

So, you want to sign with an agent before you sell...

A discussion of the unpublished author/agent dynamic. Come talk with two Golden Heart winners and agent Michelle Grajkowski, from 3 Seas Literary Agency.

This workshop is about myth busting... Specifically, the myth that says you can't get an agent unless you sell. You can! We did, and we're here to talk about things an unpublished author should keep in mind when deciding whether or not an agent is right for her, and things to consider when you're agent-shopping. You'll here us talk a lot about business today, because working with an agent, like everything else in publishing, is a business. Jot down any questions you have, and we'll leave plenty of time to talk about them at the end of the workshop.

We very lucky to have Michelle Grajkowski with us, my agent, to share her thoughts throughout the workshop, and she'll also be happy to answer questions at the end. You'll find the guidelines for her 3 Seas Literary Agency in our workshop hand-outs.

1. Keep in mind, publishing is always a business... YOUR business.

Why is finding an agent important for your career at this point?

Not everyone needs an agent. Early in your career, it is possible to spend too much time and energy focused on finding an agent, when that energy would be better spent polishing your craft and writing the best possible book you can. If you feel you're still honing your

craft, finding your footing in the publishing world, etc., you may want to focus on your writing for now. An agent is not a critique partner. Many agents will give you feedback on your work to help make it the best it can be, but their job is not to teach you how to write or to do your market research for you.

Are you ready for an agent? If you feel you are on the cusp of selling but can't seem to break through, you may need an agent. By 'on the cusp' I mean, you are finalling in contests or you've had good feedback from editors but can't seem to find the right place, right editor, right book, right star alignment to make that sale. If by all indications, your work is publisher-ready, but you just need that extra push to get on editor desks, you may need an agent. But keep in mind, there are no definitives in this business. Only you can know when you are ready to shop for an agent.

Can an agent get you published sooner at the house(s) you're targeting?

Maybe an unpublished friend has an agent, or the agent of a multi-published author you admire just negotiated a sweet deal. And now, you've just got to get one of those amazing creatures to sign you up and get you sold, too. But are you writing the same thing as your friend? Are you in the same position as that published author? Why is an agent important for you?

Timing is everything in publication. Both when you're published, and when you're trying to get your foot in the door. For an agent to seriously consider you, you not only have to be a talented writer, you have to already know where you want your work targeted. You have to already be moving in that direction, with conviction, so you can secure the agent's interest, and get the most out of your agent/author experience. Already be submitting, already be working to get to know the editors and the lines you're targeting.

The unpublished author who needs guidance in her career choices is a totally different challenge for an agent than one who hasn't bothered to do her homework and can't articulate to the agent, let alone an editor, where she sees her work fitting and what career goals are most critical to her.

For example, when I started looking for an agent, I'd been submitting to the same house for three years. I had already obtained three full manuscript requests from the line I was targeting, I knew editorial staff there well, and I was a consistent presence on the contest circuit, including winning the Maggie. I was doing everything I could on my own to get myself published, and I already had a good idea of where my work was best targeted.

An agent may be able to help get your work read faster in some cases, but a faster read doesn't necessarily translate to a faster sale. I found that having an agent helped me get work read faster at single title houses, but the work was still rejected. I do feel like my agent got more feedback from the editors as to why the work was rejected though, which helped me hone in on my strengths and weaknesses. Even with an agent, I had a book that spent two years at Silhouette going through various stages of being read, revised and passed from one line to another before it was finally rejected by a senior editor. In the meantime, a different book was read, passed to a senior editor and was rejected all within a six or seven month time frame. I understand that at Harlequin, there is a concerted push toward faster response times regardless of whether or not you are agented.

What having an agent does mean is -- your agent is the one calling the editor and pushing for an answer rather than you. You can focus on writing and keep your relationship with an editor one of writing only, not business.

How much of your business can you do on your own?

15% of each sale is significant money. How much of your need for an agent is business, and how much of it is emotional? Agents can be great sources of encouragement and support, but you're not looking for a buddy. You want a business partner. Is there currently business to be done for your writing projects that you can't do on your own? If not, maybe you're not yet at the point where an agent can help you.

Last year, I was close to publishing in category romance on my own, but I knew I needed an agent to help me realize my goal to both write for a category and publish single-title length projects. That was the primary impetus for me to start looking for an agent. I pursued Michelle, because I knew her track record getting unpublished author's published, and I knew she's hands-on with her authors when it comes to picking the right strategic times to pursue opportunities.

As far as contracts go, I have a management degree, but I'm more than happy to let my agent deal with the business side of my career. I see value in keeping my relationship with my publisher focussed on my writing projects and career opportunities. My editors are used to working with Michelle (she already had authors at Superromance when I sold to them). And her proven track record at both Harlequin and Super makes it that much easier for her to do business on my behalf.

If you have experience dealing with contracts and the language of contracts, or if you are particularly good in business and financial dealings, you may be able to negotiate your own contract. I, being extremely right brained, get brain cramps when I have to do math or deal with legalese. I wanted an agent to handle the business side of publishing simply because I knew contracts and finances aren't my forte. Anna's reasons for getting an agent were different. Every writer's career is different so you need to decide if an agent fits your needs. Are the services an agent provides worth the 15% cut they earn.

If you do sell, Harlequin in particular negotiates very little on first sales. They have what is often referred to as a boilerplate contract. Everyone essentially gets the same deal. There is some variation between lines, but little wiggling room. Since Harlequin is very open to looking at material from unagented writers, you need to decide for yourself if an agent is what your career needs. On the other hand, if you are looking to sell to a single title house, an agent can be more important. Many publishers will only consider work by agented authors. If you are looking to sell to one of these houses, finding an agent is a good use of your time.

After the first sale, an agent may be able to help negotiate multi-book contracts, foreign sales, special projects, etc. that you may not have gotten offered otherwise.

2. What do you bring to the table... Why would an agent be crazy not to want you?

Rule number one in business: Put yourself in a position to be successful.

Writing and publishing are businesses. Just as with any business, you need to build a resume that inspires people to want to work with you. (Reference the Author Bio Sheet hand-out in the book, from when I was unpublished--this is what I sent Michelle). You don't hire someone to build your house if they've never built a house before, or if their houses are consistently riddled with problems. You want the best builder for your house.

Likewise, you need to prove your commitment to your writing before an agent will take a risk on you. Their livelihood depends on whether they can sell your work. They have to believe in your work and be enthusiastic in selling it to editors. This is particularly crucial if you're unpublished, because you don't have sales numbers to speak for you.

- Have you finalled in numerous contests, especially the contests with high prestige like the Maggie or the Golden Heart? This shows a certain level of accomplishment and quality in your writing.
- Have you completed more than one manuscript? How fast do you write? This tells the agent how productive you are likely to be. Most agents are looking to represent an author and help you build a career, not just sell one book. If they're seriously interested, they're likely to ask an unpublished author to send multiple projects for review, to make sure you can produce beyond a single fabulous manuscript.
- How well do you follow through and meet deadlines? How well do you take constructive criticism? This will demonstrate the type of relationship you are likely to have with an editor. An agent's reputation is on the line if their authors act like prima donnas. If you can't meet the terms of your contract or are difficult to work with, an agent may be reluctant to sign you. Send materials when you say you are going to and be open to an agent's feedback. Sure, it's your book, but you need to keep an open mind and understand a good agent wants what is best for you and your career.
- Do you attend conferences, make an effort to make editor contacts and study the market? If you are serious about selling, you've done your research and know the market. Again this demonstrates a career-mindedness to an agent.

So to sum this segment up--Your talent is your greatest asset, and when you're pursuing an agent, you've got to know what your strengths are and make sure you communicate them with confidence.

Let the agent know you're already doing the grunt work. You're not looking for short cuts. Be good on paper. Finish those manuscripts, rack up some quality contest credits, submit your manuscripts and build relationships with editors **ON YOUR OWN**. Because here's the thing--you'll still be doing all of these things **AFTER** you sign with the agent. And if you can't, the agent's not likely to think you're her next great find. To be in this business in this for the long haul, you need to always think like a professional writer. Get serious about your business before you sell, and stay plugged into the industry and your niche. Agents are looking for this perspective in potential clients. These days, you have to bring more than just a great manuscript to the table.

Rule number two: Know your strengths AND your weakness.

Anna: Do enough work promoting yourself to know what you need an agent to help you with. Get comfortable articulating what you're very good at, as well as where you need the agent to be on the ball. Then find out which agents want what you've got, and which ones are good at what you need.

When I began talking with Michelle, I'd heard enough about bad agent experiences to be able to tell her that I was looking for an advocate for my work. I knew her enthusiasm for my work was going to be key--I stress enough worrying about pleasing my editors. I also needed an agent that was a strong negotiator. I wanted to be focussing on my writing, not duking it out with legal departments about contract clauses. When I had to push for something from my publisher, I needed an agent who wasn't going to shy away from asking the hard questions. I knew I wanted someone creative and assertive, and at the same time genuinely warm and encouraging. I hit the jackpot with Michelle.

Rule number three: If you can't get what you need where you're looking, move on.

If you and the agent you're targeting don't match each other's criteria, keep looking--no matter who she's helped become a star. Having an agent who is a bad fit for you and your goals is far worse than having no agent at all.

3. Research, research, research... And by the way, she's checking you out, too.

Just how many ducks should you have in a row? Let's get down to details.

- Research the agents you submit to. Meet the agent if possible, such as at a conference. This is when small conferences are especially good because you're more likely to get informal face time with an agent.
- Talk to the agent's other clients. Are they happy with the agent? How responsive is the agent to questions and progress reports? Does she only handle the business end or will she career plan with you? Does she report to her clients on a regular basis regarding rejections, editors, and manuscript submission status?

If you want feedback, is she open to getting involved in the creative process? Do you WANT her involved in the creative process?

- Does she represent what you write? Some agents don't represent category romance. Some don't represent paranormal. Some don't want inspirational. Some only want mainstream women's fiction or might not represent romance at all. Do your homework! Find out what each agent is looking for.
- Be cautious! Check with the Predators and Editors website (<http://www.anotherealm.com/prededitors/pubagent.htm>) and ask around about unknown agents. Ask the agent questions. What have they sold in your genre lately? Are they a member of AAR? Are they recognized by RWA? What is their contract like? This is your career! Stay informed.

Unfortunately there are too many agents out there that prey on eager new writers. Reading fees, editing fees, and marketing fees are a red flag. Legitimate copying and postage costs are okay and fairly common, but ASK about these charges and keep tabs that they aren't overcharging or disguising exorbitant fees as copying fees. These fees most of the time will be subtracted from money earned once you make a sale.

Sell yourself like a pro, and expect her to put out, too.

Does the agent attend conferences or spend time in New York doing business? Not only will you get the chance to get to know her better at conferences, but she'll also be actively talking with editors at these events. Her staying active at industry events will be crucial both before and after you sign. I don't personally think an agent HAS to work out of New York, but she does have to go where the business is.

How much work does she put into selling herself to you? It's not a one-way street, and an agent should be working hard for your business as well. I think it's easy to fall into the trap of feeling grateful for an agent's attention. But your talent is just as crucial to the business relationship as her connections and contract savvy, and this shouldn't have to be explained to the agent. If the dynamic doesn't feel like a partnership in the agent interview, it's not a good sign for how things will pan out after you start working together.

Until you sign a contract, you're the only agent you've got. Be your best advocate.

Get comfortable selling yourself, and don't wait for an agent to come along to save you from having to talk with editors. Practice your pitches, get better at talking business--because you may not land an agent. Many people don't. And even if you do, the editor relationships you cultivate will always be key, and your agent can't manufacture these for you. Getting stronger and learning your own power as a creative artist is the key here. Get comfortable talking about your work and the publishing business you want to find a home in. The agent, when you find her, will be your guide--not your muse.

4. Oh my gosh! She called.... Stop and take a deep breath.

How much happy is too happy?

You've done all your homework. Now you get to take this next step. Be excited, this is one of THOSE moments. But as always, be ready to get down to business, too. Do a Snoopy dance, then get back to work. And try not to scream in her ear!

- Be ready to send her your projects and ideas. Be ready to wait, if she thinks the timing isn't right for some projects. Refer to Michelle's guidelines here.
- Continue to make goals and follow-through. Don't take your eye off the ball and think it's time to coast. Don't wait for the agent to tell you what to do next, she's not your mother--take the initiative and continue to show her you're serious about your career.

- Be ready to listen! You're paying your new agent \$15 of earnings. Let her do her job, provide input when you've got something important to say, but pick your battles.
- Don't expect instant success just because you now have an agent. It's still a waiting game.

When you don't feel good enough to win the agent over... Fake it!

Your first instinct after she says she wants to represent you might be to ask "Why?" But now's not the time to doubt yourself. Get it together and get ready to run with the big dogs. With an agent behind you, momentum should start to build in your career. It's your responsibility to be ready for that. Continue to improve your writing, your productivity, your contest record--whatever you can do to help your agent sell you.

Ask all the questions you need to, but stay on top of your game.

When you're not sure, ask. Your agent has to be someone you can talk to. But now's not the time to lose the ability to think for yourself. Let your agent help you all she's willing, but don't fall into the trap of thinking she's going to make your decisions for you.

Agent relationships don't always last. Always be learning about your career and the industry, so you can depend on yourself to make good decisions, whatever the future brings.

5. Keep in mind, this is always a business... YOUR business.

Now that you've signed with an agent, what's the next thing YOU can do for your business?

Remember that this is a business relationship. It is all right to be friends with your agent. Send her a Christmas card, ask how her vacation was, etc.

But keep your relationship on a professional level. An agent's job is not to teach you to write, to listen to you gripe and moan about your RWA chapter, or to commiserate on your troubles with your children/spouse. That's what your neighbor/ CP/ chapter mates are for. An agent will give you the pep talk or career guidance you need sometimes, but don't dump on them and whine. Respect their time. It is fair to expect regular timely reports on the status of your submissions, but remember, you aren't their only client. Don't pester them or expect them to coddle you.

How can you partner with your agent to reach your publishing goals?

Put your business savvy together with hers and shoot for the moon.

How much of your business should you still handle on your own?

Know your business. KNOW your business. KNOW YOUR BUSINESS.