PRESENTING YOUR WORK

Think of choosing the proper presentation form for your portfolio in the same way you would choose a bottle of wine to accompany your dinner. The best choice will enhance its accompaniments; the tastes will be compatible and the combination should improve the entire experience.

The presentation of your work will account for half of the overall impression. That’s because you’re showing a graphic product to a graphic consumer. The key word here is graphic. To some degree, everyone who sees your work is making decisions based on visual input.

OPTIONS FOR MOUNTING YOUR WORK

After you decide which pieces to use, you must decide how to show them. You have lots of options: 35mm, 4” x 5” and 8” x 10” transparencies, printed samples mounted various ways, laminations, actual pieces mounted or sleeved. If you’re showing your work to a group and don’t want to use 35mm slides and a projector, mounting printed work on large foam-core boards for an easel or a freestanding display is a possibility. This is a good way to show a series of spreads or before-and-after comparisons. Posters or dimensional work are less awkward to transport and display when photographed and shown in transparency form.

Laminations are yet another option. They provide permanent protection for samples, and may be ordered in various thicknesses, with several styles of finishes. The disadvantage of using laminations is that they easily become scratched. They are also heavier than other mounting materials, so if you frequently send your portfolio by mail or an express service, laminations will add to the cost.

Mounting tear sheets or transparencies, either 4” x 5” or 8” x 10”, is a common presentation method for illustrators who prefer an unbound portfolio. The advantage here is flexibility. You choose the pieces to include and order them in the most appropriate way for a specific call. The disadvantage is that you must keep up with all the loose pieces and see that they are returned.

The bound portfolio case takes the most editing consideration, since you see a spread each time you flip a page, and the facing pieces must work together. The disadvantage of the bound book is a lack of flexibility. Even if you use only right-hand pages, you have to take the book apart to change or add new pieces. If you use both right- and left-hand pages, the job becomes more complicated.

Whatever your choice of case, bound or unbound, you have the options of size and color to consider. To some extent the size you choose will depend on your budget. The larger the format, the more expensive the production and transportation costs. If you show your work locally, this may not be a problem (but keep in mind that you still have to lug it from place to place). If you plan to ship it across the country, either develop two formats or keep the size relatively small. The size of the standard express box is 12 1/2” x 17 1/2” x 3”.

Look at your work mounted in 4” x 5” format as well as 8” x 10” or 11” x 14” and decide which format most enhances your work. Does it lose impact in the smaller size, or does your style lend itself to the more intimate format? What is the nature of the work you’re showing? Does it need more space around it? Is the proportion better with larger work and smaller mat? Are you showing it in context or not? Will the size accommodate both your horizontal and vertical pieces?

Next you must decide on the color of the mounts. Unless you are showing only black-and-white work, it will be difficult to use any strong colors as a background. The most likely choices will be black, white, or some shade of neutral gray. Black is the most commonly used and the most resistant to showing wear. White is the most fragile. Gray can add a warmer, less stark feeling. Your final decision is based on the specific work you are showing and how it looks best.
The proportion and the color of the mount will affect the visual presentation of your work. Shown opposite is the same piece mounted in 8"x10" size on an 11"x14" mount (top row); 4"x5" size on an 8"x10" mount (center row); and two 4"x5" pieces on a single 11"x14" mount (bottom row).
EDITING YOUR PORTFOLIO

Editing is not simply eliminating from your portfolio those pieces that do not belong, it is the art of preparing your presentation by its arrangement. The order in which you present your portfolio pieces will set the pace, the impact, and the overall mood of your work. Whether you’re putting together a ten-piece illustration portfolio or a full slide tray of design projects, you have the same goal: You want the viewer to be swept away. You want whoever reviewed your portfolio to think about your images on the way home in the evening and again when they wake up in the morning. In short, you want them to be motivated to call and give you a job.

We’re going to address different kinds of portfolios in this section, that is, portfolios put together for different purposes. While the editing techniques used will stay pretty much the same, the focus of the books will change considerably.

There are some known and unknown factors to deal with in editing. Sending a portfolio off in response to a potential client’s request is the easiest. The known factors are the pieces to include. They’ll be determined largely by the call for your portfolio. You’ll know who called, whether or not they have seen your work, and if so, what kind of work they have seen and a little about the specific job they have in mind. If you are trying to solicit work from a potential client who is unfamiliar with your work and where there is no specific job, then your pieces will be determined by the research you have done on the client and the type of work they do.

If your portfolio is called in on a specific job, you’ll have a rough idea of that job, and the kind of work you include will be the most relevant to the job. Breaking into a new market or introducing your work to new people calls for a different type portfolio, a general portfolio that will serve as your formal introduction.

When you make a “cold call,” one in which you initiated the appointment and the person you are seeing is not familiar with your work, you will put together a more general portfolio. This general portfolio must be broader in focus than the more specific book you would produce for a specific job. You want to show the breadth and depth of your work, to show all the possibilities. You still want to edit with the strongest pieces at the opening and closing, but the pieces you include will cover assignments from a variety of clients and for a variety of jobs.

If you have just moved to a new area and are starting the process of meeting all your prospective clients, this is the book you’ll use. As you develop relationships with art directors or designers, you will show them more narrowly focused work or different styles. This doesn’t mean that you should dig up all the life-drawing work from school or the series of nicely done but boring graphs you did for an insurance brochure. It does mean you should show examples of all the kinds of major work you want to do. It’s fine to include a few pieces of personal work, and this is probably the best time to show it.

As you present this overview, be aware that the person will be interviewing you as much as your work, especially at the outset. Always remember that you are selling yourself as well as your work through your portfolio.

THE POST & RAIL EDITING TECHNIQUE

Think of organizing your portfolio in the same way you would build a fence. Designate your very best pieces as fence posts, the strength of your fence. The number of strong pieces you have will determine how long your fence is. Think of the remainder of the pieces as the rails that join one post to the next.

First, pick out the three best pieces you have in order, first, second, and third. Open your portfolio with piece number one, close your book with piece number two, and use piece number three in the middle. The position of these three best examples will be the strong points that establish your work’s quality and substance. You will connect the remaining “rail” pieces to each of these strong posts to complete the building of your fence.

The opening piece for an illustrator might be the cover of a prestigious international publication (or, if you’re just starting out, any piece that has been published or used by a client). A designer
might begin with an award-winning project. It’s best to open with something that subliminally shows approval. It’s a vote of confidence about your work and gives the rest of your work the same sense of validation. This piece will set the tone of your portfolio. It represents the style you want to be remembered by and positions your work in the art director’s mind.

While it’s absolutely mandatory to open with a smashing work, it’s equally important to close with a great piece. The final impression is almost as important as the first impression. And keep in mind that if you are using a bound portfolio to show your work, many art directors first thumb through your book from back to front; this is another reason why the first and last images are the two most important. If your presentation is in slide-tray form, the final image may be the first topic of conversation after the lights come back up and the segue between your portfolio and the offer of a brand-new assignment.

If you can develop a story or a reason to pause at the middle piece, you can further control the pace at which your work is reviewed. Use the opportunity to explain this “story piece” to your advantage; tell how you solved a particularly thorny problem or offer a brief, humorous anecdote about the piece. Use this example to personalize this meeting. Form a bridge with your interviewer and your portfolio. And recalling the story will help them remember your work.

Now look at the remainder of the pieces you pulled to include in this portfolio, the pieces we designated as “rails.” Think of them in terms of horizontal or vertical, black-and-white versus color, or any other physical dissimilarities. If the format of the portfolio you use allows facing pages, you must consider the juxtaposition of your works. If there is no subject theme you need to edit for, then work out what flows best with your eye. Connecting one to the next, from rail to post, is this basic editing technique.

Build your portfolio, the way you would a fence. Your best work will be the foundation, the “posts” that hold the portfolio together. In between will be your “rails,” linking the strongest pieces together and giving an idea of the full range of your work.

**Special Editing Techniques For Designers**

In order to develop a design portfolio, which may include a wide range of work, the editing technique must change to allow for the different categories. Since you will have an idea of the type of work the prospective client wants to see, you will know which of your examples you want to show. Opening and closing with the strongest pieces, even in mini-categories, will give you the same results. Instead of picking single pieces, you may choose a series of works that represent a comprehensive design program. Deciding how many of these programs to show will obviously depend on how many you have to show and the range of work you have done.

Many designers like to show the broadest range of work they do so that the client can appreciate the entire scope of the firm. If, for example, a retail company calls on the design firm to work on hang tags for a product, the firm might show not only other hang tags, but point-of-sale, promotions, gift boxes, and the annual report they had prepared for a previous assignment. This would make up one section of the total portfolio. Depending on the level of this meeting (whether it is an initial meeting or one with a higher level of management), the firm may put together a series of case histories of projects created for a variety of their clients and order the histories in the same post-and-rail technique.

Normally, the work of the design firm will be presented as a whole; that is, no one partner’s work separated from the others. However, there are exceptions to that rule. In the case where the work of two artists are shown in one portfolio, the two artists should decide between them whose work will be shown first and whose will close the portfolio. Any collaborative work will be the segue between the two.
Books may be bound with a screwpost or metal spine, as well as ring binders. Sheet protectors are available in acetate, vinyl, or mylar. The heat and humidity in your location may have a bearing on your choice of materials. Ask the most knowledgeable person at the art store which is most appropriate for your needs. (Above) This leather folder and case with acetate sleeves is best for a longer-than-average presentation. This particular case comes with the option of screw-post or spiral binding. Similar items should also be available from your local art supply store. (Right) This Brewer-Cantelmo Tear Sheet Book can be customized to any size and thickness. It is shown here with its black nylon carrying case. This rain-proof, padded carrying case protects the leather of the binder and prolongs the life of the portfolio.
(Right) A clam shell storage box, with carrying case, is intended for a presentation made up of loose pieces, either mounted or laminated. If you use these boxes as a storage system for your art, be sure they are lined with acid-free paper. This box has an unhinged 2" gusset which allows the box to open 180 degrees. (Below) Storage or mailing tubes for architectural drawings or poster transportation. The red tubes, available in several sizes, are expandable plastic suitable for smaller quantities of art. The large black tube has the largest opening and has a heavier construction than the others. Both have straps for carrying ease. (Bottom right) A leather attaché case, available in several sizes, may carry either your book or loose mounted pieces. Additional support materials and leave-behinds can be kept in a side pocket of the case.
Shown here are three variations from the Elegante and Traygante series from Brewer-Cantelmo. This book/box combination features a flap, handle and screwpost binding. Each book can be custom-stamped with your name or logo. Although this exact item may not be available, similar ones may be found in your local art supply store.

The Sorel portfolio, a two-flap, lightweight box folder, is designed for twelve to eighteen square laminations or mounts, and can display your work both horizontally and vertically. The carrying case is separate. Buy the best presentation materials you can afford. How your package looks may determine whether it gets opened.

These two Presentation Mailers are a lightweight answer to air express portfolios. The larger box on the bottom fits perfectly in a standard air express shipping carton. The wooden sides provide support and help protect your art when it leaves the safety of your office.
MEETING AN ART DIRECTOR

FACE TO FACE PROFESSIONAL encounters with art directors are rarer than hen’s teeth. Most art directors are too busy with their daily routine to address the plethora of appointment calls. It’s a sad fact of professional life. On the off-chance that section part long enough to get a personal interview the following rules of etiquette should apply:

BEFORE CALLING:
• Know the art director’s name and how to pronounce it.
• Know the art director’s work. There is nothing worse than a blind phone call by an empty-headed caller.
• Make certain your work is appropriate to the art director’s needs.

ON CALLING:
• Fast and simple: Do not be verbose. “I’d like to make an appointment to show you my portfolio,” will suffice. If you are recommended by someone else mention that, too. Do not try to describe your work or where you’ve been published.
• Take the appointment date being offered. If there is an absolutely unavoidable conflict, say so, but otherwise remember that the chance may not come again.
• Forget familiarity. If you are lucky enough to get the art director directly, avoid the “good-ole-boy” routine. It’s not professional.

ON MEETING:
• Do not be late.
• Be as polite as you would like to be treated.
• Do not be surprised if your meeting lasts only long enough for the art director to page through the portfolio.
• Do not make conversation. Let your work do the talking. Offer a brief contextual comment only if necessary.
• Do ask pertinent questions if you think they’re necessary. If the art director does not respond ask either “Is my work appropriate for you?” or “What do you think of it?”

ON THE PORTFOLIO:
• Be professional. Bring either a handmade or conventional portfolio. Do not shove your work into an envelope or present on loose sheets.
• Time is short and valuable. Make your presentation as accessible as possible.
• Limit your samples to between 10 and 20. Do not bring an excessive number of tear sheets or originals. Do edit them so that they reveal the kind of work you want to get.