

How to land an agent...and avoid the dodgy ones

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Know how to find an agent who will help who will help your career without fleecing you.



We have all seen the Current Affair programs on dodgy agents, ripping off unsuspecting dreamers with stars in their eyes.

Having spent 13 years at the helm of Melbourne Agency VisionsMCP, I'm always being asked how to find the right agent and avoid the dodgy ones. Here are my answers to the most common questions.

[How do you find a reputable agent if you are new to the industry?](#)

The best place to start is with the actors' union, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance ([MEAA](http://www.alliance.org.au/)) . This site is a hub of everything you need to know and in the Equity section, which is specifically for everything to do with performers - from actors to extras, stuntmen and everything in between; there are [Agent Lists](http://www.alliance.org.au/agents-lists) relating to Agencies in each state. The MEAA site also provides award summaries so you know exactly what conditions and wages you should expect.

Another good way is to join an acting class and speak to the teachers to see who they recommend for your skill level.

Should agents charge fees to join?

A reputable agency will probably charge a fee. Being an actor is an expensive career choice. A carpenter can't work without his tools and neither can an actor or an extra. So if you are hesitant about paying an upfront fee, ask for a breakdown. The fee should be solely focused on setting you up in the industry. The breakdown may look something like this;

- Agency Website fee - most websites are third party maintained and that costs money.
- Industry casting sites - for example Showcast / Casting Networks / AT2
- Professional Photographs (although you should be given the option of getting these yourself)
- Showreel for Actors (extras and background artists do not require this)

Photos done by your friend on your iPhone are NOT professional photos. The agency you are applying for should be able to give you a list of photographers' names they have worked with. Most professional photographers will have various packages, ranging in price depending on your needs. Shop around.

What sort of work will I get? How much work will I get?

No agent can guarantee work. Joining an agency is like buying a lotto ticket. The agent can submit you, but there is no guarantee you are what the client is looking for. That decision is out of the agent's hands once they have submitted you: it is up to the casting director or client.

It is your agent's job to submit the actors/extras that fit the brief received. If you have brown hair and the casting brief says red, you won't be submitted.

Your agent should also make sure casting directors and clients know who you are by sending emails or messages with the updated information.

How do agents make money?

Agents take commission from your wages. These commissions range from 10-20% depending on agency. The commission should be stipulated on your contract when joining.

Unless you sign over power of attorney to the agent (which I wouldn't recommend), an agent cannot sign anything on your behalf. All contracts, tax file declarations and so on need to be signed by you.

Agencies invoice your work on your behalf, and then pass on your percentage of the money from the client - after the agency has been paid.

Commission is taken from the gross wage but the client also takes taxation from your wage so until you get the payment from the agency it is impossible to know exactly how much you will be paid net.

I have found payments take two to eight weeks. That is not in the control of the agent. The agent is never the employer; they are effectively just an employment agency dedicated to the entertainment industry.

Can I have more than one agent?

It depends.

If you are solely wanting to work as an actor /extra, use only one agent. There is not enough work in our small Australian industry for more than one agent to submit the same person. I have seen extras lose work for having more than one agent resulting in casting directors banning them.

There is a good reason for this stringency. Let's say one agent books you as a nurse in a hospital, then your other agent submits you two days later and you are now the hotel receptionist. If the two scenes are edited into the same episode, the casting director will phone both agents and complain that the extra ruined the scene. Notes are made and you may not be booked again.

If you want to work as both a model and an actor/extra, you may be able to join a separate modelling agency in addition to your acting agent. But always speak to your first agent before taking on a second, even in a separate field.

If I am signed with an agent can I source my own work?

Check with your agent for their policy on this.

I personally think sourcing your own additional unpaid work is a great way of gaining experience. Websites such as Star Now, Dare 2 Audition have low paid and unpaid work for experience. University film and theatre courses usually seek unpaid actors for their students to complete their film assignments.

How do I spot a dodgy agent?

- Do your research before joining any agency. Ask around. Go to online forums and ask questions.
- Look at the agency's history - make sure it hasn't just popped up recently
- At the interview, ask lots of questions. Find out what work they have gained for other clients.
- Do not hand over money unless you know exactly what it is for.
- Get everything writing

Lisa Edwards is the author of the new novel *Can't Fight Fate*.
(<http://www.vividpublishing.com.au/cantfightfate/>)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa N Edwards spent 13 years at the helm of Melbourne Agency VisionsMCP before selling up to pursue her own dreams. She is the author of the recently-released novel, *Can't Fight Fate*.