

WHAT'S A TREATMENT?

Kenneth Atchity And Chi-Li Wong Of AEI

By P. J. McIlvaine

What does Minnesota Governor, best selling author ("I Ain't Got Time to Bleed") and former pro wrestler Jesse "The Body" Ventura and novelist/screenwriter John Scott Shepherd (who made an astounding six film sales and one TV series sale in little over a year) have in common?

If you guessed a body slam, sorry. They're all represented by the burgeoning [AEI](#) firm, a self-described "one-stop full service management machine for screenwriters, novelists and nonfiction writers."

AEI's feature projects include "The Kill Martin Club" at Warner Brother's with comic Ben Stiller attached; "Henry's List of Wrongs" at New Line with funnyman extraordinaire Jim Carrey tentatively set to star; "Life or Something Like It" at New Regency; John Mulholland's "Dante's Inferno" with Mike Richardson's Dark Horse Entertainment; and the biopic "Robert Ripley" of Ripley Believe It or Not! fame with Barry Sonnenfeld ("Men in Black") interested in directing, and actor George Clooney interested in playing Ripley.

President and Chief Operating Officer Kenneth Atchity is a veteran producer, teacher (Occidental College, UCLA's Writing Program and Fulbright Professor), literary manager, poet, entrepreneur and author (the best selling "A Writer's Time") and co-wrote with AEI Partner and Exec Vice-President for Development and Production Chi-Li Wong "Writing Treatments That Sell: How to Create and Market Your Story Ideas to the Motion Picture and TV Industry."

First, let me say that I liked the book ("Writing Treatments that Sell") a lot. It works for the beginner, the intermediate, and the more experienced screenwriter.

Atchity: Thank you. That's what we were trying to accomplish.

How did the book evolve?

Atchity: My partner Chi-Li and I gave talks around the country on selling to television. The questions we were asked the most often were about treatments: How do you write one, and what do you do with one? Basically, we answered the question so many times that we got tired, and looked around and realized there were no books on treatments. We also started talking to people in the industry and realized there wasn't a clear kind of agreement on what a treatment was. We find now that almost every studio uses our book as a kind of handbook -- when somebody says, We need to do a treatment, they hand them our book. It's very exciting that a lot of creative writing classes have also adopted it as the first book on treatments. We based it (the book) partly on a survey we did of development executives in television and film to find out what they consider to be a treatment.

What do you receive more of at AEI, completed scripts or treatments?

Atchity: It's a mixture of both, but we get more treatments than we do scripts, partly because we want them. You know, it's much harder to sell a script unless the script is outstanding. But somebody can write a pretty good treatment and not write a good script and their real goal is just to sell the story and get started, so that's where a treatment can be very, very useful. We can sell the treatment, and have a great scriptwriter attach to it.

This is the opposite of what people have told me: Write the script and then try to sell that. You, on the other hand, seem to be saying, "No, write the treatment and then try to set that up." Am I correct?

Atchity: It's not that simple. It depends on what your goal is as a writer. If your goal is money and/or just getting a credit, then writing a treatment is a faster way to go and get you into the business -- and get you some money. And it also gives the buyer maximum flexibility. Let's say you come up with a great idea for a story but you're not a known writer yet. Rather than invest a year in writing a script, write a treatment. We sell it, they attach an A-list writer to it, and you have a movie up there that's based on your story. But if your goal is to be known as a screenwriter, then yes, that advice is the right advice -- which is to write a spec script first, and let us go out with it because studios pay more money for spec scripts than almost anything else in the business -- other than novels by famous novelists.

The two important reasons for writing a treatment are to sell and to diagnose your story. It's not always easy to write a treatment of the whole story before you've tried to write at least part of the script. Sometimes you start writing it and it flows along nicely until page twenty, when suddenly you pause. Generally that's a good time to stop and write a treatment of the whole thing because it will help you structure the rest of the screenplay.

To me, it's a complete waste of time for a screenwriter to write a screenplay for six months, then we look at it and say, This is never going to work because what's happening in Act 3 means I can't sell it to today's buyers. If the writer sent us 20 great pages of a screenplay with a treatment of the rest of it, then if we were excited by the writing and the treatment, then we could say, This is great, but you need a new Act 3 -- and the writer wouldn't mind because "it's only a treatment." He hasn't yet committed all that time to writing the screenplay, which to me is the most challenging kind of writing there is. A screenplay is highly precise, technical writing, and you've really got to be very, very good by that time and know your story inside out, and so many people drill right through a screenplay and they turn it in and it's just no good at all. So what good does that do when instead you should take the time to work the story out?

In my earlier book, "A Writer's Time," I talk about how you should never sit down to write until you know what you're going to write before you sit down. And that's what a treatment lets you do. It lets you know what the story is, and you just put it down in broad beats as though you're writing a letter to a close friend and just telling her what happened to you the other day. That letter's free form is similar to that of a treatment -- anything goes, the point is to get the story across, whatever you have to do to get the story across. A good joke teller can tell a fully-elaborated ten-minute version of a joke if he's got the audience's attention, or he can tell a two-minute version if he has to. The same beats are there to make the joke work either way.

Then maybe this is a misconception, but a lot of my screenwriting friends would really love to set up treatments. That's their goal. They go to websites where you can pitch for free, send in a logline or a synopsis and want somebody to pay them to write the script.

Chi-Li Wong: Yes, that's a misconception. Unless you're already an established screenwriter who has sold projects, it's rare. I'm not saying it never happens, but I would say it's extremely rare that someone would buy a treatment and ask a writer to write it without his having some kind of track record.

What do you think are the most common mistakes screenwriters will make in writing a treatment?

Atchity: Somebody that should know better sent me a 34-page treatment yesterday. I said, "I'm not even going to read that -- you've got to be joking. After we've been doing this for four years!"

Send it back to me at 15-20 pages at the most." The most common mistake is to put everything in the treatment, try to get everything into it when the truth is, you don't need to put everything into it you -- just put enough. It's a selling tool. But also the purpose of it is to put the skeleton of the story in so that the bones show clearly, so you can see what the story structure is. You don't need to go into so much detail; it's the flavor of the story. So the mistake people make is trying to make it into a synopsis, which is something that tries to cover every detail in the story.

Wong: Probably they write them too long, put too much dialogue in, they're not concise, that kind of thing, they become a bit too verbose, they don't realize that it needs to be very short and the action and the characters need to be presented very quickly. I would guess that's the biggest mistakes when they're first starting, but I also want to say that's okay because it's like making chicken soup, you have to have that big huge pot of water and throw everything in it and then just reduce it down. So start that way and teach yourself.

Can a treatment be less than 15-20 pages or is that pretty much the standard?

Atchity: We say in parts of the book that the ideal thing is to have a battery of treatments of different sizes starting with the longest one which might be at the most 20 pages, and then a shorter one that might be 5-8 pages and then an even shorter one that might be 2-3 pages, and then ideally, a one pager, and then one that's a paragraph and then finally, you get down to the logline which is the shortest treatment of all that just gives you, for example, "Under Siege" is "Die Hard on a boat."

It sounds like a Chinese Menu.

Atchity: The writers should do it backwards, because it's easier for writers to write long than short. Mark Twain said, "if I had more time I would've written a shorter letter." Writers tend to write long but the discipline is to keep shortening it and sometimes you have to write the long one first to know what you have to cut out.

In my own work, I feel that since writing a treatment is almost as hard as writing the script itself, so why not just write the script first and the treatment will come later?

Atchity: The second purpose of a treatment is diagnostic. If you write a treatment first it's easier to spot the flaws in the story structure. When you do it that way, you're less invested in what's in the treatment than you're with the script. I know it sounds like a lot of hard work to write the treatment as compared to the script, but the truth is, I think once you have a version of your script, then you generally end up, realistically, having to do 5 or 6 versions of the script before it's really presentable anyway -- and so you just count all of that and before you know it, the script has taken you six or nine months or a year at least to write. At least with a treatment, if you really got serious about putting your story beats, you could actually do that in a couple of days. Chi-Li is really the best one in the company at writing treatments, and helping writers write treatments. Her treatments are very, very strong.

Wong: I think that every writer has her own process so if that's what works for you or another writer, then that's the way they should do it. Some writers need to first have everything in there, and know their characters and what they're saying and how they're reacting before they can go back and figure out how to tell the story in treatment form -- although I do know a lot of writers both novelists and screenwriters who can't write a treatment. That's it. It's just something they cannot do. I suppose it's a different kind of writing. I don't know. I've done it for so long ... I started in the business immediately where I was always asked for treatments of books, so I learned to write them short and quick right off the bat.

What do you think of Internet websites cropping up like mushrooms where writers can pitch an idea or a treatment? At some of these websites, they don't even require that the idea be registered (with the Writer's Guild).

Atchity: If I knew that my clients were putting up stuff on the Internet without protecting it, I'd be very upset with them. It's so easy to have things go off in different directions that way. I think it's very, very alarming for writers. And I doubt that professional writers -- those who are actually making sales -- make this mistake. They've learned better.

So newer writers should be more careful, which is hard when it seems like everyone from Canada to Peoria is trying to get a leg up and it's very enticing when you see websites offering access, whether it be free or fee based.

Atchity: I've never seen any evidence of those websites really working. I mean, if a major studio like Disney or Warner Brothers were saying put your treatment up on our website and we'll look at it, and you have to sign a release, maybe I'd believe it. But I've never seen anything other than what almost appears to be a vanity press situation.

We all get e-mails every day saying put your short stories, poetry and screenplays up on our website -- but what does that invitation have to do directly with the business of buying and selling stories? It's only a few people in town who know how to sell and only a few people in town who have the money to buy, so they're the only ones you want to be dealing with as far as I'm concerned. I guess the answer depends on exactly what the situation is on the particular website. I'd be very, very cautious.

I see this all the time on my screenwriting boards. Someone will post that they have an idea that will make a lot of money and if you help me write it, we'll split the profits 50-50. I mean, you can have an idea but that doesn't mean you have a marketable idea or that it will even make a good script.

Atchity: Yes, and one of the problems is that when people come to us wanting us to find a writer to work on their idea -- a writer that will do it on spec -- it doesn't make sense. The good writers don't have to do it on spec. We refer them to AEI/Writers Lifeline Program, run by Vincent Atchity from New York -- where we have writer clients who are very promising and are working on their own projects and in order to earn money we put them together with people who need somebody to write for them. But they have to pay for that. Our writers could be doing something of their own -- they need to be paid one way or the other.

I've a rule of thumb about collaboration: You should collaborate only with someone who's better than you, never someone who's worse than you or who's at the same level as you -- because you can't profit from that. It's called "value added." Nobody's adding value to the situation if you get somebody who's at your same level. When somebody's better than you, then you have to ask yourself, why would they do it? So the minute somebody agrees to collaborate with you, it's suspicious if you're in the position of you're not broken in yet. Why would they do it without getting paid unless they're not as good as you and certainly no better than you?

Is it easier to sell a treatment to television or to a studio or production company or does it take a different type of treatment?

Atchity: In general, TV uses treatments as a way of buying much more often than the feature world does. Many, many shows and movies start from a treatment. In effect, the way a series starts -- we went into pre-production today on client John Scott Shepherd's series "Sherman's March," that started with him writing a bible which was based on what he read in our book

(Chapter 4: Treatments for Television Series), which he'd never done before. First, he actually began with the short treatment, then a bible.

Television is used to operating that way because that way the experienced execs can guide it in more successful directions. Let's say they don't like the mix of the characters, they have to have a diversified group of characters, and they can tell you that easily in a treatment before you've invested yourself in creating a character in a script.

Feature films tend to buy treatments when they're extremely high concept and/or when they're from well-known writers they've already dealt with. But it's very hard for an unknown writer to sell a treatment to feature films; they like to deal with people they know. An exception is -- and Hollywood is filled with "exceptions" to every rule -- if you've got a truly great story and we can then take your treatment and then attach a writer to it who's already a known entity. We get calls every day from attorneys and from other managers and agents who say they have clients looking for stories, Columbia owes them a deal, Disney owes them a deal, do you have any stories that we can attach one of our writers to?

But you'd think their writers would have their own ideas.

Atchity: Just because you're a well-known writer in demand doesn't mean you always have ideas. A lot of writers are good in terms of writing structure and dialogue, but they don't always have great ideas. About a third of the scripts we see are very well written and completely unsaleable because of the concept.

I'm an unofficial, unpaid reader for an entertainment company and it's given me a good sense of what's selling in the industry right now and I've to admit, the one thing that most surprised me were the quality of the scripts. Most of them are dreadful.

Wong: We find the same thing. I don't know what that means about the industry or what it even means about writers today. One of the things I find interesting is that I don't think people read much anymore. People trying to write a script have not bothered reading professional scripts. I also don't think people have literary backgrounds or foundations as they had in the past and I think it really shows.

One of the things I think is brilliant about Ken in development and that I feel so fortunate in being his partner on is his literary background and his foundation in Myth. That's one of the reasons why the things we develop really end up having so much flesh on the bone because Ken has all that background and then when you meet people who don't know any of that stuff, who don't know the basics, or haven't read basic literature, you're confused how they can write at all. But it's the same thing in the publishing world. Nobody reads and it's very tough to sell literary projects to publishers for the same reasons. We have the same problem there and in this industry (movies): People don't read and that's why the treatment is so valuable because there's so little time to get someone's attention. And that's why I think treatments are valuable and people shouldn't look at them as something that's going to deter the sale of their script. I think if you can blow somebody away in three great pages, he's going to look at that script -- and he's going to take that script. The business has changed today because we all move almost faster than the eye can see.

Between cable, television, movies....

Wong: Yes and that's why I think the treatment is so valuable and why it's valuable to learn that process and get very good at it.

Given the current state of the industry, is it easier to break into television and still a little bit harder to break into features without an agent?

Wong: It's difficult to break into either without an agent. Period. It's very difficult to get read by agents. Young writers, new writers -- I think they're going to have difficulty no matter what. They just have to be tenacious and figure a way how to get to people. They should research and find out who's taking on new writers. They always want to go to the big guys and sometimes you're better off going to somebody smaller or to production companies or to management companies and not try to get that William Morris or CAA agent.

Do you think newer writers tend to have unrealistic expectations? They shoot for the top agencies rather than a mid-size or a boutique agency.

Wong: I don't know if it's unrealistic because I always say you should set your sights high and then work your way down if you have to. So I would say sure, go to the big agencies first, why not? But I think where they become unrealistic is maybe what you said before, in where they want to be paid to write a script.

I went to a pitch festival that was sponsored by Fade In: Magazine and they had some very wonderful agencies and production companies that show up for this, it's a great pitch festival, and I actually had someone argue with me about the fact that he pitched something to me and I said to him, is this written, I don't know what made me ask the question. Something must have told me, and he said to me, oh no, I expect to be paid to write this. I was trying to explain to him, oh no, you're going to have to write it first and I'd love to see it because it's a great idea, and this guy was really annoyed with me, I mean, very angry with me, telling me off. Jeez. Get a life! Find out how people actually break in!

Because you weren't telling him what he wanted to hear.

Wong: Yes. And he was like I should be paid, I'm a writer, and I was saying, but it doesn't work this way, that's the unfortunate part in one way, you have to be entrepreneurial or you have to do another job, a day job, as a writer. It's just the way it is. I look at someone like John Scott Shepherd who was under our wing for over two years and wrote 30 versions of one script before the doors finally opened up to him. He had to move his family back to Kansas City, he'd lost his original agent, ended up with us, and the guy kept writing from Kansas City and sending stuff into us.

He does everything in treatment form first and we work out the story with him in treatment form because we don't want him to start on something we don't think we can sell -- and we don't want him to take a wrong direction so we try to do it in treatment form in a rough way, it doesn't have to be polished or anything, just so that we can see the framework of the story and where the characters are going to go. Then he does the first draft and then we get into more specific development notes.

What is AEI looking for right now? Any particular genres?

Wong: We sometimes look for particular genres -- and I guess there are genres and trends that happen but they change so quickly that as soon as I put it on the site, sometimes, I almost have to take it off the next day. But I do know that people at this moment are looking for paranormal stories like "The Sixth Sense" rather than horror or gross. Somebody asked me today that they want true stories with happy endings or do you have a true crime with a happy ending and I've to say, oh, let me think a minute. Some people are sometimes very specific like when Disney was looking for a gladiator film they actually asked us for a gladiator film. And now they have one and now it has to come off the site because there was only one to be purchased.

How many gladiator scripts could there be floating around? Maybe they'll be a renaissance of "Jason & the Argonauts" movies.

Wong: Everything always goes full circle so as soon something is successful, everybody wants one of those.

But the problem is, with screenwriters, it takes the average screenwriter a couple of months to write something, they're working on something that was hot six months ago, and by the time they turn in the draft, it's not so hot.

Wong: Exactly. That has happened. We've had people where we've developed something and we got it at the right time and say okay, we know we can sell this but they couldn't finish it in time and we lost the window. We've had that happen to us a couple of times and it's unfortunate. But you can't make a writer hurry up and come out with a good product. They have to do it in their own time, and sometimes if we miss the window, we miss it. So we just wait. And there are certain things that never change. Always romantic comedies, they always want romantic comedies, even though they're hard to sell, but if you can find a unique concept to it, find a unique thing about a romantic comedy and write it, you'll always sell one. That's for sure. Or a unique angle into an old story. Anything that was a winner, if you can find a new hook, like when they did "Dangerous Liaisons" -- they started to redo and adapt all of these, "10 Things I Hate About You," "The Taming of the Shrew," for instance, that was very smart so the industry picked up on it and we ended up with like three or four of them over a spread of time, over I think a two year period, where they were being shown and I thought that was really smart, whoever first thought of it. So the idea is to make anything old new again and you can sell it.

Concerning a newbie breaking in, would it be easier to slant their writing towards television rather than features? Or would you be fearful of them getting pegged in one particular genre? Or as in John Scott Shepherd's case, can you be both?

Atchity: It all depends on who your manager is, frankly. We wanted to develop John in every area, so he's a novelist and now television as well as feature, and he's also going to be doing a play that we can stage in New York in a couple of years. And that all depends on the vision of your coaches. Agents tend to want to pigeonhole writers because the agencies themselves are organized as pigeonholes. But it's up to the writer to avoid that. Some writers are very happy working in only one medium and other writers want to write in many different media so there isn't a simple answer -- it's really a matter of your individual character and vision about yourself and your career.

For someone starting out, it's hard to get a manager or an agent to look at their work.

Atchity: It's very true, though because managers are much more entrepreneurial they tend to be more open. I look at my writers as creating assets -- for themselves and for us. Obviously, if you're creating diversified assets, you have a bigger chance to succeed. It's like the oil business. If you don't drill new holes, you don't advance. If you drill fourteen holes, you have a much better chance of striking oil than if you just drill one or two. I kind of regard that literary properties are that way both generally and particularly. The more an individual writer can write in different media, the better chance she's going to have financial freedom -- and freedom to me is the key to creativity.

Do you think it's easier to get a manager than an agent?

Wong: I think the processes are the same. Maybe managers are a little bit more accessible. You know, it's hard to say. My first gut feeling is no, it's probably not all that easier.

Do you think writing can be taught or is it an innate talent? For example, anyone could pick up your book, maybe somebody who doesn't have any writing talent, but maybe has an idea -- it's possible that they could write a decent treatment.

Atchity: I think storytellers are born, not made. Talent is something you're almost born to, that you nurture from an early age. But I think the difference is craft and skills. That's what Vincent and his team of development editors teach writers who want to break in, in our Writers Lifeline program. Every writer who's really great has talent. The treatment book really just talks about the craft and skill and if you have talent, you still need them.

We get so many scripts that show promise, but no one has the time to develop them anymore -- which is why we started the Writers Lifeline program as an extension of our former careers as teachers -- so we could actually develop promising talent. Now, after our first three years in the management business, everyone refers writers to us -- studios, publishers, agencies and production companies -- because they don't have the time to develop a writer that has plenty of potential but just isn't there yet.

The Writers Lifeline Program is focused on teaching the craft and the skill and reminding people of the main important points about storytelling. But you have to be born a storyteller. It's like a joke. Some people can tell them, some people can't -- and if you can tell a joke, that's a different thing from somebody who tells a joke and nobody laughs because his timing's so bad.

In my own writing, I've discovered that it's also useful to write the treatment first rather than the script to find out if your idea isn't already out there. You've written a fine treatment and then somebody tells you that your great idea is already being developed by Dreamworks. I've had that happen to me.

Atchity: And you saved all that time! Imagine how you'd feel if you'd spend six months on it dying to get it right, and you turn it -- and somebody tells you within ten minutes, I'm sorry, we can't read it, there are already three movies like this in development. You've wasted all that time. So you see the marketing value of a treatment is to let you know what the market is much sooner, which is why we urge people who we think are talented to send us short e-mails just saying, Here are some things I'm thinking of writing, which one do you think? -- and we can instantly pick out the ones that are more commercial. Don't waste your time on ideas 4, 5, and 6, idea 2 and 3 are great, it's something that could be commercial. Then you're motivated to write a longer treatment and then we can work out the story details with you.

One aspect a lot of screenwriters tend to forget is that when we write our treatment or script, we don't think of the marketing end of it or the selling part of it.

Wong: I've a writer who's become very good at writing treatments, though when we first started, it drove him crazy because I'd tell him I want a three page treatment, I want a one pager, I want a teaser -- I want a little bit of everything because all my buyers are different. Some prefer just a teaser, a logline, and just a paragraph, and they may say, yup, I like that, and they'll take it into their meetings, it kind of depends on how they work. And so they have these meetings, let's say, every Monday, and they'll do a teaser or a pitch, a one page pitch of scripts that they're going to consider for a read or a purchase. And that's where we use the treatment a lot, for those executives who aren't actually going to bring in the script for everybody to read but for everybody to see what it contains and why they like it, what is this story that you think we should be reading and we should be buying.

Now let's say a writer pitches you an idea or a treatment that you like, and perhaps you don't like the treatment they hand in, then what would you do? You like the concept but you don't like the writer's take on it.

Wong: I'd develop it with them just like I do everything else. As a matter of fact, I just did that with a young woman. Brandy (singer/actress) was looking for a project for herself. She (the writer) had a script and I asked her to change it to accommodate a twenty-year-old rather than this older

ballerina (the character). I wanted to make her (the character) younger and in college. So she's (the writer) doing it in treatment form, and now we've gone through the treatment and now I tell her I just think you need more or this or less of that or have her do this or have her do that. Someone like her, because she already has a script that exists, even though it's not the same script, and she's a new writer, I might be able to sell her project based on the treatment because she has a script to back it up, she has spec scripts.

So it's a project she's already working on so they might say, okay, I do like the way the treatment reads, I do like the way you write, now write the new script for Brandy, that could happen. It could happen for her and that's why I told her (the writer), do you want to put the time in and do it because they may very well ask you to write the script since a script already exists but not the one they want. But they can see that you can change it for them and if they like the way the original script that you wrote reads, they may say go ahead and now re-adapt it for Brandy. So we try to find different ways to get people read and that's one of the ways I thought of for her, the treatment.

Now what if you have a writer whose writing you like, but just hasn't come up with a concept that you think can sell or is marketable?

Wong: Sometimes we might give them some ideas of things that are running through our heads or something that we read that we think might be more commercial, that might be to their taste. We do that sometimes. We have matched up novelists and screenwriters, we've done that or people who have good concepts but aren't great writers, we've done that. I mean, we're sort of an odd company in that way, that we match a lot of writers up with other different kinds of writers that if they have a certain weakness, maybe we can match them up and still get the project sold for them. So everybody's happy and everybody's sort of gets involved. But it's a lot of work because you really have to know your writers and who's gonna do what and trying to figure out all the credits and everything, it gets a little crazy.

But you would advise a writer breaking in to write the script first rather than try to set-up the treatment.

Wong: You know, I would never say do this or do that because anything can happen. If you can get to someone and get them to read a treatment, and it blows them away, and you have a spec script, I mean, you have to have some kind of script written, let's put it that way, and you have a great spec script and a treatment, I say go for it, why not. Try it. The whole idea is that they want to know if you can write so if you have a really good treatment and a really good spec script, you could get hired to write the script based on that treatment. Why not? Stranger things have happened in this town. But I would say to them it's probably better if you write the script. It's not impossible.

It's not impossible, but not probable.

Wong: Nothing's impossible, I've learned that. I tell people all the time, don't ever, even if it's something I don't like or I turn it down, I tell them, go somewhere else, never stop, you have to get to that yes, because my taste is one thing, I see things a certain way.

Same thing with writing treatments, I've a certain style that I like and maybe somebody else likes another style. It's like I've heard people say, there shouldn't be any dialogue in treatments. Well, I guess that's a rule, that you usually don't have dialogue in treatments. But sometimes, because dialogue is action, you can give information so fast and so quickly and so much information in a piece of dialogue, that sometimes it fits in a treatment.

I think one concern that screenwriters have in treatments is that they don't want to give too much information, they want the producer or the manager or the agent to read the entire script, so they try to leave it a little bit tantalizing at the end to make them want to read more.

Wong: The idea of the treatment is to get the story across so I think they're doing themselves a disservice if they don't prove that they can tell the story and that it's fully there. A teaser is one thing. I think they have to figure that out. A teaser is one thing you would put in a query. So when someone sends me a query and it just has a paragraph or two about a script, that to me is a teaser, it's not a synopsis, and it's not a treatment. So I might call back and say you've intrigued me, send me the synopsis and the script, and I always get that they don't want me to read the synopsis because they're afraid I'm not going to read the script.

First of all, that's not the case here. The reason we do it here is to save time. One, so we don't have any projects that's similar to something else we have, which is also why we require a release, everyone thinks that they're idea is the only idea out there, and ideas are always in the air. So that's part of it, they don't want you to get a synopsis or a treatment because they're afraid ... but you can register treatments and synopsis', and they should do it.

Anytime someone sends me something, the first thing I ask them, is it registered? Don't send it to me until it's registered and we used to read things without releases, but now we also take our lawyers advice and we better do releases because we're selling so much product, just as a safety net. Some people do think their idea is the only idea on something out there. For us, it's to save time, for that reason, and it's also because I want to know that the whole story is there. Also, if I read it, I usually know in the first act whether I like this writer as a writer, so if I read the first Act and I love it, and I already know what the rest of the story is about, I can save time by calling that person up and saying, look, I read the first Act, I think you're a really good writer, good dialogue, I mean everything is there for me, I love the treatment or the synopsis because it tells me the whole story, that I can see you've got the whole thing there, come in and talk to me about developing this. I can get through more scripts that way.

Because based on your years of experience, you've developed your sense so you can do that.

Wong: I guess that's true. I can tell pretty quickly if I like something.

AEI seems to be very accessible to new writers.

Wong: Definitely. We love new writers, that's really what we're known for. We're known as developers. If something isn't even quite there, or it's 99% there but the buyers want to change something, they probably will take the chance on our property because they know we're going to guide that writer through the development process they require -- unlike an agency that sells a product just the way it is and generally doesn't help out the buyer afterwards. That's because we're producers, not just managers; Ken and I were producing before we went into the management business. Management just gave us a wider reach. We will go in and say, okay, what is it you want and we can redevelop it and sell it again to the same company just by them knowing that we're going to do that for them. Because there's so little development money out there anymore, few do it anymore, so we're unique that way, and we really like new writers for that reason because they tend to have that excitement and that enthusiasm and that willingness to develop and work on things, a lot of writers who have success too soon too fast are unwilling to go through that process anymore. They think everything they write, every word, is golden and they want it sold, or they want it sold and then "Pay me to rewrite it." If you're in that place in your head, we don't want you as a client. If you're willing to do anything you need to do to succeed, no matter how long it takes, give us a call when you've got a great treatment ready!

P.J. is the screenwriter of Showtime original family film "My Horrible Year!" starring Mimi Rogers, Karen Allen and Eric Stoltz (in his directorial debut). The film garnered a 2002 Daytime Emmy nomination for Outstanding Directing in a Children's Special. PJ has several L.A. based prodcos and agencies considering her projects. Currently, P.J. is toiling away on a talking animal script that she calls "BABE with bite."

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