

Agent Research: More is Better

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I recently received an email from an acquaintance I met at a writing conference. “I just queried my book and sent it out to 100 agents yesterday,” he wrote.

I was stunned. When I first started querying seriously (three books ago), I found that I spent an average of half an hour on each query. It’s true that for snail-mail queries (which are going the way of the dinosaur as more and more agents switch to all-electronic querying) some of that time is spent loading the paper tray and sticking labels on SASE’s, but the majority of the time is spent on research.

This meant that either 1) my acquaintance has found a way to fit fifty hours into a single day or 2) he isn’t doing nearly as much research as he should.

I hope it’s the former. As someone who has from time to time been guilty of the latter, I can practically guarantee that an unresearched query will net you a rejection (or a deafening silence).

What should your research uncover? Besides the basics like submission guidelines and whether the agent considers unsolicited queries, you must determine whether she handles your genre. Recent deal data and client names are also helpful in determining whether she’d be a good match.

I’ve written before about online agent sites like QueryTracker and LitMatch, both of which I consider essential to researching agents.

Here are a few more resources you might consider.

Conferences

Check the websites for conferences in your genre, and take note of the agents in attendance. Review last year's list while you're at it. While it is not necessarily true that all of these agents are actively acquiring, it is frequently the case that junior agents who are building their lists attend conferences. Also, members of new agencies will frequently speak at conferences as a way to spread the word.

Looking over the ThrillerFest '08 web site, I noticed quite a few agents who had previously escaped my notice.

Publisher's Marketplace

It's twenty bucks a month, but this service is a gold mine, because it allows you to search deals based on an author's name, an agent's name, or an agency.

Every querying author should compose a list of comparative and competitive titles before beginning her agent search. "My book is unique" is not an acceptable answer – as my mentor told me, "Unless you have done the impossible, which is to write a truly original novel," you should be able to find a handful of titles.

Now find out who represented these books, and you'll have the foundation of your agent search – and, possibly, an attention-grabbing comparison you can use in your query letter.

Agency Web Site

I almost never sent a query before reviewing the agency web site. There are clues to agents' tastes, lists, and dislikes here that are not available elsewhere.

For instance, QueryTracker might offer up three agents in a large agency who all represent your genre. How do you choose which to query? Read their bios with great

care. I unsuccessfully queried an agent several times on different projects before noticing that her colleague at the same agency confessed a taste for “dark humor” in her bio. Sending her a query netted me a request for pages.

Agent Blogs

Read as many as you can – even if the agent does not represent your genre. I have found that agents like to talk amongst themselves, and frequently link to each others’ sites, as well as pass along news and acquisition information.

Back to my acquaintance: the last line of his email has me even more concerned.

“Between now and getting any bites, I need to work on my final edit,” he wrote. “I didn’t realize it needed to be close to perfect before it’s sent in.”

Luckily none of us savvy gals would ever make that mistake! Polishing, when it comes to manuscripts, is job one – and even the best-researched query will fall flat if you launch it before its time.