

Carlos: Hey this is Carlos Castellanos and welcome to the first Drawn By Success recorded Q&A call.

You know, I usually get a few questions from illustrators and cartoonists on everything from marketing to pricing to crappy clients to finding better clients to being more productive and just everything in between. And for me, this is an area that I really enjoy spending my time in, helping other creative freelancers become more successful, sharing my almost 30 years of experience running my own full service art studio to freelancing as an illustrator, syndicated cartoonist and entrepreneur.

I'm really jazzed about finally being able to do this.

Today's Q&A is from a web cartoonist who contacted me a few days ago with some questions regarding syndication, pricing, some specific market questions, the all too troublesome web versus print argument which I have my own opinions on, among other things. We actually cover a quite a bit here so let's get started.

Cartoonist: Hi Carlos! Well, one of the things I was wondering is, as far as syndication goes, I was wondering can I know how it started for you and what the actual process was?

You know, I received some rejection letters myself and it's not a good day but I'm continuing to send stuff out there. I was wondering what is the process and what actually happened to you? Did you get a phone call? How did the contracts work? Did you get a lawyer involved? Maybe you could tell me a little bit about your journey of syndication and how that happened.

Carlos: Sure. Now, do you have a list of all the syndicates already that you plan on sending your work to?

Cartoonist: Yes. I've already sent them there. I don't have it right in front of me.

Carlos: Okay, so, for those who don't know, syndicates do make their submission guidelines available on their websites. So, you'll know exactly what's required when sending in your submission.

Well, when we got started, aside from the cover letter with brief comic strip description and the 4-6 weeks daily comic strips required by syndicates, we also included quite a bit of support material in terms of market research for the strip. You see, at the time we were submitting the strip, there weren't any other Hispanic-themed comic strips in the papers, so we wanted to be sure that the syndicates were aware of the opportunity in the growing market that wasn't being exploited – that being the Hispanic market.

On our first round of mail-outs, of course we received our fair share of rejection letters. We were lucky enough though to pique the interest of 2 major syndicates – those of Tribune and Universal Press. After some deliberation and many conversations, we finally decided to go with Universal Press syndicate. We were offered a 3 month development contract under which we continued to basically produce the strip while we were working closely with the syndicate editors. At the end of the 3 months, they signed us up for the syndication contract and scheduled a launch date. So, it went relatively quickly for us and we were actually pretty lucky in that.

Just as an aside, the creators of the syndicates show an interest in what some cartoonists put under a development deal for upwards of a year sometimes only to be released from the contracts and then nothing ever happens with their feature. The purpose of the development period, also for the syndicate, is to see if the concept has legs and to see if the creators can deliver the same level of work that they saw in their 4-6 week submissions. A few creators quickly discover the immense pressure of having to

produce the strips on a daily basis and figure out it's not for them and then drop out. And yes, we did hire a lawyer.

Cartoonist: Can I ask you this – I've heard that a lot of times it's very unusual in that it's not like a 50-50 split between the cartoonist or creator and syndicate. Or that it IS a 50-50 split as opposed to any other arrangement where it is like 80-20.

Carlos: The 50-50 split is fairly standard in the industry. The syndicates reasoning for this is they see themselves as a partner versus your agent in this relationship.

This is an aside. I think the use of the word partner versus agent in and of itself is an interesting lesson on how the use of certain words describing what you do can add more perceived value and reposition your offering in the marketplace in such a way that justifies the higher fees. This has nothing to do with the syndication itself. Also, it typically takes a year or so for them to make back their investment in a comic strip launch which includes PR, material, mailings, traveling, sales force, selling, and all that kind of stuff.

Of course, if it turns out that you have a really popular strip on your hands and the syndicate is in the black very quickly, and you did a good job on negotiating for a shorter contract such as 5 years, you could probably, in all likelihood, be able to re-negotiate those terms to a more favorable split than the 50-50 you went in with.

As a side note on that, be careful with automatic renewal clauses in the contract. Using the example I just gave you, if there's an automatic renewal clause in place, you might not have the right to re-negotiate your original terms when the syndicate chooses to exercise their renewal right at the end of the term. So, what you want to be able to do at the end of the term is be able to re-negotiate before the renewal kicks in otherwise they could renew for another 5-10 years depending on what your contract says without having to change any of the terms. Also, be sure that if an automatic renewal clause is in effect, you and the syndicate can re-negotiate the terms at the end of the contract and must be in agreement on the new terms before the contract renewal is exercised by the syndicate.

As a great business philosopher Jim Rohn says “You don't get what you're worth, you get what you negotiate”

Cartoonist: Now this is a very unique business. Are there certain lawyers that specialize in this? I imagine you can't just go to any old lawyer that does wills or whatever, and then he'll know how to negotiate the right way to find out. Do you know how to contact the decent person to negotiate or to go over the contract with?

Carlos: Typically an entertainment lawyer is what you're looking for.

Cartoonist: OK

Carlos: Someone who deals with licensing rights and all that kind of stuff.

Cartoonist: Let me ask you this, just because it kinda goes if a cartoonist does not get syndicated and they decide to go ahead and try to build an audience on their own or maybe self syndicate which I've heard is virtually impossible. But I think it may very well be possible to go ahead and put something in a magazine or maybe a weekly newspaper or something. I've noticed just going over some of the markets and some of the books that are out there, they say there are different magazines and publications that you can submit comic strips and things to . My concern is that my strip has a recurring

character in it. It's not a single panel where it's different animals. I have characters that recur over and over again. My fear is that a lot of publications have a clause that say they own the rights to the artwork for something like a one time sale. So, if I sell a single strip to a women's magazine or something, does that mean I can no longer use those characters again? That's kind of my main concern I suppose.

Carlos: The publications you're talking about are magazines?

Cartoonist: Yeah, primarily. I've come across a couple that will say we own the rights to the artwork. I don't know if that's a single time.

Carlos: Typically, magazines, what's usually in their contract is First Time North American Publication Rights, for example, which means that you're doing something and submitting something to them and they get to run it first and that's it. After they run it then the rights are yours. They don't own the rights to the artwork or the characters. They just want that first right to run it. So, in other words, they don't want another magazine to be running it at the same time for example.

Cartoonist: Oh I see!

Carlos: Now, you want to make sure that's what it says. I'm not looking at the contract you've seen. But that's the typical contract that I've looked at. So obviously, if you sell a strip or a gag cartoon to a magazine under those conditions then you want to be able to honor that and not have it running in another publication at the same. Although you may be able to run it on your site but you'll have to ask them if that's okay.

Cartoonist: So I guess that goes into my other question too is that I probably should try and sell the strips first before posting them on my website as that somehow would have some more appeal to them?

Carlos: Yeah, whenever can you sell your strip first to anyone, it's always going to be a better deal than posting it for free on the website. That first time that you run it, even if you run the strip once in a magazine and then three or four months down the road another magazine comes back and says "Oh we'd like to run that strip." They may not pay you as much since it's already been out there. Everything is negotiable. It's really a matter of what you negotiate. But typically the first person that runs that is really going to pay the premium because that hasn't been seen anywhere before. It's not in any other publication and their audience is seeing it for the very first time. You really want to consider that when pricing stuff out.

Cartoonist: Ok. So that means that I can go ahead and if I sell it to a magazine that, a month later I can also go ahead and put it on a mug or something if I want to or up on the website?

Carlos: Yeah. Absolutely. You want to cover that with them and go over their specific contract as to how long they'll need, if it's a monthly publication you want to let it run for a month and maybe after that month after those 30 days, you will be able to do other stuff with it. Or maybe they don't care if you're trying to sell a mug with the image on it while it's in their magazine because it's probably not going to be the same audience that's looking at it. So, all those are the little things you need to bring up in conversation when you're doing that. Obviously if you don't have any intention of putting it on a mug at that particular moment, there's no sense in bringing it up and muddying the waters.

Cartoonist: Well, this is completely new to me as far as pricing goes, I've seen some different rates that cartoonists have online and for a cartoonist that doesn't have a syndication contract. I'm trying to negotiate with my own community newspaper which is fabulous but trying to decipher what is the right price is very difficult. Is it based on the circulation of the publication? Should the price differences vary

between offering a black and white and a color illustration? Do you have an opinion what would be a fair price?

Carlos: Syndicates charge these papers depending on their circulation. You're probably just at the mercy of the newspaper when they tell you what their rate is and then decide at that point if it's something that you're willing to do it for. And if it's not, come back with a counter offer. They are getting something that's nowhere else. It's not in other papers. It's unique to them. That's a selling point you have to build up.

Your audience is also a very specific audience that maybe they're trying to attract to the paper. You need to be able to highlight what your strip brings to the table. It's not just a funny strip. You've got to really build the value in what you're supplying whether it be the audience, what they can expect to get out of those kind of readers to build up the value for the newspaper.

Cartoonist: Ok. Something I did recently was I asked my fan base, as you probably know, to go ahead and post a comment on the website for the newspaper that had interviewed me and the response was just incredible. So, we talked to the editor yesterday and she said that yes, she did notice that there were 50 something comments or whatever and that's something I could leverage as well.

Carlos: Absolutely! Again, take a close look at maybe doing a survey of your audience. Find out if it's mostly men, mostly women, what age range are they in? All that could really help in identifying who your target audience is for the newspaper because they think in terms of target audiences as well. The more information you go in with from a marketing standpoint the better.

And the other end of that is creating the value for your clients and that's how you build your prices up. That's how you build your value. Maybe even their income levels if they're comfortable with that depending on the kind of relationship you with them. If they're signing up on your blog and if you have constant communication with them and they're comfortable giving you that information and let them know why you need it, they may be more than happy to assist you with that.

Cartoonist: And that's something I can use on marketing to syndicates and things like that?

Carlos: Absolutely! If the syndicates don't bite, you can use it to go after newspapers in different cities. If you have, depending on where your readers are from, your readers could be from everywhere. You could even have readers help you out with the campaign to help influence a feature editor at their local newspaper to carry your strip. There's a lot of different things you can do.

Cartoonist: As far as cartoonists giving their work away. My comic is now known as a web comic. I don't know if that might have, it may be a very bad mark, I don't know. But I've heard from that people that do web comics that it's based on a music model. People hear a song on the radio for free, they hear it over and over again, then they download it on iTunes or buy a CD or something. Or they go to a concert.

So, do you think that model works? If you provide your strip for free online, do the syndicates say no? Do newspapers say no? What's your opinion on that avenue and that model? If I sell a t shirt or a print for instance?

Carlos: There's a very heated conversation between cartoonists, or for a lack of better words, traditional mainstream cartoonists in papers. The syndicated cartoonists or the traditional cartoonists that have worked for print, the large majority of them, can't see why anyone would post your strips online for free. Their position is that it devalues it in the marketplace. To a certain extent, they're right.

I mean, if you're giving it away for free, no one is going to pay for it.

On the other hand, it's a totally different business model. And that's what the traditional paper cartoonists don't seem to get which the web cartoonists do. It's really no different from any other online business. You look at a lot of online businesses – a lot of them give away a lot of stuff for free to build their traffic and build their audience and build a mailing list. When you can do that kind of model, you have to realize the least valuable aspect of what you're doing is that comic strip in and of itself when you put it out there.

The value's on the back end part of your business – posters, limited prints, special membership service that gives them access to private stuff of yours that no one else is getting access to. You've really got to get creative with this stuff and you need a back-end to make it work. If you don't have a back-end to make it work and all you have is strips then yes, it's going to be a long broke ride. You're not making money. It could be a very successful business model if done correctly and if you can develop a following.

There's nothing wrong with that model. You need to sell at some point which is the bottom line. Then you need to have something to sell and someone to sell it to on the back-end.

Cartoonist: Interesting! Let me ask you this based on that. I have built up what I think is a fairly large audience and I'm kicking myself because what I want and have always wanted, which to me is the holy grail, is to be in print. Unfortunately newspapers, are kind of on the downside of things, but they still offer the color page on Sunday. I'm kicking myself a little bit here but I don't know if there's a way to balance it too and maybe just keep writing strips but maybe just post one a week as opposed to all of them or something to keep that audience and to keep them happy but still have bank of strips to save for newspapers.

What's your opinion on that? I've built up this wonderful audience and I feel like I can't let them down but at the same time I heard a great quote the other day, it was something like when bankers get together, they talk about art or when artists get together they talk about how to make money. And I think that's a great quote. I mean, ultimately, it's fun but it would sure be nice to be in print and actually do this for a living. It would be a wonderful way to make a living.

I'm just wondering if that's something I should be doing? Maybe keep my audience, maybe just post 1 a week, keep the others for the syndicates, and keep pushing for that kind of ultimate route there?

Carlos: Absolutely. I think it's important to develop that web presence. And it's really important that you do both because the syndication model, as it is right now, the newspapers, which is no news to anyone, are really hurting really badly. A lot of people are looking at syndication models – syndication in newspapers as something that's dying out. It's not a growing industry by any means. So, a lot of people aren't really looking to get syndicated so much as they are leaning more towards the web and developing their own thing where they don't have to have a 50-50 split, they have more control over what they're doing.

If you're in the process of trying to get syndicated by a major syndicate, by all means, continue doing what you're doing on the web. It's not going to affect it at all. If anything, you're developing a larger audience and you're enabling yourself to be able to sell yourself to a syndicate a whole lot easier.

Cartoonist: A couple more things. I also wanted to ask you - another community newspaper that we've talked to about my strip, they have offered to run it but they would like to run it for free. So, just starting out, gosh it would be wonderful just to see yourself in print even if you don't get paid for it.

What's your opinion on that as far as not selling it but just getting your name out there and maybe having one or two much smaller newspapers in your community run the strips for free?

Carlos: That's a real touchy one. It really comes down to a personal preference. What I do has value and if someone wants to run it then they can pay me. I understand because when I started out, I wanted to see my stuff in print too. So, I wanted to make it easy for that to happen. What you can maybe do is negotiate something. Is it a daily or weekly thing?

Cartoonist: For me, I would never do a daily for free. That would just be...

Carlos: A lot of work!

Cartoonist: Exactly. And for what? This would be more of a weekly thing. It's something I'm doing already anyways. I post it on the Web. But I see your point as far as devaluing it.

Carlos: But you know what? It doesn't necessarily have to devalue it. It really depends on how you choose to look at it. If you're just looking from a print cartoonist standpoint where the value is in the print, well then, I'm giving you my work for free, right? If I'm from the mindset that my value is on the Internet then yeah, I'll give it to you for free. My link is on there. I'm going to drive more traffic to my site. The people who are local will probably be more devoted fans than those who may not be local. Then, set up your site to be able to take advantage of that.

Again, through books, posters- your back-end. If you look at it as the value is just the print which in this case, it could be or it may not be. If you don't have a website and a back-end then the value is the print. If you have a website and you have a back-end that you're building up, then the value is there and not necessarily in the print because the print is a one time thing. When someone sees that in the paper and you get them to come to your site and then become a member of your community and you start emailing them and building a relationship and offering them different opportunities to purchase from you, then what's the limit there? There is no limit!

Cartoonist: Right.

Carlos: It really depends on how you choose to look at it and it's really the business model that you're leaning towards. I hope that makes sense.

Cartoonist: It does. That's great. I think every cartoonist ultimately wants to see themselves in print.

Carlos: To see my stuff in print, I still kinda get goosebumps sometimes to be able to see my stuff next to some of these other strips I think are really cool. But it's always cool to have. But you have to keep the emotional part of you in check and look at it realistically. Again, if you're looking at it from a business standpoint then you've got to get serious about that and where the money is for you.

Cartoonist: Right. Absolutely! I also wanted to ask you about using brand names in a strip. I've noticed, for whatever reason, TV shows like Saturday Night Live can parody political figures and mention different names of stores and things like that. I've noticed that some strips do it. Some strips actually mention celebrities or Coca Cola. And others instead of saying Costco they say Big Box Store. What's the actual rule about mentioning the trademark? How does that work? Is it better to say Starbucks or should we say Starschmucks?

Carlos: You know, there really isn't a hard and fast rule for that. We've used name brands before and specific people in our strip in the past. Now, the syndicates tend to shy away from stuff like that

because they don't want to have to deal with the backlash particularly if it's something negative. If you're mostly on the Web, you can do whatever you want. The only reason I see a lot of people backing off it in print because editors, and it's not really as much the editors at the syndicates, it's the editors at the newspapers, they don't want to deal with the backlash. So, syndicate editors become really sensitive to that.

Cartoonist: So, if your ultimate goal is to be in print, then avoid using any sort of brand name?

Carlos: Yeah. The editors do get touchy about it and magazines are probably the same, although maybe to a lesser extent. Any kind of publication is going to have those concerns.

Cartoonist: Well I appreciate you talking to me about everything. Great information to have. So, thank you so much.

Carlos: I hope this gets you up and rolling. I hope you hear from the syndicates real soon with a contract in hand.

Cartoonist: Well I hope I do. I'll be contacting you with more questions! I'd love to talk more about that as well.

Carlos: It's my pleasure.

Cartoonist: Thank you so much.

Carlos: So anyway that concludes this Q&A and I hope it's been helpful.

So what are you struggling with?

What's the biggest hurdle you have right now regarding your cartooning or freelance illustration career?

Drop me a line at drawnbysuccess.com.

I'll get you the answers you absolutely need to succeed.

This is Carlos Castellanos of DrawnBySuccess.com. I'll see you at the top.