

Modeling Tips: Expert Modeling Advice

“Not one top model I’ve worked with in 20 years went to modeling school.”¹

— **Susan Wehmann, Wehmann Agency**

“The best advice I can give is to check out an agency *before* going for an interview, and during the interview ask who their major clients are and what their success rate is in placing children in jobs.”²

— **Elisabeth Smith, Elisabeth Smith Model Agency (Child Model Agent since 1960)**

“You never write the agency a check for your marketing materials, pictures, etc.”³

— **Dominick Palazzo, IMI Talent Management**

“Children under 5 don’t need professional photographs to get started in modeling, according to a 40-page report on modeling scams issued by the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs. Snapshots also suffice for adult models at “open calls” held by legitimate modeling agencies, during which anyone is able to walk in and hear an honest evaluation of his or her modeling potential.”⁴

— **Kiplinger’s Personal Finance**

“They come to me after spending two, three, four thousand dollars on classes, pictures and attending conventions and expect me to take them on, but I can tell right away that there’s no potential.”⁵

— **Liz Bell, Liz Bell Agency**

“The Association of Model Agents has a list of reputable agents. Check their websites out, never go to a private address and never pay money upfront.”⁶

— **Sarah Doukas, Managing Director, Storm Model Management**

“Another common scheme comes from firms that charge people hundreds or even thousands of dollars to be listed in their “talent directories,” which are then mailed to agents and producers. It seems like a great way to be seen, but in reality, most agents don’t even glance at these directories. The vast majority of directories end up in the trash as unopened dreams.”⁷

— **Natasha Esch, President, Wilhelmina Models**

“There are several ways for parents to protect themselves from scams. First, you should immediately be wary of anyone who asks for money up front.”⁸

— **Natasha Esch, President, Wilhelmina Models**

“I don’t believe that a scouting service should cost thousands of dollars and ask that you travel long distance in order to meet with them.”⁹

— **Katie Ford, President, Ford Models**

“I know a lot of people spend money on unnecessary pictures and classes. These horror stories could be avoided if the parents knew how the child modeling industry works.”¹⁰

— **Valerie Miller, Mother**

“Agents who ask you for money up front—whether it be for a photo session, composite, head sheet or any other promotional tool—should be avoided.”¹¹

— **Natasha Esch, President, Wilhelmina Models**

“Unfortunately there are not only respectable and professional agencies in this business. These so-called “agencies” mostly offer classes, e.g., “How to become a model,” where they teach anybody who pays their expensive fees upfront. These “black sheeps” under all model agencies mostly promise young boys and girls a big international career, if they sign up for their expensive classes.”¹²

— **Louisa von Minckwitz, Founder and Director, Louisa Models, Germany**

“If [a girl] comes off the street into Elite and we think she has potential, she doesn’t need to pay for classes. Somewhere down the line, she may take runway classes, which she doesn’t pay for. We absolutely bear the burden. If a girl has talent and potential to become a model, of course, we help. It’s a scam of [the model] paying \$1,000 or \$2,000. That’s [expletive]!”¹³

— **Monique Pillard, President, Elite Model Management**

“A new model should not have to spend thousands of dollars traveling to outrageously expensive “modeling conventions” in order to be “seen” by national agencies. It is a placement agent’s job to promote a model and get her placed nationally. If a model has the potential to work in a national or international market, his or her local mother agency should be able to do the placement, or get them seen by the best agencies worldwide.”¹⁴

— **Exposure, Inc., Kansas City, Missouri**

“An opportunity to get you an audition and actually getting you work are two different things. Anyone who promises you work is talking out of both sides of their mouth.”¹⁵

— **Kay Tanner, Vice President, Genesis Models & Talent Agency**

“No one can promise employment. That’s not the agent’s decision, it’s dependent on the client or the director’s approval. You have to go out and audition and get the work.”¹⁶

— **Melissa Goodman, Executive Director, SAG and AFTRA Atlanta**

“If they take one penny from you up front, do an about face and run as quickly as you can. If they want any fees up front, they’re out for your money and not out to market you or your child. An agent makes money when you, the talent, makes money.”¹⁷

— **Scott Woodside, Actor**

“An agent works for you and gets you work. The only time they get money is when you get money.”¹⁸

— **James Legatt, Actor, Instructor, Georgia Ensemble Theater Conservatory**

“We recommend that people do not register with agents who ask for money up front. An agent works for you and should work on a commission-only basis when work is obtained for you.”¹⁹

— **Melissa Goodman, Executive Director, SAG and AFTRA Atlanta**

“You run into so many people all the time who have spent great amounts of money for pictures that are unusual and classes that for the mention of them on your resume can get you dismissed from an audition. It’s a big waste of time. People wander around with these ridiculous pictures and these class references that aren’t going to get them work and they wonder why they don’t get called for auditions.”²⁰

— **James Legatt, Actor, Instructor, Georgia Ensemble Theater Conservatory**

“Legitimate producers do not put ads in the newspaper. They work through established, legitimate talent agencies. Answering ads in the newspaper typically is a way to end up in [an acting] class situation.”²¹

— **Norman Bielowicz, Director, Georgia Film & Videotape**

“Most models get their start in a most unglamorous way: by knocking on the doors of agencies.”²²

— **Robin Givhan, Washington Post**

“The really big red flag is when they start asking for money up front.”²³

— **Rhonda Hudson, Model, President, The Models Guild**

“Modeling is not something you learn. With time and maturity, you develop a level of confidence in front of the camera. But don’t think, okay, you’ve graduated, you’ve now got what it takes.”²⁴

— **Rhonda Hudson, Model, President, The Models Guild**

“Modeling conventions often advertise as the best way to get exposure to the modeling industry and the best way into the modeling business. Modeling conventions can be lots of fun and a pleasant experience. However, you should know that it can be more cost effective to go to modeling agencies on their open call days to get into the industry, and there is no charge to do so. If you have what a modeling agency is looking for they will recognize you and begin working with you. Further, if one agency feels you have what it takes to succeed in the modeling industry, but are not correct for their particular agency they will suggest other agencies for you to see. You do not need professional pictures to visit agencies for consideration; snap shots are often preferred when beginning. Moreover, many agencies like to work with their talent in putting together their individual portfolio and composite card for promotion. As a result getting a composite card and portfolio before you know what agencies or agency you are going to work with is not always the best idea.”²⁵

— **Rhonda Hudson, Model, President, The Models Guild**

“If you dream about becoming a model or an actor, you should be careful about responding to any approach or advertisement that promises to make your dream come true. Bogus modelling and talent agencies charge big bucks for acting classes, workshops, photographs and portfolios. You may also be expected to pay for inclusion in a promotional agency book. Keep in mind that a modelling or talent agency is not a school. Modelling agencies that offer courses must be registered with the B.C. private Post-Secondary Education Commission.”²⁶

— **Royal Canadian Mounted Police**

“It is widely acknowledged that there are many more people wanting to be involved in modelling or acting than there are opportunities.”²⁷

— **Reba Meagher, Fair Trading Minister, NSW**

“Never have all of your photos taken by one photographer. And, when you get an agent, let your agent help select your photos, not the photographer, because the agent looks for what sells you! The photographer is only selling pictures. Also, before you involve yourself in schools, scouts, or expensive photos, an established agency should be able to provide you with two or three photographers to choose for under \$100.”²⁸

— **Dott Burns, Dott Burns Talent Agency (Talent Agent for 35 years)**

“Reputable agencies and photographers do not advertise in the newspaper classified section.”²⁹

— **Lee Gilchrist, Details Models**

“There are plenty of opportunities to be taken advantage of in this industry, so be aware and be thorough when researching modelling agencies.”³⁰

— **BBB Southern Alberta**

“Legitimate agents do not, as a rule, advertise at all. They’re far more likely to have acting and modeling hopefuls beating down their doors.”³¹

— **BBB Southland, California**

“Ask yourself (and answer yourself honestly) a most important question: Was I chosen by this agency because they believe I can make money for them, or because I can pay money to them?”³²

— **BBB Southland, California**

“If a talent agency wants advance fees, run. We only make money from the success of our clients.”³³

— **Karen Stuart, Executive Director, Association of Talent Agents, Los Angeles**

“The culprits in these cases will approach their victims on the street or advertise via a front company with promises of lucrative modeling contracts if the victim is willing to pay up front for a portfolio or training course. The victim often parts with substantial sums of money for courses or portfolios, which never materialise. The con men are careful to protect themselves by asking the victims to sign legally binding documents which essentially tie them to the company concerned. In many cases, the victims find that in addition to having paid for the initial portfolio or course they still owe the company money.”³⁴

— **Hong Kong Police**

“Never pay the agency for photos—pay the photographer. Verify the credentials of teachers for courses.”³⁵

— **CBC**

“Don’t believe promises of work. The most a modeling agent can do is send you on auditions. Don’t do business with an agency that makes inflated promises.”³⁶

— **Jules Polonetsky, DCA Commissioner, and Jack Maiden, COO, Ford Models, Inc.**

“Beware of agencies that direct you to one photographer. Legitimate agencies, if they recommend a photographer, would provide a list of several names.”³⁷

— **Jules Polonetsky, DCA Commissioner, and Jack Maiden, COO, Ford Models, Inc.**

“Modeling schools do not transform people into models.”³⁸

— **New York Department of Consumer Affairs**

“They will advertise that they can get you a job and you’ll become convinced that this is your door to Hollywood and fame, and pay them a lot of money for that privilege. The typical mode of operation will be radio ads and sometimes newspaper ads or even “Help Wanted” ads. You will get an initial ten-minute interview. Then you’ll get a phone call saying how “lucky” you are; that out of 500 people, they pick you. You are a winner. They tell you you’ve just been chosen and they want to get the ball rolling on your career, so in order to do that they need you to take a class or you need

to go to a convention so you can learn a little bit about the acting or modeling industry. Many of these conventions have thousands of attendees and you will only see a “representative” of an agency. Also you may only be in front of the “representative” for 30 seconds or less. The problem is when you’re told that you were chosen out of 500 people that they interviewed you think you are going to get work because you’re very special. How can they assess your potential with one look at you? In truth they make that call to everyone. Sometimes they call at a later date saying that they made a mistake and that your name was on the list. Only a licensed agency can offer to find you work in either the acting or modeling fields.”³⁹

— **Carol Hehmeyer, Assistant D.A., San Francisco**

“Professional modeling agencies told *Zillions* that if a legitimate agency thinks a person can get modeling jobs, they sign the individual to a contract and try to get them work. The agency’s profits come from a cut of the money made from modeling assignments, and not from up-front fees.”⁴⁰

— **Shirley Rooker, Federal Trade Commission**

“There’s no way a modeling school can help you become a model. I would never spend a penny on a modeling school. Most of them are scams. In all my years of modeling, I’ve never met a top model who came through a modeling school. If the modeling schools are as good as they advertise, why aren’t their girls in the big magazines or on the runway at the big shows? To me it’s all a scam to get money out of innocent, young girls.”⁴¹

— **Gia Carangi, Supermodel**

“ ‘Modeling schools’ are another option, but they are also misnamed; they should be called finishing schools. They can’t guarantee you will become a model and they won’t turn anyone down because you pay a fee.”⁴²

— **Cindy Crawford, Supermodel**

“Avoid modeling companies that require you to use a specific photographer. This can mean that they are splitting fees, and trying to lure you in to sell you the overpriced cost of the photos.”⁴³

— **Carl Messineo, Attorney, Partnership for Civil Justice**

“It is not common practice in the industry for an agency to charge the model for the photographs or receive a payment or commission from the photographer selected.”⁴⁴

— **Judge Norma L. Shapiro**

“Legitimate agencies make money from models’ commissions. It’s not common practice for an agency to charge the consumers for the photographers or receive a commission from the photographers.”⁴⁵

— **Barry Creany, Deputy Attorney General, Pennsylvania**

“What modeling schools conveniently neglect to tell youngsters is that only a handful of the world’s top models ever went through such training . . . The likes of Kate Moss, Gisele Bundchen, Christy Turlington, Claudia Schiffer, and Naomi Campbell never had to pay money to learn their craft. In fact, it’s difficult to find a supermodel who attended a modeling school before hitting the big time.”⁴⁶

— **Ian Halperin, Author, *Bad and Beautiful***

“Scam artists may tell you a big, expensive portfolio of photographs is necessary. But legitimate agents don’t take photographs, recommend a photographer or offer photographic services.”⁴⁷

— **Ontario’s Ministry of Consumer and Business Services**

“The experts say anyone who suggests that you can make easy money in commercials isn’t being honest.”⁴⁸

— **Ontario’s Ministry of Consumer and Business Services**

“Legitimate agents make their money from commissions from your fees.”⁴⁹

— **Canadian Actor Online**

“A registration fee or advance fee is the main characteristic that distinguishes a legitimate talent agency from a phony one. Legitimate agents work on a commission. They don’t get any money unless and until you get paid for doing the work they have obtained for you. The phony agent may insist that you take acting lessons at a particular school or from a particular teacher, or may try to get you to buy expensive photographs, audition tapes, or other services or materials sold by someone he/she suggests. Be wary of agents who insist you use their photographer because he produces a certain ‘look’ the agency likes.”⁵⁰

— **Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation**

“Personal managers must also be licensed and bonded. They may provide more comprehensive services than agents, acting perhaps also as business managers, financial and legal advisers. But, like the agent, they should not be paid in advance.”⁵¹

— **Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation**

“You should be suspicious if an agency asks you for money upfront. Legitimate agencies don’t charge fees. They simply take a percentage of your earnings.”⁵²

— **Mary Giles, *Parenting Magazine***

“Legitimate agents get paid a commission only after talent is paid for a job.”⁵³

— **Erik Joseph, Author, *The Glam Scam***

“In the state of Florida, it is a misdemeanor for a licensed agency to exclusively refer models to one photographer or set of photographers for their portfolios. In this case, we have agencies that seldom get their models work, but love to sell models overpriced portfolio work. Case in point: The aspiring model, or, in a lot of cases, the established model, goes to an open call for the agency. Regardless of their look, they are pitched a photography session that usually rings in at over \$500.00. If the model is experienced, and brings in their portfolio book and comps, the agency finds fault, and pitches them expensive shoots. When the model obtains the shoot, they often end up with mediocre pictures that are touted as great by the agency. If those pictures turn out bad, even if it’s the photographers fault, the model is talked into paying for another shoot. After the shoot, or shoots, the model is accepted into the agency, where they often sit idle waiting for work. Those that do get work are often pitched promotional jobs that pay \$10.00 to \$15.00 an hour. Normally, though, the model should be getting client shoots that pay ten times that amount. Fortunately, this is illegal.”⁵⁴

— **Tampa Bay Independent Model**

“Can you go to school to become a model? No. A girl either has the qualifications to start with or she doesn’t [. . .]. The big chain schools are franchised, and one or two of them may have good teachers who have been models and are knowledgeable. But, again, these schools exist on tuition. They’re not going to tell you, ‘You can’t be a model,’ or you won’t take the course.”⁵⁵

— **Nina Blanchard, Nina Blanchard Agency**

“. . . there are the real rip-off schools which do proliferate and make millions off the unwary. If a school promises that you can become a model if you take their course, STAY AWAY. I do a lot of lecturing to high school groups and girls tell me that they are ‘models,’ because they have taken a course and have been graduated even though they may have none of the physical qualifications. Modeling is not like taking a nursing course, passing the course and being qualified to take the state exams. Girls don’t have to have height and beauty qualifications to become nurses [. . .]. These young girls who adamantly tell me they are models because they have been graduated from schools have been quite viciously taken. I spent two years doing radio shows, television shows, and being interviewed for articles, traveling across the country at my own expense to talk about the ‘racket’ schools, [. . .]. Please understand that a modeling school is not a requirement to become a model. If you have good potential, the top (and who wants to be with any other kind?) agencies will be interested in you.”⁵⁶

— **Nina Blanchard, Nina Blanchard Agency**

“Are there schools where a man can learn to be a male model? No! End of discussion.”⁵⁷

— **Nina Blanchard, Nina Blanchard Agency**

“Legitimate modeling agencies make money on a commission basis, meaning they get a percentage of the fees you earn working as a model; they don’t make money by insisting on being paid up front, whether it’s for classes or special photos. You shouldn’t be required to enroll in the modeling school before the agency will represent you. Good schools [. . .] won’t promise you will work if you enroll at their school.”⁵⁸

— **Roshumba Williams, Supermodel**

“Open calls at a modeling agency are one of the best ways to find an agent. [. . .] The cheapest way to find an agent is to mail in pictures of yourself to an agency.”⁵⁹

— **Roshumba Williams, Supermodel**

“If you are just starting out it is probably not a good idea to get professional pictures taken until you have been seen by a model agent. [. . .] Let’s be clear on one thing—you do not need professional pictures to be evaluated by an agency. Any new face booker or agent should be able to let you know if they want you based on amateur pictures. They may want more or different types of pictures before they give you a decision, but spending on professional pictures before anyone commits to you is generally a waste of time and money.”⁶⁰

— **San Diego Model Management**

“Do not, I repeat, do not spend money on professional photographs until you have a reputable agency working with you.”⁶¹

— **Lara Bonomo, Teen Vogue Bookings Editor**

“Please do not spend any money on professional pictures if you do not already have them—snapshots are just fine.”⁶²

— **Cast Images Talent Agency**

“Is it necessary to spend money on professional pictures prior to joining a talent agency? Before an evaluation there is not [*sic*] need to spend money. Once there is a mutual agreement to join our agency, we will suggest you invest in a professional headshot.”⁶³

— **JAV Talent**

“One big mistake that many aspiring models make is spending tons of money on photos, portfolios, and composites before they get an agent. This is a total waste of money and time, and people who tell you otherwise either don’t know what they’re talking about or are scamming you. [. . .] All photos taken without an agent’s guidance are essentially useless because the photos may not capture the image the agent plans to build for you and promote to the fashion industry. [. . .] Photographers often prey on young, unsuspecting models and their parents, suggesting that models need loads of professional pictures, composites, portfolios, and elaborate, expensive photo sessions before they’ve found an agent or started their careers. They’ll tell the models that agents won’t accept them if they don’t have a portfolio full of pictures. In these cases, the photographer is probably trying to scare the unsuspecting model in order to make money off the photo session, the development and processing of the film, and the printing of contact sheets and photos. [. . .] The most that’s needed to get your foot in the door are a few snapshots that by no means require a professional to take. As I’ve said, anything more is really a waste of time and money.”⁶⁴

— **Roshumba Williams, Supermodel**

“Do not get a portfolio before getting an agent.”⁶⁵

— **Nina Blanchard, Nina Blanchard Agency**

“The modeling industry is not something that needs to be taught. Once they’re placed in an agency, that agency is going to groom them and package them.”⁶⁶

— **Mary Clarke, Talent Scout (discovered Ashton Kutcher)**

“Enrolling in a modeling school is absolutely not a necessity for becoming a model.”⁶⁷

— **Heather E. Young, Model, Author**

“If you’re from a small town or city, it’s a good idea to join a local agency first, for two reasons. First, the agent may be able to find you local work so that you can get some experience. Second, small agencies outside major cities often have relationships with large agencies in the cities. A scout from a large agency may come to your small town agency once or twice a year looking for a new model like you!”⁶⁸

— **Heather E. Young, Model, Author**

“I believe modeling schools are okay, but I believe the amount of money you spend and the way you’re treated afterwards, it’s not okay.”⁶⁹

— **Lynn Molitor, Makeup Artist**

“Ask the agency where most of their income comes from. In other words, do they make more money from placing people in jobs, or from selling training services and photo portfolios? . . . If

your first interview with an agent or scout sounds more like a sales pitch for services, then the promises of fame are probably fraud. Exit the runway—fast.”⁷⁰

— **Stacy Johnson, WISHTV 8**

“Child-modeling scams are a perennial problem. Parents are often so flattered, they ignore the red flags indicating that they may be dealing with a suspicious operation.”⁷¹

— **Elaine Kolish, Associate Director of Enforcement, Federal Trade Commission**

“Legitimate modeling agencies say there is little work for children.”⁷²

— **Karen Hensel, I-Team, WISHTV, Indianapolis**

End Notes

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