Enhancing Your Pitch

New trends in portfolio presentation
by Cameron Foote

A portfolio is proof of your talent and lends instant credibility to your work. The form a portfolio takes, what’s in it, and how it’s presented can make or break any new client pitch. Here’s what to consider when selling yourself through a portfolio presentation.

THE MEDIUM AFFECTS THE MESSAGE. Until recently, a portfolio meant a carrying case with samples of work mounted on pages within protective sleeves. While traditional portfolio cases still have their place, *portfolio* has become a generic term for whatever medium is used to best show off your work. Today, there are several appropriate ways to display a portfolio.

*Websites* have forever changed the way many clients view portfolios for the first time—alone and left to form their own opinions. Clients often expect to check out a designer’s work before committing to a face-to-face meeting. And for distant clients, websites may be the only way to show capability.

To show print samples online, I recommend the mini-portfolio treatment—a section of the website, organized by both industry type and medium, with up to a couple dozen examples. Each page should show several small examples that can be enlarged by clicking on them. Include a brief description of the client, objective, and results. To show web design samples online, post two examples (screens) of each project to indicate site treatment and, when possible, a link to the client’s URL.

*Slide shows and projected presentations* are appropriate when presenting to a large audience; when the pitch includes methodology or process, as in a PR campaign; or when showing interactive work. But a good portfolio presentation doesn’t typically require a show. In fact, it may shift the focus away from you and your work, and put it instead on the presentation.

Traditional presentations—sitting down face to face with a potential client, and showing and talking about your work—are still the most effective way to convince most clients of your capabilities. It puts you in control of the timing and sample selection, and allows you to address the client’s interests by customizing as you go along.

When a portfolio case is used to house samples, it should be compact and easy to present. Cases with bound pages of mounted samples encourage standardized presentations. This provides a crutch for those with limited presentation skills but is seldom as effective as a presentation made around samples chosen to appeal to a client’s interests.
Drop offs. Given the importance of presentation, I don’t believe portfolios or samples should normally go unaccompanied—whether in printed or electronic form. (Possible exception: purely artistic work such as illustrations or photos.) Unfortunately, some clients, especially agencies evaluating freelancers, have a “drop-off” portfolio review policy, or they ask to have samples sent. Although any review is preferable to none, such requests should be discouraged.

The best way to handle drop-off or sample requests is to say that as important as samples are for showing style and quality, more important is why you did what you did and how well it’s worked for your clients, which takes personal explanation. This rationale should suffice. If it doesn’t, direct the client to examples on your website. Otherwise, you’ll have to decide whether to say “thanks but no thanks.” If the potential is large and the inconvenience/risk small, go for it. But don’t have unrealistic expectations.

PRESENTATION IS HALF THE BATTLE. In my experience, less than half of the impression made during most portfolio showings is based on the quality of the samples. Rather, most of the impression is made from a combination of the samples’ appropriateness; how well they’re organized and described; and the overall impression of competence, service, and talent.

If you have many great samples in your portfolio, the presentation can also demonstrate value and business acumen. If you only have a few good samples, you can still use the presentation to establish yourself in a client’s eyes. Regardless of your situation or experience, presentation skills can make any portfolio better.

A half an hour is about the right length of time for most portfolio presentations—long enough to say what’s important, but short enough to conserve the client’s and your valuable time. Never willingly accept an appointment of less than half an hour, but don’t take any longer.

Think of the presentation in three parts. In the first five minutes, make small talk and get to know the client. Break the ice by asking about the client’s business, and look for areas of common interest. The bigger a job, the more likely it will be given to the designer the client feels most comfortable with. Take the next 20 minutes to present your portfolio. In the remaining minutes, close the presentation and answer questions.

Focus on problem solving, not creativity. Most clients are looking for results. Creativity should be apparent in your

What to say about your portfolio samples

However good your portfolio is, it can be enhanced by the explanations you give for your samples. Devote up to a minute for each, using these tips from the Creative Business newsletter:

1. The client and why they called you
   This is your chance to talk about your reputation, experience, and skills in the context of fact, not braggadocio.

2. Who was involved and what they contributed
   By crediting everyone involved, you emphasize the collaborative nature of most creative projects.

3. The problem faced and how you solved it
   For example, “Market research indicated the company’s logo was perceived as outdated. To give them the contemporary image they needed, I decided to ....” This demonstrates that you do strategically sound work.

4. Indications of time and budget
   Without being too specific, indicate cost and deadline concerns that were met. Don’t provide pricing information unless asked, and then say only, “I can’t recall exactly, but it was in the range of $ to $.”

5. The results, as specific as possible
   Give examples of how the piece grew a client’s business or reputation. If you can’t be specific, say something like, “I understand the salespeople felt this was among the most productive ads the company has ever run.”

6. Awards or industry recognition
   Make this a closing afterthought—a by-the-way comment that reinforces the results.
work; you don’t have to talk about it. What you do have to talk about is how your talent and experience produce results. The best way to discuss your portfolio samples is to use a consistent formula. An explanation about each piece creates the impression that you understand design problems and provide cost-effective solutions to them. It also creates the psychological impression of value.

Watch your body language. Convey a relaxed, informal, non-threatening sense of confidence during the presentation. Confidence, or lack of it, is unmistakably communicated through the firmness of your handshake, friendliness, looking the client directly in the eyes, handling pricing inquiries, and not acquiescing to unreasonable requests. In short, be professional while maintaining a sense of humor and overall amiability.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR SAMPLES. Now let’s consider how to prepare the samples you have to show.

No more than a dozen samples. This should be enough to demonstrate style and versatility, draw out the client’s interests, and allow you to make an interesting presentation.

Organize the samples by category, with the most important to the client first and the least important last. For example, show brochures, then annual reports, then web work. Don’t mix different types of samples except when it helps show all work for a client or industry together. Keep additional, varied samples in the back of the portfolio. This allows you to modify the presentation, or show more of a particular style or type of work that interests the client.

How much variety? The first three to five samples shown should represent the type of work the client will be most interested in seeing—assignments similar to the type you hope to receive or work you’ve done for similar clients. The balance should be devoted to samples that show your ability to meet diverse challenges.

Don’t necessarily show the best. A great portfolio shows prospective clients what they want to see, not what you want to show. Most clients are more interested in work done for similar clients or that meets challenges similar to theirs than they are in knockout creativity. (Possible exception: agency creative directors looking at freelance talent.) Appropriate good is usually better than inappropriate best.

No appropriate samples? You’ll occasionally be asked to show samples of a type of work you’ve never done. Handle this with honesty by saying something to the effect of “I don’t have specific samples of this type, but I think you’ll see from the variety of my samples that I can handle the challenge. And because I don’t have any preconceived notions, I’ll bring a fresh approach to the assignment.”

If you’re just starting out or wish to break into a new area, use spec samples to show your capability. Replace them with actual samples as soon as you can. One mediocre printed sample is worth two great spec samples.

Show printed samples unmounted. Rigidly mounted and protected samples are usually appropriate only when the piece is delicate (e.g., original artwork or tear sheets) or for protecting prints of oversized work. Handing the client an actual sample to examine is far more interactive and effective than turning portfolio pages or projecting a visual. It provides a sense of involvement while giving the client a chance to feel the stock, check the printing, and read the copy. Above all, it allows you to better control the presentation and describe the samples on your terms, not wait for a client’s reaction.

Close with a “leave behind” and follow up. Close your presentation by asking, “Is there anything I’ve left out that will help you better understand my capabilities?” This may trigger questions about pricing. If so, give a representative price based on an example of the type of work the client is interested in: “The design and preparation of an 8- to 12-page brochure normally runs from $ to $ depending on complexity [give a range of at least 50 percent]. Of course, I’ll provide a specific estimate when the job is clearly defined.”

It’s best not to volunteer hourly rates, because they might appear too high for some clients. But don’t hesitate if asked. You might say, “My labor rate is $ per hour, but I’ll give a specific estimate as soon as the job is clearly defined.”

Finally, present a small package of leave-behind pieces—a business card, brochure, and a “How We Work” summary (download a free sample at www.creativebusiness.com/on-line.html). Ask the client if you can add his or her name to your mailing list. Clients seldom say no, and this is your authorization to stay in touch.

If you presented your portfolio for a specific assignment, ask when the client will make a decision. Indicate that you’ll follow up around that time with a phone call. A week or so later, when the presentation starts to fade from the client’s memory, send a short thank-you note. A belated thank you will serve as one more positive client contact.


What’s inside counts!
DG is looking for examples of portfolios to feature in a future issue. Does your portfolio have an interesting shape, style, or binding? Does it use unique materials? Is it organized creatively? Does it have a theme, or is it based on a concept? E-mail a description, and images if possible, to hale@dgusa.com.
CHOOSING A PORTFOLIO CASE  A common mistake made by less experienced designers is putting too much emphasis on a portfolio or presentation case. Your samples are what sell you, not what they come in.  However, when choosing a case, keep it simple and practical. Consider weight, size, durability, and portability. A small to medium-sized lightweight case is easier to transport, view during a presentation, and mail.

Portfolios come in an assortment of sizes, styles (binders, books, boxes, attaché cases, envelopes), materials (leather, vinyl, acrylic, cloth, wood, aluminum), and price ranges. Pictured above are some of Dynamic Graphics' picks.

For one-stop shopping, visit any of the following websites—all of which offer stock and custom-made portfolio materials to suit every need.

Brewer-Cantelmo, www.brewer-cantelmo.com, 800.246.1233
Fastportfolio, www.fastportfolio.com, 415.401.9222
House of Portfolios, www.houseofportfolios.com, 212.206.7323
Keysan, www.keysan.com, 800.969.5397
Portfolios & Art Cases, www.portfolios-and-art-cases.com, 800.688.4745