

Monetizing Your Voice

by Bonnie Gillespie

Not too long ago, I spoke to high school writers about casting, writing, and living a freelance lifestyle. Casting is the newer of my careers, writing has paid the bills for a decade, and "living a freelance lifestyle" is code for "doing whatever it takes *not* to roll around on a plastic pad behind a desk inside a cube" every day. The kids wanted to know about cultivating "voice" and being paid to write.

Ah, finding your voice is easy. How do you sound when you talk? How do you sound *in your head* when you talk to yourself? What is authentic to who you are and what you have to say? Almost every penny I've earned as a writer has come from demystifying the casting process for actors in Hollywood. Potentially pretty dry stuff, right? Nonfiction, how-to, with a little opinion thrown in. Not the most exciting material, but certainly very important to its audience. Most writers who cater to actors deliver advice dryly and with a nod toward the "this ain't riveting" aspect of it.

Of course, that's not how to win an audience. I'm not saying that... *Everything! Must be! So! Very exciting!* No. That won't do. *Those* writers absolutely sell stuff, but they don't brand themselves as writers. They're all sizzle and no steak, to borrow a phrase from Journalism School. There's a place between being basic with, and over-hyping, your message. That place is where your authentic voice lives. It's how you'd talk about an area of expertise with a friend over tea. Or cocktails.

My first paid writing-for-actors gig involved interviewing casting directors (which is how I became one, but that's another story for another time). Pretty straightforward. No real "voice" other than those of the cool folks I interviewed each week for *Back Stage*. But one of my columnist duties—for no extra pay, of course—included answering casting-related questions at the message boards. No biggie. Show up, read a Q, provide an A, repeat.

Ah, but this is where I cultivated my voice. This is where I would slip in a "y'all" or a "dang" or an "eff." This is where I would split an infinitive, use a fragment,

and lead off with a conjunction. This is where I could bottom-line an answer to an oh-so-Googleable question while both advising and venting.

And, after I left *Back Stage*, it was *that* "voice" that got offers. Really freakin' cool offers. Like, "Write a weekly column, retain your rights, have no editorial interference, and we'll promote your books at our busy site." Seriously? Big-ass yes. And as my weekly readership has grown from 10,000 to over 50,000, I've sold books; been hired to speak to groups of actors, filmmakers, aspiring casting directors, and writers; and cemented my voice. I wrote (for free) in my voice while building up an audience for the (paying) dry stuff. And as more fans emerged for the voice I was sharing for free, someone saw a way to monetize the product.

Like I tell actors, we writers, too, are offering a product. The goal is to get known for it *early* so that when it's what the buyers want, they're willing to pay for it. There's little linear progression to any freelance career. But the closest to linear I've seen is this: Find your voice, use it—often and for no pay, at first—in front of your future buyers, build your brand, cultivate your fanbase, and say yes when someone offers big bucks for the voice (and the fanbase) you've created.

The good news is, for most of us, that just means *sharing* what we keep squirreled away in journals or on low-traffic blogs. Get your voice clear and get it out there. Use social networking sites, offer up your words to "the big guys" (once) for free, and interact with your earliest fans. The buyers will notice and, well, buy it!

Bonnie Gillespie is an author, producer, and casting director. Her books include *Casting Qs: A Collection of Casting Director Interviews*, *Self-Management for Actors: Getting Down to (Show) Business*, and *Acting Qs: Conversations with Working Actors*. Bonnie specializes in casting SAG indie feature films and regularly produces the Cricket Feet Casting Actors Showcase. She is co-founder and co-host of Hollywood Happy Hour. Her weekly column, The Actors Voice, is available at www.showfax.com. Bonnie Gillespie has been named a Top Film Casting Director in *Back Stage West's* "Best of Los Angeles" Issue; was interviewed on *BBC Breakfast*, on UTV-Ireland's *Gerry Kelly Goes to Hollywood*, and for the E! gossip column *The Answer B!tch*; and hosted *Inside Casting* and *The Reel Deal* for Virtual Channel Network--the Breakdown Services and *The Hollywood Reporter's* website for industry insiders. For more information, please visit www.cricketfeet.com.

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