

Agent's Hot Sheet
Ten Years of Screenwriting Wisdom
from Hollywood's Top Reps

By Jim Cirile

Agent's Hot Sheet columns reprinted courtesy of *Creative Screenwriting* magazine

EXCERPT

Copyright 2013, James M. Cirile, all rights reserved.

A Coverage Ink publication

Coverage Ink
Screenwriting Analysis, Development & Editing
www.coverageink.com
3717 S. La Brea Ave #106-522
Los Angeles, CA 90016

FOREWARD

Late 2011, after a decade and a half of consistently putting out one fantastic, jam-packed issue after the next, *Creative Screenwriting* ceased publication. Not only was this a blow to its fans and it staff, but also to the screenwriting community. I'd been writing the Agent's Hot Sheet column since September, 2011 -- exactly a decade, and my 10th anniversary column was the last one that made it into print (my last Agent's Hot Sheet, *Young Bloods*, was never published, but is included here.)

Looking back on all these columns, one thing is clear: they are all just as relevant today as when they were written. While there have certainly been changes a-plenty in the biz (and we cover that in depth,) the sage advice offered by my panelists remains crucial. The top names in motion picture feature and TV literary representation are specifically telling you what to do and when to do it. Ignore them at your own peril!

We've omitted a few columns which focused on timely events of the time but which don't have much relevance to writers today. And we've also included a few other articles I wrote for both CS as well as *Script* magazine that involve topics of interest to us all (e.g, reps and how to get one.)

Most importantly, I want to extend a mega-ginormous THANK YOU to the frickin' amazing **Richard Arlook, Emile Gladstone, Ava Jamshidi, Nicole Clemens, Jake Wagner, A.B. Fischer, Julien Thuan, Jennie Frisbie and Mike Goldberg** – my regular go-to guys, without whom this body of work would not exist. For years, these amazing reps graciously and incredibly always made time to answer my many questions. You guys rock with unmitigated awesomeness.

It was my honor and pleasure to write the Agent's Hot Sheet column, and moreover, it was a master's class for me in how the business really works; priceless information which I delight in once again passing along to you all. I hope you learn and benefit from it as I did.

-- Jim Cirile

PANELISTS

A.B. Fischer, Octane Entertainment/Shuman Co.
Alan Gasmer, Alan Gasmer & Friends
Ava Jamshidi, ICM/Industry Entertainment
Britton Rizzio, Circle of Confusion
Dave Alpert, Circle of Confusion
Emile Gladstone, BWCS/ICM
Eric Feig, AGMB Law
Graham Kaye, Innovative Artists/CMG/Christine Peters Co.
Jake Wagner, Energy Entertainment/FilmEngine/Benderspink
Jason Burns, UTA
Jeffrey Belkin, Zero Gravity Management
Jennie Frisbie, Magnet Management
Julien Thuan, UTA
Keya Khayatian, UTA
Lars Theriot, ICM
Mark Temple, Mark S. Temple Pro Law Corp.
Marty Bowen, UTA, Temple Hill Entertainment
Melinda Manos, Manos Management
Mike Esola, WME
Mike Goldberg, Roar/New Wave Entertainment
Nick Reed, ICM
Nicole Clemens, ICM
Nicole Graham, Writers & Artists Agency
Oliver Kramer, Hollywood Gang
Pouya Shahbazian, Mandown Prods.
Richard Arlook, The Gersh Agency/The Arlook Group
Rob Golenberg, The Gersh Agency
Sandra Lucchesi, The Gersh Agency
Scott Whitehead, Colden, McKuin & Frankel
Sean Freidin, ICM
Tim Phillips, UTA
Tobin Babst, UTA
Zac Unterman, Smart Entertainment

And screenwriters:

Bob Conte
Brady Dahl
Brandon Camp
Chad St. John
Chris Soth
Dale Launer
David Twohy
Dudi Appleton

Evan Daugherty

Jamie Rhonheimer

Jeff Maguire

Jim Keeble

John Fasano

Josh Stolberg

Larry Ferguson

Manny Coto

Patrick Cirillo

Peter Wortmann

Rick Jaffa

Tony Gilroy

... and many more!

SERIOUSLY, HOW DO I GET A DAMN MANAGER?

Do you really need to shell out that extra 10%? What can a manager do for you that an agent can't? And are these guys any more accessible than agents? The answers may surprise you.

Okay, so as you no doubt noted, many of our panelists asserted in our previous column “Seriously, How Do I Get a Damn Agent?” that one effective way to land an agent is to **find a manager first**. So it seems only fair to talk to a panel of managers to get their thoughts on this. Please let them not say the best way to get a manager is to find an agent first...

But first, let's clear up a couple things. There are important differences between agents and managers. While they're both involved in the development and selling of scripts, agents tend to lean more heavily towards the selling side, while many managers focus more on development of both the writer's material and career. Perhaps most importantly, a manager will generally be able to give you a lot more time. Manager A.B. Fischer from Shuman Co. says, “A manager will generate new ideas with you, nurture you and develop your craft through a million drafts of a spec. An agent only has so many minutes in the day to deal with that.” Melinda Manos from Manos Management agrees, “I handle 12-15 clients total; it allows me a lot of time for everyone. I don't know any agents who have (a list) that size.” Indeed, many agents have client lists of 50, 60 or more. Fischer adds, “A lot of agents look to managers (and) say, ‘Your part of the team is to help develop. That's what I need you for.’” Manager Graham Kaye says he is far more involved with his clients as a manager than he ever was as an agent. “When you work at places like (William Morris Endeavor), it is a volume business. They do give you great service, but they have a limited amount of time to spend with you. Do you want them to take a long lunch with you, or do you want them to help pay your mortgage?”

“(Agencies like WME are) a volume business. They have a limited amount of time they can spend with you.” -- Graham Kaye, Graham Kaye Management

There are also varying levels of managers, from those just starting out with perhaps a handful of industry connections to those who come with more juice thanks to agency or prodco experience. “I'll be bold and say it,” says Kaye, “I don't need an agent to represent any of my clients.” Kaye feels that his agency background gives him strong relationships with buyers that managers with a different pedigree may not have. “Even studio executives who become managers are limited in their exposure. I know a few people that have gone from being an executive to a manager, and they think that because they have relationships at a couple of studios it's going to be easy for them. But the reality is, they've been working in just one studio. Now they have to build relationships at new studios.”

If you're like me, all the above is starting to sound pretty appealing -- someone who actually spends time with you, helps develop your script through draft after draft? That's

worth ten percent in my book. But as alluded to above, there's one other crucial thing a manager may be able to help with: getting an agent on your team. Those of you who've been querying agents but ignoring managers might as well be trying to attack Fort Knox with a Cheeto. "Let's say it's a new writer," says Fischer, "and I've been developing a spec with him. If I feel that the script is ready, and the marketplace is ready to buy something like this, at that point I would try to get the writer an agent. It's great to have an agent onboard, and the power of an agency to help sell is really important." Manos recently took a similar approach. "We didn't show (a script) to an agent until I'd probably read a dozen drafts." She believes it's very important to team with an agent because they add a whole new level of access and contacts. "I think we achieve success faster. I can keep the heat under an agent just enough to not annoy them so I get the most out of my agents. (Marketing a script) can be done without an agent, but it's pretty tough going out there."

So let's get to the beef in this Dinty Moore. How exactly does one land a manager? Well, wait just a sec -- I must pound my drumhead here as usual. Before you do anything, make sure your script is ready! It's a simple fact: most scripts are nowhere ready for submission. Anywhere. Get that feedback from industry friends, analysts or reputable coverage services like www.coverageink.com first, and use that intel to buff your script **before** you knock on any doors. End shameless self-plug/tirade.

You'll be happy to know that all of our panelists feel that managers in general tend to be more accessible than agents. And unlike with agents, query letters CAN still open doors with some managers. It's rare, but it happens. A.B. Fischer gets "a ton of queries, and I read every single one. I don't respond to most of them, but if something catches my eye, I'll absolutely read it. You never know where you're going to find a client." Fischer says he's always looking for exciting new talent to expand his list. "If I find somebody who's never done anything before that I can get behind and develop, that works for me. Agents feel, 'It's hard enough to get clients who have sold stuff jobs. I just don't have the time to develop somebody from scratch.'"

Managers in general tend to be more accessible than agents. Query letters CAN still open doors.

While both Manos and Kaye say their doors are closed, they acknowledge that there are ways in. Manos says, "In general, I don't look at (queries.) The only exception was once I got a query by e-mail, and it was exactly the genre I was looking for. It sounded really interesting in the logline, so I took a look at it. But I do look at almost every referral. Try to get a referral through a peer or lawyer or associate." Kaye says, "Call the development execs (at my company.) Don't call *me*. I mean it, too. If one of the young managers here feels that they've found somebody who's very special, I will support them and go through the process of meeting them and finding out if it's somebody we want to be in business with. I've worked hard to get to a certain place where I don't need to sign clients, but younger managers who haven't been in the business as long as I have, that's part of their job." And, guys, please keep those queries short, snappy and personalized. Manos says, "(I get these) these long-winded, generic e-mail queries: 'Dear Management

Company...’ I get ten a day. People tell you their whole plot in an e-mail. That’s not going to fly.”

Before you start querying managers, know well what these guys are looking for -- and what they’re not. Says Fischer, “I want to see a fresh take on old material. You’re gonna be hard-pressed to find a new idea out there. Yes, when I’m reading a query, concept is important. If the idea is stale, I’m not going to request the script. When I’m actually reading something, concept is less important. If they’ve got chops to write and have an interesting take on the world, we can find that idea that’s going to sell.” Manos would like potential clients to be working hard on their craft and not sit around waiting for the phone to ring. “But the other extreme is someone who’s out schmoozing, managing their own career. (In that case) there’s not really room for a manager.” She also prefers writers that come to her with some momentum, industry interest or connections. “That gives you something to work from,” she says. “Do your research. Find management companies that might be at your level and try to get that referral. Then submit your most marketable, most commercial script.” And whatever you do, don’t be this guy: “I had a writer referral call me,” says Manos. “I said, ‘What you’ve got on the table sounds really interesting, but I’m on deadline right now. Do me a favor -- send me an e-mail.’ He proceeded to call me three times in two days -- no e-mail -- and he left these long-winded, amped-up phone messages. I so can’t work with that guy.”

So are they worth the extra 10%? You better believe it. A manager can make all the difference in getting your craft and your script to the level it needs to be; they will invest their time to develop your talent and best of all, when you’re ready, they’ll help get you an agent and introduce you to the town. Attempt any of this on your own at your own peril! None of this means getting a manager is going to be easy either. They are deluged with queries every day. But ultimately, the cream does rise. Keep working at your craft and keep persevering, and when you have the goods, eventually someone will take notice. And when a manager comes aboard to help your career, then hold on tight because at long last, things may finally start to happen for you. Good luck!

TEAR DOWN THE WALL!

TV, Meet Film. Now Play Nice.

Used to be, if you were a feature writer who took a job in TV, you were slumming, or your career was on the skids. Not so much anymore.

A peculiar evolution has occurred in the world of motion picture lit. Television, once reviled by some feature writers, has become a desirable, prestigious and even profitable medium to work in. As a result, more and more writers seem to be crossing back and forth between TV and features. The wall formerly separating these two mediums seems to be history.

“You could not safely say to your client of any fame six, seven years ago that they had a shot at working in television. It was taboo,” observes CMG’s Graham Kaye. “They would fire you--understandably. (If you said) guess what, somebody wants you to write a pilot for them, their first thought was, ‘is my career that bad?’” But as shows like “ER” and “Law & Order” raised the bar for quality writing on the networks, HBO cemented TV’s new reputation with its own superior original programming. Nowadays, many noted feature writers and producers have their toes in the TV waters. So if you’re a writer who still bears an anti-TV attitude, get over it. ICM’s Nicole Clemens says, “It’s antiquated. I don’t have any writers who still have that view.” The Gersh Agency’s Richard Arlook agrees. “I think (the wall) is gone. Look at Jerry Bruckheimer. He’s a feature producer, and he’s got more shows on TV than anybody.” UTA’s Julien Thuan notes, “I think a lot of people like to bash the television format, but the truth is, more than ever, I think there’s a lot of opportunity to do really interesting things.”

In fact, in many ways, TV can be a superior medium for creators to work in. For one thing, writers are generally not treated like second-class citizens, as often happens on the feature side. “There’s a big difference between television and features in terms of where the writer is on the totem pole,” comments BWCS’ Emile Gladstone. “In television, the writer’s at the top. That person works with the actors. That person tells the director what to do. They are the showrunner, the creator; they are it. Whereas that role in the feature business lies more on the director. But the writer is king in television.” Gladstone adds, “Once you taste that, it’s hard to go back, unless you just love the (feature film) format.”

As the economics in the features world, particularly the decline in film financing via foreign pre-sales, limits the number of features put into production, TV is also becoming the place for writers to actually get quality projects made and seen. The cable outlets have not disappointed, putting a large number of high-quality projects by terrific writers on the air. “One of the best movies I’ve seen all year was ‘Bang, Bang, You’re Dead’ on Showtime,” enthuses Kaye. “Bill Mastrosimone wrote it. He wrote ‘With Honors,’ and then he wrote ‘Benedict Arnold’ for A&E. This guy is a phenomenal playwright--he started with ‘Extremities.’ A lot of the writers (working in TV) right now are feature writers. And I think that if I was taking one of these writers from television to features, I

would have every opportunity to increase their quote.”

TV also offers shorter writing schedules. While this can be problematic for writers accustomed to a leisurely feature writing timetable (a 12-week writing period followed by a 6-week reading period followed by another 8-week writing period, for example,) in TV, the writer may only have a few weeks to turn around a script. But the time constraints can also work in a writer’s favor. “TV can be a good thing because it doesn’t take a long time to write a pilot,” says Arlook. Thuan adds, “Feature development takes a long time, and TV happens relatively quickly. You kind of know what’s going to happen next. In features, things aren’t always as clear-cut as they are in TV.” Clemens elaborates, “Instead of this nebulous, never-ending process of rewrites, studio executives changing and directors coming off and on, with TV, you know in nine months. You sell it. You write it. They either pick it up, or they don’t. They either make the pilot or they don’t, and then you know in days if they’re going to pick up the series... and then you know if it’s going to last. It’s so much more blue-collar.” Which can be a real selling point to any writer who’s experienced feature development hell. “As I explain to people who are balking about it,” continues Clemens, “you either deliver or you don’t. The people are great to work with because it’s not all based in fear and speculation. It makes for a good working environment.”

“There’s a big difference between television and features in terms of where the writer is on the totem pole.” -- Emile Gladstone, BWCS

Another benefit for feature writers crossing over into TV is that it allows you to leapfrog over some of the blockades to attain coveted show creator status. “It used to be that in television, you had to earn the right to create,” says Clemens. “You had to start as a staff writer, work your way up, and then you could finally become a creator. I represented (writers) who just a few years ago were running a show, but weren’t deemed creators. They grew up in TV. It’s kind of a catch-22, because once you start at the staff level, then you (can become) trapped in that system. You have to grow up (in the system) and earn the right to create. They then started writing features. Their feature career got so hot that the heat on the features side rolled back over into a huge deal at Studios USA, which then made them creators. So the feature career helped them make that jump (out of) the Catch-22 they were caught in in television.” And a savvy agent can use a stint in TV to launch or accelerate a feature writing career. Nicole Clemens tells us about her client Kurt Sutter, who was having trouble getting his feature career started. “He wrote a (spec) script called “Delivering Gen” which was exceptionally written. It didn’t sell, but the script got him onto “The Shield.” He spent a season on that, came off that and became an incredibly hot feature writer. He got a 2-picture blind deal at Warner Bros. The first thing he’s writing is for Antoine Fuqua. So the feature and TV heat just kind of rolled off of each other.”

And, of course, there is the money. While TV is not known for its huge paydays, if one gets a series on the air, the payoff can be enormous. “If you’re an established feature writer who’s in demand, you can actually get decent money to write (a pilot,)” says Arlook, “but the bottom line is, if your show gets picked up and hits, you stand to make

far more money than anything you've ever made on a movie." Clemens offers, "When I'm meeting people who want to be in features, I say to them, 'you want to be in TV as well.' It's a brass ring. There numbers are against you, but if you get it, it's such an annuity, and it's such a jackpot, why not be in the game? Look at Aaron Sorkin or J.J. Abrams. The money that these guys are making in TV versus what they were making in features--TV departments keep the lights on at the agency."

Indeed, all of our panelists encourage their feature writers to explore TV opportunities. Gladstone comments, "The majority of my list crosses over -- (they're) either (staff) television writers, or have created television shows, that cross over during their hiatus to feature assignments, pitches or specs, (or they're) feature writers that write TV pilots, who either stay with the pilots or move on. At this agency, we've never seen a line. There have never been television writers and feature writers," says Gladstone. "They are creators, and creators can work in any medium they choose to work in." Clemens agrees, "I started off taking television writers into features, and then made sure that all my feature writers started writing pilots. I had a lot of writers writing pilots last year." Thuan offers, "Sometimes writers work in one medium for so long that they need another creative outlet. Usually at that point, I encourage them to do it. A lot of times writers are pleasantly surprised by the process in the other world. I would even say that three quarters of the clients I work with go back and forth (between TV and features.)" Further, our panelists also encourage clients who are currently working in TV to explore features during their hiatus. "I represent this guy named David Zabel, a writer on 'ER,'" notes Gladstone. "He is writing something for Paramount right now. He had this Paramount job weeks before the hiatus started. He had his previous deal at Miramax. Miramax knew that he had the Paramount job; Paramount knew that he had to go back to 'ER' at a certain time. Every deal is subject to the prior deal."

All this is good news for writers. It means more potential opportunities to earn a living, get quality projects produced and actually get them seen. Let's hope the wall between features and TV stays down. "A creator is just a creator. They can choose to work in any medium they want as long as they have the guidance to get there," concludes Gladstone.

TEN THINGS A REP WILL NEVER TELL YOU

Think your rep is giving you the real skinny? Maybe not. There are certain secrets they will never divulge to the likes of you. Let's pull back the curtains, shall we?

Agents and managers by definition are wheeler-dealers. So don't expect a lot of honesty from them, right? You'd be surprised. Our panel floored us with their candor. When it comes to dealing with clients, many have decided it's easier to just be honest -- so as to avoid the "Which Lie Did I Tell?" syndrome, to paraphrase Bill Goldman,

That said, don't ever assume you're getting the whole truth and nothing but the truth. There are things that even the most forthright representatives may be reticent to tell you. Thus, with our panelists speaking under condition of anonymity, we proudly pull back the curtain to bring to you the cold, hard truth. Ten things a rep will never tell you, comin' at ya right now...

10) Your script blows. This is the obvious one, so we'll get it out of the way first. There are a couple of different scenarios here. If you've finagled a submission into an agency or management company, you are no doubt familiar with the "Thanks for submitting your screenplay, but it's not what we're looking for at this time" response. "You really want to keep (passes) as generic, as vague as possible," says Agent A, veteran of one of the big 3-letter agencies. "You don't want the writer whose script sucks to perceive any sort of opening." In other words, provide any details about why they're really passing, that opens the door to conversation (or argument.) 'Not what we're looking for at this time' is non-judgmental and shuts down most writer responses.

However, the picture changes a little bit if you're a client. If your new script bites it big-time, it's in everyone's best interest to convey to the writer at least a version of the truth. "I might say, I was really excited to read it, and as you know, I'm always looking for something that I can rally behind," says Agent A, "but I didn't respond to it the way I was hoping to. Sometimes the writers will accept that and move on to something else, but other times they'll insist you do something with it." In those circumstances, Agent A might send the script to a few industry friends, wait for the inevitable third-party confirmation of the script's asstasticness, then delicately pass that along to the writer. "I'm not always right, and there have been times I've been surprised," says A. "But if I'm right, I'm right. If (the writer) gets it then, great. If they don't, we're going to have a problem."

9) How the Hell Am I Supposed To Sell This Thing? Look at what's playing at the local Cineplex Odious. Can you see your movie alongside those others up there? Agents and managers earn their daily bread by being keen judges of the market. If you hand them some quirky experimental script that could never sell in a quintillion years, they may honestly want to throttle you. "Generally we know if advance what they're working on," says Manager B, from a well-known boutique management company. "But there have been times when a client drops this lead沉er on us and expects us to do something with

it.” Now this doesn’t necessarily mean the script isn’t any good. It could be great, just a tough sell. “Let’s say someone has a period drama -- I don’t even want to read it,” says B. Because God forbid the rep actually loves the script. That puts them in the awkward position of having to mount a quixotic, time-consuming and likely doomed mission to sell it. “I did have this one drama once, it was amazing. I had to make it happen,” B enthuses. “It took over a year but I finally got it set up (at a small production company.) An amazing, rewarding experience I’m not in a big hurry to repeat,” she laughs.

Manager C, however, uses the picky marketplace as an easy way to pass. “I just say, I don’t think this is something the market will respond to right now, and that’s that.” And if the writer pushes it, “I have to tell them, look, I think if I do send this out, ultimately it will be detrimental to your career. You don’t like saying that, but sometimes you have to.”

8) Never Read It. Never Will. When you submit a script to an agency or management company, do you think the rep actually reads it? Ha! At smaller firms, it will often be covered (read) by an assistant or intern; bigger firms also use freelance or in-house readers to provide coverage. I have been in meetings where it is clear my agent had not read the script and had to keep referring back to the coverage. Even if you’re a signed client, there are some reps who simply never read. “It’s pretty well-known in town who reads and who doesn’t,” says Manager D. “Some guys actually brag that they can sell a script without even reading it.”

But we’ve got a good group here -- they read. “Sometimes my clients try to catch me,” says D. They’ll name a character after me in the third act or something. I always make it a point of mentioning that I caught it.” Still, it goes without saying that if it’s a pass, it’s more often than not based on the assistant or the intern’s coverage report. So when does an agent actually read a (non-client’s) script? “I trust my assistant, but she had to work hard to earn that trust,” notes Agent E from a mid-sized agency. “It took a while for her get to the point where I am 100% confident in her opinions. So when she tells me to read something, I know it’s worth my time.”

7) He’s Just Not That Into You (Anymore.) It’s sad, but like any relationship, you and your agent or manager may someday fall out of love. How do some reps deal with this? Why, radio silence, of course! “Those are the calls you dread making,” says Agent A. “It’s no fun to tell someone it’s not working out. So to be honest, yeah, sometimes I’ll just not call and hope the person eventually gets the message and starts looking for new representation.”

Of course, there are different reasons why a rep might want to end the relationship. “If it’s going on two years, and the writer hasn’t gotten any work,” notes Manager B, “but they’ve come close, I’ll hang in -- if a spec almost sold, or if they’ve gotten traction. But if there’s just nothing at all? I might say, look, maybe I’m not the best rep for you. There might be someone else out there better suited for what you do.” In other words: it’s not you, it’s me.

6) Reconsider Dad's Plumbing Business. This is definitely the hot potato. On the one hand, as ICM's Emile Gladstone once said, "Screenwriting is a craft -- like carpentry. It can be learned." On the other, there are just some folks who should not be writing screenplays. "I've read some queries where the writer can't even compose a sentence," says Agent E. "It's like, dude, what are you thinking? Buy a Subway franchise or something." Manager B notes that if it's been 8 or 10 years and you haven't gotten anywhere -- no contest showings, no industry interest, no connex, nada -- "That may be a sign that you just don't have the goods." Still, she notes, the problem may be correctable. "It could just be the writer needs to take some classes and get some real feedback, work with someone who knows what they're doing." But don't look to our panelists to actually tell you this. They won't. "Don't try to be a writer if you have a passion for *anything* else," says B, "and don't quit your day job."

5) Your Neediness is Going to Cost You. We've covered this before, but it deserves to be mentioned again. We writers tend to be a fairly insecure lot. We often work alone for years on end, each pass another tiny incision sucking your soul away. Suddenly, success! But all those neuroses you've built up don't just evaporate. The reality is: your rep doesn't want to deal with that crap. "I'm not a babysitter," says Agent A. "I have a lot of clients, and those clients need to respect my time. I'm happy to talk about a project or your career or if something is going on. But if you're calling up just to chat, or for the sixth time that week, my patience is going to run out quickly." In short, it's the writers who can be kickback and exude cool that reps keep around. Learn to front, and vent those neuroses to your shrink or your journal, not your agent. "How much of a pest they are, that definitely figures into the decision-making process (of whether to retain a client or not)," says A.

4) I'm Not Going to Do As Much For You as You Think. You've just landed your first agent or manager -- congratulations! Now you can sit back and coast. They'll line up meetings for you and do all the work, right? Wrong! The reality is that even with representation, you still have to market yourself. Agents are an interesting lot -- the more your career heat you have, the harder they'll work for you. But if nothing is happening, don't expect them to whip up a furor out of thin air. It's up to you to fan the flames.

Oftentimes a rep will "hip-pocket" -- representing the writer, but not as an official client of the agency -- in the hope that the writer will take flight or bring in deals on his own. In these cases, the rep may not do anything for you at all! We've all heard the grousing of writers complaining how their agents' disinterest. There's even that joke about the writer who comes home to catch his wife in bed with his agent, and the writer beams, "my agent came to my house!" Yeah, it has its basis in fact. "Don't expect me to send out every script from your back-catalog," says Manager D. "Bring me great new material I can sell, and I'll bust my ass for you. If not, eh..." Segue to...

3) Write Something, You Lazy Bastard! "This drives me crazy," says Manager C. "You're supposed to be a writer. Well, let's see some evidence of that. Don't expect me to keep sending out the same spec a year later. Move on." Yep, writing is hard work. Douglas Adams ("Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy") famously said he much preferred

having written to writing itself. But in Hollywood, “new” is a commodity. “I might gently urge them to get back to me with some ideas, and from there we should figure out what they should work on next,” says C. “But what I really want to say is, what is wrong with you? How do you expect to be a professional writer if you don’t write?” C calls this his biggest pet peeve and notes it’s oddly endemic in writers. “I just don’t get it,” he says.

2) It’s Not the Team. It’s Me. Only after being reassured this was strictly anonymous, Agent F, head of lit at a medium-sized agency, hits us with a technique. “I often blame the (agency feature literary) team,” he notes. “I’ll say hey, I really wanted to make something happen with this, but I couldn’t get a consensus among the team.” Sayonara, don’t let the door hit you on the ass on the way out. F also mentions this same approach is useful when attorneys or managers call up trying to recommend someone, “and it’s some fourth-rate writer I have no interest in, or someone whose career has completely bottomed out. So even though I know it’s a pass, I’ll tell them I’m excited to read it, send it in. Then a week later I call up and say, sorry, you know, the team just wasn’t as enthusiastic about it as I was.”

And finally, the number one thing a rep will never tell you:

1) Anything. A rep will never tell you anything. By that I mean, if you’ve managed to get an agent or manager to agree to read your script, a Herculean task in and of itself, you may think you’ll actually hear back from them at some point, even if only to pass. And sometimes you do (see number 10.) But more often than not, all you get is... (crickets chirping...) Couple reasons for this. The first is *time*. It takes time to reply to all those submissions, and none of that time is revenue-producing. That means it rates just below toe fungus inspections and kitchen sponge disinfection on the agency or management company’s scale of importance. Second reason of course is, again, not wanting to open the door to any time-wasting back-and-forth. Simply not saying anything conveys the “no” loud and clear. But the main reason you’ll likely never hear anything back is they don’t really care. You either have a commodity they can sell or you don’t. If you don’t, next! It’s nothing personal. “I get hundreds of queries a week,” says Manager B. “I sometimes peruse them and occasionally respond to one or two. But if I sent ‘No, thank yous’ to everyone, that would literally chew up an hour or two of every day.” Concludes Agent A, “Writers have to develop a thick skin anyway to survive in the business. Radio silence is just part of the deal.”

+++

Now that you’ve read this universal translator of agent/manager-speak, we hope you’ll scrutinize your own habits and the way you interact with representation now or in the future. These guys are sharing what drives them nuts and what they really mean when they tell you something. Use this intelligence well and save your career. Show your rep you know the rules of the road. They’ll love you for it. And maybe someday, you, too, can have your agent show up at your house.