and David Johnson came to me from a manager,” says Gladstone.

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Which brings us to another useful strategy: getting a manager to get an agent. “This town is just brimming over with managers,” says Clemens. “They live to fill this niche. Managers are way more likely to read unsolicited stuff. In fact, especially the young ones, they’re scrounging around looking for clients. If a manager calls me about a client, I’m going to read him, if I trust the manager’s taste.” A comprehensive list of managers and agents can also be found at hcdonline.com and many other places.

Contests, pitch fests and festivals may be another way to get noticed by agents—or not. While our panelists pay attention to Nicholl, many of the rest are also-rans. “The people judging contests are not the people working at Warner Bros.,” says Gladstone. “I’m not just looking for talent. I’m looking talent that wants to work in the studio system.” He feels many contest-winning scripts are not necessarily scripts that would work as specs. Gladstone also says that while junior agents sometimes attend pitch fests and festivals, “no one’s ever signed anyone off of that. They do it more as a service, giving a little back to the community, or sometimes a free trip. I’ve gone to Seattle and Hawaii on that kind of stuff, but you don’t really go there to sign. You go to Sundance to sign.” Most of our panelists don’t pay much attention to contests, although Thuan sometimes reads the winners of regional contests. “Not everyone who could be a great screenwriter lives in L.A. You feel like you can cover a little more ground that way.” In any case, don’t expect your third place win at the Pig’s Knuckles, Iowa, Screenwriting Contest to garner you much industry attention.

There you have it—queries generally don’t work, winning a contest may amount to nothing, and you’re better off trying to get a manager or junior creative exec to read your script than let THEM get you an agent. In the meantime, keep rewriting! And, folks, please do not query any of the panelists in this column. Find someone else who they know, who believes in your material, to contact them for you. And if they won’t do it? That means you’re not ready yet. Spend the time to develop your craft and get that “consider.” Then, and only then, devise your plan of attack. And consider pursuing management first. We’ll talk about that in the next article.

There IS a path to landing an agent. You’ve just been doing it all wrong. Good luck!

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Jim Cirile is the owner and founder of top-rated screenplay analysis and development service www.coverageink.com.

