

Top Ten Pieces of Advice for a Good Agent-Author Relationship

By: Paige Wheeler

I was originally supposed to write about that elusive subject – “voice” – and how writers can find it. It’s a good and important topic, to be sure. However, I received something in today’s mail that made me change the direction of my blog posting. Today, I received an invitation to the graduation of one of my author’s daughters. This author has been with me for eleven years when her daughter was only seven years old. It’s amazing how time flies. It’s even more amazing the relationship that I’ve developed not only with my author, but with her family as well. We have shared personal ups and downs over the years, I’ve watched her family grow, and I’ve guided her career as well.

It’s the same for the majority of my clients. They start off as clients but they become friends. It’s important to nurture this relationship from both sides, because it IS going to be a long-term relationship. Once the agent sells the book, you’re working with that agent for the life of the book contract. Even if the two of you part ways, royalties still have to be paid out, correspondence exchanged, and foreign rights have to be sold. It behooves BOTH sides to follow some simple guidelines to ensure good communication between agent and author. I’m going to outline some of them below.

1. Make sure both of you agree on how you like to communicate. If it’s by email, confirm that you have the correct email address (many people have multiple addresses). If you change your email address, make sure this is communicated as well. Also, keep your agent updated on all of your points of contact. That means your phone number, email address and mailing address. This is even true once you part ways. Your agent must continue to send you royalty statements, 1099s, and other important information for the life of the book contract.
2. You may want to casually inquire how frequently you should expect to be in contact. You can expect to be in fairly close contact when your agent is giving feedback on revisions, shopping your material around and negotiating the deal. Once she has sold your book and the contract has been signed, she may leave you alone to actually write the darn thing.

3. Both the author and the agent should be attuned to how the other likes to communicate, whether it is informal and chatty, or strictly down to business. This will probably vary depending on the demands of both parties, but pay attention to cues in how communication is exchanged and respond accordingly.
4. How long is too long to wait to hear back from your agent? Or better yet, when should you start to panic? This will vary from agent to agent. But before you panic, realize that emails go astray, computers crash, people get sick, messages get erased, and calls made from a cell phone may be too distorted to comprehend. If you haven't heard back, try again, and then try a third time. After the third time, then you may want to get concerned about the lack of response.
5. If you're going on vacation, let people know. This is true for both sides. For authors, leave contact information so that your agent can reach you. Agents who are leaving on an extended trip usually inform their clients and indicate a person to contact in case of an emergency.
6. Show appreciation for each other. Remember each other at the holidays, and, if possible, birthdays (although I'm horrible at remembering birthdays).
7. Realize that you're not going to agree on everything all the time. Your agent probably won't love everything you write. If she's good, she'll let you know it's not your best work. That's her job.
8. Make sure you both understand your goals. Do you want to write a book per year? Make a bestseller list? Reach a certain print run? Move to another publishing house?
9. If things aren't going well, don't dwell on it by discussing it only with your writing buddies but not your agent. If there is a problem, it should be addressed directly. This is true for both sides. If the agent has issues, she should bring them up as well.
10. Realize that this is a small industry and gossip travels quickly. Above all, practice courtesy and be professional. Treat your agent the way you'd like to be treated and she should do the same.

Bottom line: Keep the lines of communication open, don't hesitate to bring up any concerns, and make sure you both have a clear understanding of your goals and responsibilities.