

# DO YOU NEED AN AGENT? HOW DO YOU FIND ONE?

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**Presentation to the Las Vegas Writers Group by Tami Cowden  
Summary by Megan Edwards**

When embarking on a writing career, every scribe grapples with the question of agents.

Are they necessary? Do I really need one? And — perhaps most daunting — if I need one, how do I go about getting one? These are the questions author Tami Cowden discussed in her presentation to the Las Vegas Writers Group on Thursday, November 20, 2008.

Tami gave an overview of the whole agency picture. She explained that while nonfiction authors can often develop their careers without representation, writers of fiction more frequently need to work with an agent if they are seeking publication through major houses.

Of course, it's not as simple as that. Tami went on to explain that regional publishers like Stephens Press here in Las Vegas and Harlequin, which publishes genre romance, both accept un-agented submissions.

Even so, an agent can be an asset, especially if, as Tami put it, you're "lousy at submitting". What seems on the surface like it should be a cut-and-dried decision immediately becomes a true quandary for many an aspiring writer.

"But let's assume you decide you do want an agent", Tami went on. "How do you find one?" Referring to her handout that listed useful Internet resources, Tami mentioned in particular Publisher's Marketplace, a site that not only reports most literary sales in the country but also produces the e-newsletter *Publisher's Lunch*.

Tami also recommended Agent Query, a Web site that allows you to research agents by genre and subject matter. Her main point was that it's vital to find out about agents' interests and areas of expertise, and the Internet is by far the best tool for research.

Tami's next topic was that time-honored, traditional method of agent courting, the query letter. Again, she recommended research. "Some agents want a letter only, some want a synopsis, some want chapters,

and some don't want queries," she said. Their Web sites usually make their desires known, and it's wise to pay attention.

Next, Tami called upon members of the group who have agents, asking them to share their experiences and tips for success in seeking representation. Jay MacLarty shared his experience with sending out fifty query letters. "I got forty-nine rejections," he said, but the fiftieth response resulted in not only representation with a prestigious agency, but also a multi-book deal with Simon and Schuster.

Other group members shared experiences with referrals and queries. If one fact emerged, it was that there is no single well-beaten path to an agent's door. The only definite requirement is a marketable property.

Referrals are another excellent method of securing agency representation. As Tami explained, these can come through conferences, online communities, friends, and fellow authors. Networking is the key, and the referral must be a legitimate one. It's never a good idea to submit unrequested work.

Of course, Tami reiterated, the most important thing is to finish your manuscript. While nonfiction books can be sold by means of a proposal, that's rarely true with a novel. "Finish your book," she repeated. Sending queries or submissions before you're ready is the fastest route to the slush pile.

Tami went on to explain how conferences work and how valuable they can be in the agent-seeking process. Conferences can be expensive — she and her husband, fellow writer Steve Fey, just spent about \$2000 to attend the Tony Hillerman Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico — but such gatherings offer unparalleled opportunities to meet agents and editors in person.

Conferences are also great for learning how to "pitch", or present a quick overview of a project to a prospective agent or editor. As with queries, the best way to find out whether a conference is worth the investment of time or money is to do the necessary research. Will agents and editors who are interested in your genre be in attendance? If they are, you'll have a better chance to meet them in person. The Las Vegas Writers Conference presented each year by the Henderson Writers Group is a local option worth looking into.

Tami opened the discussion to members of the group, who shared their own experiences with "agent hunting". From query letters to chats in bars, it's clear that there are as many paths to representation as there

are writers, and we all benefit from sharing our experiences. Tami's tips, background information, and excellent list of Internet resources will be a big help to all LVWG members as they make their way along the circuitous path to publication.

**Tami Cowden** is a Las Vegas attorney and author of several books, both fiction and non-fiction. She also conducts workshops for writers. Find more at [www.TamiCowden.com](http://www.TamiCowden.com).

**Megan Edwards** is also a Las Vegas-based author. She is also the publisher of [www.LivingLasVegas.com](http://www.LivingLasVegas.com), a popular blog for "locals" living in Sin City. Find more at [www.MeganEdwards.com](http://www.MeganEdwards.com).

The **Las Vegas Writers Group** is a friendly group of local writers (some published, some not) who get together once a month to offer help, advice, and camaraderie. Our goal is simple: to help our members improve their craftsmanship, and achieve their publishing objective: [www.meetup.com/Las-Vegas-Writers](http://www.meetup.com/Las-Vegas-Writers).