Self-Promo Savvy
Land a portfolio interview with an attention-grabbing self-promotion.

When you're in business for yourself, showing your portfolio to potential clients is critical to securing job assignments. But how do you gain access to individuals who are in a position to hire you? A cold call or an e-mail to a busy art director or business owner is likely to yield a negative response, unless you have a referral. Put yourself in their position. If you were working 40-plus hours a week, would you take the time to meet with a total stranger soliciting you for your business? An inquiry letter on a well-designed business letterhead, along with an impressive client list, might prompt a response, but there's no guarantee the recipient will give your letter the timely attention it needs if it gets lost in the company's shuffle of daily mail.

You could pique interest with a self-promotional mailer sent in a box or an eye-catching envelope. It's less likely to get lost in the in-basket and more likely to get noticed in a sea of mail. More importantly, it demonstrates how capably you can solve a design problem by serving as an example of your best work. It becomes a lure by giving the recipient a taste of your capabilities. You can complete the picture and sell your prospective client on your work when you get a chance to meet and discuss your portfolio samples.

Develop a Plan
The type of self-promotion you develop depends on the kinds of projects you're seeking, your audience, and of course, your budget. If the work you're seeking is of a general nature, the concept you decide to develop is limited only by your design capabilities, imagination, and budget constraints. But if your expertise is specific to a certain area of design, you'll want to design a promotion that showcases your capability in that area. For instance, it's far better to come up with a promotion that mimics a CD jacket and fits into a jewel case than to produce a brochure, if you're interested in CD packaging. If your specialty is publications, a brochure is entirely appropriate. If you haven't determined what types of projects you'd like to do or who your audience is, take time to think about what you do best and where you want to market your services, then come up with a self-promotion strategy that fits that area of the industry.

After determining your market, make a list of firms and individuals who might be interested in hiring you for freelance work. Your list can come from a combination of resources—an accumulation of contacts, names you've pulled from a Business-to-Business telephone directory or Yellow Pages, and firms you've scoped out on the web. The number of individuals on your list will dictate how many self-promotions you'll need to produce.

When determining a budget, don't be stingy—delegate a substantial amount. It's not unusual for designers to allot $2 to $4 per item for materials and printing, and just as much for mailing each piece. The return on self-promotion will exceed the expense, if done well.

An Ongoing Need
If you believe an introductory promotion is all that's necessary for continued success, think again. Self-promotion is an ongoing process. It's a reminder of your capabilities to current and former clients, as well as a means of opening the door to future clients. It's essential that you send out self-promo mailings on a regular basis, although how often depends on the unique needs of your business.

Many design firms and ad agencies send out a holiday self-promotion in lieu of a card. In fact, if you're competing in this arena, it's essential to send clients something you've created as opposed to something purchased, even a card. The holiday season also provides companies an opportunity to thank clients for their business. Though it may not appear an overt self-promo, a cleverly packaged gift and
To introduce her new business to former freelance clients, Angela Jackson used the Easter holiday as a chance to send self-promotional chocolate bunnies. The design of the accompanying card and the promotion's packaging showcases her capabilities.

Jackson's second promotion introduced her home-based business to potential clients with whom she had no prior contact.

The matching card can be as effective for reminding clients of your services as an introductory self-promo. And many times the recipient will call to thank you for the gift, saving you the time and effort of a follow-up call.

Featuring your portfolio on a website isn't the most ideal way to promote yourself, unless you specifically direct traffic to your site via a self-promotion. People who seek freelance design services aren't likely to access your site through an online search engine.

**Strategy for Success**

After 13 years of working as a designer on the campus of California State University, Sacramento, Angela Jackson quit her job to establish a home-based freelance business, Studio J, last February. "There were some assignments I couldn't accept because I couldn't devote 100 percent of my time to them," she relates. "Fortunately, I already had a few clients from freelance work I'd done at night and on weekends while I was still employed, which gave me a base to work from when I started my own business."

But Jackson knew she'd need to establish a broader client base to support herself. She decided to do a self-promo mailing to announce her new business to former clients. "I sent out 25 promotions to past clients, which included a note letting them know I set up a home studio and thanking them for their past business," she says.
Once you've determined what you can afford to spend to promote yourself, the next step is to develop a strategy and concept based on:

**INTRIGUE.** An effective self-promo should be packaged in a way that will engage the recipient and elicit a response. What type of item would stand out in a pile of mail and would make you want to open it first? Most likely something that's odd-shaped, larger or smaller than a standard-sized business envelope, colorful, or possibly three-dimensional. A handwritten address is a signal that a package's contents are personal or special.

**SURPRISE.** When a prospective client opens a self-promo, finding something unusual will have more impact than something that meets expectations. Think of intended recipients as “guinea pigs” for testing your mailer. How they react to your promotion is how they'll assume others will react. If your piece makes a favorable impression, they'll assume you have the power to create a promotion that will similarly compel their clients.

**STAYING POWER.** A self-promo that remains on a recipient's desk or gets used is more likely to serve as a reminder of your services. That's why coffee mugs, pens, and calendars are popular self-promotional items.

**VISUAL UNITY.** Your self-promotion will no doubt have several components—at the very least outer packaging with something inside. Think of your self-promo as a packaging assignment, and come up with a visual theme that works for all components. Color coordinate the promotion with your letterhead, or place your firm's logo on the promotion. When you've produced a piece that fits your audience and budget, compose a cover letter that's personalized for each recipient. Don't write from a vantage point that suggests you have much to gain from the experience of working with your potential client. People are always more interested in what you can do for them. It's better to convey the message that you can help them and that it would be mutually beneficial to meet each other. Close the letter with a sentence indicating you will call them to determine a convenient time to meet. Don't suggest that a recipient should call you. In the business world, doing so is the equivalent of asking someone out on a date then expecting them to pick you up. Those in a position to hire your services expect you to be proactive by following up.

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Because the promotion went out shortly before Easter, Jackson made chocolate Easter bunnies. The chocolate bunny tied in with past promotions, made from chocolate, that served as holiday gifts to freelance clients. “I started using chocolate molds because it's easy to fashion a concept around them and it's pretty inexpensive,” she says. Many former clients called to wish her well in her new venture.

A month later Jackson directed another promotion to a second list of potential clients with whom she had no prior contact. She compiled a list of 25 art directors and business owners in the Sacramento area and sent them her next edible promotion—a chocolate house with an insert that reads, “Now making house calls.” She followed up with a phone call to each recipient. The mailing yielded two projects. Jackson's chocolate promotions are such a success, they've become her signature. Since 1990, she's done nearly 100 holiday promotions.

As she got more involved in talking with local studio and agency personnel, Jackson discovered that her ability to do calligraphy and custom lettering set her apart from other designers. So she developed a third promotion of lettering samples. “This has been the most successful,” she says of the mini-portfolios of lettering styles she sent to the heads of ad agencies and design studios. Although she followed up with phone calls, many recipients called or e-mailed her. “I've heard from all but five of them,” she notes.
Every holiday season Jackson sends a chocolate gift, like this New Year's greeting (left), which uses the Chinese Year of the Dragon as its theme, to past and present clients.

To promote her logo creation and custom lettering, Jackson created a mini-portfolio of samples (below). The foil-stamped insignia on the portfolio’s flap coordinates with the stationery.
HAWK: Great self-promotion campaign! It shows the designer's love for art and a creative drive that evolved out of childhood. The design is simple and consistent. It tells a lot about her personality, which I think a future employer would appreciate.

LANE: Anyone whose fifth-grade teacher would write on her report card “While art is a nice hobby, we fear it’s causing math grades to suffer” is truly meant to be a designer. Leigh Standley showcases her design skills and humor in this precious self-promo.

MORTON: Standley is obviously a very creative, organized and hands-on designer. I love how she exploits her childhood “faults,” which are her assets as a designer.