

It's not my job to sell your book
Terry Burns, Hartline Literary Agency

What? I thought that WAS the agent's job.

It can be, but I tell my group that I believe it is OUR job to sell their book, not just mine. I tell them it is a team effort. The clients that I have that are more successful are participating in the process.

The proposal

It begins before they are ever clients. They place a proposal in my hands that I can see using to sell the project. I can never write a proposal to represent a project as good as the author can write because I can't possibly know it as well as they do. We can do things with it once we have it to improve it and make it stronger, but it can seldom be stronger than the base proposal we have to work with.

When I am evaluating a new proposal to see if it is a fit for me, to see if there is a clear market and a pathway to that market that I have to work with, successful submitters include market information that helps me see the fit and the connection. They give me some comparables that show me their reader base by showing me books of other people that are selling to the same readers. Not that the other books are even necessarily similar to theirs but that are likely to be read by the same readers. In short, they show me that I will have what I need in my hands to make the sale.

This type of proposal also helps an editor see the potential for the project by answering many of the questions they will have to see if the fit is there for them. A good professional proposal is the building block or foundation that the submission process sits on.

Support and nurturing

Once I do accept a client I put them in an online support group that is only open to my clients and those who work with me. It is a friendly, nurturing body. There are two levels of participation, very active, praying for one another and sharing information and support, or simply being in the part of the group that gets the regular updates, announcements of contracts and releases of books by clients, allowing them to know what everyone in the client group is doing and what the marketplace is doing. So they continue to be part of the team effort through support and encouragement of one another.

Gathering intel

Clients play a role in the information process. They go to conferences that I may or may not attend, and they are proactive pitching their book. The goal for them is to make a personal contact and get a submission invited that I can follow up on. Sure, I'm doing the same thing, but the more contacts that are made the better the odds. Once they make this contact I make the submission and take it from there, but the editor involved has already met the author, and that is a big step forward.

They serve as information gatherers. The marketplace, and publishing in general, change rapidly and information is solid gold. They gather and report back on any information they run across whether it seems to affect them or not. If it doesn't affect them it may affect someone else in the group and that client may find out something to reciprocate with.

Read in their genre

They read. There's no way I can read a lot of books in all of the different categories that my clients write in so I encourage them to read in the genre they are writing in. They will find out things that way such as how the books are doing, who is publishing them and maybe even who the editor was. That's valuable information for targeting places for submissions, places that represent genuine publishing opportunities and not just a house that might or might not be interested.

And reading should not just be for fun, but I encourage them to analyze those books, trying to see what works. How does the successful write handle dialogue, description, develop characters?

Make sure the project is as good as it can be

Targeting submissions and tracking markets and publishing opportunities is a major portion of what I do, but the more help I get in the process the better the chances for the person being proactive. I have several assistants that work on this as well, helping work incoming submissions to give me more time to get things out, helping evaluate projects and see that they are really ready to submit. I concentrate more on the story and content and they help me know if the writing is there, if it is ready to go. Clients that are active in critique groups and other ways of making sure their writing is as clean and professional as possible help their cause as well.

Help each other with marketing and promotion

I mentioned my clients support one another. This is particularly the case after one publishes. They all talk about it on the social networks helping create a buzz. They interview each other on blogs and share marketing tips. Not that the number of sales represented just within the group is significant but they do tend to buy and read each other's books.

Continue to write

They continue to write. They don't just put a project in my hands and sit around obsessing over it, worrying over the length of time it takes to hear back on submissions. They continue to be aware of possible avenues we could pursue with it, but they get on with their next project. I encourage them to keep an idea file so they always have something new to work on.

Books tend to be seasonal. It is not uncommon after spending all the time to get one written that the demand is just not there. Maybe it has been overdone and people who were looking for just that type of book now not so much. Often people's first books are not the first ones to make it into print. Career writers see books get set back until they come back in season again. Successful writers always have more in the pipeline.

Publishing is like a house

I tell people in pitch sessions that if the publishing industry is like a house, maybe I am only working in one room. I know the editors, the genres and the markets in that room. You could have a wonderful book, and if it goes over in another room, I don't know the people or the market there. That is the most common reason that I turn down representing projects, I'm just not the right guy for it. It doesn't fit in my room. It's also the primary reason that a project fails to connect with an editor at a house, it doesn't fit their room either.

It is also the reason a client and I might part company, if I have used all of the contacts in my room without success. Maybe we have found it doesn't fit in my room after all and they need to get with one of the agents in another room. Conversely there may be someone over in another room that really belongs here. It's all about fit.

Build platform

Clients can also help by building their platform. In non-fiction platform is probably as important if not MORE important than the content itself. It is more and more important in fiction as well. Publishers know what they are going to do to market the book, but they want to know how proactive the author is going to be in the process and what connections they have to groups of people who might be potential buyers.

An author who waits until they have a book to promote to start building a website, start a speaking schedule, doing social networking, and other avenues of building visibility and buzz is way behind the curve. A book can run its season in a matter of months without such visibility and buzz to propel it forward. In other words, it could be through before the author is making any progress getting their platform established. That's why the existence of that visibility NOW is so important to an editor in making an acquisition decision and it should be well demonstrated on the project proposal.

Moral support

This is no small item, and it seems to mean more when it is client to client instead of just me reassuring a writer. We do have to keep in mind what's happening in the marketplace as we wait anxiously. It isn't about the quality of the writing, it is about the fit to the market. I like to use the illustration of the skit they used to do at the end of the old comedy show Laugh In where writers kept popping out of windows delivering lines, then another window would open and it'd be something else. That's the publishing industry. The trick is to get the manuscript in the right window at the exact time it is open. At any point in time maybe it only fits one place. It's a miracle we ever make that connection, much less as often as we do.

Even with my careful targeting and only pitching houses that I'm sure are a valid possibility it usually takes a dozen or two dozen tries before I make that critical link, on my own writing or on those I am submitting for clients. We are able to do them more than one at a time, but editors and agents have a tacit understanding that we won't have more than three or four out on a given project at a time so making the right connections does take time.

How about the non-proactive client?

I'm still doing everything I can to sell their project, but without the team effort they don't have as much going for them. Plus, if I am sitting around running through my publishing databases trying to find submission opportunities and a lead comes in where someone else has had a meeting or a contact with an editor and managed to get a submission invited, guess which one I do first? That's a no-brainer. That personal contact has to be followed up on while it is still fresh in the editor's mind.

All of the things that I have mentioned above that proactive authors do to advance their cause are missing with the client that just sits and waits for me to do it all for them. It'll get done, but not as quickly as it gets done for those who are heavily involved.