

Screenwriters' Guide to Navigating the World of Agents and Managers

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Before you start querying agents or managers, learn what they do, what they'll cost you, and what combination of reps you need to succeed...

Mo' Money, Mo' Problems

by Jim Cirile

Every up and coming writer dreams of breaking in. But what then? Here's how to keep from going broke as a successful writer.

Ah, the life of the Hollywood screenwriter – fame! Fortune! Okay, not so much fame. But still – fortune! Right? Heck, your spec script could sell for a million dollars. Unlikely, but it could happen. You could become a production polish guru netting \$250,000/week. Unlikely, but it could happen. Or you could sell your script for WGA scale plus 10%, then melt down into a neurotic mess for the next ten months until the next check, any check, finally comes in.

Likely, but it could happen.

Welcome to the scintillating world of Mo' Money, Mo' Problems (with apologies to Notorious BIG.) We're serving up the good, the bad and the ugly of how the whole money thing works for successful writers. We're not even going to talk about being an up and comer, since as we all know, your writing income during that time is called "day job." There's no shame in that, and in fact it's part of the deal, so suck it up -- and I said extra whipped cream in my Java Chip Frappuccino, thanks. But once you finally do claw, scratch and furrow through the reinforced battlements surrounding Hollywood, it's a good idea to have a clue what to expect.

THE PEOPLE WHO TAKE YOUR MONEY

Let's say you sell your spec script for a cool \$100,000. Nice, right? But how much of that do you actually pocket? The answer is \$425.32. Okay, okay – kidding. But not as much as you may think. There are a lot of people with their hand out – agent, manager, attorney, WGA. And don't forget least everyone's favorite uncle (Sam) who desperately needs your money to keep blowing people up around the world. Here's the breakdown:

SALE: \$100,000

Agent: 10%	(\$10,000)
Manager: 10%	(\$10,000)
Attorney: 5%	(\$5,000)
WGA: 1.5%	<u>(\$1,500)</u>
Subtotal:	\$73,500

Federal Taxes (28%) (\$20,580)

CA Taxes (10.5%*) (\$7,717.50)
Net: \$45,202.50

(*estimated CA state and local taxes from taxfoundation.org.)

Poof. Your six figure payday is now the average salary of a llama groomer or a junior high janitor. The picture is exponentially worse if you have a writing partner. Each of you would net \$22,601.25. And let's not even discuss the 10% sales tax on anything you buy in Los Angeles. Oh, did I mention the \$2,500 WGA West initiation fee (mandatory with any deal with a signatory)?

Uh... okay, that pretty much sucks. I know what you're thinking – who needs all those hangers-on? Well, you do.

AGENT – It's possible to get a deal without an agent, to be sure. They generally do next to nothing until you're already established anyway, and then after you've done all the heavy lifting yourself, then they come aboard. You may be able to roll with just a manager and an attorney, especially if your manager is a former agent and has solid connex in town. But managers cannot legally negotiate for you, whereas agents can (or a manager/attorney combination could save you big bucks.) But when you're starting out, the more people you have on your team, the better. Agents come with relationships, and those can be key not only to launching your career, but also introducing you to the town.

MANAGER – You don't necessarily need both an agent and a manager. But what's also true is that generally speaking, agents won't give you the time of day, whereas managers will take your calls and help you develop your script until it's good enough to land the agent who will then likely ignore you in the first place. If by some miracle you score an agent without a manager's assistance, you're either extremely lucky or your college roommate just happens to work at WME. But even in this scenario, you're likely destined to be just a name on an 80-person list the agent can't really bother with. Managers exist to provide that handholding and development most of us actually need but don't think we do, to get us ready for prime-time as well as eventually get us the agent. So yeah, you don't need to shell out that extra ten percent. Except you kind of do.

ATTORNEY – Five percent for an attorney? Trust me, that's a deal. What can an attorney do for you that an agent can't? A lot. They can build in bonuses and protections into your deal that agents sometimes miss or can't be bothered with. If you get a piece of the merchandising of your film as well as box office performance bonuses, it's because your attorney went to the mat for those. He is your "bad cop." You certainly don't want to be a d-y-c-k to the company who bought your project, and your agent may not want to ruffle too many feathers there either. But lawyers have no compunctions about ripping into the rapacious studio business affairs guys (whose job it is to screw you and delay payment in every possible way.) They act as your pit bull. You can certainly do a deal without an attorney, but you'll likely get bent over most majestically.

So what's a working writer to do? Make as much money as possible while you can, obviously. The better the work you do, the more you'll make. And if your quote is \$250K and you're getting two of three gigs a year, heck, even with everyone's hand in your pocket, you'll make out pretty well. So now the main thing is to try not to sabotage yourself, and to learn to financially cover your ass.

SUSTAINABILITY

Many of us assume that once we're in, we're golden. Er, not so much. ICM agent Emile Gladstone says the average life of a screenwriter in the biz is about five years. There are factors both within and out of your control that conspire to railroad your career. First up: ego. Think you can keep your mouth

shut when idiot producers make you rewrite your draft (uncompensated) for the 26th time? Can you suck it up and say, “Thank you, sir, may I have another?” Because it is exactly that ability that defines the successful writer with a long career. Seems obvious, right? But when you are in the thick of it and can’t take it anymore, you will rationalize a teeny little outburst. And in one fell swoop you could kill your career – no one wants to work with anyone perceived to be “difficult.”

And beware the trap so many writers fall into – not writing. We harangue our reps to keep shopping material the entire town has already passed on. Many a career has been killed by writers simply failing to write.

Worst of all: heat. One day you are hot; the next, brrrr. And it can happen in no time flat. Maybe a movie you wrote comes out and tanks. Maybe the town simply gets bored with you. Or maybe you’ve worked on a couple of assignments but the execs didn’t love the results. Everyone talks, and word will spread, and before long, poof, the heat is off. And when you are cold, brother, you are Godzilla-frozen-in-a-glacier cold.

Sooner or later, the gravy train will derail. You need to have a strategy for how to handle that.

DIVERSIFICATION

Okay, you’ve banked a couple hundred grand and are working steadily. What you need to do now is grab the snazziest suite in the Bellagio to celebrate your success and cruise in there in your smokin’ new Bentley Arnage. Buy an expensive house in Pacific Palisades with a heated pool and hire a staff. Take your pals to expensive dinners... in France. Oh, my God, did any of you believe any of that? Surest way to disaster. Many a writer has done exactly these things, only to wind up a one-bedroom in Van Nuys in short order.

So: diversify. Sure, we’re talking saving and investing, but that’s just part of it. Sock money away in the best interest-rate accounts you can find. Invest, but beware the volatile market – many of us lost good chunks of our life savings in the past few years. But also think about developing secondary and tertiary revenue streams. In other words, develop ways to make money immune to the vicissitudes of the movie business.

Maybe there’s an investment property you can buy – land, or perhaps an apartment building where the rents cover the mortgage every month and you make a little profit on top. Maybe you’re a closet cake boss. You could open a bakery and hire a manager to run it for you. Perhaps you can partner in your cousin Aloysius’s start-up electric dog polishing service. Because when your writing career gets cold, it’s nice to know Barky’s Wash & Wax will cover your rent! We all have interests other than writing – baseball, renaissance faires, study of ancient Latvian dentistry manuals. Find a way to monetize it. Putting all your eggs in the screenwriting basket is the surest way to eventually crush a marriage and land you in therapy (which you will not be able to afford.) Please consult with a trusted investment professional before investing in anything. We at Script magazine are not financial advisors and are not making specific recommendations.

IF ALL ELSE FAILS

So now you’ve seen that despite your best efforts, despite years of dedication to the craft, your exciting new career may end sooner than you thought. What to do when that happens? Go to ground and plot your comeback. Take the time. Maybe it’s six months. Maybe it’s two years. Your next salvo is going to be incredibly important. It could reinvigorate – or permanently sink – your career. And then, when you are absolutely certain that new piece of material is tight enough to bounce quarters off of, then

contact your remaining industry pals and casually ask them if they'll check out your new spec. The great thing about being a writer is that a sizzlin' new spec can re-energize even the iciest career.

And remember, there are plenty of ways to be a writer. Consider TV, novels, childrens' entertainment, plays, etc. Bang out a 5-page comedy sketch and put it up on YouTube or Funny or Die. Something you could generate in a weekend could wind up going viral. Same principle – shoot a short and take it on the festival circuit. Win a couple awards and suddenly it's a whole new ballgame. Travel magazines are always looking for writers and pay damn well. Dash off some articles and submit 'em. Write about that expensive dinner you flew your buddies to in France. And hey, there is no shame in falling back on that barista gig.

The good news is it has never been easier to jump-start a flagging career if you're smart about it. Just make sure you're realistic about what to expect from the movie business, and remember: downtown Culver City does need a pizza joint.

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If that didn't scare you away from screenwriting, let's now explore further the differences between agents and managers, and how you go about finding one that's a good fit for your writing...

Agents and Managers for Screenwriters – How the Hell Do I Get One?

by Mario O. Moreno

Question: What's the difference between agents and managers for screenwriters and how the hell do I get one?

First things first: is there a difference?

In the current landscape, roles continue to evolve.

The classic dynamic was one where an agent sent material to contacts, worked to get clients assignments, and negotiated deals (with a lawyer, or as a lawyer since many agents are law school grads).

agents and managers for screenwriters A manager nurtured the writer and forwarded scripts to contacts and worked to get clients assignments in the same vein as an agent. The adage was that an agent could negotiate a contract, but by law could not be a producer on a project, while a manager could be a producer on a film but could not negotiate contracts.

While agents still cannot take producer credits, managers have been known to negotiate a deal now and then by bypassing the agent and working with an entertainment attorney. This is in part due to changes in the industry over the past decade. There are now only a handful of major agencies, and as some have merged and consolidated staff, former agents have found themselves venturing out into the world and

opening up their own management companies.

Before I knew better I used to dream about the idea of a manager or agent being someone like Woody Allen's character in *Broadway Danny Rose*, a lovable stuttering neurotic who believed in me with a fierce, unyielding passion. I thought they would cater to my every need and fear and even host Thanksgiving. Alas, this is not the case, unless you're one of the really big writers — and then only while you remain one of the really big writers.

Wish I Knew Before

One common misconception is that once you have a manager or agent, they will send out any script you write. But that's not actually the case.

Managers and agents have to be careful with what scripts they bring out because every time one doesn't sell, which is often the case, it weakens their value in terms of being able to sell projects for a small window of time. For this reason, they do not take out all of the scripts their clients deliver.

They need to be picky and sometimes they will hold back a project until they feel it will have the best chance to sell. Or, if it's not something that he or she feels reflects the kind of projects they usually represent, or those they feel will create the right brand for the writer, they will shelve the script and advise the client to "move on" to the next project.

I know a writer who's had the same manager for several years: while this writer has had some success, the manager has actually done little for the writer's career overall. This particular manager has provided feedback on scripts and general career advice, even once or twice played bad cop with companies, but he's no Danny Rose. He's never spec'd one of the writer's scripts, even the ones that have gone on to be sold and produced.

This writer's manager has gone through the development process of scripts with the writer only to back out of sending out the script because he feared it wouldn't sell. In a few of these instances, the writer forwarded his script(s) to other contacts and those contacts have, fortunately, known a producer whose needs aligned with what the script(s) offered.

Even though this writer has had representation for years, it's been through his own managing of contacts that he's been able to move forward with his career.

Stealth

In some cases, managers use their companies to help find and access scripts without an official deal in place beforehand. This means they "hip pocket" writers, allowing them to view the work before anyone else and without signing a representation agreement. In essence, this tactic provides the managers and their companies with free, unofficial, first-look deals with screenwriters. The drawback is that sometimes the writers aren't aware this is the arrangement they have with a manager, especially since so many deals these days are verbal instead of on paper.

While some successful careers have begun with no formal agreement in place between writer and manager, having one shows the rep is serious enough about working with the writer that they will put their responsibilities on paper.

Sometimes a writer might be convinced to develop a project based on the manager/producer's idea.

I've known writers who've spent months working on a project that the manager aimed to set up as a producer. For all those months, the writer didn't have any time to work on original projects and eventually had no ownership (or not enough) of the work they'd done with the producer.

A variation on this is when managers attach themselves to a script: the writer thinks the manager is representing them in the sale, but actually the manager is coming on as a producer. These are referred to as "stealth producers." There are pros and cons. Their passion and interest in a project may push them to work harder. However, if they are not established as a producer, their attachment can scare away more accomplished producers. You can read more stealth producers in chapter six of *Save The Cat! Strikes Back*.

"I don't want a manager. I want an agent."

With all this talk about managers, what about agents? Here's the reality:

If you're thinking of finding an agent, and you haven't yet sold anything, and no one is about to pay you money for your writing, then you're probably not going to find an agent — at least not a highly reputable one.

One manager that I spoke with for this blog said that agents have become lazy; they no longer want to do the work of building a writer's career, they just want to come in when the writer is about to collect a check so they can shave off that 10% commission.

Getting One ("Danny Rose, where are you?!")

But, seriously, how do you get an agent? You don't. An agent gets you. One thing you can do is get recognition through high caliber contests (see this previous blog entry). If a producer becomes interested in your contest entry, an agent won't be too far behind.

You can also attend pitch conferences like the Screenwriter's World Conference Pitch Slam. If you don't have any contacts that can put your work in front of reps, this is a way to get some guaranteed face time. And you'll attain a stronger sense of what meetings and pitches are like at the same time.

Or you can blaze your own path.

A writing team I know struggled to even get a meeting with a manager or agent for many years. They finally gave up on that strategy and started taking out their work in other ways, like starting a comic strip and slipping it into L.A. Weeklys on newsstands in parts of L.A. that they knew were frequented by industry people. A producer at one of the big networks came across their work, liked their creative voice, and hired them to work on a big series. The writing team then got to choose from an assortment of agents and even got to ask agents, "Why should we pick you?"

"What will representation really do for me?"

A manager once told me his job was forwarding PDFs of his clients' scripts to his contacts. If the contact responded positively, the manager would set up a meet-and-greet and then it was on the writer to try and turn it into something more.

Other than serving as an email forwarding service, reps can help you vet possible projects. With their access to the industry, they know before the writer does if something similar is already in the works

and possibly save the writer time and effort.

If you're willing to deduct 20-25% from your paycheck, you can have both manager and agent. Ideally, they can work as a team and use combined contact lists to put you and your work in front of more producers. They can then serve as bad cops or nags for writers when dealing with companies.

The other reason why you need to have an agent or manager (or both) is so you can say you have one. Saying you have representation makes you sound more legitimate, even if they never get you any work.

If you're going to focus your search for representation, look for a manager. Rest assured when someone's ready to pay you, an agent will be there to always have your back — for all its worth.

Maybe your very own Broadway Danny Rose will make an appearance.

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Once you find an an agent or manager, the hard work isn't over. Learn some tips on choosing and working with representation...

Top Ten Tips for Choosing an Agent

by Susan Kouguell

Congratulations! You just might have found an agent. You just got a response from your brilliant query or pitch, and an agent is interested in representing you! Hallelujah! Do the happy dance but don't lose your common sense!

In my book, *The Savvy Screenwriter*, I write:

When I first got into the film business I uncharacteristically lost my common sense. I didn't trust my rational gut instincts. Why? I wanted to write. I wanted to see my scripts made into films. If someone had asked me to jump, I would have asked not only, "How high?" but also, "For how long?" Whether dealing with an independent production company, a studio, or agent, I was putty in their hands.

I didn't ask agents how they planned on working with me or how they thought they could sell my work. (I was represented by agents who wanted me as part of their stable of writers, but they didn't really know how to place my work. Because I never asked what type of scripts they actually sold, or if any of my scripts might be submitted as writing samples to companies, or if I should write another script in a different genre to show my diversity, or offered suggestions as to where to submit my scripts, I never got hired for assignments and didn't sell one script.) By not asking questions, I often worked with people who didn't share my vision of my work or career. If you don't ask questions, you might just repeat my mistakes!

Top Ten Tips on Choosing an Agent

1. Choose an agent who is signatory to the Writers Guild of America (wga.org). Guild signatory agents must abide by rules that will best protect you, including fees they charge for both selling your work and finding you writing assignments.
2. Research the agent to confirm his or her real film industry connections. You want an agent who has established and extensive contacts in the industry in order to increase that agent's opportunities to sell your spec script and/or find you writing assignments.
3. The prospective agent should share your sensibility and vision. If he or she doesn't really understand you and your work, (and certainly vice versa) this relationship will likely not benefit either one of you.
4. Don't be afraid to ask agent questions, including what their game plan is for you and your work, and where they intend to submit your projects.
5. If the agent represents many writers (maybe too many writers) whereby the ratio of writers to agents is high, (for example more than fifty writers to one agent), than you might want to question whether you'll get enough attention.
6. The agent / writer relationship is a business relationship, not a friendship. You may like the prospective agent personally, but honestly consider if he or she is truly the best person to represent you.
7. Ask the prospective agent how you will be working together. For example: Calling or e-mailing an agent once a week or biweekly and scheduling strategy meetings every few months is a reasonable request.
8. Agents who represent clients who are working steadily, is a positive reflection on the agent's ability and clout in the film industry.
9. Ask the prospective agent if he or she will read your new work, and if so, how long you should wait until receiving feedback.
10. My best advice: Trust your instincts to determine if the potential agent is the best person to champion you and your work.

Remember...Don't lose your common sense! It's great news that an agent has expressed interest in representing you, but do not jump into a relationship without making sure the agent is a good fit for you and your work.

*[Susan Kouguell](#), award-winning screenwriter and filmmaker, teaches screenwriting at SUNY College at Purchase, is a regular contributor for IndieWire/SydneysBuzz, and other publications. She is the author of *THE SAVVY SCREENWRITER* and *SAVVY CHARACTERS SELL SCREENPLAYS!:* A comprehensive guide to crafting winning characters with film analyses and screenwriting exercises. Follow Susan on Twitter: [@SKouguell](#)*

Now that you have representation, you have a new best friend and champion, right? Not so fast...

Writers on the Verge: Your Screenwriting Agent or Manager is NOT Your Friend

by Lee Jessup

At a recent morning meeting with a prominent literary manager, I was on the receiving end of a frustrated rant. The manager - who shall remain nameless if only to protect his clueless writing client - went on and on and on (and on some more) about that particular day's source of frustration: The writer delivering poorly conceived work to a producer because "he wasn't feeling up to it," which led to the writer - admittedly - phoning it in. "He wasn't feeling up to it?" complained my manager friend, "I don't get to not feel up to it! I have to do my job for him, day after day, get him out on meetings, get him notes... Do you know what any one of my clients would say if they called to see if I sent their latest script out or followed up on work and I told them that I didn't do it, or did a half-assed job doing it because I wasn't feeling up to it???"

screenwriting agent Sadly, this is not the first time I've heard a screenwriting agent or a manager rant of this particular flavor. All too often, writers mistake the rep/writer relationship for an all-too-friendly one, and reveal information that should not be shared. One of my writers once told his agent that he missed a writing assignment deadline because the project was too hard, so played hooky and went wine tasting instead. Another once said that he failed to properly prep for a meeting because he was feeling lazy and couldn't get properly excited about it.

Even though this is an industry that encourages highly social behaviors, the bottom line is that your manager or agent is NOT your friend. Sure, it all has the appearance of friendship. And how could it not? This is an industry where people work 60 to 80-hour weeks on a regular basis; on many occasions the only people they see in a remotely social setting (see: breakfast, lunch, coffee, dinner, drinks) are their clients and colleagues. They may even choose to reveal way too much information once they've had more than one drink. But ultimately, that shouldn't inform your behavior, or the choices you make in making your relationship with them.

Treat your agent or manager like a client. Always conduct yourself professionally. Never tell them that you weren't feeling creative, that the muse hadn't arrived, that you are debating quitting and walking away altogether. Even though it may not feel this way, the reality is that you are always competing: Competing with other clients to remain front-of-mind, competing with emerging writers hot for representation for your place on your rep's list. Never drink too much in their company; sure, you can let loose, but you never want to say something you won't remember in the morning. Never appear unavailable by returning their calls with an email, or calling after hours when you assume they will not be in the office.

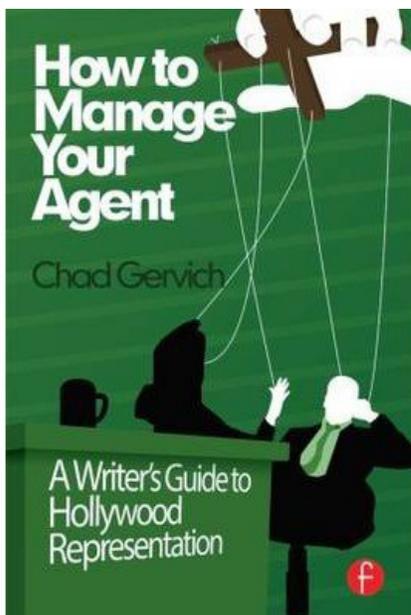
As far as your reps are concerned, you should be the one who is always on it. Always delivering. The person they can comfortably send into an industry shindig. Sure, if you stick with them long enough they may just hear about your marital problems, even help you break a story or find your second creative wind. But until you start making big bucks for them, and making it consistently, manage them as you would a client you have to always keep happy. Otherwise, just a few misconstrued words on a bad day can deem you a challenging, over-privileged client, and the rep will become increasingly uninterested.

This doesn't mean you're not entitled to your own vents: Everyone needs a safe place where they can just be lazy, or altogether complain. Sometimes things are not happening in the pace that you've been promised or come to expect. Or work that you've been super jazzed about is not stimulating any sort of strong reaction. Sometimes, a script you send to your manager that you know would blow people's minds away only ends up getting sent to five companies; others, you nail meeting after meeting and receive great feedback, but that feedback never materializes into a staff writing position or other paying work. This will happen. It's part of the way this system works. So find a support group, a writer's group, even a loose group of writer friends who will provide an outlet for your frustrations again and again. This way, you will always have a safe, understanding place where you can vent and deal with the difficulties that come with this profession, while continuing to manage your representation like a client, and reinforcing a strong impression of your resilience, professionalism and work ethic.

Lee Jessup is a seasoned career coach for screenwriters, with an exclusive focus on guiding and supporting screenwriters as they parlay their screenwriting prowess into a focused and dynamic screenwriting career. Follow Lee on Twitter [@leezjessup](https://twitter.com/leezjessup)

How to Manage Your Agent: A Writer's Guide to Hollywood Representation

by Chad Gervich



At a Glance:

- Every writer will need representation
- Find out how to get an agent and why you need one
- Don't get burned in your next deal, get yourself an agent

BUY NOW

Chad Gervich has worked as a TV writer, producer, and executive. He's written, developed, and produced shows for the Littlefield Company, Fox Television Studios, Paramount Television, NBC, Warner Bros., ABC, Fox Reality Channel, E! Entertainment Television, and 20th Century Fox.