



THE INS AND OUTS OF PACKAGING

by

Michele Wallerstein

In the hopes of selling a screenplay many writers turn to packaging to enhance their project. They are told that bringing in an actor or director will make producers want to buy their material. What few people understand is that the only way to really package a film is to bring in what is known as “A list” talent. That means that if you attach a non-star actor or director you will be hurting a possible sale rather than helping it.

What makes it so difficult to package a project is that you rarely have direct access to the biggest stars. These people will only look at projects if there is an offer attached, as well as a major studio or financier and a great director.

Star actors will literally count their lines in a script. If there are not enough, they will pass on the script. They must also be in every scene. These are the rules. Without writing with these things in mind you will never get a major star for your movie.

The really tricky part of attaching actors or directors is to know who is really hot at any given moment. Except for those people who are insiders in the business, no one is privy to what is going on behind the scenes in the lives of these chaotic people. You might think that someone is a great person for the starring role in your movie, however what you probably won't know is that they may have a drug or alcohol problem, or that the studios can't get insurance on them because of some prior acts that have been kept quiet. You also won't know who has fallen out of favor, or gone cold at the box office, in the minds of the studio heads.

The big agencies are famous for the packaging departments and expertise. This work is only done if they represent the writer, star and director. If you are signed with CAA and you think that a William Morris agency client would be perfect then you will probably be sorely disappointed. The point of packaging is not only to get a project produced, but for the agency to make a ton of money. Once again we are reminded that this is show business not show fun.

It has been interesting to me to note that, particularly when it comes to thrillers, writers often think in terms of low-budget films. Having the assistance of a packaging agency transforms a small thriller into a big movie or even an “event” movie. I have found that the biggest disparity between a low and high budget thriller is often simply the casting that makes the difference. Why not think in terms of a high budget when you first enter the game with a new screenplay? If that doesn’t pan out you can always try the lower budget/independent market later.

The other entities that understand packaging are the good producers in Hollywood. These are the ones with great track records for producing films with great actors. You need to get to them and trust that they will be able to put all of the right elements together to get the picture financed and produced. It is, after all, what they live for. This is where your agent comes into play in the best way. They know these producers and can get your projects read by them.

Both actors and directors can fall out of favor in a New York minute. It’s best to let the pros do the job for you since you can’t possibly keep up with the many follies of those people you believe to be so hot in the market at any given time.

Producers look for good scripts from big agencies and small ones. They know that the next great writer may have been found by any agency. The smart ones keep their doors open to everyone, and most producers are very smart people.

Email: novelconsult@yahoo.com

Web site: www.Novelconsultant.com

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