



So You Think You Want a Rep...

Your business is stagnant, and you're tired of making cold calls and working on your target list and chasing slow payers, and then there's all that estimating and schmoozing and legalese contract stuff, and what about marketing...darn it, you just want to shoot and get paid for it. Get a rep!

That's the ticket! "My rep will take care of all that stuff, and I'll be free to shoot and get paid!"

Nice dream, but unfortunately, the rep/photographer (or any creative talent) relationship just doesn't work like that. It, like most things, isn't quite that simple.

Each and every rep out there does a variety of things for his/her talent. Every rep builds relationships with (potential) clients, but beyond that, it can vary dramatically. Some reps only do that, arranging meetings, schmoozing, building lists (which, by the way, are the property of the rep, not the photographer, in most cases), others develop complete marketing plans, develop advertising strategies, and participate in designing mailers and ads. Some do the estimating and invoicing, others just tell their talent that the fees should be \$X for a specific project and leave the shooter to do the rest. Some work as producers (casting, arranging crew, etc.) while others expect their talent to handle the details. In addition, some expect to receive as much as 30% of the fees for their services, though between 20-25% is more usual, and that's not always directly related to what they do for you—that is, a rep who does "everything" might only want 25% while one who only builds relationships and suggests fees might expect 30%. Each rep has his/her own way of doing business.

Also, some reps will only handle one or two talents, while other rep firms may have a whole bevy of talent, including some who share your speciality and/or general style.

So what does that mean for you, the creative? It means you had better know what you want before you go looking for a rep. If you just "want more business" then you should re-evaluate your needs to be more specific—you might be able to do that yourself once you determine your real goals (maybe you just need to be a bit more organized). If you want someone to take care of all the "business crap" like labeling postcards and filing film, then hire a marketing assistant or a studio manager. But, if you want someone to work with you to build your client base, provide expert advice on a variety of business-related subjects (contracts, usage, fee structures, marketing, and the like), to help define your best market, and to get your book to the right people, then maybe you should seek out a rep.

Getting a rep is not unlike trying to get a new client. You will have to convince the rep that you are worth his/her effort. Talent isn't the only thing (though it is obviously important); you have to convince him/her that you know how to do your job—both creatively and business-wise.

"But," you're thinking, "that's why I want a rep—to do that business kind of stuff!" Yes, but no rep is going to touch you if you don't show some sign of at least understanding the business side of your business. You're still going to have to work, to hold up your end of the bargain, and if you don't have a clue what that involves they're not going to be interested. No rep is going to want to handle a talent who doesn't understand the importance of deadlines, how to work with

a client, and at least the basics of marketing. Basically, a rep (usually) wants to work with an established talent—one who has a decent track record. A rep's reputation is as fragile as your own—if you drop the ball on a project, you make him/her look bad and threaten the relationship between that client (at least—pray they don't talk to others in the business) and the rep and all of his/her talent. A rep wants to protect against that ever happening.

So, before you start looking for a rep, look at what you are doing now and make a list of what works and where you think you need help. Then, make a separate list of your goals. Lastly, make a list of what you expect out of a rep. These lists will give you a good idea of your needs and will help in the actual rep search.

The rep/creative relationship is very much like a marriage: it had better be based on trust and good communication or it will fail. It is, in its own way, an intimate relationship. You wouldn't marry someone you had only known for 2 days—you shouldn't get involved with a rep without taking the time to get to know him/her. It needs to be a match.

When you start looking for a rep, you can check out professional organizations like SPAR (but many reps who do not live in NYC are not members), AIGA, GAG, ASMP, APA, even EP. There are also business consultants like Suzanne Sease and, well, me, who can suggest people. Art buyers are another good source—they work with reps regularly and can tell you whom they like (and, maybe more importantly, whom they don't).

Once you have a list of potential reps, contact them. I suggest email or sending a promo piece with a personal note expressing an interest having this person rep you. You can try to call them, but reps tend to be a busy lot and returning your call will not generally be a priority. You want to impress a rep in the same way you would want to impress a potential client.

And, most importantly, don't be discouraged if you don't get an immediate response. Reps, if they're any good, are busy people—so you must be persistent but understanding. You will not get a rep in a week or two; it could take months or even years, depending on where you are in your career and where they are in theirs.

Once you have someone who is interested in repping you, you need to get to know that person. Do you have similar goals? Attitudes? Are you comfortable talking with her/him? Do some more research on the potential rep—how is her/his reputation? And importantly, do you like the way s/he looks and acts? That last question isn't as shallow as it seems. Your rep will often be your “face” for clients. If you don't think s/he presents her/himself in a manner you're comfortable with, then find someone else. A good rep is a great thing and a bad one can kill you, business-wise. Art buyers have said that they won't work with someone, even though his/her work was perfect for a project, because the rep was too unpleasant to deal with. Sad, but true.

So, you've found someone you're comfortable with, now you need to negotiate what your roles will be. You need to have a complete understanding of what you will need to do and your rep will have to know specifically what is expected of him/her. Who will take care of promotions/marketing? And who will pay for what? How many portfolios will your rep need? What are the financial goals? Who will decide on advertising in sourcebooks and make all the arrange-

ments? Who will do the estimating? Billing? Collections? Producing? And what about the reps fees—what percentage will s/he get for house accounts? Non-house? And, what about if one of you decides to leave the relationship—who is obligated to pay what and for how long? All of these questions (and others) need to be answered before the relationship starts.

Most importantly, the entire relationship (all of these questions) should be defined in writing—in a contract. This protects both you and your rep. Just like a marriage, you both are going into the relationship with the best of intentions but things can happen which might sour it. The contract will keep things tidy if there are any bumps along the road or if, heaven forbid, you need to end the relationship.

One side note about reps: many creatives think that their spouse would be the perfect rep for them. While there are exceptions, this is generally not a good idea. The spouse relationship has its own pressures and issues and, when combined with the business relationship, it is extremely hard to keep things separate. For example, it can take many months for a rep to do anything financially positive for a talent. If the rep is intimately aware of the home mortgage and child care payments and the like, s/he cannot effectively focus on what needs to be done for the long-term good of the talent and will often settle for less, just to get “something” now. In addition, if you have issues with your rep, and s/he is your spouse, it is extremely hard to address those issues without affecting your personal relationship. Besides, if your spouse is not a professional rep, s/he will probably not negotiate the kinds of fees a “real” rep would. So, in the end, you are not saving money but rather losing it.

Your relationship with your rep is extremely important. Take the time to do your research, know what you want and need, and to find your match. Then have patience while they do their job and build relationships for you. In the end, if you’ve taken the time and done your part as well, it can be one of the best relationships you’ve ever had.

