

Model Misbehavior

A nationwide talent-scouting agency is under fire for its dealings with would-be models—and its own employees

By Brian Braiker

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June 18 — When Chrissy Molloy, a pretty girl, saw the job listing on Monster.com, she thought it could be a good way to help her pay for college. A company called Trans Continental Talent was looking for models. She sent in her resume, and even though she had no previous modeling experience, she received a call that night asking to come to an interview session the next day.

THE PERSON ON THE phone told her the agency had ties to actor Josh Hartnett and the Backstreet Boys (boy-band impresario Lou Pearlman is the company's chairman); he told her she had a nice smile. When Molloy showed up for her appointment, the agency took pictures and told her someone would be in touch. An agency representative called her the next day for a phone interview. He said the firm wanted to represent her—that it wanted to help her launch a modeling career.

Molloy was excited. "I'm a person with really low confidence," she tells NEWSWEEK. "When I signed on with them, it was a confidence booster." But then Trans Continental asked for the money. The company wanted \$795 to post her pictures on a Web site that it said only exclusive modeling agencies can access and \$60 every three months to keep the picture there. That was more than she had bargained for, but, after all, Josh Hartnett supposedly got his start with Trans Continental. (Molloy would have benefited from calling Iris Burton, Hartnett's agent, who insists, "they never scouted him. He came to me, I put him in his first job.")

Less than a month later, the agency called her with a potential gig—a rep told her 100 people were being selected for an invitation-only casting call for models in Miami's South Beach area; MTV and all the major agencies would be there. It wasn't even a job, just an open call. Still, Molloy agreed to pay \$895, not including airfare, to attend—and \$14 for the privilege of interviewing over the phone.

By the end of April Molloy was nearly \$1,800 poorer, still unemployed and no longer able to afford tuition at Tomball Community College in Tomball, Texas. She was also a little suspicious. A week later she saw a "Dateline NBC" program detailing what appeared to be a talent agency's "selling people phony dreams": Trans Continental Talent (which began operating its model-hunting group under the name Wilhelmina Scouting Network in March, its fourth name in half as many years) was sending scouts into city streets to tell average people that they may have what it takes to be a model.

Without promising them anything, WSN scouts convince starry-eyed men or women to stop by a local branch office, where, for a price, they are told the agency will show their pictures to 1,000 modeling and casting agencies throughout the country.

But the problem is that Wilhelmina Scouting Network has no official relationship with top agencies like Ford or Elite, as reps have claimed verbally to would-be models like Chrissy Molloy. The best the agency has reliably been able to do for its models is get them promotional work. A typical gig includes handing out prizes at a hardware store or demonstrating toys on behalf of Hasbro.

“We do not offer gigs,” writes company chairman Lou Pearlman in an e-mail to NEWSWEEK (Pearlman would not conduct an interview over the phone or in person). “We offer opportunities and do not guarantee specific individual results.”

But Michael Gross, whose 1995 book “Model: The Ugly Business of Beautiful Women” was recently republished, points out that “Most of the top modeling agencies will tell models that there is no need to pay anybody anything. Just send in a picture, show up at an open call and they’re going to tell you straight whether you can be a model or not.” WSN still charges wannabe models money to have their pictures shown to agencies.

But the agency’s latest name change (as well as its own advertising) may prove a bit confusing even to those who know their modeling history. Although it’s only been using the Wilhelmina name for two months, the company claims on its Web site’s message board that “The Wilhelmina Scouting Network is the most successful company in the history of modeling.”

A WSN spokesman justifies this claim by pointing to a licensing agreement that allows the firm to use the name of a once-great modeling agency called Wilhelmina Models. Wilhelmina Models was founded in 1967 by Dutch supermodel Wilhelmina Cooper, her husband and two minority partners. Cooper was an icon in the industry, a Vogue cover girl with her own eye for talent—she discovered supermodel Iman.

But in 1980, when Cooper died of lung cancer, the top models began leaving the agency, which had been acquired by her partners. Wilhelmina then sold to Horst-Dieter Esch, a German construction magnate who was looking to build a modeling conglomerate. The name remained the same, but that’s where the similarity with the original Wilhelmina Models ceased.

“Wilhelmina was once a very great agency, and I knew Willie. It was a completely different kettle of fish, but it’s been sold and sold and sold so many times that it just doesn’t hold the same weight that it used to,” says modeling agent and producer Bryan Bantry.

And now, in partnering with Lou Pearlman, the agency is getting into the scouting business. “The question is: is there anything wrong with what they’re doing?” asks Gross. “You could say that they’re preying on models’ dreams. You could also say they’re attempting to *facilitate* their dreams” by showing their pictures around. He points out that actresses Julianne Phillips (“Fletch Lives” and the television show “Sisters”) and Michelle Johnson (“Blame it on Rio”) started their modest careers by coughing up around \$1,000 to attend an open call for models in New York more than 20 years ago.

Pearlman points to one of WSN’s own success stories, a model who he says made \$250,000 in her first year working. And, he says, WSN talent will appear as extras in upcoming films

“Seabiscuit” and “Legally Blonde II.” Still, Florida Assistant Attorney General Jacqueline Dowd is investigating WSN under the state’s unfair-and-deceptive trade-practices law.

Dowd’s office has received hundreds of complaints about the Orlando-based company, several of whose paid consultants—Dave Elliott, Alec DeFrawy and Cortes Randall—have spent time in jail for fraud. WSN is also being investigated by the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, which has received nearly 100 complaints about the company, and the Massachusetts Attorney General’s Office.

Pearlman responds to allegations of misrepresentation by shifting the blame to the scouts. “The company has very strict nonmisrepresentation policies designed to prevent any type of misinformation to potential talent and requires all applicants to wait 24 hours after enrolling to provide actual payment in order to eliminate undue ‘pressure’ or impulse decisions,” he writes in an e-mail.

SLIGHTED SCOUTS

But rank-and-file WSN employees have told NEWSWEEK that misrepresentation and pressure are tacitly encouraged. Darlene Elliott is a former scout who worked her way up to a management position at the Hartford, Conn., branch of WSN when it still went by Trans Continental Talent. “When I officially went to director training at the corporate office in Florida, it became really evident to me that this is a big scam,” she says. “We say in our open-call presentations that we have over 1,000 model agency clients. I want to know what I’m selling is real.”

What Elliott learned was that the Wilhelmina Scouting Network will call an agency to show them a database of models, free of charge. The agency fills out an application saying that they are interested in looking through WSN’s database. “Once they fill that out, they’re considered a registered user. That’s how Wilhelmina [Scouting Network] can get away with saying it has 1,000 registered users,” even if the modeling agencies never once flip through WSN’s face book. (Pearlman declined to disclose a single one of the 1,000 agencies he says are registered users.)

Elliott didn’t know any of this when she signed on as a scout. She, too, was introduced to the company through a job posting on Monster.com. Each would-be model she brought in who then signed with WSN earned her between \$20 and \$50 a week. “They claim to offer benefits. There are no benefits,” says Elliott. “There is no base salary.” Carol Coles, who got *her* scouting gig through Monster.com, says the job ad she responded to promised \$17 an hour.

Five minutes after her first interview, she says, she was scouring the streets of Oakland, Calif., for pretty faces on commission—“no benefits, no hourly.” She worked full-time for a week and convinced five people to go in and sign up. But then she didn’t get paid. After three weeks went by, she stopped trying to recruit people. Then her immediate supervisor quit, telling Coles “it’s not fair to the scouts.” Coles says she eventually badgered her \$250 out of WSN, but was shocked to learn that one of her friends who had signed her 5-year-old on as a model was being asked to pony up \$750. “Their concept is good, but that’s when I just lost it,” she says. “For Monster.com to advertise it as a job is wrong.”

Monster.com apparently agrees. Just last week, the world's largest job board yanked all 1,200 of WSN's talent-scout and modeling-job ads "until this company changes its business practices," according to spokesman Kevin Mullins. The listings claimed that scouts could earn between \$60,000 and \$90,000 a year. Earlier this year Trans Continental Talent was similarly pulled off the HotJobs.com Web site. In a business so reliant on Internet recruiting for scouts and even models, being pulled off of major online job boards could deal quite a blow to the agency's ability to do business.

Still, WSN continues to recruit scouts and models through its own Web site and in-house publication, Industry Magazine. But don't quit your day job if someone on the street says you've got a nice smile—you probably couldn't afford it.

<http://www.msnbc.com/news/928444.asp>

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_kmnew/is_200306/ai_kepm309769