THE BASICS OF PROFESSIONAL MODELLING

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Trevor Spiro, aged 50, was founder and Managing Director of Assassin Management Ltd, one of London’s top high fashion model agencies for men and women.

As well as former owner and Editor of the internationally acclaimed fashion magazine Scene, Trevor is also a highly accomplished photographer and in 1989 was awarded a Licentiate of the Royal Photographic Society. He has also studied holography (three-dimensional photography with lasers) at The Royal College of Art in London under the world renowned Graham Saxby. He holds a BSc degree in aerospace engineering and is a fellow of The Institute of Directors and The Royal Society of Arts.

Trevor is a guest lecturer at many British universities on the diverse, but connected, subjects of fashion, photography, psychology and motivation and has appeared on numerous terrestrial and satellite television and radio stations.

The following guide to modelling is a condensed and updated version of his book So You Want To Be A Model co-written with Rachel Braverman, first published in London in 1992.
The world of modelling could be described as one of soaring highs and gut wrenching lows, where each casting might just possibly lead to the front cover of a major magazine, an international catwalk show, fortune and the stars, but could end up as yet another rejection. Have you got what it takes? Let’s see…

**Basic Requirements**

For girls, you need to be over 5’ 8” (173 cm) and wear a dress size 10 or 12. Boys must be over 5’ 11” (180 cm) and take a size 40. All models must have flawless skin and a well-proportioned frame and you also need to be photogenic - a quality that is hard to define but very apparent to a good agency. Whilst some models are pretty and have a 'boy or girl next door' look that appeals to commercial clients, many of the top models often have striking, strong faces with features that stand out in magazines. A large number of successful models wouldn’t stop the traffic in the street but have the kind of faces that respond well to make-up and can achieve the look a photographer is after.

There is no formal qualification that will get you into an agency, and so-called modelling courses are a waste of time and money. One of the most important attributes is self-confidence, and no course can give you that. Confidence is something that can come with experience, good and bad, but it is often said that you either have it or you don’t. If you don’t perhaps you should consider a less stressful career.

**How agencies find new models**

Agencies often scout for potential models at exhibitions or even in the street. Unfortunately, there are also rip-off merchants about, who pretend to be scouts and are really after taking your money to register with them or to have wildly expensive photographs taken. If you are approached, feel complimented, but be wary. Telephone the agency to make an appointment and take someone with you such as a friend or parent. However, be aware that good agencies need you to be available for most of the time, for opportunistic castings and so on, so try and find one near to where you live unless you plan to relocate. Generally the centre for modelling, particularly for high profile and international work, is London but there are some good agencies in Manchester, Scotland and Eire.
How to approach an agency

Whatever you do, don’t go to a so-called ‘professional photographer’ in order to obtain pictures to initially send or e-mail to an agency. It’s a waste of money. A good agency can tell more about you from a couple of simple snapshots (more about this in the next paragraph). So many girls come in to an agency with ‘portfolios’, but invariably the pictures are posed and lifeless, of poor technical quality, and in all honesty they don’t tell you much about the subject.

If you write in start by sending in two snapshots, one of which should show you smiling straight towards the camera and the other a full-length shot, preferably in casual clothing or a swimsuit to show off the proportions of your body. Don’t forget to enclose your height, vital statistics and age, and include your address and telephone number. Also, don’t choose photos where you’re wearing a lot of make-up or where your hairdo is elaborate. Holiday snaps are ideal as it’s a time when you are likely to be relaxed and happy. In the same way that a good A&R man can assess a pop group’s potential from a demo tape, good agencies can tell the same about a model from a simple snap (as long as it’s in focus!).

Most agencies have times each day when potential models can call in to see a booker, another name for a model’s manager. So you can simply ‘phone up and find out when the ‘open hours’ are and then go along. In the way that you wouldn’t buy the first car you see, try a few agencies and see how you like them. Do they
seem professional? Do they give straightforward answers? Are they in a rush with you? Are they trying to
get you to sign a contract almost as soon as you’ve arrived? Well, don’t ever feel pressurised. Ask to see the
books of some of their models. **Ask any question you like because this is a serious business and you
deserve equally serious answers.** Forget any agency that tries to rush or to hurry you. And if you’ve
forgotten to ask a question, phone back afterwards and speak to the person you saw.

Modelling is a job, like any other. When you go to see an agency, you are going for a job interview. You
must take yourself seriously and you must take the agency seriously, or they won’t be interested in taking
you on. You will not succeed if you are half-hearted or just doing it for a laugh. As agencies see hundreds of
applicants each week they can usually tell very quickly if someone is suitable. If you are rejected most will
give you an explanation as to why.

**Trial periods and contracts**

You will probably be taken on for a trial period of about three months or so, at first. If you are offered a
contract, take it home and read it carefully before you sign. Make sure you understand all the terms and
conditions. Get professional advice if you can, or at least show the contract to someone with experience. In
the excitement it is very easy to get carried away and sign something you may later regret. The top agencies
insist that you use them exclusively, at least for London work. If you live out of town, you may also have an
agency nearer home for local jobs. Smaller agencies, which won’t be able to get you as much work, won’t
mind if you go to other people as well. If you are asked to belong exclusively to one agency do not cheat and
sneak along to another. It is unprofessional, for a start. Modelling is a very small world. People who do the
dirty are usually found out and blacklisted. Also, there is no point in having two agencies looking for work for
you in the same area or at the same time. You will only end up competing against yourself or letting one
agency down and wasting everybody’s time.
New faces

When you first join an agency, you are known as a 'new face'. There's a lot of work to be put in before you start getting work. You need to create your image, start putting your portfolio together, get model cards organised and begin to make yourself known to the clients. Here's where you need to spend some money. A good agency will help you keep your expenses to the minimum and they will often have one booker whose entire job it is to push new faces. Some models are very commercial looking, so they'll appeal to more commercial clients who'll book more regularly and quicker. Some are more editorial or strong looking, so it might take them six months before they work. The hardest part about modelling is getting started. When you first start, you often don't get jobs because people don't know you. But don't despair. You have to be patient and determined. Always remember that if a good agency is willing to represent you, they must have confidence in you.
Creating your image

Your booker will discuss the creation of the right image for you. From now on never make any drastic alteration to your looks, such as cutting long hair short or adding a tattoo, without discussing it beforehand with your agency. A change of image is often a good thing, but you will need to update your portfolio and cards. And you must be prepared for personal comments without being thrown by criticism. If you are going to earn your living by your looks, you have to take care of them and get used to people making constructive comments.

The portfolio

Your portfolio or 'book' is a set of photographs showing you in different styles and moods. It is your 'sales brochure' to the clients and will become your most treasured possession. It goes with you to every visit or job, and an important aspect is to keep your portfolio updated and exciting, reflecting new ideas. Your aim is to collect about ten to fifteen images. More than that and clients will lose interest before they've seen them all. Also, it is a far better advert for you to have fifteen stunning pictures than to have twenty-five pictures of which ten are so-so. Moreover your portfolio will eventually reflect the kind of work you do and the kind of work you want to do.

It is not only models that need pictures for their portfolios. So do photographers, make-up artists and hair stylists. The test system means that people who need photographs, including make-up artists and stylists, gang together to do a shoot, so everyone ends up with prints. The agency will have a list of photographers they use to test. In the old days, you didn't have to pay anything for a shoot and would get some prints for free. However, nowadays, photographers often need to ask for money to cover film, processing and prints. One of the myths is that you build a portfolio from one photographer, but the truth is you need to get different
looks from as many different photographers as possible. It can take ten weeks to get three pictures. It can take a day. There's no set rule to it.

The model card

Your model card is your calling card. It is normally an A5 sized stiff card with your first name, the agency's details and a couple of your best pictures. One common method is to put a stunning, eye catching shot on one side and a couple of others on the back showing alternate styles. If you've done a prestigious editorial or advertising job, one of those pictures might be used to tell the clients that you're in the big league. This is another item you have to pay for. Expect to be charged in the region of £120 for a thousand cards. This may seem like a lot, but they go quickly. Every time you go to a casting or see a client, you leave a card. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, your agency will also be sending mail shots to existing and prospective clients.

The Agency's Book

Most agencies produce a glossy book containing pictures of all their models. You have to pay to be in it, but it is important advertising. Prices vary from agency to agency and according to how much space you want to pay for, but it's important to be in the book because clients use it as a reference when they choose models. Agencies normally update them once or twice a year, and do a mail shot of all their clients. This means your face will be seen by literally thousands of people who are in a position to offer you work.

How Your Booker Finds You Work: 'castings' and 'go-sees'

'Booker' is another word for manager. He or she is responsible for booking you work. New faces are often looked after by one person in particular, but after that any of the bookers might be the one to get you a job. Some agencies divide the work into different areas, with one person in charge of editorial, another in charge of shows and so on. The booker's job is in two parts: touting for business and handling the administration of work when it comes in. Touting for business means sending out cards and the agency's book, and sending models out to visit clients on 'go-sees'. This involves the model going to see an editor or a photographer or a
casting agent, showing your book and generally getting to know the clients. Unlike a casting, it is not attached to a particular job, but the principle is similar. Because there aren't so many people to see, the client may be able to give you more time. If you are sent on a casting, the agency will have been presented with a brief, giving details of the kind of model the clients are looking for. Sometimes clients will ask for a model by name, but often if they don't have anyone particular in mind, they will invite models with, for example, short dark hair and stunning eyes.

Once a client decides you are suitable, there is a complicated system of 'provisionals' and 'options'. The reason for this is that once a booking is confirmed, the client has to pay a cancellation fee. So many things can go wrong and so many people have to be co-ordinated, that people often prefer to leave booking to the absolute last moment. This means, however, that the model they want may not be available, so clients can place a provisional booking which is like a reservation. Remember that even when you start working, there can be a time lag between doing jobs and getting paid, so be aware you will have to budget for:

- Travel and accommodation
- Clothes and cosmetics
- Photographic tests
Whilst there are many perfectly reputable agencies about that will treat you honourably and can find you work, you've probably heard horror stories of places that take your money and rip you off. Unfortunately, this does happen, so you need to be careful. **Never sign any contracts or part with money until you understand exactly what is involved** - if in doubt, consult a professional advisor such as a lawyer.

**Checking-in**

You check in with the agency, usually by phone, twice a day, once in the morning to see if anything has changed from the night before and later in the day to see if anything has come in during the morning and to receive instructions for the next day. Your agent is not your boss as you will be self-employed. Neither is he or she your servant, who does everything for you. It is very much a partnership. Be very clear as to what is your responsibility. If you are unhappy about something, say so. However understand that ultimately your job is to sell the clients' products. You may well be faced with having to model clothes you think are horrendous, but, frankly, that's tough. You've got to make those clothes look wonderful. That's what you're paid for!

**The Model Release Form**

In order for a photographer to be able to use pictures of you commercially, you have to sign a 'model release form'. The agency will have told you what the pictures are for and those are the only uses to which you should agree. This is because if a photographer takes a picture for a magazine, for example, and then manages to sell it to an advertising agency, you should get another fee.

**What makes a successful model?**

The look, right? To a large extent, yes but you need the personality as well. Perhaps the most important thing is drive. With so much competition, you have to want to be a model wholeheartedly and single-mindedly. There are no guarantees, there are only possibilities. But if you want it enough, you'll work at it because you might just make it one day. You've got to have that mental attitude or it's no good. As a model, you will be faced with continual criticism of the way you look. It's part of the job. You can't afford to be insecure about your looks or your personality. This is probably the hardest thing of all. Very few people are truly confident although many know how to appear as though they are. You just need to learn some of the tricks yourself. Remember that modelling is a job - at the end of the day, you can go home, shut the door and it's over. Your family and friends, who love you for yourself, are invaluable. They can help you keep things in perspective. When you feel nothing but a pretty face and a nice pair of legs, being amongst friends reminds you that you are also a human being.
Even if you’re not tall enough to model, you could be destined for stardom as a celebrity!
**Looking after yourself: weight problems and bulimia**

Modelling does not cause eating disorders, but the modelling life can make them more likely. With many agencies, female models can be pressurised into being exceptionally thin: this is something that we do not do at Assassin. For a woman of 5'9” to be a size 10/12 is to be very, very slim, much slimmer than more than half the women in this country who are a size 16 or over. Human beings come in all shapes and sizes, though you might not think it from the media, and there are exceptionally few women who are naturally very tall and skinny. However, most models have a battle with their weight. When work is scarce, or if there's a problem at home, it is very easy to blame problems on your weight. "I didn't get that advertising jobs because my hips are so big" or "he'd love me if I were slimmer". You come back from yet another casting you know you haven't got. You're tired and fed up, so you buy a Mars bar to cheer you up. Then, you feel guilty. The chocolate is sitting there, making you feel worse, not better. You decide to put your fingers down your throat to get rid of it, or you resolve not to eat dinner to make up for it. It's a slippery slope. In no time, food has become the focal point of your life. You find that most models smoke a lot in order to keep weight down. It is not for us to moralise, but it is our responsibility to tell you to avoid drugs ‘cos drugs ruin lives. Enough said!

**Relationships**

Modelling is an unusual job and it can cause problems in relationships. Models have a difficult image. They're seen as glamorous and vain, used to the high life and not interested in ordinary things. It can make people bitchy and resentful or it puts them off. The other side to this coin is the problem of people wanting to be seen with a model and who aren't really interested in getting to know them. Because models are looked at all day long, it is easy for their boy and girl friends to become insecure and jealous, whereas in reality if they really are your friends it should up to them to be understanding and reassuring. Whether it's friends, partners or families, the worst thing is to let resentment build up silently. Be aware that these problems may occur and face them if they do. A lot of the time, people appear to behave badly because they're worried or jealous or insecure. Reassurance works wonders, so does compromise. You may have to balance the really important jobs against the really important occasions. At the end of the day, there will be people who cannot cope with your career, but this is one of the hazards of life, not just modelling.

**THE TYPES OF MODELLING**

**Catwalk**

Everyone loves to do shows. Although it's not the best paid work, it's very prestigious and a lot of models think it's the most fun. Most shows involve a catwalk or 'runway', but there are still a few that use the traditional 'couture' style, where models walk along the carpet, instead of on a raised stage. Couture is quite popular with fabric manufacturers, as the buyers can stop the models to feel the cloth. Catwalk models have to be even taller than normal. It's very unlikely that you'll get this type of work if you're a woman under 5'9". This is about the only aspect of modelling where there's a real reason for wanting tall people. When you're on a catwalk and people are looking up at you, your body appears to be foreshortened. You need the extra height to compensate for this.
Editorial refers to stills photography in the press. The huge number of newspapers and magazines in the UK and around the world make this a large market. As well as fashion shoots for magazines, you could be involved in lifestyle articles or fitness features, to name just a couple. For fashion, there is a definite hierarchy of magazines, with Vogue and Elle at the top. The pay is on the low side for modelling and despite what you might have assumed, goes down the more prestigious the magazine. However, models are always keen on editorial work because they get excellent pictures for their portfolios and a high reputation. Work breeds work in this business.
Beauty

Beauty modelling refers to close-up photographs of the face and the hair. The pictures are used all over the place - advertising make-up or demonstrating hairstyles, for instance. It is a separate category, because the models who do it have to have special qualities. Their skin needs to be absolutely flawless. The camera goes in so close, it picks up every tiny detail. Powder clings, so facial hair that's completely invisible to the naked eye can easily show on a picture. Even so, retouching a photograph is common. Very young girls are often chosen for beauty work because their skin can stand the scrutiny of the camera. Also, models will be chosen because of a particular feature. The client may want a girl with broad eyelids to advertise eye make-up or full lips for lipstick.
Catalogue

Catalogues are used to sell just about everything these days. Although the majority of catalogue work for models is still showing off clothes, you could find yourself sitting on garden furniture or selling a kitchen or hi-fi system. Models for catalogues usually have 'commercial' rather than 'editorial' looks. This means they are more conventionally pretty, with so-called 'next door appeal'. The style of photography tends to be less imaginative than it would be for pure fashion but this is a matter of time and expense. Catalogues for mail order can be huge and budgets limited. However, there is a growing trend for upmarket ones, such as the Next Directory, to use strong models and exciting photography. There is a big market for outsize and petite models for catalogues, as they provide the choice in clothes outside the so-called 'normal' ranges lacking in high-street shops.
**Advertising**

This is where the really big money is and, surprise, surprise, the most competition. A lot of models would kill to have their faces in every magazine and staring down from the hoardings. If you are lucky enough to become associated with a prestigious product, such as a fragrance or lipstick, your modelling career will be made. Whilst it tends to be less well paid than it used to be, it is still where the wealth lies. Models are often used in pop videos as dancers or even pretending to be backing singers, miming the words of the song. You may be asked to mime in commercials as well, if the client likes your looks but not your voice. There are actors who specialise in voiceovers. Also, when commercials get sold abroad, they may be dubbed. You've probably seen such ad on the TV that are obviously American from their style, but where the voices have solid English accents.

**Promotions**

Clients often hire models to promote new products or special offers at exhibitions or in shops. You could be asked to hand out samples or leaflets and you often have to dress in a company's outfit. The money isn't as good as other types of modelling but you could get several days guaranteed work. It can also be tiring, as you have to be on your feet, cheerful and smiling all day long. Promotional work doesn't normally come through castings. A client will ring up the agency and ask for four blondes, for example. The agent may send pictures for the client to choose from, or simply book four suitable people.

**Glamour**

Glamour basically means taking your clothes off. It is a wide market, ranging from the Page 3 and calendar girls through lingerie and bath product shoots to artistic nudes shot by top photographers. You have to be over sixteen for glamour work, but you don't have to be so tall. These days, there is less distinction at the higher end between glamour work and other types of modelling. Nudity is far more acceptable than it used to be. A few years ago, you would be paid more for nude or topless shots, but these days the rates are similar. In fact, glamour models complain that the fashion models are muscling in on their castings for lingerie and so on.
Think carefully before deciding to try for glamour work of the Page 3 and calendar kind. How would you feel about being recognised in the street? How would your parents feel? What do you think of these pictures yourself? If you go for glamour modelling, it is almost impossible to cross over into fashion modelling, even if you do meet the height requirements.

TV And Video

TV and video work for models is mostly commercials and pop videos. It is well-paid and good fun. Being able to move well is essential and acting is a very useful skill. Models who have done a lot of this kind of work often get a compilation video made called a ‘showreel’ that they can show clients along with their portfolios and model cards.

The castings are slightly different to those for stills photography, because you will probably be videoed as part of the audition. You might be asked to perform an action that will be in the commercial so the client can see how you look on camera. Making a commercial is like making a mini film. It can take a week to get material for a thirty second advertisement with lots of people and an enormous number of shots. For models, there’s a lot of time spent hanging around. The pay is good. If you are featured, in other words if your face is shown clearly, you will be paid much more than if you are part of the background.

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