

THE COWBOY WAY—January/February 2002 issue

By Mickey Freiberg

Q • Several agencies are saying that they will accept e-mail queries, which seems like a good way to get an immediate response. But are they more likely to pay as much attention to it as they would if they received a traditional query letter?

The chance of an electronic submission being lost in the daily shuffle of a busy literary agency is surprisingly high. A hopeful writer has every right to expect that an e-mail should extract a quicker response. But despite such common sense, the opposite is often the case. A query letter has a life of its own and has a greater opportunity of being passed around the literary department as a whole. The more people that read a query letter the greater the chance of a script being requested. So for my money, I'd suggest the submission of a quick and 'to the point' query letter. Time tested, simple and sound, it's the cleanest presentation for any worthy idea.

Q • I was recently advised to ONLY contact agents who handle other writers working in the genre in which my work falls. (In other words, if I've written a thriller, research the agents for Grisham, Clancy, etc). Do you agree? Or do the best agents recognize a good story regardless of genre or medium?

Whoever advised you to contact the agent that handles Grisham and Clancy is putting you in a dead zone. If I represented Grisham or Clancy I wouldn't be looking for any new clients, PERIOD. My career would be set. That having been said, let's now address your problem. The best agent for you is an agent that has read your work, loves your work and believes you have a future; one that you can get on the phone and will deal with you on a regular basis; one that is willing to guide you toward and through a distinguished career. Please keep in mind that your agent doesn't have to become your new best friend, only someone that you find a common ground of respect with. Good work and mutual respect should never be limited by genres. At least not by those writers and agents that have a true appreciation for their profession.

Q • What are the most important things to ask an agent/manager before signing with them?

Ask him if he loves his job? Ask him if you can reach him on the weekend? Can I call you at home? Are you prepared to kill for me? How long have you been with the company? If he's an agent ask him if he ever plans to be a manager. If he's a manager ask him if he dreams of becoming a producer. If his answer is "yes" to either of the last two, you should be leery of your future with this person. Ask him who his clients are and what were his last three sales. Ask him who he had lunch or dinner with last. When you pick your agent, pick him like you'd pick a co-conspirator; make sure it's someone you can *almost* trust.

- Q • I have been told that if it takes longer than 4-6 weeks to get a response to my screenplay that means the agent likes it. If he didn't like it I'd pretty much receive a "thanks, but no thanks" right away. Is this true?**

In regards to the length of time it takes to receive a response on a submitted screenplay—there is no way to come up with a factual answer. There is no way to tell how long it will take for anybody to get to your material, much less get a response back to you. I would suggest that if four weeks go by and you have received no form of response, go back to our earlier question and put that electronic mail to its proper use. In this instance, an e-mailed reminder (if available) would be the quickest way to nudge a non-responding agent into finding the time to give you an answer.

- Q • When I send in a script to an agent or producer that has requested to read it, what happens to it? Does it get read? And by whom? Through whose hands does the script travel? And why do some agents and producers never get back to you about that script ... even if it's just to say "no thanks"? Shouldn't we expect an answer from an agent or producer that has requested to read our material? If they don't answer back, does this indicate that they are not reputable?**

Once an agent has accepted your script, it will be logged in and either read by an assistant, a reader, or the agent himself. If an assistant and/or reader comes across the script prior to the agent, then there will be a detailed reader's report consisting of a logline, summary, and their personal comments. Many times they will grade your script for story, dialogue, character and, in summary, will make a recommendation as to whether the project is fit for film, television, or worst of all—rejection. Subject to this reader's report, the agent will decide whether or not to read the material himself/herself.