

THE COWBOY WAY
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Q: What do you think of an entertainment lawyer that wants to work with me to edit and polish one of my scripts?

I'll be the first to tell you that even a marginally successful entertainment lawyer is probably a pretty smart cookie. He's likely read more books than most people see walking through Barnes & Noble; he has the kind of vocabulary that could send you running for your Palm Pilot thesaurus; and he speaks a fluent but indecipherable form of legal babble even while he sleeps. All of this and a sharp tongue is what makes him good at his job ... as a lawyer. None of this necessarily means he knows what he's talking about when it comes to your script.

I'm sure any entertainment lawyer has read his fair share of scripts (both good and bad) over the years. But, then again, so has your average mailroom assistant. Now, I'm sure there are a fair amount of talented lawyers that happen to be as capable dealing with story issues as they are sorting through legal briefs. But I'm equally sure that any mailroom assistant is as likely to have an innate understanding of the writing process as any lawyer. Story consideration is not part of either of their job descriptions and their ability in this direction should be considered entirely independently from those more primary responsibilities. First and foremost, you want a good lawyer that knows his way around and through the law, just as you want a mailroom assistant that can get you your trades bright and early every morning. If they are able to bring other skills to bear, that is certainly a bonus (as much as it is a rarity).

If an entertainment lawyer is offering his or her services to you and those services extend beyond the legal arena and into the actual content of your material, consider the following: Does the lawyer have the kind of pedigree to justify their opinion concerning your script (how is their previous track record working with writers)? Do they seem to know what they're talking about when giving you notes (if you're a good writer you should be able to differentiate the canny speak of a wordsmith from the erudite sounding crap of a wannabe). What do they expect to get out of the additional service (are they really trying to help you or merely positioning themselves for some kind transition into the world of production)? Do you stand to benefit from the additional help (good notes are good notes and a good writer takes input from every source willing and available to help the script)?

At the end of the day only you know what your script needs and who can help you to address those needs. If a good lawyer is able to make your script better and he's willing to do it simply as part of the services you're already paying for (or even for an additional fee that is worth the additional help), then go for it. If a marginal lawyer is trying to stick his finger into a pot that's already past boiling ... well, it's always in your best interest to reserve the aprons for those that actually belong in the kitchen.

Q: I'm flying out to L.A. to meet with an agent who wants to represent me. I'm new to this and have no idea what to ask this agent! Do I ask how he plans to sell my script? Do I ask him what else he has sold lately? Help!

Those are already some great questions you've got there; just the sort of questions you would do well asking any potential representative. Of course, they also seem like just the kind of questions you should have asked before going to the trouble of buying a plane ticket and planning a trip to L.A. The answers to those most basic questions are exactly the kind of information you need to know before you waste your time (or anybody else's for that matter) on a lark trip across the country.

What happens if you make it to this meeting only to find out your "representative" is working out of his mom's basement and plans to sell your script to an up and coming producer with big plans for the local high school's talent show? I'm not saying that's very likely, but the simple fact that you came away with so little information from initial conversations with this representative tells me that either you're too desperate to find an agent willing to take your call or this agent is too desperate to find a writer willing to call him back (likely a little bit of both). So far, we haven't proven a trip to L.A. is worth the tax write-off.

Let's just say that it can be much simpler than you're making it on yourself. You already know the questions you have, so don't be afraid to ask them up front. Any reputable agent will be willing to give you their spiel (especially if they're actually interested in representing your material).

From this most basic exchange of information—(1) He tells you why he liked your script; (2) You tell him what you're looking for from a representative; (3) He tells you how he would attempt to address those needs—you'll be able to figure out if a more formal meeting (*i.e.* those tickets you shouldn't have already bought) is in order.

As a writer in possession of a commodity (your material and your ability to produce more material) you should never sell yourself short. That means not jumping on a plane and extending yourself before you even know what an agent is willing and able to offer you.

Take my advice and make sure you and the potential agent both know exactly what you're bringing to the table before you plan the next trip.