

## Business interview – Bridges: The Actors' Agency

*At Bridges we offer a unique experience for both our clients and casting professionals. Our co-operative business model, whereby our agency is managed and run day-to-day by the very actors it is providing to the industry, allows us to offer a high level of service with a very in-depth knowledge of each of our clients. We are able to build strong professional relationships with casting directors and give our proactive clients the opportunity to take control of their careers.*

*The interview is with Carrie Mancini, one of the founder members of the co-operative.*

### **Q1. What circumstances led to you setting up Bridges: The Actors' Agency?**

The idea of setting up a co-operative was first discussed in 2006 by a group of eight professional actors who wanted to pool their skills and resources and help each other obtain work in the arts.

### **Q2. Had you any experience or knowledge of co-operatives at that point?**

No. The founders were unaware of the merits of setting up a co-operative, but decided to explore an arrangement where they might collaborate and share resources.

### **Q3. Why did you choose a co-operative consortia model rather than a traditional private limited company or a partnership?**

A Co-operative Development Scotland (CDS) adviser helped register Bridges: The Actors' Agency at Companies House as a private company limited by guarantee. The co-operative is a not-for-profit organisation. All the members were unanimous they wanted to work as a co-op where all members are equal.

### **Q4. What support did you receive during your early years?**

The original members approached CDS, who assigned a free business adviser. He helped the members set up a consortium co-op, which would allow the members to work together while retaining their individual identities and independence. Without the adviser's help in registering the business, choosing a co-operative model and filling in numerous lengthy forms, we would have felt overwhelmed.

The CDS adviser helped Bridges: The Actors' Agency draw up a Members' Agreement. This sets out the aims of the co-operative and how the members work together, for example:

- All members enjoy equal status;
- Decisions are made by majority vote;
- Termination of contract - notice and arrangements for contract termination;



- A Grievance Officer has been appointed to settle any disputes involving co-op matters between members.

**Q5. Could you give a brief explanation of the company's governance model?**

All our members are attached to satellite groups with targets to reach throughout the year and we have regular Action Plan meetings to discuss what needs done and the time scale for these objectives. So everyone is involved with the running of the coop. The bank insists we have office bearers for forms and companies house like us to have them for all official documents. So we have Secretary, Treasurer, Book keeper and Grievance office.

**Q6. How important are the co-operative values and principles to the business?**

Very important. These principles are why we are all members and why so many actors ask us for representation over a traditional agent. They are really what hold us all together.

**Q7. What is your attitude to growth being a co-operative?**

We are always on the lookout for new members and have regular enquiries from actors seeking representation. As a group it has been decided to have a top limit of twenty members as we think this is a manageable amount. At the moment there are fourteen of us and we hold auditions twice a year for new members. We have a satellite group who look through all the submissions and present the actors they think we should see as a group.

**Q8. What is the greatest benefit or competitive advantage you derive from being a co-operative business?**

Professional actors can feel isolated when there is little work. The co-operative offers a regular forum to meet and discuss activities. The acting profession can be very hard and lonely but in the co-op you feel supported by a group of like-minded people. Forming the co-op has created a new brand in the marketplace and increased the profile of its members. Theatre producers, directors and casting agents now take Bridges seriously and are keen to follow its progress. Building relations with theatre and casting directors has been the way forward for us to be looked upon as professional actors working for the good of each other.

**Q9. What is the biggest constraint to your business by being a co-operative?**

It is sometimes difficult to get everyone together and decision making can take time as we want to keep to our democratic roots. We are looking into Web Forum, where we can discuss and vote on topics electronically.



**Q10. What are the key things you need to get right to run a successful co-operative consortium?**

Everyone needs to be signing off the same hymn sheet. Just talking about Bridges, everyone needs to realise they have a share in the business and the business belongs to them. All members pay a stakeholder donation to join which gives the feeling of buying into the business and that you are part of it. All members are equal and know it.

**Advice for budding co-operative entrepreneurs**

Bridges found it hard to get a bank to understand that we are a non profit organisation, not a charity and each member has equal status. We bank with the Cooperative bank as they were willing to deal with us and understood our needs.

All founder members of Bridges made a Stake Holder donation into a business bank account when we initially started up; this funded office rent, legal fees and telephone line/internet. Initially most of our equipment was either donated or borrowed. Each new member buys into the business with the same stake holder donation to keep everything equal. Running costs are funded by the commission members pay to the business from acting work. This is set at 10 per cent for theatre, role play, and 12 per cent for all electronic work like TV or radio.

