

THE COWBOY WAY—July/August 2002 issue

By Mickey Freiberg

Q: What should an unrepresented writer do if a major production company, based on a query letter, wishes to read his high-concept screenplay, but asks that it be sent via agent or attorney? I've inquired about their release form but have not received a reply.

The first question you should ask yourself is whether or not the “interest” this “major production company” has demonstrated toward your material is genuine. On any given day a studio or production company might request a mountain of materials through their proven channels (i.e., literary agents, entertainment lawyers, industry contacts). These materials are immediately given a certain amount of credence based solely on the producer’s relationship to the submitting agent. If a respected agent is sending you material that he believes in, you know, at the very least, that he has read it and respects it enough to stake his continued reputation on its submission. But even with the special attention afforded these solicited materials, only a handful of these scripts have the chance of actually making it past the cursory read. Now, the script that you’re talking about has been submitted without the benefit of an attached reputation. It therefore falls under the category of “unsolicited” material. Keeping this in mind, let’s take a moment to rethink the intentions of that “major production company” when requesting that your script be sent “through the proper channels.” Consider how that company might benefit from only accepting your material after it’s been screened through the representation process. Why should they waste their time giving it the first look when a literary agent or lawyer would be willing to accomplish that first read for them? I’m not saying that there can’t be a point of interest buried beneath the producer’s request that you follow the proper channels. But instead of trying to find an elusive release letter that might change their mind, just go ahead and find the necessary representation. If this is the kind of script that is already whetting a producer’s appetite, then you shouldn’t have a hard time finding someone willing to sell the thing for you. And if it turns out that it was all just a bunch of producer hyperbole, then at least now you’ve found agency representation.

Q: I’m not too delighted with my agent, but I’m not ready to leave. Any advice on how I can improve the situation?

The first order of business would be to sit down and draw up a list of how you feel your representation is currently falling short. No reason to jump the gun here or lose your focus; make sure this is truly about your career and not your personality or ego. Be as objective as possible and really sit down to figure out what kind of representation you’re receiving and exactly what further attentions you feel you need. Such an itemizing process will primarily help you in coming to terms with what you’re actually looking for as a writer, though it can also be used as a resource in bringing these concerns to your agent’s attention in a more intelligent and professional fashion. If your agent wishes to continue his relationship with you as a client then he should be more than willing to open

up such a dialogue. But if he balks at the conversation, or proves unwilling and unable to satisfy these concerns, then you've moved past the point of diplomacy. Just be sure to protect your own interest and have a fallback plan in the case of your eventual departure. An unagented writer is by far the loneliest species known to man, and the worst thing you can do is allow a transition between agents to bring your writing inertia to a cold and abrupt halt. Besides, if you lose representation outright then you'll no longer be able to blame your lack of work on that damn agent that's been holding you back.

Q: When looking for a new agent how do you go about wording your query? Should you say, "I'm looking to switch agents" and leave it at that or should you give a reason why?

With all these queries in search of a new agent, I find myself taking a closer look at my own client list. But who am I to discourage an unhappy writer from jumping ship and swimming upstream. Now, if you haven't taken my previous advice and shored up your representation before leaving, the best floatation device to grab before taking that plunge would be a solid recommendation. You can utilize fellow writers who have already established themselves in the industry, managers that respect your abilities, or lawyers that have worked with you in the past. Better than any of these would be any friend or respected business acquaintance of the agent whose attention you are trying to capture. If you can, make sure that your potential agent has heard of or worked with whomever you've chosen as a referral. If you find yourself with the opportunity to speak to your next potential representative directly, remember to focus on the positives of your own work instead of dwelling on the negatives of your past relationship. It's fine to indicate, in a gentle fashion, exactly where you feel your past agent may have let you down. Just don't get too exuberant in placing any blame. Never forget how deceptively small this community can become. There's nothing that says you won't find yourself working with that last agent again, whether you like it or not (and if not as an agent, then perhaps as a producer or manager!). All of this is to say that you should never burn a bridge on your way up the industry ladder. A year from now, that ship you jumped off of so boldly might be the only one that passes the island you've been marooned on ever since. That's when you'll be glad you didn't drill any holes in their hull.

Q: How necessary is coverage in regard to having a feature script considered by producers and/or agents? If it is necessary, which companies give the biggest "bang" for your buck?

Let me start by assuring you that I have nothing against industry coverage. I can think of very few avenues that allow a writer to receive such careful attention to his material as well as the attachment of objective and industry savvy recommendations for his writing potential. It's rarely cheap, but it can go a long way in educating a young writer or benefiting the work of an experienced one. Unfortunately, that is exactly as far as this form of coverage will take you. It is incredibly helpful, but entirely self-serving. Agents and producers have little reason to take it seriously. In the best of cases it will be glanced at long enough to flavor the opinion of a producer's in-house reader, whose coverage will

ultimately dictate if your script makes it into the next set of discerning hands. I'm not suggesting that such coverage will ever prove a negative, but it would be foolish for a writer to ever depend upon these outside means to push their material "over the top." Get the coverage if you'd like and utilize it to your own purpose as you redraft in preparation for submission. Just don't waste your time trying to take it any further. The most "bang for your buck" will be gotten from focusing all your time and energy toward making your script as good a product and writing sample as it can be. It's only when your work falls short of your intentions that you'll be tempted to benefit from hiding behind someone else's kind words.