

“What *Does* a Portfolio Look Like These Days?”

Speak Up, January 26, 2006

<http://www.underconsideration.com/speakup/archives/002526.html>

One of my classes is the last graphic design class for seniors at East Carolina University so the subject of portfolios inevitably comes up. I told them that they would probably want several variations of portfolios—a website, an electronic portfolio on disk that they can mail or leave, and what one would have traditionally thought of as a portfolio. But what is that last thing?

If you hire designers, what observations do you have about the form of the portfolios you look at? Are handcraft and interesting binding impressive or distractions? Are boards the flexible way to arrange work while showing the proper respect or a clumsy pain? Can a well-maintained collection of loose pieces allow you to feel what opening a book or brochure really feels like for the reader or does that just seem sloppy and overly casual?

What do people do with their portfolios that impress you and what (other than the quality of the work shown) makes you want to shut them and scream “leave me alone!”?

If you have been looking for work, what reactions have you seen to the structure of your portfolio (as opposed to the quality of the work shown)? What have you found most useful and what have you discovered is a waste of time?

Do you end up dropping off your portfolio? FedExing it? Just emailing a URL? Is the portfolio you send or leave the same as the one you carry for an interview?

If you hire designers, what about smaller samples? Is it effective to get postcards mailed to you? PDFs emailed to you?

I've been showing work to potential clients, peers, and to instructors for feedback. I do it all on screen.

I find that I don't get awarded jobs based on print quality, paper texture. I get and hold interest when I frame the problems and explain my solutions. The "portfolio" becomes a visual accompaniment to a well-articulated end of a conversation with the person on the other side of the table.

For a while, full-screen PDF presentations were sufficient. Now I find Keynote best, because motion work, audio, videos, and web links are easily maintained and integrated.

I've consistently hear from showing work this way that the viewer was impressed with how organized and together the presentation was. I usually put in blank slide before pieces that need an extended setup. This way, I maintain attention on what I'm saying, then reveal the piece. No one has ever indicated that they wish they were in control of the process. In fact, some appreciated not having to "work" to review. There isn't any awkward board shuffling or page-flipping.

□

When I used to be the art director looking at books, it wasn't the carrying case, or even the mumbled awkwardness of explaining their work, but the intrinsic power of good graphics and originality that mattered.

I've seen memorable young photographers bring their best work in humble supermarket brown bags and just knock my socks off with their images. Portfolio's are nothing but bags. If there's nothing inside that grabs me, then it's all show and no punch. The trickier the portfolio the more I think the kid stayed too long in school. Even in student work, of which I've seen my fair share, I could see if the work or the portfolio case was more important. My rule of thumb was cut them some slack, be encouraging and not injurious.

But now the shoe is on the other foot, and I am the one walking around with a portfolio. Since evacuating New Orleans and not taking essential portfolio material with me, showing my work around a new city has beenah..... educational, disappointing and painful. Oh sure, people can fawn all over an award-winning piece but they see a Post-Katrina Designer and somehow it just takes the air out of the room: I don't get hired. Well, not yet anyway. I'm beginning to think that big time CDs enjoy outsider creative work but they hire friends. Am I wrong in this?

As much as I seem to yack a lot around here, I'm really shy. So showing a portfolio takes summoning up some courage-by-necessity.

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First, I will say I am a web designer who has both been recently looking for work and slightly less recently in the position of hiring interns.

As someone who recently ran the gauntlet with tons of interviews... I took my laptop with sites statically queued up for offline viewing (so as to not have to depend on internet connection) as well as a hard copy portfolio with printouts and the very little print work I have (for what it's worth, I use the metal portfolio from veer.com because I think it goes well with my powerbook). In the interest of streamlining, I ended up just having sites with animation or interactive elements that weren't represented in print on the laptop. I also maintain an up to date online portfolio.

When I get to the interview, sometimes they have already gone through my work online and sometimes they want to see everything. Regardless, they seem to appreciate someone arriving totally prepared.

On the other side, when interviewing web design candidates, the presentation of it mattered to me less than a demonstration of ability and the quality of the work. The same issues of craftsmanship and originality apply whether it is digital or hard copy (an example of poor craftsmanship in a digital portfolio being poor image optimization or sloppy font usage). Since I was hiring interns, I didn't need to see a lot of technical web skills, so I suppose if hiring a more experienced person, some digital presentation would be needed.

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I am an Art Director at an agency, and am involved in interviewing/reviewing portfolios for both print and web positions for both freelance and full-time work.

First, in my opinion, unsolicited promos - postcards, direct mail, email, etc. are a waste of time. I simply don't have the time to pay attention to them. Postcards probably have a better chance of getting my attention because I have to look at it, whereas email just gets deleted immediately or completely ignored.

That said, I think it is important to have your portfolio in a variety of formats. A few sample jpgs or a short pdf attached to an emailed resume definitely help a candidate to stand out, and an online portfolio is a must.

We generally don't look at physical portfolios except during interviews. Occasionally, books are dropped off, but they sit around and get buried because we don't usually have time to look at them. As far as format goes, I have to agree that the quality of the work is more important than the presentation, though attention to detail is always important; A loose 4"x6" postcard floating around inside a 17"x20" sleeve is not a quality presentation.

My personal preference is for a smaller book - maybe 11"x14" max (bound or boards - doesn't matter) with a small group of loose samples as a supplement. The smaller size makes for a less awkward presentation, plus the loose work allows us to "experience" the piece from an end-user perspective and also evaluate things like paper choices and attention to fine detail.

In my opinion, printing a hard copy of web work is a waste of time. It is always going to look bad, and to me, the quality of the underlying code is as important as the visual presentation.

I'm intrigued by the idea of a keynote portfolio presentation, though I'd still definitely want to see printed samples if it were for a print position.

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i'm three years out of school and actively interviewing for either freelance or full-time work... **the best tool i've had to get my foot in any door has been my AIGA Design Jobs link.** i find interviewers prefer that to PDFs or CDs, especially because it's easy to use in conjunction with a phone interview. it allows for five pieces and low bandwidth, so people aren't juggling a series of hefty attachments but still feel that they get to see a good amount of work.

when called in for the interview, i bring a sweet book i bought my senior year, and show the work inside chronologically (i've had six very different jobs since graduating, and allocate a page or a spread to each). this seems to go over well because it's an easy & linear narrative. i hope the work speaks for itself... i'm a fan of showing it clean and simple. hopefully this doesn't come across as cocky, but that seems to make a pretty good impression.



what i've seen to be useful: always show up early, be clear about what you want (frightening as that is!), and be friendly (it can be so easy to get defensive about your work).

a waste of time: not doing research beforehand. i can't stress that enough. approach the interview with questions about your possible role and about how the company plans to grow. and think about what you want to see them do; (this might get me in trouble, i'm not suggesting working on spec here) some of my best clients have come from me looking at a project, saying "if i could direct this, it would look *this* way." then i whip up a little something, send it over and say "look what i can do for you." then they call me back and the real fun begins. this has gotten people excited because it implies that i can do the work and already have a good understanding of it walking into the project.

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I am building an online portfolio to teach myself XHTML & CSS and to help in my low-key job hunt. (I'd post the url but I haven't picked a hosting company yet.) This is an interesting topic and I look forward to reading many responses.

I have been trying to translate my print-based body of work into an interesting and representative pixel-based gallery. It's been a trial, to not put everything up, to narrow down my selected pieces to the few best. This is the same problem I face with my paper book. I haven't decided about overlap with my hardcopy portfolio for potential face-to-face interviews. Is it better to hit them with the cream of the crop first? What if they never look at my online portfolio--I don't want to sell myself short. Does the 12-15 pieces rule apply online? So many questions.

So far, I've kept my work divided by content, presenting each piece with a brief description of objective, results (if favorable) and process issues (if overcome). My hardcopy book is a 3-ring binder, with pieces mounted inside. I can flip quickly, but retain the flexibility to rearrange as needed. I always explain work as I go and have never left a portfolio behind. No one has complained about the presentation style or manner.

□

I found my current job with my work presented in my portfolio right out of school. It is a typical black carrying case with a handle that unzips flat to reveal my print work mounted on individual black boards, or not mounted if it is a brochure, etc. that needs to be handled.

I think personally this makes it easier for the viewer to look at everything at once (if spread out on conference room tables like mine were a few times).

That was the way my professor told me to do it. He said that that was the "only" professional way of presenting your work.

I believe we were supposed to do a website as well, but I never got around to creating the site (mostly because I am horrible at web design and hate it).

After I graduated and was looking for work I got advice from professionals in the field on whether or not a website was necessary, and the generic answer was no, not if I thought it wouldn't show my work to its fullest, and I am not a web designer so it wouldn't matter as much.

Other students in my class had similar portfolios that were turned down by my teacher because they were the style that had bound pages and work would be slipped into clear pages, and could then be flipped through. Apparently our teacher felt this was a "taboo" because it made too much work for the potential viewer (i.e. they may want to take something out of the protective sheet to look at it closer). Not sure if the student bought the other style book to pass the class or not, or which version he went with for interviews.

In the case of sending files electronically, I created PDF's of specific work from my portfolio and ended up emailing these to clients with a resume (usually what was asked for in the advertisement for the job). Some, I submitted a cd with the PDF's on it along with my resume.

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Seriously... the best way to impress top-notch firms is with a professionally bound book. For those of you who want to know what this looks like, read the new issue of STEP which contains a typical portfolio from the Academy of Art University here in San Francisco. Slides and flats don't tell the story. A real book with good photographs and a light narrative do.

□

Well bound books that show meticulous care was spent putting them together project a certain skillset (and methodology). However, it will *always* be about the work itself. If you don't have the design chops, a good presentation alone generally won't get you an interview. Whether I look at jpegs on the screen, or offset printed pages in a beautiful hand-bound book, I always ask, "does that work make *me* jealous?" That has always been my measuring stick.

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For the record, no Academy portfolios are actually offset printed. They are just printed front and back on inkjet printers.

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I do agree with your comment that no amount of attention to detail on the presentation itself can make poor or commonplace work float.

As my grandfather once told me:

"Billy, you can't polish a turd."

□

As someone who's reviewed portfolios and now shows them to potential clients, I have a few thoughts on this subject.

First and foremost, your portfolio should generally reflect the kind of work that your intended interviewer/company does. Do not go into an interview with fine art flash presentations when you are interviewing for an in-house corporate design job.

As has been said, don't sell the work. Sell yourself. The work isn't being hired, you are and you'd better have a good story prepared as to why the person would want to hire you. (A true story, of course.)

The number of pieces to show varies as well. A friend, who's CD of a well-known branding firm, likes to see around 15-16 pieces. Another friend, who heads a successful design firm is in the 10-12 camp. So if you can find out ahead of time the parameters, more power to you.

And please, please, please. Don't put mattress ads in your portfolio. You may have done them but it's not something I'd advertise. (Had a student at a portfolio review who once did this and I literally took from her and said to throw it in the trash, quickly.)

□

guybored, my wife and I have a running joke about the Academy of Art being something similar to the Church of Scientology, which is buying up as many buildings here in Los Angeles as the Academy of Art seems to be buying in San Francisco. Every time we go to San Francisco, we see more buildings with their logo on them. The entire city may become one big Academy of Art someday.

The article that Bill Kerr posted a link for was very interesting to me, because I recently saw a portfolio from a graduate of that college. It was almost identical to the one in the article: a title, a theme, cloth covered binding, 2-page spreads, credit information running down the sides of the pages, etc. When I first saw his portfolio, I was blown away. I told him it was the best student portfolio I'd ever seen. However, now that I've gotten to know this designer and read the article, it's pretty obvious that the college is coaching students on how to put together a portfolio that is much more conceptual than what they could do on their own, which I don't think is a good idea.

The Academy of Art seems to be very aggressive in everything they do, including television ads and very expensive marketing pieces.

□

it's all great until you have to stick a web site into the printed mix because clients want to see a web site you've done "in case they ever need web work." how to tackle this issue is still a fight between my buddies. i think screen shots never do justice, but hey, i guess if they are asking for web on a printed piece, they should expect injustice.

□

I think to some degree your argument might be valid... but moreso pertaining to some other departments. Yes they keep gobbling up real estate, but hey... students moving across the country have to start of somewhere, right?

The classes in the Graphic Design department are taught by adjunct designers working in the field... not professional educators. This provides relevant experience in a professional-type atmosphere.

The graphic design department is currently placing 98% of its graduates in jobs within the field. You can't argue with those results. Granted, the majority of students (i am guessing based on personal observations) never get through the program due to its rigorous workloads and demanding instructors. But if you do, there is an overwhelming chance at having a good job ahead of you.

I don't know about you, but my main objective in design school was to get a great job with a good company. In that regard, I can do nothing but recommend the Academy to any student wanting to enter the field.

□

I don't know anyone who was hand-held to create their book from the Academy. The concepts, images, and the overall feel are created by students with minimal feedback from the department director. I would say that over the course of 6 weeks, I had about 20 minutes of face time with the instructor.

Any suggestions outside of that were generated by my friends in the department or in the field.

The only real requirement is that the portfolio meet a professional standard. Some are better than others and some are presented to employers better than others. In the end the portfolio is a tool. What gets you the job is your ability to sell yourself, speak about your work, and the quality of the work contained within.

□

My current portfolio format was an idea stolen from my last employer: 8.5x11 color printouts bound via medical clip binders. Cheap, insanely flexible (just print out the pages you want for each interview) and nothing to worry about (ie, no big deal if left behind, etc.) In my last interview, I brought it in, unclipped it, and started handing it out. As I talked, items were passed around the table and when I was finished, I just left the work there for them to review on their own. If designed right, these can also be easily converted to PDF for on-screen presentations.

Web sites are great too.

Electronic portfolios on CDs seem rather pointless, IMHO. Just send them your URL.

Big black board boxed portfolios aren't terribly great design...big, bulky, a pain to carry around, etc. Overly cute/package homemade portfolios are just that...overly cute and really just distract from the work within.

As a web designer, what I like to see in an online portfolio is a web site that's EASY TO USE. Ideally, that means:

- no flash
- no crazy-ass javascript
- type at a legible size
- no #666 type on a #ddd background
- no mystery meat navigation
- no splash page
- no looping background music
- no HTML clearly made from some crappy WYSIWYG editor.

Just give me nice screenshots and a detailed description of the project.

By all means, if the project included any of the above, show that on a separate page, but don't use those as part of your portfolio.

All IMHO, of course.

□

Honestly, its the work that speaks for itself. I well constructed portfolio never hurts, but it really only makes for about 5% of the grade -- in my book (no pun intended).

An online portfolio, a PDF version, and possibly samples of your work to bring along, is all that I care about when interviewing.

Like someone said before, a "polished turd" is still a turd, even when its wearing a fancy dress.

Ohh, and "imaginary/school/pretend project work" doesn't do really any good. It just stinks of inexperience.

□

kyle -- this post was aimed more towards students, i thought. how do you claim spec work stinks of inexperience when mr. swanson is speaking of not only professional but student portfolios. how do you deal with this aspect? or do you not hire any young blood because you think they stink?

□

i like to pre-screen by looking at a portfolio online, at my own time and pace. if we set-up an in-person interview, i'm all for a great presentation. i don't care if its a bunch of single sheets, boards, binders, books large, small, whatever -- but it needs to be well designed.

as far as online portfolios go: again, i don't care if they are flash, html, heavily scripted etc. but whatever method is used, it should work well to present.... work.

presentation matters not just in the portfolio review, but also in our real life presentations, wo why would i not care how the work is presented. its part of the package?

as far as postcards and mailings of any sort: hey, if they stand out from the clutter and are clever -- i'm all for it. suddenly a cold-call to get a job interview is not a cold-call anymore.

and please: if you send one: design your resumee and spend some effort on your cover letter.

□

This is only my opinion, of course:

I have had great success with a LARGE black box-style portfolio, with loose boards. Of course all non-mounted work should have a constructed sleeve on a loose board, to make everything cohesive.

This portfolio allows me to display my pieces at full scale. After all, what good is showing someone a tabloid size poster at the size of a postcard? Scale changes everything. You do not design a poster to be read from up close, so when it is shrunk down certain element may change.

The portfolio is a tool, not a piece. It should set up your work so that the viewer is not distracted. Unless you have designed and constructed your portfolio to be a piece within itself, I do not see any reason why it should be anything but a black box/book. Size should be according to what you have designed.

As far as worked is concerned, I would have to say put in your best work, regardless of what it was designed for. If you have a phenomenal (but fictitious) annual report done in school or a "mattress ad" done in the professional world, use the well designed annual report. Of course after being out of school for a while these pieces should start to be replaced. Use this as an excuse for self-promotional pieces! They are fun and, if well designed can be great replacements in your portfolio.

Anyway, I have rambled enough, good luck everyone especially you newly graduated students! It starts out tough, but it the more you interview and the harder it is, the more rewarding a job you will most likely get.

Most important, don't be discouraged by employers who say they don't hire fresh graduated students. It's a shame they forget so soon about that lucky break they caught. Everyone will get their chance to showcase their talents!

□

First and foremost, your portfolio should generally reflect the kind of work that your intended interviewer/company does. Do not go into an interview with fine art flash presentations when you are interviewing for an in-house corporate design job.

Generally I think this is bad advice. A great designer can sell any project (web, print, direct mail, etc.) as a success of aesthetic chops, process, problem solving and critical thinking. Any firm that only wants to see examples that are similar to what they do is a firm that one needs to stay far away from.

For example how infuriating is it when a client prospect, say a car manufacturer, only wants to see examples of work that involves cars? As if that has any bearing on a designers ability to communicate a quality and convincing message.

Personally, a good working website has done wonders for me time and time again. Make the work highly accessible. Essentially one click away. Avoid superflous messaging and drawn out witisisms. But put a personal stamp on it. Be original and be clear.

The most important advice I can give is to learn how to talk about your work confidently and intelligently. Good work is pure poop if the person talking about it appears to be unfamiliar with its concept or execution. Stumble over your words in that situation and its over. Because someone else will have gotten it right.

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r agrayspace said:

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The key in both cases is *relevance*. Whatever you show, and however you describe the work, has to be relevant to the interviewer. The interviewer has to have the assurance that what you have done in the past will be applicable and highly valuable to the work that needs to be done for them. And it's worthwhile remembering that the interviewer may not be a person with a design background. What is deemed relevant to one person's background may not be of any interest to another. For a job interview in a corporate setting, you may interview with several different people: the director of design, the manager and/or vice-president of marketing or communications, as well as with at least one human resource professional. The HR person probably won't be looking at your portfolio, but the others will. And they'll probably be looking for different things from it.

□

And please, please, please. Don't put mattress ads in your portfolio. You may have done them but it's not something I'd advertise. (Had a student at a portfolio review who once did this and I literally took from her and said to throw it in the trash, quickly.)

I think we need to see more mattress ads, pizza flyers, etc. in portfolios. No, this work isn't glamorous, but it may be design's high calling: to bring good design to even the most mundane things of life. I mean, if you can do great design work for a shoe polish company, doesn't that say something about your capability?

What I think would be more helpful is understanding the individual's creative process and ability to collaborate on projects. I'd like to see sketches, scratches and scribbles that lead to the pretty, shiny things. Often those who have creative brilliance will have awkward and seemingly unfinished works until their 40's because they haven't found or developed the creative skills to express their ideas adequately. Designers that are highly polished at an early age are likely copying a style and doing it very well, but their creative potential is less.

□

Speaking of portfolios, I think the most memorable one was when Chank stopped by our studio with his latest work. His portfolio consisted of an old suitcase packed full of bags of candy. He had stopped at Target and just grabbed all the candy whose packaging was using his fonts. (so, advice...uh...definitely try to design some candy packaging, as it makes for a great leave-behind. :o)

And going back to the interactive portfolios...remember who's going to look at them. Likely/hopefully some tech aware folks, but just as likely, some art director who can barely check his email and is still using OS9 and IE5. So don't go nuts with the crazy browser tricks.

[This is a nice example](#). One page. Nice descriptions. I can easily scroll through everything to get a nice overview of what work this person does.

Finally, while the piece, itself, is important, I'm much more interested in the project as a whole. Research, strategy, goals, etc. That story is much more valuable than the actual produced product IMHO.

□

Here's a "don't" that should be common sense for everyone:

In response to our online ad seeking a designer for our in-house design department, one person included with his samples a critique of the company website. He went on and on about how bad the typography was and how much better he could do, with comments such as "Your designers are trying to sell you the Brooklyn Bridge!" He obviously thought that the people doing the interviewing would be the HR department, since they were the ones who placed the ad. HR did read the email, and forwarded it to us along with their comment, "This guy sounds like a real jerk."

All of us, including the web department, gathered around to read it. And as we all leave here and go on to other things, we will all remember his name.

□

While I agree that it's about the work, I think how you present it is important for the same reasons that it's important to make sure there's no spelling errors in your resume and that you wear a clean shirt to an interview--it's a reflection of yourself and your attention to detail.

At the moment I'm just using a web site, but then I mostly do interactive and usually get other types of assignments through clients for whom I've done interactive work first.

My site is Flash, because that's the medium in which I prefer to work. At the moment it's organized by project type, but I'm considering changing it to 5-10 featured (mixed) projects, and then the rest listed chronologically by year.

I've been debating various ways of dealing with a physical portfolio, but haven't had time and rarely get asked for it. If I did one at this point it would be because I had a compelling reason to--either I needed one for a job or I had both downtime and a great idea.

□

This has mostly been about portfolios designed to get you hired. What about portfolios for presentation to potential clients? Most places I've worked used a larger size than I would use for a job interview, sometimes with the work mounted on heavy stock and laminated. I'd think that this would make a more impressive presentation to a client than a smaller book with sleeves.

Would anyone want to comment on how their studio or the studio they work for does it?

□

ok...so as a student coming out of college trying to find a job there are several "rules" that one might adhere to in order to land an interview. keep it simple, show only your best work, etc.

I pose this question...what does a person who is already in the real world prepare to show a graduate committee to get BACK into school for a MFA?

I assume the same standards apply, but is it a different portrait you are trying to paint?

□

David E., here's a perspective from the lowly one-man-band end of the market.

Four years ago when I was new to N Wales & didn't know anyone & desperately needed clients & didn't really have a portfolio I would create a piece specifically for a company that I wanted to work for and go knock on their door.

For example, I created a rather superb salon ad (with a photo "courtesy" of a Prada magazine ad). I then customised it for whichever salon I went to. I talked to about fifteen. Three hired me. I still do ads a few times a year for one.

That method worked rather well to get me started.

The last time I pitched to a new client I went with a blank white square of paper folded in half & a great idea. I was up against 2 actual design studios that put together a shedload of glossy stuff on spec. I got that work and a whole lot since.

Next week I am meeting with a potential client. I will throw about ten pieces that I really like in a shoulder bag and take them along.

My point, if there is one, is that my ability to connect with people (listen, be interested, offer the right idea) is way more important for me personally in getting & keeping work than is what I show and the way I show it.

I think you have to show and talk about work in a way that is genuine to you. If you are a formal person and tried my approach, you'd probably not get much work and you'd hate trying.

□

From the Step article: "Christopher Morlan graduated from Academy of Art University in San Francisco in 2004. Right out of school, he was hired as a creative director with Crescent Jewelers at an impressive salary. Granted, he was not a typical BFA grad—he had been to two universities and worked in agencies for seven years when he entered design school. *But that experience would not have helped him without a stunning book.*"

Surely that last sentence is complete and utter rubbish!

□

Jeff, there is certainly NO DOUBT that it helped him get a creative director position right out of school... there is no question about that.

Would he have gotten his position without his book being as well-done as it was? Probably not on that count, as well.

□

I'm a print/web guy who's just moved back to seattle and I've been making the rounds recently. I feel like have had great success using my website as the initial point of content. I've really focused it on the work, keep it plain & simple. Once I get in the room I've got a mix of boards and loose stuff in a box. it seems to work pretty well. even the loose stuff is in pockets on boards though.

□

Hi. I just graduated in December. I was coming out of a new design program, so I didn't have a portfolio development class like they do at Academy (although I do know people who went there so I am aware of the level of work that goes into them, not to mention the amount of money), and am now plugging away at it on my own, so this conversation is very helpful.

I have a question about web sites.

Darrel pointed to a one page site:

"One page. Nice descriptions. I can easily scroll through everything to get a nice overview of what work this person does."

In looking at other designer's sites, I have found that this one page style is much more common in Europe, Mexico, and South America than in the states.

Is this because this is a style thing that hasn't reached the states yet, or is a one page site without any type of navigation just not sufficient to prove your web chops to an employer here?

□

Apparently, you dont even need a portfolio these days. All you need is a catchy trailer for one.

Its catchy, creative, and has no substance what so ever. Sounds like a famous graphic designer in the making to me.

□

If you have read this far here is the synopsis you need:

- Show your work in any format you feel relevant or can afford. Just don't skimp on the preparation or visual presentation. In other words, K.I.S.S - Keep It Simple and Smart.

- Show your best work, not all of your work. Professional jobs if possible, student work if still relevant. The people that hire you can tell if you have it or not with a quick view.

- If you get an interview, be concise when talking about your work and sell your skills as it would relate to your position. Don't boast, objectify your best qualities that made your work for clients successful. Be confident.

I've been through the proverbial ringer a number of times and have a good track record with the former points.

□

> Its catchy, creative, and has no substance what so ever. Sounds like a famous graphic designer in the making to me.

Derrick... I need to step up for my man, your man, everybody's man, Dave. His portfolio is coming, as you mentioned, this is just a trailer and any employer looking for an interactive/motion designer with a sense of humor and some creativity will likely not need to see anything else. Surely there is no "substance" (if by substance you mean work) but that clip alone is better than 75% of portfolios out there. He can back up the flashiness and white boy rapping skills with his work. (for more daveformances check his stuff on [Google Video](#))

□

Bill, the book is superb, no denying that. It was surely useful as well. I attacked neither its quality nor its effectiveness. I simply pointed out that the writer's conclusion (that a pretty portfolio book is more important than anything else in recommending one to the position of creative director. In fact, if you had the choice of education at three universities and seven years of studio experience OR a pretty portfolio book, you are probably better off going with the book) appears patently wrong to my little mind with its four-and-a-half years experience. But who knows, in another two-and-a-half years I might just trade it all in for a pretty book.

□

I dont know him, so I cant speak on his work. However, I think its a rather silly idea to use a lot of time making a trailer for a portfolio when you could be devoting time on the actual thing.

□

I think its a rather silly idea to use a lot of time making a trailer for a portfolio when you could be devoting time on the actual thing.

Actually, for someone specializing in motion graphics, designing a trailer seems perfectly legitimate, since that represents a lot of what motion designers do. If you're going to go through the trouble of creating a self-promotional piece, one would hope it relates to your professional focus.

On a side note, am I the only one who find the following a bit troubling?

I would say that over the course of 6 weeks, I had about 20 minutes of face time with the instructor.

□

Your point might be valid, but experience is something you can't fake, though. If you have professional work and put it in the same kind of book... it would seem that you have twice the interview weapon than someone just out of school.

□

experience is something you can't fake, said Bill.

That's exactly my point, Bill. You also can't fake a mind full of good design ideas or an ability to connect with people or an ability to understand problems. You can, however, (though I imagine it is highly unlikely) fake a pretty book.

If you have professional work and DON'T put it in the same kind of book... I would estimate that you have at least 1.8 times the interview weapon of someone just out of school.

My design education is only what I learn from reading & watching others, and my experience is not that great, but it tells me that people are far more interested in hearing what I CAN DO for them than seeing what I HAVE DONE for others.

I realise my experience is in getting clients (and relatively small ones at that) not a job, so pretty books might be more important than I think, but surely not so important as to trump real experience?

□

As a recent Academy of Art University graduate, I am very grateful to have the portfolio I do. The response is flattering, and the knowledge that I can hand over a book that does most of my interview work for me — a clear and concise communication vehicle about me, my work, and my capabilities — is a great feeling.

And honestly, I don't want to hear anything about how Academy students are forced to make portfolios that outdo the work inside of them because they're not that hard to make: pictures and words on a page. The hardest part of the whole process, aside from the ten hours to print each book, is the photography. I recommend making a nicely designed, printed, and bound portfolio book to anyone looking for a design position, recent grad or not. And \$75 for a cloth bound, foil-stamped, cover is not that expensive, considering its function.

The next step is getting over my fear of the web and creating an online portfolio. While the book itself is impressive, a website is immediately effective.

□

Thanks for the feedback about the okaydave trailer, I appreciate it (I threw a SpeakUp shoutout in there for fun). I hope the portfolio (coming in about a week) lives up to the hype.

□

"Professional" experience or work won't necessarily result in the final piece becoming blessed for the almighty portfolio.

But...is this not the point of a portfolio? To showcase the absolute best work presented in the most pleasing and logical arrangement one is capable of regardless the amount of "professional" experience one has? I'm gearing this towards the perspective of someone who has graduated recently from college or has been attempting to break into the design field since graduation. (Myself included) Experience is important, but GREAT experience in the start of one's own career I feel is more important.

How is someone supposed to obtain GREAT experience with mediocre portfolio/work? How are they supposed to obtain GREAT experience with what you later come to find out as mediocre decision makers? Of course it's good to show pieces of work that you have done working for a studio or agency, but as an intern/junior designer, just how much of a say do you have on how the final piece will turn out? What happens then if you yourself aren't happy with how it turns out, directly a result of the decisions made by the people who work above you? You become reluctant to include it in your portfolio correct? So then where does that leave you after the internship? You did the work that was assigned to you properly and with efficiency... but in the end you may have ended up with, in your personal opinion, a shoddy piece of work... then what?

Embellish all you would like about the "professional" experience you have had while working at various organizations, but if the work you end up producing is just OK (subjective) and nothing more, tell me how someone's so called "professional" experience will be the advantage or deciding factor in helping to acquire that person a job or internship?

Wouldn't it be so wonderful if the hiring process were black and white with no attention given to the underlying grey values, which makes that person tick creatively in the first place...

□

Notes on portfolios, use what you will:

1. There seems to be a correlation between size, confidence and experience. Student portfolios are huge, while experienced professionals carry simple 9"x12" binders.
2. The worst thing about gathering photographers' portfolios for a client presentation is their size and weight — which tend to subscribe to the New-York-School-Large-Painting aesthetic. Perhaps to them, scale makes up for any aesthetic shortcoming. Personally, I've left "also rans" behind because the cumulative bulk got to be too much to lug from studio, to taxi, to client and back.
3. We own a [Less Table](#), designed by Jean Nouvel for the Cartier Foundation and a glorious wenge table by B&B Italia. They are exquisite AND prone to scratches. So there's no fucking way your rad-hardcore metal portfolio with over-sized screws will ever go three feet past our front door. The same goes for those Pina Zangaro aluminum boxes. (But our tables like their Saar PVC binders)

If you can't consider for one moment whether your portfolio will scratch a person's desk, then how can they trust you with the details of production?

I once heard that the firm Associates in Science had an over-the-top portfolio that came in a square (plexi?) box with rounded metal corners, heavy-duty clasps and florescent lights placed inside to give it an eerie glow. I also heard that it became a problem when visiting clients after 9/11.

Can't say I blame them.

□

I personally struggled with my own portfolio for a long time. The result I had was a very clean, burgundy leather, clasped book with 9 x 10 sheets in sleeves. I made sure I had a clean intro cover, and paid attention to details such as credit information on every spread. It has served me very well so far.

When it comes to portfolios, I think its all about context. From the discussions I've read here, it is evident that everyone has a different opinion about personal presentation. Some like it one way, some like it another.

With regards to fancy portfolios, I think that if your work and personality can carry one, then by all means go crazy. The fact is, the portfolio is about showcasing you and your work. You are never going to make *everyone* happy.

As long as you do some research on who you are interviewing for, and show appropriate work, it is all up to how well you match with that particular employer. At the end of the day, if the potential employer doesn't like you, you're probably not a great match for the company anyway.

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□

I am always surprised to see that so many designers don't really care about the physical presentation of work and think that bringing some photos printed on a color laser and bound at Kinko's or placed in a brown bag or FedEx box is appropriate. (its even worse when they wear a baseball hat and jogging pants)

Presentation of the work is just as important as the work itself. What's the difference between presenting work to a client and presenting work to another designer in the hopes of obtaining a job? The case, box or book that the work is presented in should be meticulously crafted, regardless of how simple it may be — it, in itself is a design piece and a design decision.

I agree 100%, that the work is what needs to stand out and that often times a fancy case or a handmade book could possibly mask the work or hype it up too much. But, we could certainly say the same thing about a beautiful photograph. How many times have we seen what looks like an amazing piece in a design annual only to find out that the photo is ten times better than the actual piece itself?

I think that PDFs and screen presentations are fine and good for for an initial presentation and to score an interview. PDFs can give a nice idea of what your work is like, they are fast, customizable, and simple. If I were interviewing another designer who gave a in-person screen presentation of print work, I would immediately think that they were trying to hide something — that the work was not produced well, the photos were touched up to hide issues, or that the work was not strong throughout.

When it comes to print, identity and packaging I strongly believe that seeing the physical work is essential. I like to see that designers have made nice paper choices, and enjoy having the experience of flipping through an annual cover to cover to see that there is more than the one nice spread that they chose to show in their PDF.

I guess I am always bothered by designers who choose to show their work as photos that are ultra-magnified beauty detail shots that say absolutely nothing about the piece whatsoever. Showing an actual sample of the work demonstrates that the designer knows how to deal with production issues as well as well as design and concept. The same can be said for web and interactive work, I want to see the final thing, not just a screen shot.

After all, final execution is just as important as the concept itself — right?

□

Rick, I put rhinestones on my brown paper bag portfolio, just for you, buddy.

Of course I care how my presentation looks, but right now GLOSS is not part of the program. Actually I lost my portfolio to post-Hurricane Katrina damage - looting actually - someone stepped all over the stuff - so contempt for humble presentations seems a bit shallow to me. I wish I could afford one of those slick ones, but I just can't. I can't wait for another day. And color laser prints are all I have. Originals are unusable now.

Give those who are working their way up a break. My original post about meeting a young African-American photographer with a supermarket brown bag was true. It impressed me that he was confident enough to walk in the door with his work. I don't know what happened to him. Like a lot of people I knew back in New Orleans, we lost touch. His name is Keith Calhoun and his wife, a photographer also is Chandra McCormick. Both really fine photographers. I miss them both, like I miss my city. His work - which I just looked up on Google is still around.

□

I am in the unique situation of being a senior designer who just hired another designer, I am also putting my own portfolio together to find a more challenging studio.

Pesky, I believe that you are in a fragile situation in which your character and talent are all that you have to work with right now as you find your way again. My best wishes to you.

What I believe Rick was referring to is the lack of respect that interviewees tend to show in some cases for their work and the studio/agency they are presenting to. I cannot tell you as I scoured applicants from Creative Hotlist how frustrated I became by the hundreds of people who couldn't care less about their presentation. Resumes designed using the Microsoft Word Project Gallery, full of typos, I even got one where the applicant "designed" his name on his resume with the image of a dog, the letters of his name trailed behind in a pixelated stream of yellow pee.

All I ask is:

- a thoughtful cover letter and resume typeset well (you are a designer for Pete's sake)
- a link to your URL or a SMALL PDF layout of samples (not the 12mb file you just sent to the printer the other day)
- your work presented in a way that I can be convinced that you care about presentation
- if you are asked to come in for an interview you show me something CLEAN, whether it be photos, actual samples, book or box or whatever
- bonus points for actually BEING clean, not marinated in perfume or smoke

And by the way I am presenting my work bound as 11 x 14 pages with photos or eps layouts, in a screwpost binder, with a small pocket of printed samples in the case that someone wants to touch and feel the paper, or see things actual size.

□

I think your right. Rick's point was about professionalism and presentability, not economic circumstances. (Sorry, Rick!) I think I was just in an irritable mood for some reason. Thanks for the kind words, though. I'll work on improving my attitude and my portfolio next.

□

so here's a predicament... i've worked seven places in three years, which means a lot of cool and hopefully good work... but often i'm not around for production. i'm usually not involved that far along, either because of timelines or because i'm a freelancer and sometimes that translates to photoshop cube monkey. so everything i have are color comps printed at Kinkos, trimmed down, and shown in that Compton book i linked to early in this thread.

so if i show up with low-res JPG printouts, hi-res PSD printouts, but can't really show you anything that's been professionally printed, bound, and shipped to the public, is that working against me? i've never been in a position to make paper or ink choices. should i produce some company projects myself if i have the files to do it?

any insights?

□

i've never been in a position to make paper or ink choices. should i produce some company projects myself if i have the files to do it?

If possible, get a copy of the final piece that you contributed to (if that is all you did). As far as recreating them goes, it might be hard considering you were rarely a participant when the final files were sent to press. If you do have the files, try printing and binding a photo-worthy comp yourself. Make paper choices (there are a growing number of choices for inkjet printers) and make it look great.

When you work as a "photoshop cube monkey" are you designing, or just helping out with another designer's project? What right does one have in these situations when it comes to getting their name and credit for work?

□

I think a portfolio that's really fancy can seriously distract from the contents. A book that looks expensive smacks of 'trying too hard'.

I know how difficult it is to promote one's own work - I've had my share of awful interviews. But if you can't impress someone with a simple print-out and your own personality, you're not going to impress them with a metal binder.

When I graduated, I carted my stupid student work around the agencies like everyone else, and I tried all sorts of dumb presentation gimmicks. But what was most effective was just *talking* about my work.

Of course student work isn't going to be immediately relevant to a potential employer; but if you can talk about it with intelligence and passion you'll stand head and shoulders above all the cretins with their chrome-plated binders.

Another thing - people like to touch your work. They like to scrutinise it up close. They like to look at it in private - without having to adhere to be polite because you're in the same room.

Give them samples they can keep - it really makes a difference. They don't have to be particularly fancy: just good enough to show your work in a good light.

But don't be precious. Don't insist on being in control the whole time. No-one likes a prima donna.

Being *nice* is the best advice I can give.

□

before an interview i usually try to find a contact with whoever is going to interview me. i dont like to cold call agencies, i like to get an email address first and make contact that way.

to the interview i bring loose 11x17's in a case, clearly labeling:project, client, agency/studio, year. i also show exploratory in a clear way to show potential employers my design process and how i get to where i need to get to. if they ask for anything i email them a 2 MB pdf portfolio thats a bit more extensive than the work ive shown. i never leave anything behind, i think that shows how desperate you are. no online portfolio, im not really allowed to show online the projects ive worked on because of NDAs and because the work is not released to the general public yet.

im confident in a simple, clear presentation, and im confident in my own work. if someone starts giving me a lecture on my presentation skills or doesnt get why id show professional exploratory work i figure that the interview is over and that they are too picky or old-school for me to work with. production skills are very important, but, especially for agencies, someone is usually there to help you take care of it.

□

When you work as a "photoshop cube monkey" are you designing, or just helping out with another designer's project?

both. it depends on the project. in some cases, it's taking existing PSD files and implementing the client changes that are marked up on the comps. in that case, i won't include it in my portfolio but if i do enough

work i might mention i worked on the account. like right now, i'm working intensely with a promotional site, but it's not like the original art was my idea. i just push the elements around the way the red pen marks tell me to. so now i'm a cube monkey, but sometimes i can see a better way to lay something out; if that is adopted, i might take credit for that.

What right does one have in these situations when it comes to getting their name and credit for work?

if i'm somewhere long enough, like a few months, i'll have proven myself and might get some more conceptual work, in which case i'll take credit. in my portfolio, i'll credit myself and any art directors that i reported to. plus i'll prepare myself to talk about my role in the process. there definitely are some projects where i was given a shot at leadership; however, being freelance means i had to be buddies with our CDs and AEs to pull that off. i only take credit when it's limited to myself and the creative director directing.

does that all make sense? it's a judgement thing, but i feel comfortable with doing it this way. i don't ever present something as MINE! but i am able to present my hand in it.

Being nice is the best advice I can give.

i agree with you so absolutely.

□

I have used my website to show potential clients my experience and the books I have designed. I find, however, that most people are more interested in seeing the actual books than my website. I usually ship 3 or 4 books in a box that fits them perfectly—it has riveted corners and is made of heavy grey cardboard with a lift-off top. I put that inside another shipping box along with a cover letter and résumé. I always include a pre-paid return shipping label. For cover designs I send color laser prints or the actual printed covers—both front and back of course. I put these into a 9 x 12 envelope made out of good quality paper that I bought at "The Paper Source". (I used to make my own but found it was cheaper to just buy them and showing off "hand-skills" doesn't seem to be as important as it once was) Now, I am thinking of creating a pdf version of my portfolio that I could just e-mail but wonder if it that would be seen as "spamming".

□

I have to agree with most of the above post that the quality of concept is the paramount issue, and craft of the book second.

Being quite a few years out of school now (an ECU grad, BTW Tell Craig the "Consummate Craftsman" said Hello).

I have gone through quite a few interviews myself and conducted quite a few. The one common thread between all of them is that the online portfolio gets you in the door, yes but what happens after that is another story. A website may show work online as does a pdf work sample both of which in todays market are crucial to have. This will get the employeeer interested and show your uses of layout, type, etc, in a brood sense and also show that you have the technical ability of building web products as well as being able to design and conceptualize.

After you have landed an interview having a printed book is very important but one of the largest gripes I have when potential designers come for interviews is they just sit there while I look through their book. The interview needs to be a forum for discussion about the job, clients, thoughts philosophy of the designer etc, so I can not only get a feel for the skill level but the passion, how they communicate their design vocabulary, and drive of the future employee. And yes the book should have some style some class itself not just a 3-ring binder from the local drugstore. Put some thought into it, the craft and actual production of the book doesn't have to be world class after all this is a 1 off piece and that skill can grow.

In summation of my tangents, I do think that students need all three especially in this current marketplace, there is always going to be someone a little better, faster than you and you should strive for that.

□

In my day job, I'm an executive recruiter working for a search firm focused on advertising agencies and media companies. We do not accept unsolicited portfolios, and unsolicited mail attachments are often not opened. There just isn't enough time, and in the case of e-mail, enough bandwidth even on a broadband connection. Historically, most of the unsolicited work we get has not be appropriate or up to par for the positions we are recruiting for; so we require resumes first.

We've also found that portfolios with elaborate or expensive covers usually have mediocre work inside, and such covers to have been used more of a mask for inappropriate or inadequate experience. Oftentimes, they end up sending up a red flag rather than being the type of lure the potential candidate intends them to be. So my advice would be to save your money and focus on what's inside the portfolio case, which should be a showcase of only your best work. But keep in mind that a sloppy looking portfolio will distract from even the best work - make sure pages aren't bent or covered with fingerprints, etc.

Limit the number of portfolio items to your very best work - we like to see 10-15 pages. If our clients end up in a quandry over a tie between two candidates (which doesn't happen all that often), we suggest that they request an additional 3-5 pages from each one. But more than 10-15 pages becomes overkill, and the extra one or two pages might end up not being the superior kind of work the client is looking for, which could end up knocking you out of the ballpark.

If you've got a reel as well as a print/web portfolio, keep the print to about 10 pieces, and maybe 5-6 commercials or videos, if appropriate.

It's usually a good idea to have a portfolio that will enable you to reconfigure pages. If you're interviewing for a cosmetic account and the job requires prior experience on similar clients, it's often a good idea to front load your book with what the job would require.

I have seen a few portfolios that open with an introductory ad for the candidate, which can be effective for candidates with less experience.

The size of your book should reflect the type of work you do - someone with some great outdoor ads would have a bigger sized book. But keep in mind that both recruiters and our clients have storage issues, and a really huge book is difficult to schlep around the office and to store. Most potential employers will have a one-on-one or two-on-one relationship with your book, and you won't be presenting it to a group of 25 people.

DVDs or CDs are also good introductions, but again, they are often not opened unsolicited in the interests of time. Do not have it autoplay, esp. with sound. There is nothing more aggravating when you're talking on the phone with someone and want to load a portfolio on disk and all of a sudden the screen gets taken over, and esp. if music or a commercial starts blaring out of the speakers.

Always have a plain text and PDF version of your resume available, as PDFs usually won't paste into databases well.

Good follow up is really important. If you're working with a recruiter, keep in mind that while you might not be the best candidate for the job you initially interview for, something might turn up shortly or in the future, so you always want to make the best impression and have a memorable book.

□

Some FAQs and personal answers on portfolios and resumes — apologies if it has been covered.

Q: How many pieces?

A: Enough for about 15 -20 minutes viewing. That's how long I usually have to flip through a portfolio. At the end of 20 mins, I just stop or flip to the end. Time is the factor here — so if you have complicated ARs that take some time to view, limit your pieces down to 8-10. But if much of your work are posters, stationery sets,

and small collaterals — then you can include more. Have someone flip through it, viewing casually, and see how long it takes.

Q: Should I make/send a CD or DVD of my portfolio?

A: It's a waste of time and money for most. The only exceptions are an interactive portfolio or an advertising reel portfolio. No one will load an unknown, unsolicited CD. No one has time.

Q: How big should my portfolio case be?

A: It should fit and open easily on a desk. If it doesn't, I usually won't view it. Another consideration is shipping. Many photographer's books are sized to fit a medium FedEx box exactly. Smart.

Q: Should it have detailed explanations of the work.

A: Not necessary, but if you must, no more than a paragraph. The people reviewing your book aren't idiots; they can tell what the project is and who it's for without a detailed report.

Q: Resume length?

A: No more than 1 page. No more than 5 past employers. No "objective" — people know your objective, to get a job. Besides, that's what should be covered in the cover page. And for God's sake, please do NOT include a photo of yourself.

Q: Cover page?

A: Mandatory, but keep it short, to around 1.5 paragraphs max. It's a professional introductory handshake, not an autobiography. No one cares about your hobbies or your trip. Stick to the work, try to get a meeting/interview, Be proactive, but not overeager or become a stalker.

Overall, don't try to be cute or tricky with your book and resume. No confetti, or sparkly, puffy crap. Tricks will surely kill your book.

□

No confetti, or sparkly, puffy crap.

I would really really like to see some samples with the above stunts. Does anybody have anything with puffy crap? Please, please tell me you've gotten one of those puff painted portfolios, Tan. I

□

Truth be told, I've never gotten a puffy portfolio. But I've gotten resumes with confetti inside that littered all over my floor. Immediately trashed resume. I also once got a portfolio that had glitter glued to the boards — so as a consequence, my desk was glittery for a week. I was not amused.