

The Portfolio Process— Start to Finish

“**C**an you start on Wednesday?” The words floated across the table. I paused for a moment before answering. “I believe I can free up the remainder of the week.” (Not that I had had anything lined up.) The dean of education handed me a completed teaching schedule, shook my hand, and said, “The meetings are all day Wednesday. You start teaching on the following Monday. I’ll need all of your syllabi by next week.” I nodded and mumbled, “No problem.” As I stood up, the dean spoke once more. “We’re taking a chance on you, so don’t let us down.” Taking a slow breath so as not to hyperventilate, I said, “I’ll do my best.” I picked up my portfolio, walked out of the office, and headed back to my car.

This certainly wasn’t my first job interview. I had completed the interviewing process many times before. What made this interview so nerve-racking was that I wanted the job so desperately. The expression, “Never let them see you sweat” came to my mind as the adrenaline finally gave out. Then it hit me: “I’m teaching college!” I hurried to the nearest phone to call home. I couldn’t wait to break the news of my new position.

So how did I get that job? Was it my interview skills? My interview attire? Might I have been offered the job because of my positive attitude? Nope! It was my portfolio—plain and simple. I had come to the interview with

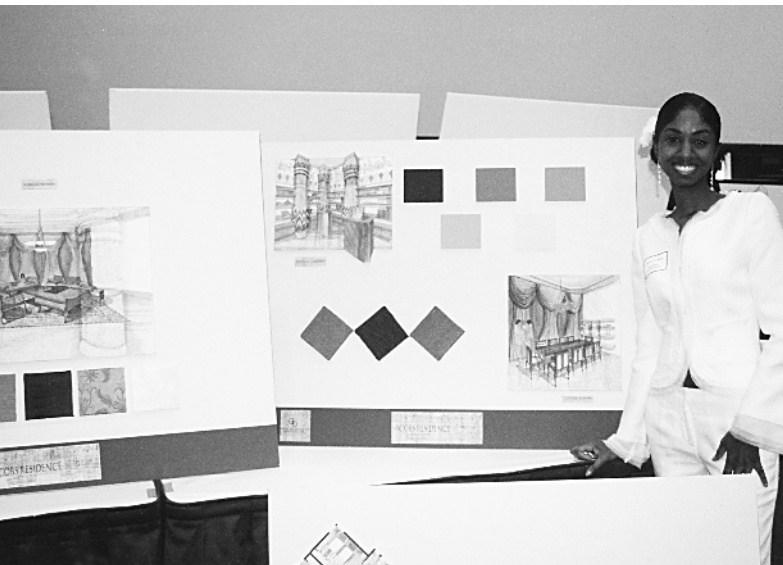
a portfolio of design projects that I had completed in college, plus a number of pieces that I had created in my freelance business. They, plus my ability to discuss the portfolio projects and what they represented, were what got me the job.

The process of building a portfolio and conducting interviews for jobs is, possibly, the most intense you will ever undertake as you advance your career. Your portfolio must reflect the very best of what you can contribute as an artist/designer to a potential employer. And the pivotal moment in your interview process begins as the employer slowly opens your portfolio to reveal the best of what you have to offer.

You Need a Portfolio

As you arrive for your job interview, you notice that another applicant is leaving. And when your interview concludes and you are departing, you see that yet another applicant is waiting. Assume these three people have equal qualifications for this job, and that each candidate has a similar college degree, and had an excellent interview. How does the company make a decision?

No doubt about it, the competition is tough in today’s job market. So you cannot just say you are an



above • Preparation is the key to a successful portfolio.
below • Here is a beautiful display that really showcases the artwork.

extraordinary designer; you must provide the evidence. That's the purpose of your portfolio: it demonstrates the proof of your skills and abilities. Instead of just talking during a job interview about what you have done or can do, you can show samples of your work. Your professional portfolio showcases your talents. In this way, a well-designed portfolio can help you stand out from the other candidates. It gives you the edge.

It was once thought that only fine artists, graphic designers, and fashion designers needed a portfolio to

get a job. Not anymore. Today, portfolios are used to secure jobs in many different areas. Architects, interior designers, multimedia and Web designers, engineers, journalists, and teachers can all use a professional portfolio to advance their careers. A portfolio for these professionals will be unique to their field of specialization; however, the overall purpose is to present a unified body of work that represents what the designer can offer. Thus, regardless of your design background, you can develop a portfolio that highlights your accomplishments and shows off your talent. Portfolios are especially necessary for people seeking a new job, changing career fields, or negotiating for a promotion or raise.

It's one thing to say, "I have great organizational skills," but when you can give examples of that statement, you're demonstrating that you can do the job. It's the difference between saying, "I can do it . . . really!" and showing you can—the difference between talk and action.

If you look up the definition of "portfolio" in a dictionary, you're likely to read something like: "a portable collection of paper and artifacts that demonstrates one's experience and skills." That's pretty vague, considering that these papers can be made up of almost anything—artwork, writing samples, award certificates, even performance reviews. Other samples might include customer satisfaction surveys or graphs that chart improvements in products or services based on your contributions. The point is, the artifacts you include in your portfolio should always be chosen carefully to highlight your most relevant skills and achievements.

A Portfolio Has to Stand Alone

Suppose for a moment that your portfolio is being viewed by a potential employer but that you are not allowed to be in the room while this is going on. Will he or she be able to understand the pieces, or your participation in the projects it contains? The point is, once you have selected what to include in your portfolio, organize them in a logical manner. You may choose to arrange your work by strengths, or chronologically. Whichever way you choose, document your involvement with the project. For instance, if you include a brochure from a training program, make sure the interviewer knows whether you designed the brochure, attended the class, or organized the event. Add a simple caption to clarify your connection to the piece.

Building Your Portfolio

The hardest part about building a portfolio is deciding where to begin. You know that you must include your best art in the “port,” but just how do you go about organizing the presentation? You may have several dozen pieces of your work or just a few. As you begin to develop your portfolio, you must first think about which pieces are worthy of inclusion. Your design background and history will most certainly influence this process. If you are still in college, your portfolio will more than likely contain a collection of projects that reflect the classes you have completed. In contrast, a professional in the field will exhibit a different set of layouts based, at least in part, on completed client jobs. Consider the following situations for which it makes sense to develop a portfolio.

You Are a Professional in a Related Field

You have been working in advertising, but want to move into the area of graphic design. You are a fine artist who illustrates or paints, and you have a number of finished pieces, but you don’t feel that they best reflect your current design sensibilities. In this case, consider taking one of your illustrations or other arts piece and placing it in a layout. Show the application of the piece. A good illustration will look even better as an editorial spread.

Perhaps you have worked in a related field but want to change the direction of your career. In this case, consider displaying early versions of any client-based projects. You may have lots of sketches for ideas that were eliminated from final use. Many of my initial concepts were actually better than the ones eventually selected by the client.

Or perhaps as part of your job, you were part of several design-related workgroups. Why not display the art developed by the group, then clearly define your involvement with the project? Including these concept designs in the portfolio shows your range of design abilities and the thought process involved, and it freshens up the look of your port.

Demonstrate expertise and technical skills. Demonstrate that you are a problem solver. Employers want to know not only what work experience you have had, but what skills you gained. Give explanations of your involvement with a project and how you contributed to the overall success of the project. You want to be able to demonstrate that you are a top-notch designer who is both creative and self-disciplined.

You Are a Student Still in College

Much of the design work you complete in college or a technical school can be considered for inclusion in your portfolio. You may, for example, have recently finished a series of design-based classes, in which your professors challenged you to create a variety of creative pieces to fit the design criteria they established. Take a good look at these projects. Many of them demonstrate your style of design. And because student portfolios tend to be general in nature, be especially aware of projects that show your area of expertise. If you are an excellent illustrator or photographer, make sure your portfolio reflects that special talent. (You’ll find additional discussion on the selection of appropriate projects a little later on.)



Was this project completed in college or in the field? A truly professional piece simply shows off your art skills and abilities.



Computers are an integral part of today's design environment. Most disciplines utilize technology to complete work.

You Are Searching for New Ways to Develop Artwork

Completing your basic studies is important, but you might also want to consider these additional options:

- Think about joining an advanced design group in your area.
- Consider participating in any design honor's groups or industry organizations.
- Investigate applying for an internship?
- Enter a community-based contest.

Each of these venues provides an excellent opportunity to show what you can do. And the best part is that you could end up with a printed piece that shows real-world experience. The point is, don't be afraid to show off.

You Participate in a Summer Program or Attend a Special Workshop

Special seminars in design are offered in most major cities throughout the year. And Companies such as Adobe and Macromedia regularly offer free demonstrations of their best-selling software. Companies that specialize in training frequently give one-day workshops in design-related areas. For example, as part of my master of fine arts program, I studied Native American culture and

art for two summers in Santa Fe, New Mexico. During those months, I created a number of artistic pieces during week-long workshops. I highly recommend that you explore any opportunity to advance your design skills.

You Design for Family and Friend.

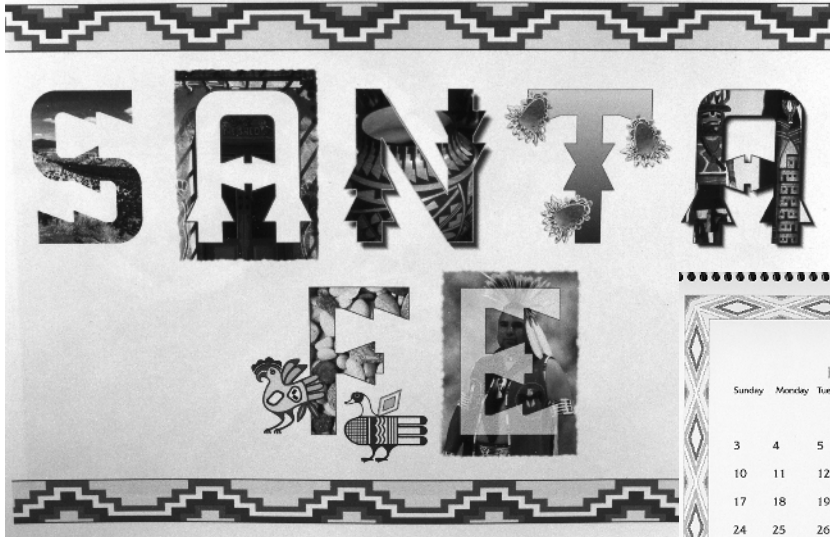
Never miss an opportunity to generate artwork that you might be able to include in your portfolio. Perhaps your aunt is starting her own business. Offer to design her business card and stationery package. Maybe she could use some interior design advice for her new building or home office. And designing a professional-looking Web site would most certainly make you her favorite relative. Likewise, your friends (especially the noncreative types) will appreciate you for designing creative resumes for them. And why not create original holiday or birthday cards? In short, keep your eyes open for project opportunities will help you to build up a body of work.

You Take Advantage of Freelance Opportunities

Don't overlook the chance to take on some freelance work. Most design schools feature a freelance bulletin board where local companies post their need for design assistance. Check out this board on a regular basis and contact any company of interest and offer your services. It may sound a little intimidating to do while you're still a student, but the rewards are many. You'll generate some artwork and collect a little cash as well. If you are unsure about what to charge, there are a number of ways to research the going rates. Books such as *Artist's & Graphic Designer's Market* (Cox, 2004), *Starting Your Career as a Freelance Illustrator or Graphic Designer* (Fleishman, 2001), and *Pricing Photography: The Complete Guide to Assignment & Stock Prices* (Heron & McTavish, 1997) will help you determine your costs and profits.

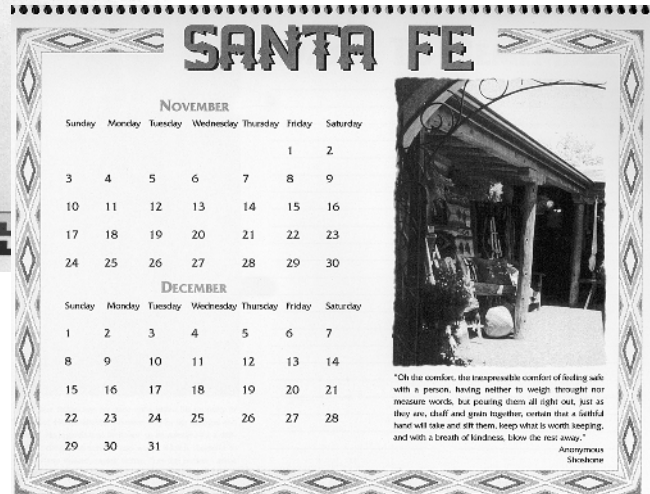
You Advance Your Design Skills Using the Barter System

In addition to freelancing, another viable way of marketing your design expertise is via the barter system. The benefits here are twofold: You get some valuable design experience and you get compensation (though not monetary) as well. I once had a student who went to restaurants in the local area and offered to redesign their menus. In return, he received a voucher for food from the establishments. Not only did he generate some great art, he got to sample some terrific food. What a deal!



left • Here is the project I created to promote a study-related trip. It demonstrates that portfolio opportunities are always available. Don't hesitate to do volunteer design work.

below • Art created for a calendar is a great way to challenge yourself. Regardless of your background, you can develop pieces to include in your portfolio.



You Design for Yourself

If you don't already have a personal identity package, design one. Create your own business card, resume, and stationery. You might also design an invoice for billing freelance clients. Additionally, you might create a self-promotional package (see color insert for some examples).

You Compile Examples of Improvements You've Made to Bad Design

You've seen them: those horrible ads in the back of magazines and newspapers. Find a particularly bad one and create a series of interpretations to improve on it. The same goes for all of the design majors. Bad design is everywhere! If you're an interior designer, find a less-than-effective interior space and show how good design can improve the environment. Likewise, industrial designers can demonstrate how home appliances, children's toys, and computers can be effectively designed.

Focus Your Portfolio

The second step is the most important in the portfolio process: to decide on the particular type of job you want. There are many different areas of specialization within each of the design disciplines, and you will want to tailor your portfolio to the job you want. For example, consider the field of architecture. Within this discipline are a vast variety of jobs available, including: corporate

architects, building contractors, architectural engineers, civil and industrial engineers, marine architects, draftspeople, and even architectural journalists and historians. If interior design is your specialty, you'll find jobs as interior design stylists, manufacturers' representatives, sales associates, renovation specialists, draftspeople, facility and space planners, lighting consultants, and set designers. Graphic designers will be able to choose from such diverse careers as art director, production assistant, layout specialist, prepress specialist, illustrator, or production artist. Although every portfolio will look different for each field, the objective is the same: to create a design portfolio that demonstrates ability.

Identify Your Strengths

In order to develop a portfolio that highlights your accomplishments and shows off your skills, you must blend two different concepts. First, your portfolio must give a snapshot of your creative talents and imagination. Second, and more important, your "port" must represent your ability to communicate design concepts and ideas. As such, your portfolio must be an effective tool to



This beautiful display clearly shows the designer's range of style. The model stand to the right is an eye-catching way to attract viewers.

promote you. So, regardless of the job you're applying for—illustrator, photographer, or interior designer—place in your portfolio only those samples that match the job you're applying for. Beautifully designed greeting cards will not make an impression if the job calls for a space planner. Remember, you can always add samples of other work you have created in the back of your portfolio. Label it and include it in a separate section. Or you can create a second portfolio just to show how versatile you are.

The most important thing to remember when creating a portfolio is to ensure that your work always represents your best efforts. *Never* include a weak piece in your port even if it demonstrates the skills that a particular job requests. If you're not sure what to include, ask for advice. Consult with professionals and professors. Allow them to critique your work. It may make you a little uncomfortable, but it will help you to focus on your

strengths. And don't forget to replace older design work with newer, fresher designs; and, whenever possible, use professional work.

Diversify or Focus Your Portfolio

There are a number of differing viewpoints on this topic. Many companies feel that you should diversify and show a wide range of pieces. Other companies believe that the portfolio should highlight a well-defined style by displaying art created within that narrow range. The problem with a narrowly focused port is that it can exclude you from a number of different jobs. As an example, a fashion port that focuses exclusively on, say, bathing suit and outdoor attire, may not get you an interview in a company that's looking for someone to design evening wear. Or a graphic designer who creates art with an urban approach might be excluded from a design firm that caters to a corporate clientele. Simply put, a diversified portfolio opens you up to a wider range of job opportunities.



left • Always be prepared to discuss your art. Expect to be asked to explain why you created a piece in a certain way. Your ability to articulate an answer can influence how you are perceived as an artist.

below • Make eye contact and demonstrate your confidence. You would be amazed how many people cannot look others in the eye when talking to them. If this is a problem for you, practice in front of a mirror or with family and friends, if necessary.

So do you diversify or focus your portfolio? The answer is . . . it depends! If the description of a particular job appears to ask for specific skills, you should tailor your work for the position you are applying for. However, if you are just starting out, it is best to have a portfolio that showcases the many different types and styles of work you can offer as a designer.

Some companies recommend taking a common-sense approach. Every potential employer has an idea of what should be in a portfolio, and most agree that the selection of pieces in a portfolio should be based on what the designer wants to say about him- or herself. If possible have a couple of extra pieces on hand. Perhaps the best advice is to research each company and determine what they might be looking for in a designer. Then rotate your design work in and out as the job indicates.

This much is clear: the portfolio you present should reflect your best examples of your designs and concepts. The pieces you ultimately choose for your portfolio will stand as an indication of your ability to organize, conceptualize, and to present. Whatever artwork you decide to show, make sure that each piece represents the best of what you offer as a designer. Keep the goal in mind: You



want your potential employer to decide that they must hire you and have access to your unique design ability!

Be Prepared

Once you have created a portfolio, you will always have it at the ready. You never know when an opportunity to interview for a new job (or for a promotion) will come along. And when opportunity does knock, you will be ready to answer the inevitable question about your qualifications by opening your port and showing them. “I designed a new clothing line that would really enhance your product line—here let me show it to you.” This book will show you how to be always prepared. ■