

## **Agency Business: Pros and Cons**

**By Leeny Del Seamonds**

Wouldn't it be great to have an agent find storytelling jobs for you? Once those jobs were found, wouldn't it be great to have the contracts drawn up and sent to you so you wouldn't have to do all that paperwork? Sounds wonderful. Unfortunately, finding a good storytelling agent isn't so easy. And keeping one throughout a long career isn't easy, either. There's no such thing as 1-800-MYAGENT. Consider networking with other performing artists or use a search engine to explore performing artist/storytelling agents on the Internet. Some agencies, such as Young Audiences, display an "Artist Auditions" section on their web site for new roster applicants. Good booking agents are few and far between, and most of the really good ones already seem to be taken.

I was lucky enough to have an agent find me. We met fourteen years ago when I performed with *The Showstoppers*, a song-and-dance troupe I founded (and for which I also served as writer, director and choreographer). After attending a performance, the agent asked me if she could represent the troupe, making us the second "act" in her new agency. I was delighted to have someone find and book gigs for us — plus do all the tedious paperwork. She and I became fast friends and business associates, and the bookings started to roll in. Within months, however, several members of my troupe moved out of state; instead of re-casting those actors, my agent suggested I perform solo as a storyteller. It was 1990, prior to the schools' emphasis on "teaching to the test," and storytelling in schools was a lucrative business and very popular.

In the early 1990's, most of my performances and workshops were in schools. Gradually, the work expanded to include libraries, camps, conferences, special events, corporate functions and festivals. My agent requested that she handle me exclusively, regardless of which one of us generated the business. I had mixed feelings about this, but due to our friendship, I tried to honor her request.

During this time the agency grew to represent six performers, each in a specialized discipline. Fortunately, I was the only storyteller, so I received regular bookings. My agent handled client communications, contract execution, distribution of promotional materials, and assistance to clients with grant writing. In addition to building a large repertoire of programs and workshops, I wrote all of my marketing materials, teacher guides and related educational materials (including grant support information), and participated in showcases and preview/networking opportunities. I paid my agent a 20% commission fee plus a quarterly agency expense bill (to cover utilities, printing, postage, office supplies, marketing pieces, and miscellaneous overhead). I kept my calendar as open and available for bookings as possible, often scheduling personal time at the last minute.

Having an agent (or being part of an agency) has many benefits, including less work for the storyteller, allowing us more time to focus on our craft. The agent handles telephone calls and e-mails and executes the contract package and promotional materials. A good agent increases the potential for a greater amount of work through his or her networking opportunities provided by established client contacts, mailing lists, showcases and, in some cases, grant writing assistance. With some clients, being represented by a particular agency garners additional respect for your work.

Another benefit is in fee negotiation. With an agent, your fees are set and advertised. Potential clients are less likely to try to negotiate for reduced fees. There are more and easier showcase opportunities. Potential clients are more likely to preview your work in an agency

showcase, where they are able to preview more than one artist at a time. And satisfied clientele are more likely to hire other performers in the same agency.

But there can also be disadvantages. Commissions and fees can add up. Twenty percent of a \$300 fee for a performance booked by an agent is \$60, leaving the performer only \$240. Some agency commissions are as high as 30%. If the agent also bills quarterly apportioned expenses, gross earnings decrease as well. Some agencies divide the expense of a brochure, marketing piece or web site design among their performing artists; others charge a yearly agency fee to cover those costs.

Other possible issues include maintaining a professional relationship. I had a personal friendship with my agent, which sometimes presented a conflict when there were booking miscommunications and when I wanted to expand the scope of my career.

Being an agent is a time consuming job and requires a tremendous amount of phone calls and follow up. If representing more than one performer (most do), the agent may prefer to communicate with you via e-mail. This may be an efficient method, but it can be frustrating to storytellers. We're in the business of spoken word and likely feel the need for telephone discussions instead.

If your agent wants to exclusively handle your bookings, even for work you secure on your own, you may have to pay for those services regardless of who made the contact and acquired new business. A nonexclusive arrangement is one where you pay commission to your agent only for work he/she secures for you.

In an agency with multiple performers, an individual's needs may not always be met. Clear-cut communication with the agency regarding your specific needs and requirements is vital. Many agencies, such as Young Audiences, have an Artist Booking Sheet listing specific requirements of each artist to aid in scheduling.

What happens if your career progresses beyond the scope of the abilities of your agent? If your agent isn't able or willing to provide the level of service you feel you need, you must be prepared to change your representation. If you require one-on-one attention on a regular basis, consider hiring a manager to handle your business instead.

After many years of working with a single agent, I was beginning to feel that I worked for her agency, instead of the other way around. She had represented me for almost 13 years; but as my career expanded to national touring and residencies, my needs changed. I wanted more control over my schedule, increased touring and fees charged. I felt I could do more of my own bookings and not have to pay the agency overhead.

Last year, I left the agency and went solo. Six months later, I joined the roster of Young Audiences of Massachusetts. Unlike my previous experience, they do not represent me exclusively. Young Audiences handles most of my school bookings, leaving the remainder of my business to be handled by me.

I've had to become more organized and disciplined — and post fees on my web site to avoid too many fee negotiations. My next step will be to hire an assistant (or an apprentice) — someone to help with the paperwork and filing. Unfortunately, no agent files for you. That's left up to the artist, and the mountain of paper can be daunting!

If you are looking for representation and find it, don't sign with an agent just because you feel flattered they noticed you. The due diligence process is all important in ensuring you're matched with representation that will advance your career. It's always wise to keep business and pleasure separate. Your relationship with your agent should be professional, with emotions out of the picture. And when things go wrong — and occasionally they will — try not to take it personally. Consider the alternative: mountains of paperwork....

*Leeny Del Seamonds, Master Story Performer™, is an award-winning international performer of Latino, original and world tales that are uplifting and demonstrate the passion, resiliency and triumphs of the human spirit.*  
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