

How to Break Into Casting

Contributed by Shawna McCormack

Casting is an art form, and an integral part of the creative process in any film, TV show or live theatrical production. But how does one break into this area of the business? If you are just starting out and your Rolodex is not chock full of industry contacts, read on.

We'll start with a brief explanation of the casting process. For the sake of time and space, we will only cover principle casting, not background or commercial.

A Casting Director (CD) is the person or company hired by the producer to find talent for the available roles of a film, TV show or theatrical production. Talent is rarely hired directly by the producer.

Talent agents receive a breakdown of available roles to be cast, then compare their roster with the needs of the CD and submit the appropriate clients for auditions. Headshots and resumes are sent via messenger to the casting office, and it is the responsibility of the assistant or intern to receive, open the packages and organize the submissions for the CD to review. It is also the responsibility of the assistant or intern to field phone calls from agents who want to put in a "push" for a particular client who either has name value or one that they feel very strongly about for a certain role.

After the CD has filtered through the submissions and selected the desired talent, the assistant puts out the calls to set up auditions and distribute "sides". Sides are a small portion of the script used for audition purposes.

Typically there is a pre-screen audition process for actors whose work the CD may not be familiar with. Actors with name value or whom the CD knows often go straight to the producer callback session.

In film, the director has the final say in casting; in television it's the producer. Once the final choices are made, the CD, not the assistant, will call the agent and make an offer to the actor. Let the negotiating begin!

Every casting office works differently, but as an intern it is crucial to watch, listen and learn as much as possible to work your way up to assistant.

So that's the how, now the where. Where do you find these opportunities? Often times casting directors are former actors, much like myself. As a young, struggling NYC actress without representation, I found it difficult to secure auditions with CD's, producers and directors. One day, while searching for auditions in the trade papers, I saw an ad for a casting internship and decided to apply. I thought, what better way to gain access to producers and directors, the people actually responsible for hiring actors, than to work with them side by side? I landed the internship, loved it, and made the decision to leave acting and made my living in casting for the next five years.

But what if you're not an actor? Even more to your advantage since many casting offices refuse to allow actors to work for them, it can often be a conflict of interest. However, it would be beneficial to have some experience in the entertainment or production arenas, but it's not an absolute requirement.

Internships: It's not impossible, but unless you have casting experience or very strong industry connections, the chances of landing a paying job in casting are slim. There are too many people willing to work for free as a way to break into the industry.

A good place to start looking for opportunities is in The Casting Director directory. You'll find names and contact information for the top CDs. Another resource is The Hollywood Creative Directory, a very costly book that is updated and published quarterly. If you are on a tight budget, carve out some time, bring a notebook and head over to your local Barnes & Noble and start copying; just don't tell them I sent you!

Other sources are craigslist, mandy.com, Variety careers, monster, hotjobs, etc. The major studios all have in-house casting offices, check their Internet job boards for available positions. You may even consider a position in a different department, just to get a foot in the door.

Armed with your list of suspects, please make sure you have a well-crafted cover letter and resume ready to send out. Keep cover letters short, professional and to the point. Please avoid form letters, try to personalize them. For instance, if a certain CD just happened to cast your absolute favorite film, tell them. Or, if you had the opportunity to work with a cast or crewmember on a particular film they cast, throw that in there as well. The higher up the food chain the better. Do your homework, go the extra mile to ensure you stand out from the multitudes.

And last, but never least: Network, network, network. Call up every person you know in the industry and put the word out. Six degrees of separation does apply and chances are, someone you know knows someone, who knows someone, who

has access to a CD.

Good luck!

Shawna McCormack has experience as a CD, a franchised talent agent, documentary filmmaker, and is currently a screenwriter/producer.

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