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Aspiring Child Actors Face Biggest Money Scam in History

Multiple cities, multiple business names, and open calls in the name of Disney and Nickelodeon have made for a toxic combination for hundreds of unsuspecting parents. The rip off tally is estimated at \$12 MILLION so far, but companies continue to hold “auditions” in hotels around the country. Are they really looking for the next Hannah Montana? Or is a scam moving into your town?

In the last six months, companies known as Pacific Modeling and Acting Academy (PMAA), Edge One LLC, DGA Productions LLC, and Academy of Cinema and Television (ACT) have been holding open calls in cities around the U.S. Their business model is very similar to the John Robert Powers franchise, and many of the staff are the same, although none of the promotional literature mentions a connection between the companies. This week, the business model went horribly awry when Pacific closed its doors after taking thousands from hopeful parents.

Pitching Hollywood to Hopeful Kids

Radio and television ads drop names including “Hannah Montana”, “Suite Life of Zack and Cody” and “Drake and Josh”. They run on Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, Radio Disney and local radio stations, giving the appearance of endorsement by those kid-centric studios. When hundreds of parents arrive at the weekend event, they are treated to a slick multi-media presentation and meet an agent, manager or casting director (usually real ones who were hired for publicity purposes). Kids are whipped into a frenzy as High School Musical is played and salespeople drop the names of

legitimate industry agents and casting directors as their “associates”. When parents ask questions, the answers are vague and scripted, and it isn’t clear to some parents whether this is an agency, a movie studio or a school. Some kids are even given signed photos of the Hannah Montana cast.

If they have the “look” (the look of talent or money?) the child will be chosen for a callback. The pitch at the callback is always the same: they believe the child has “potential” and could be the next Hollywood star, but they need training, which is conveniently provided by the “Academy”. They are told they are very fortunate to be accepted into this prestigious school, and auditions are guaranteed. According to a Craigslist ad posted last week, the school’s “talent coordinators” (sales people) work on commission and can make up to \$110,000 per year. Parents are instructed to bring their checkbooks and told that they need to enroll immediately, or their spot at the school and their opportunity for Hollywood success will be lost. The cost ranges from \$2,400 to \$11,000. Classes are held once a month, and sometimes photo sessions are included as part of the package. There is no brick and mortar building for these “satellite schools”. Instead the classes are offered in hotels, convention centers or other temporary digs.

That business model is very similar to that offered by the controversial John Robert Powers chain of schools. It is not criminal, but is not accepted by the legitimate entertainment industry as the way to get into the acting profession (more below). But in the case of Pacific Modeling and Acting, things seemed to go one step further when the organizers simply took the money and disappeared.

The Pacific Scam

Tampa parents, who had been recruited in early May, reported to their first class on Saturday May 30th to find no PMAA representative at the hotel. Company contacts were fruitless. Some phone calls were answered “John Robert Powers”. In fact, Stanley Robinson, the apparent owner

of Pacific, also owned John Robert Powers franchises. Parents at the JRP in Santa Clara, also report paying money and then having the doors closed in April. An email was sent from PMAA to some parents, saying that all classes were cancelled and the company was considering bankruptcy (that has not happened). Families got nothing for their money.

It is estimated by former employees of Pacific, that approximately 200 families in each city signed up for the classes, paying an average of \$5,000 each. They say 10 cities were involved.

Pacific held open calls in San Diego, Nashville, Albuquerque, Las Vegas, Seattle and Greensboro, NC. Other cities are unidentified at this time. Many of those parents have yet to realize that they have been scammed, since classes only meet in each city once a month.

Read the email from PMAA here:

<http://www.tampabays10.com/images/pdfs/pacific.pdf>

Read parent stories here:

<http://pacificmodelingandacting.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.topix.com/forum/city/everett-wa/TEQ370ETC6HE7SV03>

Local news stories from Nashville, Seattle and Tampa:

<http://www.wsmv.com/news/16454350/detail.html?rss=nash&psp=news>

http://www.king5.com/topstories/stories/NW_060208WAB_model_agency_shutdown_KC.56377181.html

<http://www.tampabays10.com/news/local/article.aspx?storyid=81648&s=e>

The Next Victims?

But the story doesn't end there. Open calls are being held this weekend in Secaucus, New Jersey, by Edge One, aka Academy of Cinema and Television. The extent of the partnership between the companies is unclear. While A.C.T. is not apparently owned by Stanley Robinson, the schools' business model is the same, the salespeople are essentially the same, and they use the same promotional materials littered with references to Disney and Nickelodeon. Some of the celebrity

photos and endorsements (some false) have been commonly used between JRP Santa Clara, PMAA, and A.C.T.

Avoiding Scams

Research is key, but so is recognizing the general business model, no matter how flashy the presentation. Parents say that they tried to research the schools before paying, but there was little on the internet about these new company names. The Better Business Bureau listed them (companies simply pay for a listing at the BBB) but did not have complaints yet. Parents who asked if the school was related to John Robert Powers (who has a more extensive web history and would be easier to research) were expressly told that they were not a part of that chain.

BizParentz Foundation is a non-profit organization serving families with children in the entertainment industry (professional child actors). The organization is the recognized expert on predators involving children in the entertainment industry. They warn that this business model is predictable and dangerous.

“In our opinion, acting academies and modeling schools are not the best way to enter the entertainment industry. You should never pay money upfront for representation—legit companies work on commission. Even under the best of circumstances, the classes are overpriced, the instruction is not at a professional industry level, and parents will be forced to endure more sales pitches down the road. Conventions and competitions bring in even more money to these businesses, and their rate of success is dismal. These places are simply not respected in the Hollywood community and it isn’t necessary.”, says Anne Henry, co-founder of BizParentz.

BizParentz has an article about how to spot a talent scam here:

<http://www.bizparentz.org/gettingstarted/avoidingscams.html>

BizParentz also offers practical tips on how to pursue an entertainment career in a positive way, and how to seek acting opportunities in your own neighborhood.

“The Pacific situation is tragic. Not all acting schools or modeling academies outright steal parents’ money. But the risk is always there. These are businesses from out of town, operating out of a hotel. They used pressured-filled sales tactics and leveraged the love of parents for their children, and they are very, very good at what they do. There is nothing stronger than a child’s love for their kids”, said Henry.

Even BizParentz was a victim of Pacific. “In March, both Pacific and A.C.T. took our press releases about our charity event, re-worded them, and re-released them to make it appear that they were sponsoring the event and affiliated with BizParentz. They did the same to an article about the event in Backstage West, an industry trade paper. It was false of course. We have never spoken to them or been contacted by them in any way. These people are dishonest. We’ll do everything we can to make sure this practice stops,” stated Paula Dorn, co-founder of BizParentz Foundation.

Parents involved with Pacific scam are currently seeking criminal and civil action and organizing parents among the various states. For more information, please contact BizParentz@aol.com.

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