

Anatomy of an

ACTING SCAM

For young actors, knowing what to avoid is the first step toward winning the battle against showbiz swindlers

BY CHRISTOPHER ZARA

If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Nowhere is this universal adage more applicable than in the world of show business, where scams devised to appeal to the hopes and dreams of aspiring actors exist around every corner. Most seasoned actors have conditioned themselves to gloss over casting scams. They know what to look for and they recognize the red flags: empty promises of instant stardom, amateur phrases like “no experience necessary,” and guarantees of work or representation. But for young people who are just starting out in show business, the difference between the legitimate and the bogus is not so obvious, and scammers know that aspiring performers make the easiest prey.

The best way to tell a legit opportunity from a scam is to educate yourself on the audition process. For an industry shrouded in mystery, the mechanics of casting are really quite simple. You book an audition, either through an agent or on your own. The person holding the audition, after seeing you, decides if you are right for the part. If you are, you may be asked back in for a callback, after which the casting directors, producers and director will make their final decision. If they like you best, you get the part. If they don't, better luck next time.

Notice that at no time during this process has anyone asked you to break out your parents' credit card. Agents earn a percentage of the income from the work they find for their clients, the standard rate being 10 percent. In other words, agents don't make a dime unless you do. There are no fees to join a talent agency, and agents in New York must acquire a license from the Department of Consumer Affairs before they can legally represent talent. Before they can be licensed, agents must first meet a stringent checklist of requirements, including an office space, a business certificate and state-approved representation contracts. New agents are even fingerprinted before

they are permitted to practice. If you want to verify the legitimacy of a particular agent, a quick reference check with the Association of Talent Agents (ATA) and the National Association of Talent Representatives (NATR) will reveal whether or not an agent is licensed.

Casting directors are kind of like the Human Resources Department of the entertainment world. Their job is to oversee the audition process, which is essentially a job interview. Just as you wouldn't expect someone interviewing you for a job to ask you for money during the interview, a legitimate casting director does not charge audition fees. In fact, it is against the law for them to do so. Educational facilities are the exception to this rule. It's not uncommon for schools, workshops and even college service organizations to charge application fees prior to an audition. However, if you come across a casting notice for a specific theater or film project in which the audition requires a fee, skip it. It's a rip-off waiting to happen.

Casting scams come in many varieties. Some have

been around since the advent of show business, while others have only surfaced more recently. The Internet has served as a breeding ground for all kinds of shady business practices, and casting scams are no different.

As is the case with any industry, scammers in the world of entertainment are always retooling their efforts to stay one step ahead of their targets, but the basic modus operandi for these shell games are often easy to recognize if you know what to look for.

In the guide below we break down five of the most common acting and audition scams in the industry. Although some jaded theater veterans may tell you that getting scammed is a show business rite of passage, there is no rule that says every young performer has to follow in that forlorn tradition. Knowing what to avoid will help you transition smoothly from amateur to professional as you look for opportunities.

Scam # 1 'No Experience Necessary'

We've all seen the ads: “Local actors and models wanted; No experience necessary; Looking for fresh faces; Seeking all types; etc.” This common bait-and-switch swindle has been around in some variation for decades. Years ago, it reared its ugly head in the classified sections of daily newspapers and alt-weeklies. Virtually every newspaper in the country at one time contained one of these homogenous calls for local actors and models, followed by a 1-800 number. Like all other classified ads, however, this scam has since migrated to the Internet, where self-policed websites such as Craigslist provide the perfect forum for phony ads to flourish.



How It Works

Phony agencies post casting calls designed to appeal to aspiring actors with little or no experience. The ads are purposely vague, with generic headlines such as “Actors and Models Wanted.” Rarely do the calls contain any specific information about the project being cast, although the more audacious ones sometimes try to lure you in with big-name actors (i.e. “Extras Wanted for Movie Starring Will Smith”). One thing these ads all have in common is that they are crafted to sell you a dream — namely, that your big break is awaiting you, and all you have to do is respond to the ad.

These bogus calls are usually very brief and accompanied by a phone number or website. But when you call for more information, you are not given details about the advertised opportunity. Instead, you are solicited by a high-pressure sales person trying to sell you something that will supposedly help your acting career. These services could be anything from a new set of headshots to a one-day intensive acting class to a subscription for a casting website. But in the end, selling these goods and services is how the swindlers make their money. They are not in the business of finding or providing jobs for anyone.

How to Avoid It

Never respond to a casting call in which the poster is not specific about the project. Often times, the posters of these types of ads try to pass themselves off as talent agencies looking for fresh faces, but legitimate agencies don't advertise. They don't have to. They're busy enough sifting through the countless cold submissions that they receive on a daily basis. If you do respond to a casting call and someone tries to sell you something, walk away. It's not a missed opportunity if there was never an opportunity awaiting you in the first place.

Scam # 2 The Audition Farm

The Internet is probably the first destination for aspiring actors in search of auditions, and the legitimate casting websites do list great opportunities. The downside of online casting notices, however, is the ease with which other websites can pilfer and repost information. Over the last several years, casting sites have sprouted up on every corner

of the Web. Every day, every hour, a new one comes along, and somehow they all seem to be the entertainment industry's “number one” resource, despite the fact that they've only been online for about 10 seconds. Many of these sites exist exclusively on the backs of genuine services, swiping notices wherever they can find them and offering no original information of their own.

How it Works

These websites troll the Internet for auditions, reposting headlines and character breakdowns as teasers, all with the goal of getting you to sign up for an overpriced casting website containing out-of-date information.

How to Avoid It

With so many casting websites out there, how can you identify the frauds? For starters, do your research. Bad news travels fast on the Internet, and a simple Google search will reveal if a website is the subject of numerous complaints by disappointed customers. If you start to Google a website's name and the word “scam” shows up in the suggestions drop-down box, consider it a red flag. Another method for gauging the legitimacy of a casting service is to find out how long it's been around. The few legit casting services predate the Internet by decades.

Scam # 3 The Mall Rat

Scammers have long known that the best way to prey upon aspiring young performers is to go where young people hang out. What better place than the American shopping mall? This is another scam that has been around for many years, and often the perpetrators target teenagers or parents of young children.

How it Works

You're cruising through the food court with a few of your friends, heading over to Subway for a five-dollar foot-long, when you are approached by someone who claims to be a talent scout. You're told that you have a great look, that you could be a model. The scout asks you if you've ever worked professionally. He says all the right things and you are flattered by the compliments. Then he gives you his card, and asks you to visit his



agency. The agency has a generic name, such as Star-One Productions or Top Talent, which makes you feel as if you've heard of it before. (Some of these so-called agencies, rather than approaching random strangers, will actually set up a booth to solicit passersby.) However, when you visit the agency, you soon discover its true motives.

Once you're in the office, the agent informs you that, while you have a lot of potential, you are not quite ready for primetime. Before the agency will accept you, you are told that you must first make an “investment” in your career, which usually amounts to expensive but useless acting or modeling classes. Maybe the agent tells you that you need better headshots, which he will be happy to provide courtesy of the agency's in-house photographer. Once again we see a glaring conflict of interest: With such revenue coming in from classes and headshots, these hybrid “full-service agencies” have no real incentive to find work for their clients.

How to Avoid It

Be suspicious of anyone who approaches you in public. Legit agents don't go trolling the shopping malls for new clients. While we've all heard stories of actors being discovered in public places, such stories in reality are extremely rare. Sure, lightning can strike anywhere, but how often does it strike when you're out for a sandwich? Again, the easiest way to avoid this scam is to do your research. If a supposed talent

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Scam Speak

One of the best ways to defeat scammers is to learn how to speak their language

What they say...

Our agency is very selective, and we've chosen you over a thousand other applicants.

What they mean...

We take anyone with a credit card.

What they say...

If you're serious about acting, you need to invest in your career.

What they mean...

Our in-house photographer will be happy to provide you with some overpriced amateur headshots as well as thousands of reproductions that you'll never use.

What they say...

Our agency represents some of the biggest names in the industry.

What they mean... We don't have a single client you've heard of.

What they say...

Our website is revolutionizing how the modeling and acting industries conduct business.

What they mean...

Our website just launched last week.

What they say...

I know this business. I'm an experienced professional with a huge list of film and TV credits.

What they mean...

My last acting role was Passenger #2 on *The Love Boat*.

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scout is interested in you, Google the name of the person and the agency. It won't take long to learn if either is legitimate. Moreover, never trust anyone (or any agency for that matter) who uses phrases like, "I can make you famous." A real agent would never make such a promise.

Scam # 4 Check, Please

This relatively new variation on the standard fake-check scheme targets actors and models with online profiles on websites such as Model Mayhem. Scammers send checks to talent for acting or modeling jobs that don't really exist. The checks look so real that then may even fool bank tellers. Some are phony cashier's checks, others look like they're from legitimate business accounts. The companies' names may appear to be real, but someone has forged the checks without their knowledge.

How it Works

You are contacted by someone claiming to be a potential employer, who states that he or she has viewed your profile and wants to hire you for an acting or modeling job. You are offered an advance payment of, say, 20 percent, which is equal to several hundred dollars. The representative says the payment will be mailed to you in the form of a company check or official money order. You are then told that the balance of your pay will be given to you, in cash, on the day of the job. Eager for payment, you gladly provide your home address and personal information to receive the advance check.

A few weeks later, the company check or official money order arrives at your home, and you quickly notice a discrepancy: The check is made out for several thousand dollars more than what you are supposed to be paid. You receive a follow-up email explaining that your generous employer, along with paying you in advance, also wants to spring for your new headshots, and the overpayment is meant to pay the photographer for your photo session. You are then told to deposit the check into your bank account. When it clears, you are to keep your portion as your advance payment and send the remaining money to a photographer via Western Union or MoneyGram. Like

most actors, you are so elated over the prospect of a paying job that you do exactly as you are instructed.

Several days later, however, you are surprised to be contacted by your bank, which informs you that the check or money order that you deposited was discovered to be worthless.

Moreover, the bank explains that you, as the account holder, are responsible for reimbursing the lost funds to the bank and not doing so could result in criminal charges.

How to Avoid It

Recognize the red flags. First, it is rare for an actor or model to be paid in advance, and a producer or rep who is eager to do so should be viewed with suspicion. Next, producers are not in the business of paying for headshots for actors and models; they're in the business of producing. Finally, never cash a check from someone you don't know, and never send money to strangers using Western Union, MoneyGram or any wire-transfer service.

Scam # 5 The Actor Guru

You might ask yourself: What exactly is a guru? Traditionally speaking, a guru is an expert teacher of religious doctrine who shows others the path to enlightenment through, say, Hinduism or Buddhism. In the secular world, though, the term guru has evolved to become a derogatory designation for false experts who claim to have all the answers but in reality know very little about anything. Gurus exist in virtually any competitive industry, but they are particularly abundant in entertainment, primarily because there is never a shortage of new actors trying to break in.

Actor gurus don't call themselves gurus, of course, but anyone who refers to himself or herself as a "master," "mentor" or "life coach" is almost certainly a guru in disguise. These smooth-talking charlatans tout themselves as seasoned professionals or masters, eager to pass on their experience to young performers, but more often than not they are simply failed actors who have entered the guru pool as a means to make a buck. At best, this is a person who appeared as an extra on *All My Children* back in 1977 and has been bragging ever since about how he or she worked with Susan Lucci.



Lou Pearlman, the infamous promoter behind the Backstreet Boys, was the center of a two-year investigation after more than 2,000 aspiring performers stated that his talent company was a scam.

While there's no one-size-fits-all guru profile, you can generally recognize gurus by their lack of credentials and glazed facial expressions. One thing actor gurus all have in common is their willingness to profit from an actor's unwavering desire to break into show business. Gurus make their money by claiming to have discovered "the secret" to breaking in, a secret they will gladly share with you — for a price.

How it Works

Gurus go where the pickings are easy. They set up shop and hawk their wares at festivals, actor expos, networking events, and other workshops designed to lure in young would-be actors. These folks offer up everything from books, DVDs and demo reels to career counseling sessions and workshops on such nebulous topics as "How to Get an Agent." They make outrageous claims, such as having a 90 percent success rate in finding representation, and they'll charge you whatever they think they can get away with.

Gurus set their prices by sizing you up. They ask personal questions, attempting to gauge how much you can afford, and they charge you accordingly. If they think they can get \$10,000 for a few coaching sessions in which they purport to give you career advice, then you can be sure that they will charge \$10,000. They will do everything short of holding actors by their ankles to see how much change falls out of their pockets.

Gurus are Jacks and Jills of all trades, offering anything and everything that they think actors will buy. The only thing they don't offer is results.

How to Avoid It

There are times when it's necessary to invest in your acting career, but it's just as important to adopt a "Buyer Beware" mindset. When you put down your money, always be clear about what it is you're getting in return. If it's an acting class, fine, but do your research beforehand and make sure the school is legitimate and respected, with university-level instructors. In the end, if you work with someone who has a bad reputation it will only hurt you. Many gurus are firmly recognized as such by agents and casting directors, who will immediately mark you as an amateur if they see a guru's name on your resume. Do your research on anyone you intend to work with.

Finally, be suspicious of any so-called mentor who also claims to be a working actor. Chances are, if that person really knew the secret to success in show business, he or she would be too busy acting to moonlight as a career coach. ■

Arnold Martin contributed to this story.

RESOURCES

Report scams at the agencies below:

Better Business Bureau

National: www.bbb.org

New York: www.upstateny.bbb.org

Consumer Protection Board

www.nysconsumer.gov

Association of Talent Agents/ National Association of Talent Representatives

www.agentassociation.com

Casting Society of America

www.castingsociety.com