

Ask Tammy



Tammy Smith/Ask Tammy

"How in the world do I get my SAG vouchers?!"

This question is the most popular question in the history of extra work! It seriously comes up a bazillion times a day in our office! (see, "bazillion" is a REAL word!) Anyway, we digress...

For this oft-asked question, we decided to flat out ask a casting director to respond to this hot little topic! This way you get first-hand insight from someone who sometimes has the opportunity to give out vouchers. And who better to ask, but a busy talks-a-lot caster who loves to give advice? Introducing, our latest column, ASK TAMMY. For those of you who are new to the scene, Tammy is one half of *Smith & Webster-Davis Casting* (SWD Casting for short), one of the busier independent extras casting companies in Los Angeles.

OKAY, TAMMY, HOW DO I GET THOSE COVETED SAG VOUCHERS?

This is the never-ending question. This is also the reason I don't disclose to people at social engagements what it is I do for a living. Alas, the power of giving the SAG voucher is very similar to the ring Frodo Baggins carries in those *Lord Of The Rings* films. It is desired by many, yet it can bring out the evil in anyone who does desire it OR carries it. Well, the aura of the SAG voucher is something like that with no "cut and dry" solution. I can, however, give you some of the scoop and advice from Dixie's and my standpoint.

It certainly does NOT reflect how all casting directors handle giving a SAG voucher, nor does it include any illicit practices by some casting companies or services that utilize less-than-honorable tactics either. I can only vouch for Dixie and myself and for the "normal" group of my casting peers. The rest of the puzzle, well, you'll just have to excuse them for being evil-doers.

The technical part of this matter is the quota. It is up to us CD's to provide a feature film with the first 45 background (including the Stand-Ins) as SAG members (I am going to refer to features here only

because Dixie and I don't really do much extras TV casting). For the most part that is fairly easy. There is a strong pool of SAG background talent out there. It is our JOB to hire SAG members to fill those spots. The producers hire us to do this and we are required to do this according to the SAG rules. We are trusted by the entire production in this arena. On an average day, we book our calls from our files, Hollywood OS®, the services, etc... and the SAG are SAG and the non-union are non-union. Bu-u-u-u-t, there ARE days when other things occur.

The most important thing that changes this is a production's creative needs. It is when the nature of your film asks for specific things that are NOT in the SAG pool of talent or the SAG talent that you want are not available. I must say that this does happen quite often for my company, as we are known for providing more than the average background actor (not to say that any of you are average, but you know what I mean). Whether it be a scene where the director needs real people (meaning real nurses, real Native Americans, real belly dancers, real banjo players... whatever) or the criteria is just something more specific (like a bar room full of redheaded women or an insane asylum full of patients).

Often times the creative needs of a particular production pulls you out of the SAG pool. These are the times that are most common in giving a SAG voucher to Non-Union talent. I cannot lie, however. There are times when we bend and even on a normal booking day, are asked to book someone on a union spot from someone else on the production that we answer to. It is their prerogative and we must oblige considering we work for THEM.

And yes, on occasion, we throw a small bone to a few people who we have come to know and who need the help. The latter is not abused and not something to be taken lightly or for granted. You must remember that the pressure that an extras casting director is under far exceeds any frustration you might have in not receiving a SAG voucher. We have to answer to SAG, the producers and the studio. It can get ugly and be a cause for that producer not hiring us in the future if there are SAG problems on a project.

So, what about on set, in the morning when the much-desired actual SAG vouchers are so close and yet so far from reach? Well, that is a different story. First of all, on our sets, you are only going to get one if a booked SAG member doesn't show up, therefore being "under" in the SAG quota. I was recently informed by SAG, however, that we are not obligated to do this (when did this happen?), as long

as we BOOKED the 45 people, we have fulfilled our obligation. Well, that doesn't mean that we won't still give those "no-show" SAG vouchers out. Personally, we feel that they are budgeted for that amount for that day, so why not? Unless an AD becomes aware of the "underage" and instructs us not to, these vouchers will still be given out on our sets.

Now the main advice begins – how YOU, the Non-Union talent, should handle yourself in the asking of this voucher. Whether it be on set or over the phone, there is so much that you all need to learn in asking. The mistake that people make is that they assume we are power tripping on our ability to give out SAG vouchers. Au contraire! I, personally, would like to take this supposed "power-of-giving-SAG-vouchers" and throw it in the fires of Mount Doom along with Frodo's ring.

It is not all fun and powerful as people think and you have to remember, we are human beings that respond to normal courtesy and we do not respond to blatant butt-kissing or a bad, frustrated attitude. We have our own problems. Not to sound cold, but in general, we don't need to take on yours at that very moment. I can honestly say that the majority of SAG vouchers that I personally have given out were to folks that calmly approached me, AFTER the hectic check in process is winding down, asked simply and nicely and then walked away and let it go.

That is the person I will walk over to when I realize I am under the SAG count and have an available voucher. Unfortunately, the best way to really point out to you how to handle yourself in asking, is to also point out how NOT TO handle yourself. I have provided real experience examples:

HOW TO ASK:

1. (In person, on set) "Hi (Casting Director, coordinator, etc.), my name is _____. I just thought I'd ask that if there are any available SAG vouchers today that you consider me*. Thanks." (Now walk away and go enjoy a lovely donut at craft service, never to ask again that day.)
2. (On the phone, AFTER being booked) "Oh, one last thing. I was wondering, if there are any open SAG spots, could you keep me in mind? I have been working hard towards getting my SAG vouchers and I would appreciate any help you could give me*. Thanks (end of conversation)."

*You can throw in, on occasion, the TRUTH. This is a brief, honest, synopsis of why you want the voucher. Did I mention BRIEF? Okay, yes I did.

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HOW NOT TO ASK:

1. "Hey, um yeah...can I get a voucher?" (laden with attitude)
2. (In frustrated tone) "Hey, uh, are there any SAG vouchers, um cuz, I mean I have been trying to get one and blah-blah-blah and whah-whah-whah and whine-whine-whine..." (STOP right there. You have just made the decision for us)
3. "Hey, can I pay you to give me a voucher?" (Yuck... take your sleazy Vegas tactics to the mob-run agencies)
4. "How can I get a SAG voucher?" You should already know HOW to get a SAG voucher and then ask for one (see above "How TO.") Most of us do not have time to answer this question at the usual untimely moment that you have asked. Also, this is a bad tactic. Asking personally how a CD thinks you can get a SAG voucher does not inspire them to give you one. It is usually aggravating because our time is limited and if you have to ask, chances are you haven't earned your dues yet in the Non-union world.
5. "Hi!!!!!! (eager-beaver voice) I need my third voucher. Can you help me out? I would really appreciate it...blah blah blah..." (and then proceed to stalk the CD, the coordinator or the PA with the vouchers all morning or all day).

Look, you MUST realize, no offense, you are probably the 49th person to ask that day

and after merely ONE person asking, it can become aggravating for us. We have 5 billion things going on at once and again, pressures you won't ever know about and don't need to know about.

We have people pulling at us from all directions ON TOP of the people that we hire pulling at us for SAG vouchers and bumps etc. It is draining beyond belief. Just trust me when I tell you that you only ruin your chances by making a CD feel annoyed that you have asked or more importantly asked like a putz or worse, a needy, draining person. I'm just being honest. Seem confident and exude that you will be an asset to the SAG world by following the above suggestions, and you are halfway there anyway.

Important Note To Remember: you need to earn your dues as a professional Non-Union talent. No casting director in their right mind gives a voucher to anyone unless you prove to be reliable, have a good attitude and are someone that can be counted on to be a part of the day going smoothly and without problems on any set.

My own personal preference for a SAG voucher recipient is if you are legitimately seeking your SAG vouchers to pursue getting an agent and pursuing an acting career (not to mention the important note above). Honestly, the minute I can tell your intentions are just to make more money, I am less inclined to give you one, unless you have a highly bookable look that will be useful to the talent pool. Then again, the

truth is always the best regardless of why you want one. The key here is how you ask and not to bug or aggravate the situation. Cut to the chase, be pleasant, not needy and let it go. THOSE are the people that generally get their vouchers. It IS a crap shoot, a "hit or miss," lucky-day thing ANYWAY, based on if there are even any open vouchers available. Just don't ruin that small window of luck you might have by blowing the way you ask.

One last comment: I know some of you may have had a negative experience when asking for a voucher (even when you did it the right way). I myself treat even the "bad" askers with patience and as nicely as possible, but not everyone has the same threshold. Don't give up and assume that every CD is going to have the same response. I guarantee you, if you try the above "how to," it will get you further than the "how not to" list. Eventually, the people with the right attitude and intentions will get their vouchers. It comes down to you.



ASK TAMMY COLUMN: We'd like to thank busy CD Tammy Smith for contributing her time to our publication. If you have a question for Tammy about the extras casting industry, please drop her a line by emailing us at HollywoodOS@aol.com.

Letters

Dear Hollywood OS®,

Several months ago I was paged by a woman by the name of Becky from Booking Actors and Models. (BAM for short!) I returned the page and she said that I either sent them a picture or someone referred me to them. She asked if I wanted to come in for an audition. I said sure and asked if there was a fee and exactly who they were. She said no, the only fee would be if I wanted to order their portfolio. She went on to say that they book actors and models for movies and print jobs. I agreed to go in on the next day, but I ended up having to cancel. When I called and cancelled, I asked if I could instead come in on Saturday. After talking with Becky a second time, something told me to look into this and I referenced my "EXTRA" WORK for Brain Surgeons® directory. My suspicions proved to be correct.

I then took action and called the Dept. of Industrial Relations, which had no record of this supposed agency doing business in California. I then called the Better Business Bureau. They told me that as of July 3, 2002, this company was not licensed to do business and they, BAM, had an unsatisfactory business performance. Yes, all of this took time, but a small price to pay to clear my conscience, as opposed to my wallet and to become educated.

It sounds like BAM is making the rounds to the background community. Everyone should beware of such sales pitches and business tactics. I still do not know how they obtained my information. I learned my lesson quick! When in doubt check your "EXTRA" WORK for Brain Surgeons® or even better yet, take charge for yourself - trust no one at face value and call the Better Business Bureau.

Needless to say I will not be going to that audition and feel no obligation to call and cancel since it seems as though they may be operating illegally. Thanks Angela, Carla and everyone at Hollywood OS® for looking out for all of us in the acting community!

Cynthia Porter

Dear Cynthia,

Thanks so much for warning us and our fellow readers about the business tactics of BAM. I have since received many other complaints from other fellow actors who have received the same unwarranted sales invitation, but offered up no answers as to how they retrieved their personal information. Here are a couple of tidbits and then a random true story...