If you are a new student programmer, you must realize you are not the first person to be new in your job, nor are you alone in the challenges you are facing. Each year, program boards across the country experience turnover among their membership. New students assume programming positions and advisors and agents need to learn how each of them works. It is a learning process we all must work through together. Advisors can serve a role in this transition period by introducing students to agents at regional conferences and the National Convention, as well as through phone calls. No matter how the working relationship begins, though, don’t be afraid to make mistakes.

Agents who are members of NACA are used to working with new programmers. They understand that students change positions, graduate, etc. every year. They are accustomed to working with students in new positions and are there to help you learn the ropes. No matter whether you are presenting a coffeehouse show, a special event, or a national act, ask your agent the questions you need to ask for your program to be successful. Don’t be afraid to let them know you need help. In fact, creating and maintaining win-win relationships between schools and agencies is easy as long as you remember the golden rule for any relationship — communicate!
Keeping Your End of the Deal

For the win-win relationship to happen, each side has to keep up their end of the deal. For students, this means following through on basic responsibilities.

- **Make sure you are keeping your posted office hours.** If an agent is trying to contact you and you are not keeping the office hours you said would, you are not supporting your side of the relationship.

- **When agents leave messages for you, return those calls.** Just as you would appreciate an agent returning your call seeking a band’s fee so you can get your budget approved, they need to hear from you about whether you will book their band so they can release the date if you don’t want the booking.

- **Follow through with what you tell the agent you are going to do.** If you tell them you need to check with your committee, let the agent know when you are meeting and then check with your committee. Most agents and advisors have done enough committee work to understand that sometimes the initial response date comes and goes due to the inaction of a committee.

- **Let agents know the most convenient way to reach you.** They truly want to reach you only at the time and in the manner that are most convenient for you. So, be sure to let them know what those are. For example, if you want to be called between 2 pm and 4 pm on Tuesdays or Thursdays, because that is when you maintain office hours, tell them that. If you prefer to be e-mailed rather than called, tell them that, too. A good agent wants to contact you only when it is appropriate for you.

- **If you are finished booking for the semester and won’t be booking for the following semester until a specific date, share that date with the agent.** It is then the responsibility of the agent to document those call times and contact dates you specified and get back to you accordingly.

- **Be direct with the agent regarding the acts they represent.** If you are not interested, say so and let the agent move on to another school. Don’t be afraid of hurting their feelings. Agents also need to know if an act you booked didn’t live up to expectations, just as advisors need to know if students aren’t doing their jobs. Don’t be afraid to tell an agent that the comedian you hosted last night didn’t perform as expected. With that knowledge, the agent can make sure the next school has a better experience.

- **Remember that your actions today reflect on your programming board for years to come.** You are likely to spend a maximum of four years in your role as a student programmer. However, your advisor and the agents you work with will be working with each other for a long time. Your actions will reflect on your organization, your school and may impact the relationship between your advisor and agents long after you’ve graduated. So, don’t burn bridges.

Forms of Communication: Cold Calls, E-mail and Snail Mail

**Cold Calls**

Throughout the year, you will often receive calls from agents asking you if you would be interested in booking this act or that—without you having any prior knowledge of the act itself. This is a cold call. As a student programmer, it is your responsibility to listen politely to the agent and determine whether the act is appropriate for your campus. Again, honesty is the best policy. Often, at the time you get such a call, your budget is committed for the semester or you may be booked solid. If either is the case, just say so.

It may be that your school is rural and the act in question is a hip-hop act and is not likely to go over well with your student body. If that’s true, tell the agent what kind of acts will work for you.

If you are not prepared to talk to the agent at the time of the call, ask them to call back when you can give them the attention they deserve, answer their questions and ask intelligent ones of your own. Always be polite and professional. Even if you aren’t booking their acts today, you are likely to work with them in the future. However, if you have no intentions of bringing an act to campus, do not ask to have information mailed to you if you will not use it. Just say, “No thanks.”

Agents make lots of cold calls and for good reason. Such calls allow them to inform you of acts that may be coming through your area at a particular time or of new acts that are unique and are offering a special first-time deal. Cold calls allow schools an opportunity to save money, and often lots of it, if you are in a position to take advantage of the deals they convey. However, if you are not interested or your schedule is full, be straightforward with the agent and they will move on.

An agent’s second favorite word is “no.” They would much rather you be honest and be able to move on to their next client than to think you might be interested in an act and there is a need for continuing follow-up. You will not cause ill will by being honest and direct. However, being evasive and indefinite can negatively impact your relationship with the agent.

Always remember that an agent can be a great resource in your search for new acts. If you are seeking a specific type of act they don’t represent, they can often give you recommendations of where to look.
E-mail

E-mail messages have become an increasingly popular way for agents to share information about artists’ schedules, CD releases and touching base with both individual programmers and program boards. For students, it is an easy way to communicate with associates, especially when neither party is in the office. However, it also comes with a few downsides.

What agents must remember is to respect students’ privacy by using the organization account for booking communications, using personal e-mail accounts only when the account holder has given them permission.

It’s also important for agents to remember that many campus e-mail systems block e-mails sent to huge distribution lists and to check with programmers to make sure the information is getting through.

Students must learn to recognize that although many e-mails are sent through huge lists and do not require a response, others are more direct and deserve an acknowledgment of receipt, just as you would return a phone call. Never respond to a phone message with an e-mail. A phone message should be returned by phone. However, it is acceptable to respond to an e-mail message by e-mail or phone.

Snail Mail

Snail mail—it’s old-fashioned and low-tech, but it works. Although most communication between schools and agents these days is accomplished electronically, many agents still send out press and promotional packages via mail. If you receive such a package, please extend the courtesy of reviewing it so when the agent follows up, you can talk about the information it contained and aren’t bluffing your way through the phone call because you threw the packet away.

If an agent sends you promo, they will follow-up to see if you received it and if you have had a chance to review it. Be prepared to let the agent know a time frame that is reasonable for them to touch base with you for a conversation about the materials—after you’ve had time to review them. Be prepared to let them know what you think.

If you want additional promotional materials, let the agent know. But again, if you’re not really interested in receiving printed information, be honest about it. Promotional materials are expensive for the artist and agent to produce and send.

Often you will also receive unsolicited flyers in the mail from independent artists, some associated with NACA and some not. Take the time to follow up on these because you never know who you will find.

Several years ago I (Winslow) received an 8 1/2 x 11 tri-folded sheet of paper in the mail from a Chicago area singer/songwriter. After checking his Web site, we decided to book him for our new coffeehouse series. While he was on campus I told him all about the wonders of NACA and he eventually signed with an NACA agency and has showcased at one National Convention and three regional conferences.

Crucial Times for School-Agent Communication

When You’re Ready to Book

When you are ready to book an act, know the following when you talk to the agent. Whether you are a seasoned or new programmer, this checklist will help make the process smoother.

1. The act in which you are interested.
2. The date or dates that interest you.
3. Your budget. (Make sure you have included in that budget travel costs, housing, meals and production.)
4. What production you can provide. (Level of sound, lights, staging, etc.)
5. Make sure you request a copy of the act’s technical and hospitality riders, if they apply. Review this information with the agent and be clear as to what you need to provide. If there is something you don’t understand, don’t hesitate to ask.
6. Know the performance timeline:
   - Artist arrival time;
   - Show starting time;
   - Duration of performance;
   - End time; and
   - Whether there will be a break and, if so, how it will be handled.
7. The performance location. (Be sure to have checked the room’s availability on the date you want before the call with the agent takes place.)
8. Appropriate contact information:
   - The contact for the event;
   - The on-site contact; and
   - An emergency phone number for the day of the event. (This is very important!)

When You’re Ready to Request a Contract

When you ready to request a contract, be sure to have the following information ready:

1. The person who is authorized to request a contract—can the student programmer request the contract or does it need to be done by your advisor? If it is the advisor, make sure to let the

The movie that inspired the Broadway hit “SPAMALOT”... 35mm and non-theatrical DVD bookings now available! Promotion materials included at no additional charge. For booking information contact: Sharon Lester/Rainbow Releasing 9165 Sunset Blvd, Suite 300 • Los Angeles, CA 90069 tel: 310/271-0202 fax: 310/271-2733 email: lester310@earthlink.net
Agent know your advisor will be calling to request the contract once you complete the negotiations.

2. The person authorized to sign the contract—make sure you know the correct spelling of that person’s name and their title.

3. The correct address for where the contract should be sent.

4. What you need to do to process the artist’s check and whether it will be ready to provide to the artist on site at the conclusion of their performance. If for any reason the check will not be ready, it is important that you inform the agent of this in advance so that they can inform the artist and the artist can plan accordingly.

5. Whether your school needs to issue its own contract or whether the agent’s contract will be sufficient.

When You’ve Booked the Act

Perhaps one of the most crucial communication opportunities you share with an agent occurs when you have actually booked a show.

Promotional materials are often available for you from the artist to help you in promoting the upcoming show. During this timeframe, make sure you make the agent aware of your promotional needs and they will coordinate getting you the items that are available. In most cases, you can request posters, photos, CD copies, video footage, etc.

Advancing the show is important during this time. While some artists’ contracts are very detailed, many simply reflect time, date and place, as do most school contracts and riders. So make sure you maintain periodic communication with the agent and advance the show to avoid surprises.

Some of the things to discuss with the agent prior to the act arriving on campus should include:

- Changes that might have occurred since you booked the act—There are many times when personnel within an act change or technical and hospitality riders are updated as tours progress, but are not forwarded to pre-booked schools. If you have a tech crew, make sure they have the artist’s rider and the artist has the tech’s office phone. I (Winslow) NEVER try to tell the tech what the artist needs, nor do I tell the artist what equipment we have. It’s crucial that these two parties talk directly.

- Discuss hotel reservations—Make sure you have the right number and kind of rooms: doubles vs. singles, smoking vs. nonsmoking, etc.

- Arrive and Pick-up Times—Make sure you are clear on artist pick-up and arrival times. Having each other’s wireless phone numbers can prevent much confusion, such as when the artist is lost somewhere on your campus and you need to help them find the venue.

When Providing Hospitality

When the artist arrives at the venue, there will likely be extra requests that were not included on the hospitality or technical riders. If they ask for a cup of coffee or tea, for example, get it. Don’t make it an inconvenience—your job is to take care of the artist. If you do that, they will take care of your audience and you will have a great show.

Remember, the program is NEVER about you.
When the Show Is Over

One of the most important things you can do to ensure a win-win relationship with the agent actually comes after the show as part of your follow-up. It is important to let the agent know how the show went. Tell them the things you loved and anything that may not have gone well. This is the only way the agent can help the act improve and resolve any issues before they perform at another school. Agents appreciate your feedback because they want to be sure they are providing a quality product to schools.

Also, be sure to submit an Artist Performance Report (APR) online at www.naca.org/NACA/Schools/Artist-PerformanceReports/. APRs can help programmers at other schools make decisions about booking acts.

Win-Win in the Long Run

Perhaps one of the most exciting things to come out of good relationships between programmers and agents are opportunities outside of the normal school-agent relationship. Developing good rapport with agents may open doors to summer internships, future jobs and long lasting friendships. What you are doing now as a student programmer involves, in many ways, more responsibility than many people shoulder in their first jobs out of college. If you develop a great relationship with an agent and they can speak to your skills in management, communication and execution, they can become a valuable professional reference.

The relationship between student programmers and agents can be very special. Your agent can become someone you trust and who can make your job very easy. They work hard to get you great acts for great prices.

But beyond that, they can become valued friends. They can be a great resource for networking and for potential job opportunities down the road.

About the Authors

Grant Winslow is program coordinator in the Office of Student Life at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. In NACA, he serves as the associate member relations coordinator for NACA Northern Plains. He previously served as NACA's National Cooperative Buying Coordinator, as well as Cooperative Buying coordinator for the former NACA Wisconsin Region. He holds a bachelor's degree in international political science from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

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