

Insider Feature: Get an Agent, Part 1, "Who Might Be the Right One for You?" By Stephanie Gunning, *The Publishing Insider News*™ (March 19, 2008)

It is tough to have discernment in an industry where you don't know the players. You feel like Blanche DuBois in "A Streetcar Named Desire" vulnerably saying: "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers." Her tragedy was that this strategy never worked for her. She'd been taken advantage of. You want to avoid sharks, but also the ineffective.



An agent is supposed to be your life raft, your GPS navigation tool, your consiliere, your buddy, and teammate. Both of you profit when YOUR book is a SUCCESS. A long-term marriage, the agent-author relationship needs to include a balance of the personal and professional dimensions. You don't want just anyone, not even if that someone is good at what s/he does. You want the right one for you. But how do you know, if you're a book business bunny? Here are five possible ways. (P.S. Matching is art, not science.)

1. Shared Interests—As Reflected in Your Material and Their Past Books and Clients. You've got to do homework. To find candidates: Look in the acknowledgments of your favorite comparable books, read the trade journals (Publishers Weekly), study "Publishers Lunch" sales reports (yes, you have to pay a fee for this part of the online service), talk with people in your social network, go to a writers conference or a lecture on publishing. This will help you come up with the names of several literary agents you want to approach to handle the sale of your book proposal. Now study each agent's website. What books are there? Who does this agent handle? Are these anything like you and your material? Then maybe it's time to send a query.

2. Open, Thorough, and Unrushed Communication. So, you've done some homework. You've queried and gotten a positive initial feedback. You're made an appointment to speak by phone or in person. If you feel like you're at an HMO where you're being slotted into 15 minutes so the doc can bill the insurance company, that's not the right match for you. If you're new to the business, you need to be educated about the right questions to ask. A good agent knows what you need to know, and you--on hearing this information--need to have the opportunity to reflect and let it sink in. Bring in your questions, that's due diligence. Satisfy your concerns. And seek to understand if you and this individual who's about to become a business partner of yours have the same picture in mind of your agreement. What's being promised? Who does what? What needs to happen? What's our time frame?

3. Human Decency and Professional Consideration. This falls into the life-is-too-short-to-deal-with-assholes category. When we talk about writing books, we're talking about self-expression. Add to that the matter of money, and you have the potential for an emotional meltdown. Yours. You deserve respect, and even kindness. But don't be a big, needy baby. With rare exception, weekends and evenings are inviolable. Make appointments. Be on time. Follow-through on commitments. The tone of interaction gets set early in relationships, so begin (and you'll end) with courtesy.

4. A High Level of Confidence, Imagination, and Resolve. The publishing industry changes alongside technology. You want an agent who can keep up. Some agents were editors, some were marketers, some were . . . something else to begin, and depending on whose playground they've been playing with they may be highly knowledgeable about all areas of the industry or expert in only one or two areas. I look for marketing savvy but also good networking skills. And recent successes, too. Someone whose energy is in motion. Nerves

make me nervous. Innovation excites me. Persistence on my behalf commands my loyalty. Is this agent optimistic? And for me, an agent who is a vital, multifaceted human being who's looking for new book writers and creating concepts is my kind of person. Often agents seek out an expert to do a book.

5. ***A Diverse Network in the Publishing Industry.*** Even though it's a global business, this is an insular industry. We ask, "Do you know this guy? This woman? Who did she work with?" We follow trends. Like hunters, we track acquisitions editors from house to house. "Who's hungry? Who's burned out? Who's cooking on all burners?" We use the network both as an information service (and you have to contribute, by the way, as information flows in a circle) and to matchmake. An agent might run into an editor at a cocktail party and ask, "What are you looking for these days?" If there's a clear answer, a sale could be made to that editor swiftly. Agents with diverse networks are privvy to diverse insights.

Now, with all this said, I should add that there are tons of decent agents in the field. If you get offered representation and you're a first-time author, unless a red flag goes up or you're "not feeling it" with an agent, grab hold and go for it.

All bets are off if you're a celebrity or a billionaire, then you need a power-broker, which is a different matter altogether. For most writers, that's not required.

Let me know if there's a way I can be of assistance.

Stephanie Gunning, "The Publishing Insider"™, is a bestselling author and editor, and publishing consultant with over 23 years' of experience in the book business. Her A-list clientele includes bestselling authors (Hale Dwoskin, Gregg Braden, Ernest Chu, Sandy Grason), major publishing firms, top caliber literary agencies, and innovative self-publishers (Sedona Press, Quimby Press/Whiff Solutions, Hot Mommy Next Door). She has mastered the art of transforming powerful ideas into highly marketable books. She is co-creator of The Great American Think Out 2008.

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