

## **Rita Rosenkranz**

Rita Rosenkranz founded Rita Rosenkranz Literary Agency in 1990 after a career as an editor with major New York houses. Her non-fiction list includes health, history, parenting, music, how-to, popular science, business, biography, sports, popular reference, cooking, spirituality and general interest titles. Rita works with major publishing houses, as well as regional publishers that handle niche markets. She looks for projects that present familiar subjects freshly or lesser-known subjects presented commercially.

### **1. What does an agent do? Why do authors need an agent?**

Optimally, an agent is the author's primary advocate. The agent helps shape the proposal (so that it is clear how the proposed work is different from and better than the competition) or work of fiction, finds a publisher, negotiates the contract, sells subsidiary rights to the work, intervenes when there is a controversy, whether it be over an editorial question or the publisher's promotion plans, weighs in with an opinion (e.g., the book cover), monitors the publishing process and steers the author's career, book by book. Many authors don't know how to manage all these concerns on their own; when a representative is there to intervene, the talent can concentrate on the creative process.

### **2. Most authors have designs on being published by a large publisher with a 50,000 print run. Why do agents submit to a smaller publisher who does smaller print runs?**

Most large houses require a minimum first printing for the publication to meet their overhead requirements. To simply keep it in the catalog and store inventory is costly, and the book has to have a large enough anticipated audience to be worth a big publisher's investment of time.

Smaller or regional presses can be a better match than the larger houses for certain niche projects where the initial printing will be modest even though, ultimately, the evergreen<sup>1</sup> market results in regular reprints and respectable overall sales. I have many examples of books that started out with a 5,000 first printing but over time proved their sturdiness by continuing to sell from year to year. Some of these books require updates, but if the publisher keeps tabs on the book's content and the market, the author will revise the work from time to time.

I stay up-to-date on many smaller publishers' lists and have a sense of their regional or niche interests. Sometimes when I have not been able to place a book with a large house I will look to a smaller publisher. For some books where I understand the market is small but renewable—again it might be a regional book—I might still take the work on because the subject interests me or I simply believe the work will prove itself over time.

### **3. Do agents submit to publishers who accept unagented work? If so, then can't the author do this for themselves just as easily?**

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<sup>1</sup> A book that sells year after year and remains in print

I believe some of the smaller houses I submit to work with unagented authors. At times I am brought in to negotiate a contract after the author has found a publisher on his own. I've sold a number of projects to university presses, which also work directly with authors. I would like to think I get a better overall contract thanks to my detailed negotiation. This is not to say authors can't negotiate hard on their own, but, generally, it is easier for an agent to step in as an advocate for the author. Publishers understand that this is the agent's role.

4. **Nearly every author wonders if they are “big New York publisher” material. Do agents immediately know where a manuscript fits in the publishing food chain?**

I have a game plan in mind from the outset—an immediate sense of the prospects for a work—whether that means major publishers or smaller houses. For most projects I hope for a big house but have backup smaller houses in mind, too. This game plan is one part science and one part art. My instincts are honed by my experience with previous projects, my conversations with colleagues—agents and editors—my keeping tabs on recent publicized deals and the market.

5. **What should authors look for in an agent?**

I advise authors to “know thyself,” because there is a spectrum of agents with different personalities, strengths, level of experience, connections to the film world, etc. Depending on the author's publishing history and/or ambitions, she might benefit more from a well-established agent, whereas another author will connect better with a hungry, new agent. Do you want a New York-based agent? Some—but not all authors—do. Some authors prefer to have an agent close to where they are based. Will the author be working with the agent or mostly with an assistant or intern? What are the agency's commission and agency charges (and is there a cap on charges)? I advise authors to review the questions listed on the Association of Authors' Representatives' (AAR) Web site to help determine the best fit.

6. **“My agent charged me reading, mailing, and processing fees. I'm \$500 in the tank, and I still haven't seen a publishing contract. Is this normal?”**

The AAR prohibits reading fees but does allow for mailing, messengering, and copying reimbursement. (Some agents will send manuscripts electronically—and many editors prefer this approach because it reduces or eliminates any copying charges. Generally the author is responsible for copying when hard copies are generated.) Any allowable charges and how reimbursement is handled should be clear in the agency agreement. Agents approach reimbursement differently. Some will send an invoice on a regular basis, even before the publishing deal is made. Others might wait to be reimbursed from the book's advance or from royalties.

7. **How long should authors stay with an agent?**

Under the best circumstances, the agent/author relationship builds book by book and the author feels well served at each stage. But if the agent doesn't handle an author's new genre or if the agent doesn't want to move forward with that project but the author is intent on publishing that work, then the issue might be forced, and it might be time to move on. So much depends on good chemistry, faith, perhaps the history of the author and agent. Usually it is good to have a conversation to understand the agent's intentions—especially if the

agent and author have worked together for a long time and the author has had success with the agent. If the agent is losing steam on a project after many months (or years), the author likely will know this and it's appropriate for the author to come to terms with the next step. It might be appropriate to move on if there is a personality conflict, regardless of the reason.

**8. “How many publishers will my agent query before they give up on me?”**

Before signing an author, I make it clear how many prospective publishers there are for the project. This is a case-by-case situation depending on the obvious (and not so obvious) candidates for a work, the author's financial requirements, and the overall durability of the relationship—in part determined by both the author's and agent's stamina and patience. I have had several successes where I have told an author that I have only one publisher in mind and asked, “Are you game?” and hit the target with that one submission. My watermark is 42 submissions after three years. I attribute this to the author's faith in me, my sustained interest in the project and the fact that the author ultimately did not mind having a small publisher for her project. There are many inspiring stories about the long road to publication but that often requires the strength of will to stay the course once it's clear gratification won't be instant.

**9. Do authors need to provide a promotion plan? Will it help convince an agent to accept their work if they do?**

In the case of non-fiction proposals, I do like to see a promotion plan to understand the author's marketing strengths. Publishers will want to know this too. A promotional plan often will note the part the author's Web site, e-mail list, speaking circuit, promotional outreach—perhaps tried-and-true for previous books—and connections to media will play in the promotion of their book. Perhaps the book's publication can be tied to an anniversary or holiday.

**10. Do agents sell foreign rights as well, or is that a separate agent?**

This is different from agency to agency. Some have in-house staff, some use co-agents abroad, some use domestically based co-agents who sell foreign rights. They will either sell directly to a foreign publisher or use a co-agent to sell to that territory. Foreign rights agents have an understanding of the international appeal for a work, keeping in mind which categories are popular abroad at that time. Foreign rights agents might sell on the basis of a proposal or more likely wait for galleys or even a finished book before they make the deal. Sometimes an agent will sell rights abroad first to prove international interest that can lead to a U.S. deal.

**11. What does it mean when a manuscript is taken to auction?**

When an agent thinks the project will command interest from multiple publishers, she can raise the bar by putting a project up for auction. The agent will set rules for the auction (what rights are being offered, when the agent needs to hear back from the editor, whether there are “topping” privileges, etc.). It is important to note that most projects are not auctioned.

**12. Do all agents have personal relationships with editors? Is that how they sell manuscripts?**

An agent depends on her relationships with editors and the access that provides. When you've had success with an editor, it's easy to build on that relationship with new projects. That said, I'll sometimes reach out to new editors by e-mail or phone if I'm handling a new category or need to go beyond my set checklist of editors. I'll hope that my years in the industry and the strength of the material help streamline that connection. Perhaps I'll name a title I represent in a category they handle or I'll name a colleague who has done business with them, hoping to secure an instant connection.

**13. "My agent has submitted my manuscript to everyone with no bites. I've decided to go with a Print on Demand publisher. Will she help with contract negotiations? If not, why?"**

I suspect many agents would not be in favor of a print on demand publication and would not be interested in reviewing the contract. There is no advance from which to get a commission so there would have to be a different arrangement for payment to the agent. Generally, POD publications do not help a career. If a POD book does not do well because the author has not promoted it successfully, the book isn't likely to interest a new publisher. Simply having the work in book form does not make it more attractive to a mainstream publisher.

**14. "What kind of an advance can I expect? After all, that's why I got an agent."**

A book's advance is determined by size of market, author's track record and ability to promote the work, how popular the category is at that moment, if there is more than one interested publisher, as well as other considerations. Typically a publisher's profit and loss statement, and the advance offered, will be influenced by the estimated first printing (which is subject to change at the time the book goes to press), the estimated retail price (also subject to change), the estimated page count, whether there are illustrations, etc. While agents can make ballpark guesses, we are not the ones making the offer and there is no way to know what the advance will be until the process plays out.

**15. "My agent told me I needed to edit my manuscript. Won't my publisher do this?"**

As much as the editor will edit the work, in order to increase the odds to generate an editor's interest it is best to submit the cleanest proposal or manuscript possible. This process can change from agent to agent. Some offer general editorial advice. Some will edit the work. Others will recommend outside editors who will work with the author closely and be paid by the author. The agent's hands-on involvement might be determined by the amount of editing the work needs.

**16. Do agents help promote the book once it's published?**

This differs from agency to agency. Some authors hire outside publicists. Some agents use their contacts to complement a publisher's and author's efforts. Some agencies now have in-house publicists.

**17. What are your biggest frustrations when working with a client?**

It's easiest for me to do my best work when an author is dependable, respectful of deadlines, proactive in terms of generating publicity for themselves and promotion of their books, thanks to their speaking circuit, podcasts, etc. The more I am preoccupied about these points the less time I will have for higher level efforts, for instance, discussing the author's next book project. Also, too often I am making excuses for delays in the publishing process—for instance in getting contracts or payment of advances to the author—and it can be frustrating to spend so much time on what should be automatic.

**18. What steps should authors take to insure their work will be reviewed?**

I have found that well-crafted proposals— that make clear the book's intentions, how the book is different from and better than the competition, how well the author is paired to the subject, and the author's ability to promote their work—often generate quick interest from multiple agents. Agents read their mail, are always scouting for new and interesting talent. I advise authors to send out their best work—work they are proud of and that they feel expertly expresses their point of view. I find that sometimes authors work very hard on their work and simply get tired and decide to send out the proposal even when, in their heart, they are not sure about its strength. They might contact me shortly after the first submission and ask to submit an improved version. This tells me that the author is still honing and sent out the project prematurely. I don't want to stigmatize a submission for this reason, but it does seem wasteful.

**19. What changes have you seen in the industry, and do those changes affect how you submit your client's work?**

Almost all categories are crowded and it has become increasingly difficult to make a work stand out. I can get more easily excited about a project when I know the author is impassioned about his work, has great insight into a subject, perhaps has spent many years researching the subject and has unearthed new and fascinating material on it, and proves in the sample chapters a strong ability to harness the information to make it readable and useful for an audience that is identifiable (where there is an understanding of the demographic of the readership and the popularity of the category thanks to comparative titles).

Most proposals are interchangeable; they don't have a distinctive, fresh point of view or an author who can carry the project past the clutter in the marketplace. Occasionally, I am disappointed when I see a great idea, but I don't believe I can sell it with that author. The author doesn't have a good enough resume, and I expect publishers to reject the work for that reason. As a result, the promotional strengths an author brings to a work can both help launch a work and help that work endure. While I am drawn first to the project's concept and content, I have a special appreciation for authors who intuitively understand the promotional needs of the industry and who capture that in their proposal. I enjoy it when an author captures my attention with a subject I hadn't realized interested me. They are opening a new world to me with their work, and that makes my own work worthwhile.

**20. Do you show your clients the final proposal before you begin submitting it out?**

I feel obligated to not only show the author the last draft of the proposal before it goes out (they might see something in need of tuning that I missed) but also the cover letter in case there's inaccurate info, or perhaps new info to add.