

Is a Boutique Agency for You?

by Kate Epstein, Epstein Literary Agency
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Should your query list include boutique agencies?

If more than one agency (happy day!) wants to represent you, should you select a boutique agency over a larger one?

Conversely, if the only agent interested in representing you is from a boutique agency that's relatively new, should you go back to the drawing board/redo your queries entirely/burn your manuscript?

Answers: 1. yes, 2. possibly, and 3. probably not.

Boutique agencies are popping up all over the place—1-3 person operations offering representation to authors of every stripe. Some of us work out of our homes. We might review manuscripts in our pajamas, much as consumers read books. And we don't have the name recognition that William Morris brings to the table. But don't let that fool you. Boutique agents are among the strongest advocates for authors that you'll find, and you'd do well to have a good agent from a boutique on your side.

Boutique agencies should be on your query list.

Obviously including boutique agencies on your list increases the number of agencies that will look at your query. And this may increase your chances of finding the agent that recognizes the potential of your book. But what's as important as numbers is that boutique agencies have more flexibility when they select authors. This flexibility takes two forms.

The first type of flexibility has to do with risk. Agents at bigger houses have basically one category of books they take on: those books that will make them the most money—the good bets. Agents at boutiques have two: the good bets, and the long shots. I can't afford to take on a lot of long shots, but if I love something enough, I don't have a boss that will forbid me to take it on. Even if it seems a tough sell.

The second type of flexibility has to do with the kind of advance a project can command. Some boutique agencies (such as mine) take on projects unlikely to sell to major publishers and therefore unlikely to receive a large advance. Most larger agencies don't represent these projects; it's not in their business model.

For both author and agent, it takes longer to make money with an independent publisher. There are many worthy and reputable independents that offer good distribution and an open publishing program—innovative, ore adventurous, less demanding (especially in nonfiction) about author platform. A larger agency may even drop you if the major publishers all decline because of this difference; most boutique agencies won't.

It may be wise to select a boutique agency over a larger agency.

If you want to publish your book even if you can't get a large advance, and you have a choice between a larger agency and a boutique, you may wish to ask the boutique agent about independent publishers.

Even if you don't want an independent publisher, or the boutique agency doesn't sell books to them, the boutique may offer advantages. Boutique agents vary as much as writers, and in the brutal business of publishing, you want one that's compatible with you and that you admire. We offer up the entrepreneurial spirit. If you don't eat, we don't either. We offer the personal touch. We take your calls. Our cheerleading has less of the corporate veneer. We're more likely to stay involved long term and make sure you have the best shot at doing well on the backlist—and backlist sales are a big part of the business. And you never get lost in a sea of writers with a boutique agency.

Smallness shouldn't be a reason not to select an agency. It may seem obvious that a larger agency has better name recognition with editors than a boutique agency. No editor has to think about who Sterling Lord Literistic is. But name recognition, past an acquaintance with editors, avails little. Consumers don't care who represented a book, so publishers don't either. Editors want to know what the book is and whether it will sell. If the boutique agency has made deals with the publishers you want to publish with, and your gut says go for it, there's no reason not to select a boutique agency over a larger agency.

If only boutique agencies get back to you—even ones that haven't made the deals you'd wish to see—you may have found your match anyway.

Smallness shouldn't be a reason to reject your only takers, either. If you're in the position of hearing back only from boutique agencies, it might be because you're destined for an independent publisher.

If you're only hearing back from agencies without the history of major deals that evidence the best contacts, you need to find out if they are reputable and ethical and the agent has relevant experience. My agency belongs in this category. This may mean that your project needs a little TLC that only a new agent has the time to give it. It may mean that you haven't, in one way or another, put your best foot forward. But the agent sees that best foot behind the less-good foot. She's willing to put in a little extra time to bring it forward. She'll work alongside you to make your project something she can sell.

And when she does sell it, she will take your success about as personally as you do. And that's a bonus.

Kate Epstein founded The Epstein Literary Agency (www.epsteinliterary.com) in October, 2005. She is actively seeking clients for nonfiction projects.