

HOW TO GET AN AGENT (FROM BACKSTAGE MAGAZINE)

Sure, significant others are lovely—but for actors, perhaps no relationship is more crucial than the one with their talent agent. Your acting agent is the person who acts as your personal representative to the industry at large, whether it's Hollywood or Broadway or anything in between. If that sounds like a big deal, that's because it is! Getting a good agent can be the difference between moderate success and true celebrity.

But finding representation is easier said than done, and understanding how to get an agent is crucial for many early-career actors. In this article, we'll walk you through how to get an acting agent, from identifying the best acting agencies to understanding how much agents charge in commissions when you finally book your first role.

How to get an agent in six steps

Commit to acting: Even if you still have a day job, you need to be able to make time to audition regularly and hone your craft. Agents generally aren't interested in potential clients who aren't fully committed.

Prepare your materials: You'll need headshots and a résumé at a bare minimum, but having a demo reel and an active social media presence can be a big help as well.

Research talent agencies: Start by reaching out to SAG-AFTRA to obtain a list of union franchised agencies, then do your research to find agencies that will be suitable for you. That research is especially important: if you submit to agencies that don't suit your talents, you'll be wasting their time—and your own.

Submit your materials to agencies: Once you've narrowed down a list of agencies to those that might be good fits, start submitting. Be sure to include a personalized cover letter along with your acting résumé, headshot, and demo reel (if you have one). Be sure to follow the submission guidelines for each agency exactly.

Interview and audition for agents: Getting a meeting will take time and effort, and any agent who's interested in representing you will likely want to meet in person. Be prepared not only to ask questions about the agent, but also to do a cold read at the meeting.

Build a strong relationship with your agent: Maintaining a good relationship with your agent is a two-way street. Be sure to answer their calls and emails promptly, communicate with them about scheduling conflicts or challenges, and keep them updated about your goals and auditions you've attended.

What does an agent do for an actor?

A talent agent finds jobs for the actors (or authors, athletes, musicians, models, etc.) they represent. More specifically, acting agents submit their clients for auditions, pitch them for roles, follow up on submissions and auditions, negotiate better pay and contracts, and renegotiate existing contracts. How they go about these tasks varies, however. Some are

decidedly hands-on; others are more remote. Some are highly selective, representing only a few clients; others maintain a much deeper roster.

A good agent is one who's personally and sincerely invested in your career as an actor. They pitch you for all the roles you're right for, generate auditions, and advocate on your behalf. "[Wonderful representation] is the kind that pitches you via telephone for every role you're right for," explains acting coach Joseph Pearlman. "It's the kind that generates five to six major auditions per week during peak months."

Finally, keep in mind that agents are employed by agencies, not by actors. You're an agent's client, not their boss. It's a subtle distinction, but one worth noting.

Talent agent vs. manager: what's the difference?

Agents book you for roles and auditions, while managers help you establish your brand and advance your career. Agents work for talent agencies that are licensed by the state, which gives them the legal right to solicit employment for their clients and negotiate contracts. Managers, on the other hand, are not licensed—they provide career guidance and help you establish a brand, not set up auditions or negotiate contracts.

The other crucial difference is—you guessed it—money. "Agents are not allowed to take more than 10 percent of their client's earnings, but managers don't suffer from the same restriction," says Secret Agent Man. "Most of the ones I know only accept 10, but quite a few ask for 15, and others work on a sliding scale. That means they take 15 percent of your earnings up to \$50,000 during a one-year period, but the commission drops to 10 if you make more than that. And by the way, most managers commission all of your earnings, including theatrical, commercial, voiceover, and any other work that's part of the entertainment industry."

But it's not always black and white. Especially as the casting process has moved online, the difference between talent agents and managers has become increasingly fuzzy. "There are quite a few managers who have access to the casting breakdown service used by talent agents and, once given agency permission, can then submit actors for auditions," acting teacher Mae Ross notes.

Do you need an agent to be an actor?

At the beginning of your career, your focus should be on gaining experience and building your résumé rather than pursuing an agent, but you will eventually need an agent to book higher-profile jobs.

Exactly when you should start looking for representation depends on where you're located and how much experience you have. "When you're just starting out, you don't really need an agent," says Secret Agent Man. "A personal manager can step in and guide you to the point where you're ready to start working. That means getting you in the right classes, making sure your pictures are great, and teaching you the ins and outs of the business."

It also depends on what type of work you want to do. Most professional projects with major studios and networks will require an agent to submit on your behalf. You'll also get a boost from an agent in major markets like L.A. and New York, where the competition is fierce. In smaller, more regional markets, self-submitting is often the norm. (In fact, in very small regions agents may not even exist!)

So, how do you know when you're ready for a talent agent? If you can answer yes to most of the questions below, then it's probably time to start searching for representation:

Have you trained with qualified teachers? Is your potential agent likely to recognize their names?

Are you ready to commit to acting? Can you focus on going out for auditions, and is your life in order?

Do you already have headshots, a social media presence, an acting website, or a showreel?

Are you in the acting union? If you have your SAG-AFTRA card, your agent can submit you to far more roles.

Do you have any industry connections? Do you know anyone who is already established who is willing to vouch for you?

For most people, it takes a year of prep work (at minimum) to complete this checklist. In the meantime, actor and Backstage Expert Amy Russ recommends interning at an agent or casting director's office—and getting out there and auditioning on your own!

How to find a talent agency

Start by putting together a list of potential options. Finding an agency starts with figuring out exactly what roles you're interested in. Agents have different specialties and connections, and one that focuses on voiceover talent isn't going to represent you if you're trying to make it on Broadway, for instance.

Do your research. Talk to your actor friends, talk to your teachers, read industry articles, use IMDbPro, and google local SAG-AFTRA agents. Make sure you're submitting to acting agencies that represent your type. Familiarize yourself with the major agencies in your market. If you're in Los Angeles, that includes CESD Talent Agency and Hyperion; if you're in NYC, it means Paradigm and Avalon. Several established agencies operate offices in both cities, including Abrams Artists Agency, Buchwald, and Innovative Artists.

Narrow your list. Once you've put together a list of potential agencies, comb through their websites to figure out which specific agent you'd like to meet with based on their department or existing clients. Once you have their names, it's back to Google—see if they have a personal blog or an active Twitter or Instagram account. Many agents have been interviewed or profiled, and these articles can help you get a better understanding of their work and who they like to represent.

How to submit to talent agencies

To submit to most talent agencies, you'll need to send in headshots (a maximum of three!), an acting résumé, and a cover letter—but what form these should take depends on the agency's submission policy. While some want online submissions, others still prefer you to mail in a hard copy. The key here is to follow instructions!

Keep your cover letter short and to the point. "Don't go into exquisite detail about your childhood on the farm in Iowa, your favorite show tunes, and how many character roles you played in junior high," advises marketing coach Gwyn Gilliss. "Instead, talk about your type and brand (girl next door, quirky neighbor, suburban mom, beer-drinking dude, Home Depot husband, spy, Ivy League college guy). This will tell the agent that you are savvy and know how you will be cast." Other things to include, if possible: major roles, established actors you've worked alongside, and links to a website or reel.

If you're writing an email, be clear why you're writing in your subject line: "Actor seeking representation" works in most cases, "Just got great reviews!" is better, and "Referred to you by [insert casting director's name]" is best.

Beyond the submission itself, there are a few things that can boost your chances of getting that coveted agent meeting:

A personal referral from a teacher, casting director, or fellow actor that the talent agent knows and trusts can be tremendously powerful.

Sending a potential agent a comp invitation to your next screening or performance is a great way for them to see you do what you do best. Another option is to enroll in a reputable, audition-only agent/manager showcase or workshop.

Treat every interaction with a potential agent like it's a job interview—because that's what it is. Everything about you should broadcast professionalism: your outfit, your cover letter, headshots, résumé, and website, your social media presence. You want to be sure you're representing yourself as the industry pro you are.

What to expect from meeting with a talent agent

Any meeting with an agent is a job interview, regardless of how you ended up there. You should come prepared accordingly—expect to talk about your training and work as an actor, especially the credits on your résumé. Know where you want your career to go, and be able to discuss these goals confidently. Bring your recent headshots, an updated résumé, postcards, press releases, theater reviews, and any other materials you've used to build relationships with casting directors, producers, and others in the industry.

To put it bluntly, you're trying to prove to an agent that you're worth their time. "They have to believe that with minimal development, you will make them money," note Backstage Experts Risa Bramon Garcia and Steve Braun. "You do that in a few ways. Either you're charming and have the perfect look, you've worked consistently and/or recently, or you're talented and will absolutely kill in the room. Most of that you can't do much about—you look how you look and

you can't create a solid reel and résumé out of nothing. But the two things you can control are your talent and hard work."

It's also crucial that you don't fabricate or embellish your career. "I need to know all the facts so I can address them down the road if we end up working together," says Secret Agent Man. "I've had actors lie about their credits, training, fluency in a language, and a million other things. Trust me. None of those lies serve you. They just get in the way. And eventually, they will be discovered."

The agent meeting may be an audition of sorts—but don't lose sight of the fact that you need to be comfortable working with this person, too. Acting coach Denise Simon suggests four essential questions all talent should ask when meeting with a possible agent:

What type do you see me as?

How many clients do you have and how many are my type?

How do you feel about me submitting myself for projects?

Do you recommend photographers, acting, voice, or dance teachers?

Their answers should help you determine whether or not the agent is a good fit. "Gaining a good understanding of how an agent or manager can represent you will help you choose the very best rep to be a part of your winning team," Simon explains.

Signs of a bad talent agent

Not all agents are created equal—and some may even be trying to take advantage of actors just starting out in the industry. Watch out for red flags when meeting with a potential agent, including:

Requiring payment upfront

Taking more than 10 percent of your earnings

Strange contracts—always check with your union or lawyer before signing a contract

Advertising—a good agent doesn't need to advertise

Agents who are also acting coaches—they should be busy and successful enough as agents to not need a side job

Even if an agent isn't outright trying to scam you, they may not be presenting you in the best light. Casting director and acting coach Marci Liroff often receives half-baked submissions from agents. "Many times agents use photos that are 10 years old and black-and-white (which we don't use anymore), or résumés that aren't updated," she says. "Or they'll call or email with a client suggestion and not include a link to their demo along with a photo and résumé. Lazy? Careless? Overworked? I'm not sure—but it's not effective in the least. You've got to 'police' your agent (and his or her assistant) to make sure your most up-to-date information is being sent."

How to maintain a good relationship with your agent

At long last, you've found an acting agent who's compatible with your career goals and disposition. Congratulations! But don't kick back and relax just yet—healthy actor-agent relationships require work. Follow these four basic rules to ensure that your new agent stays glad they signed you:

Keep your phone on. Respond quickly to phone calls, text messages, and emails.

Update your information. Your headshots, casting profiles, demo reel, and website are vital tools for your agent to use when pitching you. If you've made any major changes to your appearance, make sure your agent knows before breakdowns come in.

Respect that your agent has a life. By all means, call to let your agent know how an audition went—just not at six in the morning! Keep correspondence limited to work hours.

Take their advice. If your agent is counseling you to get another headshot taken, it's not personal, it's professional. Trust that they're looking out for you and your career.

What happens if I get dropped by a talent agent?

Getting dropped by an agent is not uncommon if you're not booking regularly. "A top agent who signs you in the early days of your career can also drop you. I've seen it happen often," says marketing guru Gwyn Gilliss. "A young actor gets a small part in a major film with stars and gets signed to a celebrity agency, such as William Morris Endeavor or Creative Artists Agency. They're riding high, and six months later, the film is forgotten, no new film or bookings have come up, and the agency drops you."

But that doesn't mean you'll never get an agent again! "Get an opinion of your strengths, repackage your portfolio, and shop till you drop," says acting coach Denise Simon. "Agents and managers need talent. Just because your current representation is unwilling to handle you doesn't mean someone else won't. What may not be in vogue for one rep may be just the thing another is looking for."

Being dropped is also a chance to step back and reassess—and potentially emerge as a better actor and client. "Take the agent's reasoning and criticism to heart and learn what you can do to make the most of it," says Chris Roth of Avant Artists agency in L.A. "Reflect for a moment: Do you let your agent's phone calls go to voicemail? Do you forget to reply to work-related emails? Do you turn in audition tapes late? All of these little mistakes can add up—and they're very fixable."