

THE COWBOY WAY—May/June 2002 issue

By Mickey Freiberg

Q: I seem to have had some success getting my script into the hands of a known producer, who optioned it for 1.5 years (and got some serious interest from HBO). But now the rights have returned to me. I'm in New York and not plugged in to the agent/manager community. What should I do to try and get this script some interest?

Dear One More Time Around: One of the first questions you should ask yourself is where that previous success from a year and a half ago came from. What did you do right and what channels did you use to get your material into the right hands? What has changed so drastically in the last two years that you no longer have access to those or any similar resources? Secondly, I would suggest that an objective review of your previously successful material might prove insightful. Your script was optioned, but it was never put into production. What do you think prevented this? Find any obvious shortcomings and rethink the material in light of what is now surely a greater appreciation of marketable potentials. Rewrite the script with all of these things in mind and then plug it back into the same system that saw the earlier success. Living in New York or not, there are more than enough agents/managers on both coasts that are waiting to appreciate any talent you might have. It doesn't hurt that your project was previously under option by a producer, so be sure to include that in your next round of query letters. Good luck. I hope you don't need it.

Q: I'm an entry-level screenwriter in Orlando, FL. I pitched an action screenplay logline to WritersScriptNetwork.com. They sent a positive response and forwarded the logline e-mail to the agent of a well-known actor. Should I contact an agent and/or lawyer to represent me in these arrangements? Should I use someone local or a major (L.A. area) firm?

Dear Jumping the Gun: It's great that you've gotten a positive response from this organization, and even better that they seem to be drumming up some interest in your material. Even so, I think it's a touch premature for you to go out looking for representation based on this alone. My best suggestion for now would be for you to keep in close contact with the WritersScriptNetwork.com. Make sure they are keeping track of any and all submissions they are making on your behalf, and make sure they are willing to keep you informed on this process as much as possible. Loose talk about the interest of a "well known actor" is worth about as much as the opinions expressed in this column. So, until a more substantiated interest is demonstrated by a reputable production entity I'd say you'd do best not to get too excited too fast. Assuming someone expresses a formal interest in optioning/buying your material that would be the best and easiest time to secure willing and capable representation. Any agent that smells a sell will be more than happy to help you out at that point. And if you are thinking of opting for a lawyer instead, just make sure whoever you choose to represent your interests is able to

understand the nuances of the motion picture/television industry as well as your legal well being. Some people tend to forget that these are two separate but equal obligations due a client.

Q: It's difficult for a previously unpublished writer, when querying an Agency, to give adequate details with simply a Title, Logline and brief letter. Should a scriptwriter include a separate one-page synopsis?

Dear Inadequate: A standard logline accompanied by a brief letter, when written properly and representing good enough material, should be more than enough to engender proper interest in your script. The notion of a query letter supposes not only the quality of a writer's mind and imagination, but also his ability to quantify his material into succinct and easily marketable terms. The format itself can often seem limiting and inadequate, but the truth is there is little that can demonstrate a writer's abilities more fully than a professionally executed logline and letter. Remember that the logline itself should contain not only the "hook" of your story, but a focused energy that compliments the taste of your style of writing. A writer should always, "put his best writing forward," to coin a phrase. For bad or good, the reason this industry relies on the query letter is because there's no hiding behind it. If you have any faith in your writing and story telling abilities, then just slap it all on the paper and leave it to stand on its own merit.

Q: Should a writer submit just one script query at a time without mentioning other finished and/or potential stories? Along the same line, does the mention of book credits taint an agent's consideration of screenplay representation? I was under the impression that most agents liked the idea of a client with a marketable portfolio.

Dear Portfolio: The value of any credits or supplementary projects that you have the impulse to cram into a query letter can only be as good as the patience and attention a reader will allow. A wise man once said to put your best writing forward. At the risk of mixing metaphors, I don't think this means you should go around trying to stuff both feet into one leg of your pants. Limit your query for clarity's sake and focus on only those aspects that are the most commercially viable. If you've written a published book then it is, of course, important to let the agent know this. Always list previous publications or applicable writing experience in your query letter. The more you've already accomplished as a writer, the more willing I'll be to partake of the fruit of that experience. A final thought on query letters in general: After you've written your letter, shine it up all nice and set it on the mantle overnight. Wake up in the morning, rush downstairs and reread the result of your night's labor. You might be surprised to find much of the wit and wisdom that seemed so sharp by the twilight hour has found itself magically dulled by the coming of dawn. Always keep in mind that if your query letter bores you the third time you read it, it will sure as hell bore me from its very first glance. Perhaps none of these last suggestions will actually help you as a writer. But if there is any mercy in this world, it will make the mountain of letters I receive on a daily basis that much less painful to go through. If for nothing else, I'll thank you for that.