Designer and armchair humorist Rick Tharp has endured countless ill-fated interviews and hellish portfolio reviews. He presents his Ten Commandments for youngsters seeking sage advice and the perfect job.

by Rick Tharp

In the 20-something years that I've been reviewing portfolios (more than 530 of them at last count), I've come across 10 recurring habits that really irk me. These peeves of mine manifest themselves during the initial contact, or during the portfolio review itself, or even in the follow-up. I interviewed a few seasoned designers and art directors around the country and found that I'm not the only one.

First, let me tell you why I review portfolios and why I interview the designers who bring them in. Aside from the two obvious reasons, (1) to find employees and (2) to steal ideas, I have a sincere desire to share what others shared with me when I was just starting out. Gee, this sounds commendable, but it's the truth. When I was fresh out of school, I wanted to show my portfolio to anybody who sat at a drawing board for a living. I didn't care whether there was a job opening or not; I just wanted someone to look at my stuff and talk to me, someone who actually did what I wanted to do and who really cared about their work.
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Oh sure, a job would’ve been nice, but that never happened to me. You see, I’ve never had a job. But I’ve had hundreds of bosses since I opened my own studio (Tharp Did It, Los Gatos, CA) in 1975. So now I make a point to review at least two portfolios a month, regardless of whether we have a job opening. It’s part of my “giving back” to the design community.

The most difficult part of any review is keeping my mouth shut when something bothers me. I’m not talking about annoying little habits like chewing gum or bouncing knees—hell, I used to be nervous when I walked into a studio and put my portfolio on a professional’s conference table. I’m talking about subtle cues that indicate the portfolio presenter’s work ethic and potential as a representative of our studio.

DEAR MR. FARP ...

The initial contact the presenter makes with most firms is usually a phone call followed by a cover letter and a résumé. Most of us who have been in this business for a while have seen hundreds of cover letters and can spot a form letter even before reading it. Some presenters don’t take the time to find out to whom they should address that letter.

Petrula Vrontikis of Vrontikis Design Office in Los Angeles, gets really annoyed when she receives a form letter. “Or worse, one that begins with ‘To whom it may concern,’” she says. “If you’re going to take the time to write a letter, then don’t send a canned letter. And if you’re going to address an individual, at least spell the name correctly. Do a little research.” (Just try spelling her name without seeing it first.)

SAW ME ON DAVID LETTERMAN, HUH?

Another of Ms. Vrontikis’ rankles is receiving letters that say, “I saw your work in Communication Arts magazine.” I, too, get letters saying they’ve seen our work in some design publication that we’ve never been in. The presenter may actually have seen our work in print, but didn’t pay attention to where he saw it. In this business we can’t afford to hire someone who doesn’t pay attention to details.

WATCH YOUR KARMA.

Our small studio receives so many letters and résumés that we have to keep a file divided into sections. One of those sections is labeled “Waiting-for-Call.” The last line in most of the cover letters we receive reads, “I will call you in a few days to see if you are interested in seeing my portfolio.” Even if the presenter finds employment after sending this initial letter, we anticipate a call.

It’s not as though we’re just sitting here waiting for that promised call, but if he doesn’t pick up the phone, then the résumé goes to the back of the file in a separate section labeled “False Promises and Other Malfunctions.” Even if the presenter found another job right after sending us a letter, that call would indicate his or her follow-through abilities. Who knows? This person may eventually look for another job, and we keep résumés for five to seven years.

TOO MUCH WHITESPACE.

Doesn’t anyone know what that one inch of whitespace at the bottom of the letter, between the word “Sincerely” and your name, is to be used for? Maybe an autograph? That’s the only thing besides the salutation that can personalize a cover letter these days. If one doesn’t take the time to sign the letter after Mr. DeskJet spits it out, I question how much time went into writing it.

I don’t read unsigned letters. Each piece of correspondence produced by our studio, with the exception of faxed memos, is signed by its author. It’s good form, it shows we’re paying attention, and it fills in that handy whitespace after “Sincerely.”

HOW ABOUT A PAIR OF $12,000 SKID MARKS?

Legend has it that an overzealous student searching for an internship slid her rigid portfolio box (with riveted metal corners) onto San Francisco designer Michael Vanderbyl’s maple-with-ebony-inlay 10-seater conference table and was never seen or heard from again. The tale says that the conference table, designed by Mr. Vanderbyl himself and built by a 100-year-old furniture company on the East Coast, cost more than 25 summer-intern salaries combined. God only knows what went through Vanderbyl’s head when those beautiful little curls of maple appeared in front of the portfolio as it slid toward those ebony inlays.

Many years ago I replaced my big, beautiful conference table with a four-seater from Home Express. That didn’t eliminate those nasty gouges left by the metal corners on portfolios, but I figure it saves me about $1,500 per interview. I’m now prepared to take on any who enter my sanctuary, metal corners and all.
VI.

BEEN TO ANY DOGFIGHTS LATELY?
Stephanie Paulson, creative director of The Stephenz Group in San Jose, CA, has one of those Vanderbyl-designed tables in her firm’s conference room. But that’s not what concerns her. She doesn’t always have time for personal one-on-one reviews, so the agency has a drop-off policy for first-timers. Although I don’t subscribe to this method, it’s quite beneficial to someone who is as busy and bombarded with portfolios as Ms. Paulson.

Drop-off policies allow reviewers to look at work on their own time. One of Ms. Paulson’s seeves is receiving “thrown-together, loose samples in those horribly scratched acetate sleeves that have been taped together and ripped open too many times,” she says. “I have no time to decipher work that the designer isn’t conscientious enough to present with care. Unorganized portfolios are immediately closed and put at the front desk for pickup.”

And don’t even ask her about online portfolios. “Convenient? Yes. Annoying? Absolutely,” she says. “If my system crashes while trying to get to your URL, I’m done.”

If I’m doing a one-on-one portfolio review, I’ll usually find a way to cut the interview short if the presenter isn’t organized. Organizational skills are important in this business, and a poorly presented portfolio with dog-eared samples is a tip-off.

VII.

HOW ABOUT A FOUR-WEEK PAID VACATION TO HAWAII?
Chris Berner, senior designer at Funk & Associates in Eugene, OR, is especially irritated by “those who don’t know who you are or what you do, and don’t seem to care,” he says. “Before they’re offered a position, all they want to know is what it pays and what the firm’s vacation policy is.”

This seems to be the case with new design-school grads more than experienced job-seekers. If money seems to be the prime motivation, I offer Mr. Vanderbyl’s recommendation: “Get into the real-estate business.”

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THE INTERVIEW FROM HELL (ER, EUGENE)
AS TOLD AND ILLUSTRATED BY MR. THARP

Chris Berner, senior designer at Funk & Associates in Eugene, OR, and former design instructor at Lane Community College, always agrees to portfolio reviews from his past students. When I asked him about the most interesting portfolio review he’s ever conducted, he related the story of a former student who was going on his third career change in as many decades. This guy showed up late for his interview and smelled like rotten eggs mixed with stale chemicals from an old photostat processor. Mr. Berner said the guy’s book consisted of 20-year-old price/item newspaper ads for the local discount drugstore. Nothing in his presentation even remotely suggested that he understood design, marketing or basic hygiene.

Mr. Berner picks up the story from there: “As the interview progressed, his voice became louder and more demanding. He kept asking me what positions we had for him. I started to get an uneasy feeling that this man also had an anger-management problem.”

“When he sensed that I wasn’t steering the conversation to a job offer, he said something like, ‘Oh, you’ll never hire me because I’m too old, will you?’ This fellow was probably in his late 30s, early 40s. Quite a few of our employees, who this former student of mine had seen on his way in, are in their mid-40s. We even have one designer in our office who is 52, so I don’t know where this idea came from.”

“Then things got worse. He insisted on turning the interview into a litany of how his ex-employers were out to get him, how nobody ever treated him fairly in his other jobs, and how he didn’t want that to happen here [at Funk]. Now my only goal was to figure out how to get this poor guy into counseling—or at least out of our office.”

You know an interview is going badly when your thoughts turn to how you can escape your own studio without physical harm. Mr. Berner used the only trick he knew to end this fiasco: He looked at his watch and said, in a surprised voice, “Oh, I’m late for my next appointment,” and apologized for having to cut the interview short. The smelly guy then slammed his book shut in a huff and walked out of the office, without a thank-you, without leaving a résumé, never to be seen or heard from again.

So the next time you think you’ve got it bad, just think: There are people out there like that poor fellow who showed up in Chris Berner’s office. He’s probably still looking for a job—and a shower. I just hope he doesn’t find his way to San Jose.
IF MONEY SEEMS TO BE THE PRIME MOTIVATION, I OFFER MR. VANDERBYL’S RECOMMENDATION: ‘GET INTO THE REAL-ESTATE BUSINESS.’

VIII. WHERE’S THE BEEF?
When I put my first book together, I was proudest of work I did as tight comps, pieces I meticulously labored over to make look even better than a printed sample. But I quickly realized that potential employers wanted to see how I thought and how fast I could work, not how much time I could put into a comp.

Now I, too, want to see the real work; I want to see some thinking. Those cocktail-napkin scribbles (or whatever one does before jumping on the ol’ Mac to start moving type and images around), placed in an envelope in the back pocket of a portfolio, can come in handy if a reviewer asks for them. As Mr. Berner says, “I see too much fluff and not enough meat.”

IX. HOW ABOUT A NEW HOOVER?
During a typical portfolio review with the more seasoned designer-type, I often select one of the best works and ask what the presenter’s role was in developing the piece. “Did you come up with the concept? Did you art-direct the photography and illustration? Did you design it? Did you do the final production and press check?” Often the answer is, “It’s all mine. I did everything.”

“What about the other work in your portfolio?” I may ask. “Oh, yes. Everything in my book was done completely by me.”

This tells me that either the person isn’t a team player, or there’s some serious lying going on, neither of which is a good sign if you want a job at most studios. Most of us with a staff don’t work in a vacuum. We work as a team.

X. WHAT! NO COOKIES?
Before scheduling regular reviews, we notify the presenters that there isn’t necessarily a job opening in the studio, but we’d be happy to review their work and keep their résumés on file.

I don’t know what’s going on in some presenters’ heads, but they must think we run a portfolio-review service. Perhaps they think we’re doing us a favor by showing their book. A half-hour or 45 minutes is not something I can afford to give away. Don’t get me wrong; I get my share of thank-you letters, but what about a box of chocolates or a nice Cabernet Sauvignon? That alone could move a résumé to the front of our file.

PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY
I hope you don’t get the idea we ripe-old professionals don’t like doing portfolio reviews. As I noted, it’s important to “give back.” On the other hand, we’re not in the portfolio review business. We have precious little time as it is, so you have to be organized, succinct and focused. I concur when Ms. Paulson says, “You have five minutes of my time to make an impression.” Just don’t plan on doing a tap dance on her conference table. HOW

Mr. Tharp runs Tharp Did It, a five-person design firm, somewhere south of San Francisco. If you’d like to show him your portfolio, drop him a cover letter and a résumé. He’s just dying to see you. (408)354-6726

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