

WORKING WITH A LITERARY AGENT

BY: MARLO BERLINER

So, you've finished and polished your manuscript, sent out hundreds of queries, and finally, lo and behold, you've landed interest from a literary agent! Congratulations!

Now what?

Well, hopefully you've already done at least some of your homework about this agent. Most literary agents come from one of four backgrounds. They are either **a former editor**, so they have strong editing skills, or **a former writer/author**, so they understand what it's like to try to make a living by writing, or **a lawyer** or other business professional, so they have good experience with contracts, or **a former agent assistant**, who worked their way up through the ranks of the agency. So do some research on an agent you're considering signing with. Figure out what sort of skills you may be looking for in an agent, as well as what sort of relationship you expect to have. For instance, do you want an agent who will be editorial, or not? Is that something that is important to you? Does the agent represent all of the age groups and genres you are considering writing in?

Basically, right out of the starting gate you are trying to figure out if you and this agent are a good fit. One of the opportunities you will have to flesh that out is 'the phone call'. Most agents will have a phone call with a potential client, just before offering representation. On that phone call, the agent will probably tell you what they liked about your manuscript, their vision for your story, a little bit about themselves and the agency they work for, and perhaps their style as an agent. The agent will also most likely ask you questions to flesh out if they feel *you* are a good fit for *them*. Are you open to revisions? Are you in this to be a career author or to publish one book? Do you have other WIPs or other ideas percolating? Basically, an agent is looking to be sure there are no red flags with a potential client (arrogance, stubbornness, unwillingness to take direction or make revisions). You and your agent are going to need to get along personally as well as professionally, so on the phone call both of you should be trying to figure out if you get the right 'vibe' from each other. Keep in mind that finding a "good" agent is like finding a "good" friend — what works for you might not work for another writer and vice versa.

One thing I must mention here, never pay an agent upfront! An agent only gets paid a percentage of the proceeds once they make a deal for you. If an 'agent' asks you to pay any fees upfront, run away because that is a scam! Money flows from the publisher, to the agency (who then takes their commission), and finally to the author.

Once the phone call goes well on both sides, then the agent will offer representation. Huzzah! You have an agent!

Now what?

The next step will be to sign an agency agreement or contract. These can vary widely from agency to agency, but they all have a lot in common. There will be sections in the contract such

as: Scope of Relationship, Term of Relationship, Commission, Payment of Monies, Duties and Powers of the Agency, Warranties by the Author, Indemnification, Termination & Amendment, Arbitration & Governing Law. The commission that an agency is taking should be 15%, that's the industry standard. Commission on subsidiary rights (TV/Film/Stage, a.k.a. dramatic rights) or foreign rights can vary between 20-30% depending upon the agency. Make sure you're comfortable with and understand all of the terms in your agency contract. You may also be asked to provide a W-9, which will later be needed for tax purposes in the event that money is earned by the author.

Once the contract is signed and countersigned you should receive a copy from the agency. Then it's off to the races with your brand new agent!

Now every agent will handle this in their own way, but here is an example of the email I sent out to my newly signed clients to get things started:

[Subject line: Getting Started]

Dear New Client,

Hope all is well with you! Now that we've gotten the formality of the contract over with, I just wanted to again say, WELCOME! So excited and honored to represent you!

I also just wanted to let you know what I'm going to be doing next. The first thing I'm going to do is read your book through again and make some editorial big-picture notes. I'll also make some track changes right in the document for lines I feel can be fixed right now, because they won't be changing later. These line edits won't be anything major - for example, any dropped words, a word change here or there, maybe rewording a sentence for greater impact, etc. We just want to tighten up the ms so that it's perfect when I submit. My plan is to have that done in no more than three to four weeks, hopefully less. You'll learn that I take the restaurant approach - I promise you the wait will be an hour, then get you seated by a half hour, so you're impressed with the service. And then also, if something comes up and it takes the full hour, I've covered myself :)

Then once I get that done, I will toss the book back to you for you to make the appropriate edits. While you're busy doing that, I'll be working up a list of editors I believe would be a great fit for your book.

Then once you complete your edits, we'll reconvene and see where we're at. We won't drag any part of the process out too long, but we want to give everything the time it requires to get it right. I definitely want our visions to align for your story. And, I always want us to be able to bounce ideas off of one another. (After all, two heads are better than one!)

Like I said, I'm excited to get started! Look for my editorial letter in the next few weeks.

All best regards,

~Marlo

While you're working on your edits, your agent will be developing a pitch letter that will go out to a number of handpicked editors. That targeted list of editors is called a submission list.

To understand the submission process I'm going to share with you the letter I sent out to my clients when they went on submission:

Dear Client,

Here's info on what you can expect next re: submission process and submission time...

Editors acquire books all year round, and then slate them for where they want them to appear in their publication schedule - so agents pitch year-round too. Things slow down somewhat in August when many execs take vacations (though deals are still made then), and publishing pretty much shuts down mid-December through New Year's (though it's not unheard of to receive an offer on a book on December 23rd!).

Here's the process... Now that we have the manuscript submission-ready, I send the full ms, along with a pitch letter, to a **targeted** list of editors at several imprints at the major houses. This email letter encapsulates the pitch and brings the submission package a step further (some more sale points they should know) and I also ask that they confirm receipt of the submission. My goal is to get them very excited about the book before they even read the first word, and to already have in mind ways they can convince an acquisitions committee that this would be great for their publishing house to sink money into and get more money back in return. I research deeply who would be the best editors for your book. Depending on the book and the market it is for, I could submit to as few as three editors or as many as twelve at once – it entirely depends on the market at the moment for this sort of book, and who I decide would be best to see it. Sometimes a smaller test-run is a great way to get feedback before sending out wider, sometimes there are a few absolutely perfect editors, sometimes a highly commercial work with a timely theme goes out widely right away, and most submissions fall somewhere in between. I trust my gut on this.

Once I've sent out the submissions, I wait for them to confirm receipt and acknowledge that they will be reading the ms and taking the book under consideration. Many times, I will also call an editor to let them know an important submission has hit their inbox. Either way, I definitely follow up via email and phone to make sure all editors have confirmed that they are considering the manuscript. Then I put together a list for my author of every editor I sent the submission to (when you receive this list, yellow means the editor confirmed they're reading, gray means I'm still waiting for confirmation and will follow up with the editor until they confirm. I will send you an updated list once all editors have confirmed). The list gives you the editor name, imprint, and house. Not all agents share their submission list with their authors, but as a writer myself, I like to know, and I bet you do too.

Then we wait. Manuscripts are long, and editors have a ton of them to deal with. I do a follow up email or phone call every 8 weeks or so to nudge them – “Have you gotten a chance to read this yet? I look forward to your thoughts.” That sort of thing. Most editors are pretty good at getting back within 2 to 8 months, but sometimes they take longer, and in some rare cases they disappear from the face of the earth...I make a note of editors that 'ghost' like that and generally avoid submitting to them in the future.

When editors do respond, I'll keep you updated with a SUBMISSION UPDATE note. I will share with you their comments, since they can sometimes be helpful and informative. Just so you know, I cut and paste *exactly* what they said. Some authors don't want to know anything, and some only want to know yes or no. Most want as much info as possible. I'll assume you want it all – if you don't, however, just let me know, and I'll filter info accordingly. Trust that I'll stay on top of this whole process :)

I keep great records of when I last contacted people, and when I should bug 'em again... As editors pass, I'll resubmit to other imprints that are good choices if that is warranted. In general, I can only submit to one or two of a publishing house's imprints at a time (though to multiple publishing houses). Once an imprint passes, like an editor at Macmillan F&F for example, I can't then sub to another Macmillan F&F editor, but I can sub to a different imprint at Macmillan, if I feel that is appropriate for this manuscript.

If we get a number of rejections specifying the same issue in a work, we might consider an edit of the work before subbing more. This is a very subjective business, though. One editor might say - love the voice, hate the plot, and the very next editor could say hate the voice, love the plot... That same book could then go on to sell at auction for a really great 2-book deal, so don't be discouraged. It really is about finding the right match, the right home for the book. During the submission period, it may seem like 'it's really quiet' and 'nothing is happening'. The truth is though, instead of worrying about being out on sub, an author should be taking their mind off of submission by Writing! Why? Two reasons: 1) you should never hang your hat on one project; the truth of this industry is that getting published, even with an agent, is hard! You may get a deal from your first book, but it may also take writing a few books before you ever get published, and... 2) The time before you get a book deal is the most free you will ever be! Once you get a book deal there will be deadlines, round of edits, various author tasks to juggle, marketing & promotion to be done. So relish that pre-deal free time and write! The best way to keep busy so the time passes quickly while you're on submission is to write! (Incidentally, all this advice came directly from a multi-published NYT best-selling author friend of mine!) And there's actually a third reason to be busy writing – if a publisher shows interest in your work, and we begin to negotiate with them, they may try to sweeten an offer by making it a two book or three book deal. So having other projects in the works might become really important in that instance!

When we do get interest from an editor...whether an offer, or an editor saying they are sharing it with others up the chain, and/or interested in taking it to an acquisitions meeting, I immediately email or get on the phone with the other editors who are currently reading the manuscript to alert them there is editorial interest, or an offer on the table. I never tell the other editors any specifics – not the name of the publisher, or the extent of the offer – that is *privileged* information and they know not to ask. This keeps the advantage with us, since they'll never know when they also offer if they are competing against a publisher who deals in big bucks or a small modest house.

*****Throughout the submission process – you, as the author, are not to share any of the info about this online in any way, or beyond your closest friends (if possible, I would prefer just your closest relatives!) Please don't blog or tweet etc. about 'being on submission', about 'rejection', it's 'taking a while', or about 'exciting developments', etc.** Imagine if an editor is interested in your book, and before deciding to make an offer, googles you only to learn that the manuscript has been 'out on sub for over a year', or has already been sent to a number of houses, or see you discussing why others rejected the work, or that so and so made an offer – imagine how that would influence their opinion and value of the work. It would give the editors too much information we don't want them to have. I see authors telegraph way too much information like this on social media all the time! That is like shooting yourself directly in the foot!

Okay... So let's say that a house makes an offer on your book. That first draft of the offer generally only contains a few deal points – like the advance, the royalties, the territory, and perhaps if they want certain subsidiary rights. At that point, I thank them, and let them know I'll get back to them soon... I'll let you know this offer is on the table (no matter how excited you are, you keep this a **secret...see above!**) My next move is to contact all the other editors who have the manuscript...I let them know that an offer is definitely in, and that I'd like to give them a chance to also offer...I then give them a deadline of a few days to a week, and a specific time, to let me know. If all the other editors back out, then I, with Jennifer De Chiara's guidance, negotiate these initial deal points with the one offering editor. If more than one house makes an offer, we set up an auction for a certain time – asking them to give me their very best offer – we set up certain terms for the offer and parameters for the auction, as is appropriate.

*****Throughout all of this, I will keep you updated as appropriate, but it is the agent's role to negotiate, review, and handle all of the contract particulars – the author trusts the agent to negotiate strongly on your behalf and get the best deal and working terms for you. This is a hands-off stage for the author, not something you will be interacting with, FYI.** With that one remaining offer, if it isn't an auction with terms set by us (thus implied that we'll accept those terms), we go back and forth a bit on the initial deal points... If appropriate, we might ask for better terms, they might say okay, but you have to give us this sub right, etc...so it's a back and forth. Once we then say we accept these deal terms...I'll let you know what those initial agreed upon points are to keep you informed...the publishing house will then send along what is known as their boilerplate contract...a long legal contract which contains everything we've already agreed on, plus much much more legal language. Anything not already agreed upon is still up for negotiation. This stage of back and forth of terms negotiation will go on directly between their legal department, myself, and Jennifer De Chiara. Once all the points in the boilerplate have been negotiated and agreed upon, they will send the final contract to the agency, and Jennifer and I will then give it one final review, and send it to you for your signature, with instructions – this is your chance to review everything and let us know if you have any questions at all. It's not the time to negotiate further. However, if there is a **SERIOUS** problem with something in the contract, you should let me know and I'll talk with Jennifer about our options. Otherwise, you'll sign the contract and send it per the instructions.

Once the publisher countersigns and sends that contract along with the advance due to the agency – it is considered fully executed and binding...

***We then post the deal announcement in Publishers Marketplace, and let you know...only THEN can you tell the world that you have this book deal. Again, this is to protect your interests. In any step, if things go south and a deal is halted (a rarity of course) and we have to go back out on submission – you don't want an editor to google and find out that they've gotten sloppy seconds – they each want to feel that a submission is fresh and new and exciting. It's also an exciting announcement time – film producers and foreign rights people eye the Publishers Marketplace deals – **that is your moment to shout from the rooftops and start the buzz about your book!**

It can be tough keeping all this – from submission to pub announcement – under wraps, and sometimes (often) contracts can take months from the time of an offer, to being fully negotiated and signed – it's all up to how slow their legal department is in responding at each step. Several months is common. It can be tough to wait until the ink is dry – but it's necessary! The best way to get through the waiting throughout all this is to be always at work on another book – great for the mind and for the career too!

And communication is always key. Let me know if you ever have any questions, or concerns. I'm here for you and your career!

So, how does your agent develop that all important submission list of editors to submit your book to? Well, all year long, your agent spends a lot of time connecting and chatting with editors at all of the various imprints and houses. Keeping in touch with them over email, the phone, or Zoom, about their wishlists, their tastes, what they're looking for, and what they're not looking for, and keeping files on all of this. Your agent will then scour their notes and their files, and select the editors they feel would be the best fit to enjoy your manuscript and be inclined to buy the rights to it. In general, an agent can only submit to one editor at a time at an imprint, but they can oftentimes submit to multiple imprints under each house simultaneously. It is your agent's job to keep up with where the editors are, what they're buying, and what the rules for submitting are at each of the publishing houses. A good agent will have their finger on the pulse of what's hot in publishing and know the best place to try for your book.

So, now let's assume you've received an offer of publication! Huzzah! Your agent will negotiate the deal and get you the best money, terms, and deal points that they can. After all, it's in their best interest and yours, to do so.

Example of a Deal Memo or Deal Points Memo –

Deal Memo: A PUBLISHING WISH

Author: Bob Smith
Slated for Fall 2026

Author Contact info:
Bob Smith
bobsmith007@gmail.com

Send contract to:
Marlo Berliner
Literary Agent
The Jennifer De Chiara Literary Agency

ADVANCE

For A PUBLISHING WISH, which we intend to publish as a high-quality hardcover, jacketed book, we offer an advance of \$50K for World Rights.

ROYALTY

HC: 12.5 percent (all sales)
PB: 7.5 percent (all sales)
EB: 25% net (all sales)

SUBRIGHTS

Bob will retain the following: Calendar, Merch, Commercial, Dramatic, Theme Park, and Graphic Novel.

We also offer the following:

	Author	Publisher
Bookclub	50%	50%
TextBook	50%	50%
Anthology	50%	50%
Audio	50%	50%
First Serial	90%	10%
Second Serial	50%	50%
Abridgment	50%	50%
Large Print	50%	50%
Reprint	50%	50%
British	80%	20%
Foreign Language	75%	25%

ADDITIONAL SUBRIGHTS:

Two-year reversions on UK, Translation, and Audio rights

AWARD BONUSES

\$5,000 National Book Award finalist
\$10,000 National Book Award winner

EARN OUT BONUS

\$5,000 for earn out sales in first year

So, real briefly let's review, **What are a literary agent's primary functions?**

- 1) Scout for literary talent and sign writers to be represented as clients.
- 2) Maintain relationships with the editors at the various imprints/houses. Know their manuscript wishlists and tastes.
- 3) Pitch a writer's unpublished work to editors. Check up on the status of these submissions as time passes.
- 4) Once your book receives an offer (or offers), an agent negotiates book deals on a writer's behalf.
- 5) Liaison between the author and publisher as the book comes to publication. This includes ensuring that the publisher makes each payment to the author in a timely fashion and according to the agreed upon contract.
- 6) Manage an author's ongoing publishing career. Help you decide what book to write next. Do you stay in the age group or genre you're currently writing in, or do you branch out? Are you happy with your current editor and publishing house, or would you like to see if you could do better elsewhere? Your agent will read your next book and provide feedback.

So, you want a Dream Agent, we want a Dream Client – How do we make that happen?

Well, like any relationship in life, an author/agent partnership requires effort on both sides in order for that relationship to remain productive and healthy—or it can begin to fail. So it's important to know how to maintain a healthy author/agent relationship, but also to know how to spot red flags and how to handle troubled waters if they arise.

How to be a Dream Client

The most important thing to remember is – working with a literary agent is a partnership, a professional relationship, and a business relationship.

The agent-author relationship is a two-way street. Which means you need to take your role as the author seriously. There are several absolutely crucial things you should always do to hold up your end of this partnership:

Take feedback and suggestion

Part of your agent's role is to evaluate your work and make sure it is the best it can be before it is sent to an editor. Right on that very first phone call an agent may make some suggestions for how to improve your manuscript. Trust that your agent has your best interest at heart and knows what editors are looking for. Be open to this feedback, be open to revision. It is still your book, and you don't have to agree on every change your agent would like you to make, but don't be so stubborn that you believe your book to be perfect as is. Even once an editor finally buys your book for a sweet amount of money, you will most likely get your first disturbingly long edit letter detailing many many changes that will need to be done to your manuscript. So, the point is just to keep in mind, that your agent and your editor are both in your corner, helping you make the book the best it can be.

Again, you don't have to take all of these suggestions. But to have a healthy relationship with your agent, you do have to take them seriously, consider them, and respond thoughtfully.

Always give your best work

As mentioned earlier, it's important to remember that you and your agent are business partners. Your agent decided to represent you for your first book because they could see your talent on the page and they believed beyond a doubt that they could sell your work. And they need to feel that way about every book you write! So give them what they need – great writing. From your second book to your twenty-second book, put your best foot forward and give them your best work. Don't rely on your agent to completely fix your manuscript. While we can assist an author at all stages of the brainstorming and writing, and we often do, the burden of being the author of the work should fall...well...on the author! If your agent starts to feel like they're doing all the heavy lifting, they may sour on how they feel about representing your talent. Along with this goes following instructions. If your agent has asked you to send a manuscript in a certain format, be sure to do so.

Respect your agent's time

It's important to keep in mind all the tasks your agent is trying to juggle in order to be successful not just for themselves, but for you! So it's paramount that you respect your agent's time. If your agent promises that they will let you know as soon as they hear positively or negatively from editors, then perhaps wait before you send an email asking for the third time if there have been any responses. Trust that your agent is following up on submissions and if they had heard anything, they would've told you. Don't badger or pepper your agent with questions about the submission process that have already been answered. Your time is better spent writing! Don't call your agent at nine o'clock on a Sunday unless there is an emergency! (Yes, this has happened to me before, and no, it was not an emergency.)

As mentioned above, be sure to always send your agent manuscripts that are clean, organized, and formatted properly. An agent shouldn't have to spend time formatting your manuscripts, before being sent out to an editor. Their time is better spent on maintaining a relationship with that editor, so they will know if they're a great fit for your work.

Meet your deadlines

If you tell your agent you'll have something to them by a specific date, make sure you do that. If you have a contractually-mandated deadline with your publisher (e.g., a revision is due on a specific date), make sure you hit that date. If you can't for reasons beyond your control, communicate that to your agent as soon as possible so your agent can approach your editor and explain what's happening. If you don't have that simple professionalism and courtesy, it may hurt your relationship with your editor, and in extreme cases, even possibly jeopardize publication of your book. Never forget that your agent is your representative, so your behavior reflects not only on you, but on them.

Be patient

Selling books can take time. While there are books that can receive offers after only a few weeks on submission, that's not often the case. More typically, selling a book—especially by a debut author—can take a long, long time. In fact, everything in publishing takes a lot longer than you would expect. The time between having an idea for a book to seeing that book finally in print can typically be years. Even the time going from an initial offer and deal memo, to actually having a signed contract can be months, sometimes up to a year. Basically every step on the journey to publication takes a long time! The publishing industry is often “hurry up and wait”—you go full speed to deliver a revision on time, and then it takes weeks or even months to hear back from your editor. And 99% of this waiting and delay is beyond your agent's control. As long as you're satisfied that your agent is doing their job and the delays aren't due to neglect or incompetence, don't take your frustrations out on your agent. If you wish to sustain a career in traditional publishing, you will need to wear your patience like a badge of honor!

Manage your expectations

Everyone wants to see their book get a deal, but no agent can absolutely promise that will happen. And everyone wants to be published like...yesterday. And I get it, you've put a lot of time, effort, and blood/sweat/tears, in *up front*, before seeing anything come of your efforts. But bear in mind, that's also what your agent has done; an agent puts all this work into a client and doesn't make any money until you do. So here's what can happen - As time goes by, and you and your agent aren't seeing results, a sort of desperation to be published can creep in. Don't let your desperation to be published cause you to act unprofessionally or affect how you treat your agent.

The reality is that first book your agent submits for you may get an offer, or it may not. There are many factors that affect the acquisition of a book. Sometimes it's just not in the stars for that book at that moment. And if your agent exhausts all the possibilities for that book, then it

may have to be shelved. Then you and your agent try again with another book, and another, and another. Until finally one day, you get that wonderful offer of publication. If your agent is sending out your work in good faith and doing all they can, then you need to accept that. A wise agent who had been in this business a long time, said something to me when I became an agent that I want you to think about and hopefully *not* mimic – “When things are going well authors pat themselves on the back, when things are going poorly, they blame their agent.” Being a good author in the author/agent relationship means always treating your agent with respect and appreciating their efforts on your behalf, even if they don’t always pan out the way you hope. A good author/agent relationship is one in which expectations are clear and reasonable.

What a Dream Agent Looks Like

Of course, you shouldn’t be doing all the work. As with any partnership you have every right to expect certain things from your agent as well. It’s important to remember that every agent/author relationship is different, because they involve individuals with unique styles, personalities, and professional goals, so don’t make the mistake of observing another author’s career and assuming that’s how all agent relationships should work. But there are a few universals that always apply when it comes to judging the relationship you have with your agent:

Open lines of communication

You’re probably not your agent’s only client. So it’s unreasonable to expect them to pay exclusive attention to you at all times. That being said, your agent should be available to you when the need to communicate arises. Calls and emails should be returned in a reasonable amount of time. Questions should get answered. And when surprises pop up—like opportunities, or disasters—they should be on the spot ready to guide you, advise you, and protect your interests.

On the same page

You should feel like your agent is a partner and wants similar things for you in terms of career and sales. This doesn’t mean you should never disagree with them—disagreement is part of a partnership—but you should always feel comfortable discussing things with them, and you should always feel like they understand what you want. It’s your career, after all—you should have confidence that you’re both more or less on the same page.

Relationships evolve, and so does a writer’s goals and approach. As time goes on you might drift towards different genres or career goals that don’t match up with what your agent does, in which case a voluntary and amicable parting of the ways might be in order. But while you’re working together there shouldn’t be any unwelcome friction.

A confident strategy

It is crucial that your agent have a strategy for your success. There are no guarantees it will work, of course, but there should at minimum be a coherent approach to selling your work to publishers. And just as importantly, they should execute that plan. It's one thing to have a list of potential editors to send your book to, it's something else to actually do that, and then follow up on those submissions—and then have a second submission list in place if the main list of editors proves disinterested. In other words, your agent shouldn't be making stuff up as they go.

Your biggest fan

This is frequently overlooked, but your agent should actually like your writing. You shouldn't be a cog in their success machine, you should be an artist they believe deserves more attention. Of course more practical concerns like marketability or potential sales are important—plenty of agents turn down books they absolutely love because they simply can't figure out how they'll sell them. But your agent should be really excited to read your new work, simply because they think you're a great writer.

They're knowledgeable—but they know what they don't know

Part of what you're paying your agent for is their expertise and knowledge. They should know more than you do about a broad range of subjects: The publishing industry, editors, contracts, the market, and the genre you hope to publish in. You should feel confident that when you ask them questions about any of the above, they have smart answers for you.

At the same time, a good agent also knows when they lack knowledge—and they're willing to admit that and find someone who has the information/experience. The best agent is the one who can say, "I don't know the answer to that, but I know someone we can contact to find out." It's key to remember that every agent/author relationship is different. The most important aspects are mutual trust and respect. If you're on the same team—and feel like you're on the same team—you increase your chances of success.

Red Flags and How to Deal with Them

We all know that if you ignore your significant other, your relationship can become troubled. The same goes for your agent relationship: You should never take it for granted, and always monitor that relationship to ensure it's still healthy and productive. While every relationship is unique, there are a few warning signs to watch for:

Lack of communication

As discussed, you probably won't hear from your agent constantly. And you might not hear from them for what seems like long periods of time. But there are two things your agent should always be doing: One, keeping you informed so you know what's happening with your work, and two, responding to you when you reach out with questions. That doesn't necessarily mean

a weekly or even monthly phone call, but it does mean your voicemails and emails shouldn't fall into a black hole, never receiving a response.

And those responses should be prompt and filled with information. If your agent acts like answering your questions is a burden, or is cagey about simple facts like who's got your book right now, or what the feedback from editors has been, or where your royalty payments are—that's a very bad sign.

Rudeness or Aggression

In the same vein of communication, it should be a red flag if your agent ever gets nasty, rude, or aggressive with you. This is plain and simply unprofessional behavior and should never be tolerated. (And on the same note, neither should it be tolerated from a client. You are not a cat, and your agent is not your fuzzy ball you can bat around with your paw.)

Different goals

You and your agent should be on the same page when it comes to the types of books you're writing (and that they're trying to sell) and the overall approach to your career, your brand, and building your readership. If they push you in a direction you don't want to go and resist when you push back, you might have drifted into incompatible visions of your future.

No deals

If you've been with your agent for a while and have nothing to show for it, it doesn't necessarily mean they're a bad agent—or that you're a bad author. It could just mean that the strategy they employed didn't pan out. The key, then, would be to come up with a new strategy. If your agent hasn't sold anything after a significant period of time and hasn't discussed how to adjust their approach, that might mean it's time to think about changing agents. You want to know that they're committed to selling your work, not to a specific strategy or approach.

You're just unhappy

Authors often get trapped in a subservient mind frame where they feel lucky to have an agent. As a result they're unwilling to "rock the boat" or complain when they're unhappy. But a sense of frustration and dissatisfaction with your representation is definitely a warning sign. At a minimum it should prompt you to think critically about how things are going, and maybe set up a call or meeting to discuss the relationship. Sometimes all it takes is a little further communication to dispel any bad blood or mistrustful feelings that may be brewing.

Client mill

Be wary of any agent you see who is signing a lot of clients all at once. There is simply no way they are able to give all of the upfront attention necessary to sending out that many clients' books all at once. Which may mean that their plan is to throw spaghetti at the wall in a

scattered fashion and see what sticks. And that is not the proper way to be an agent. Your book simply won't get the shot at publication that it deserves.

In summary, an agent can definitely help you achieve your author goals, but only if you have a good business relationship with them based on communication, trust, and respect.