

# RITASUE SIEGEL RESOURCES

an Aquent company

## PORTFOLIO GUIDE

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A portfolio is a self-explanatory strategic tool for showcasing the type of experiences you've had, your core design ability and process, the needs you've addressed, the quality level of your technical skills, and your potential. Critical to making a successful portfolio are a well-organized archive, a strategy to determine what to show in a particular interview, a sequence plan for presenting visuals, and framing the storytelling of the context and circumstances. Visuals and text have to support one another.

The portfolio is a vehicle to make your value offering so obvious that it makes the competition irrelevant.

Every designer needs a portfolio; even design managers, design directors, vice presidents of design and chief creative officers who may have not been doing hands-on design for a while need one. These individuals' portfolios show projects and programs that resulted from their vision and direction. Teachers' portfolios, in addition to showing their own work, contain photos of the work of their students. Design operations and project managers who participated in establishing effective patterns, cut time and cost, and were significant profit drivers should show the results of their collaboration and contribution with numbers and visuals of the design accomplishments involved (sentence is way too confusing - missing something). Account and marketing managers, strategic consultants, new business developers, design researchers and design planners can do the same.

Students should begin early to collect and to carefully store materials - online or in paper folders - relative to the best projects from the classroom, freelance, summer jobs and personal work. Label folders with project name and dates and include the statement of the situation, your research, digital and/or by-hand concept sketches, photos of preliminary models, form development, wire-frame drawings and interface design (if appropriate), renderings of final design, drafting, materials and manufacturing specifications, "green" and "inclusive" considerations, any testing, and whatever else was done to actualize it. Archiving is a good habit to develop as is keeping the content safe.

A portfolio is a work in progress. Its content will evolve and change as you gain experience, learn about what you do well and what you want to do more of. It is not a trip down memory lane. Just because you designed something doesn't mean it is portfolio material. If there is anything in the portfolio you have to make excuses for or are not proud of, get rid of it. ("When in doubt, take it out.")

After you have had 3-5 years of experience, school work will be replaced by "real" work. Prospective employers are not interested in how you used to do something, unless it relates directly and positively to what they need you to work on, and doesn't look dated. Potential employers want to know what your abilities are at that given moment. Never show to anyone, especially a prospective employer, any work considered confidential by an employer or client. Always be clear and truthful about your responsibilities or contributions on a project. (See page 71 for confidential work.)

## Customize

What is customizing? If a job description calls for someone who sketches excellently by hand, be sure examples of hand drawing are in your portfolio, hopefully integrated into the presentation of a project. If not, show them separately. If you are an automobile designer and

want to have other types of consumer product design opportunities, change your traditional automobile design portfolio. Instead of nothing but automobile design, stop and think about the series of integrated products and systems that make a car or truck a most complex consumer product. Show and talk about the research you engaged in or used the results of to develop a vehicle or products a vehicle contains. An instrument panel, steering wheel, entertainment and vanity consoles, storage systems, seating, lighting and so on are products within a product. Supplement the portfolio with sketches of the other types of product design opportunities you are looking for. Very often students who are graduating think the portfolio has to consist of work done in school or on the job. There is no law about this. Develop content to showcase who you are and what you want to do in design terms, and create a broad picture of your talents.

When you are presenting a portfolio and the position for which you are interviewing calls for a strong team leader, what should you do if you haven't played that role? Explain what your role on the team for each project was, and the contributions of other team members. Describe what you would do differently, if anything, or what you learned from the team leader. Say, if it is true, that you are ready for a team leader role as your next step.

### **General vs. Industry-Specific Portfolio**

Once you've graduated (or if you're graduating from a school having majored in automotive design or furniture, for example), you'll have to decide whether to have a portfolio featuring a range of subject matter or one to show to industry-specific employers. Our experience shows that for a new graduate, a completely industry-specific portfolio can impede a career under some circumstances.

- What if there are very few jobs in the office furniture or toy industry when you graduate?
- What if a parent's ill health confines you to a geographic area where no firms are engaged in designing footwear?
- What if, after making the rounds, none of the automobile companies offer you a position?
- What if no one will hire a design researcher without a master's degree?

My colleagues and I advise diverse portfolio content, in case you need to seek employment outside your area of first preference. Keep out the wider range of work until you need it, or include it if it adds quality and depth to your specialized portfolio. In the final analysis, you may find happiness working on projects and programs you never dreamed you'd be interested in.

### **Formats**

Trust me: There is no need to ponder the creation of the greatest container of all time or the slickest website or PowerPoint; it's the quality of the work and the design and strategy of the presentation of content that matters. I've seen more than 70,000 portfolios and heard years of feedback from clients about what they wanted to see and what was missing.

Once you accept that fancy presentation techniques are less important than content, you are free to think about your core presentation and what you want to communicate. You also need portions of content that are customizable to match the requirements of a particular job for which you are interviewing. Before you are offered a coveted position, you may have to show your portfolio to people who understand what they are looking at, as well as those who don't. Plan the content around visual materials of completed design work preceded by the research and thinking involved. Include how you visualized concepts, developed solutions and created forms to express ideas and value rather than the usual rectangles with rounded corners. The content will showcase your approach to discovering opportunities, solving problems, understanding context, ability to integrate parts into a whole, and your ability to

commence work despite not having all the information or resources at hand. The latter demonstrates your ability to deal with ambiguity, something designers are supposed to be very good at, as well as technical skills like hand sketching of concepts, model making, computer concept visualization and modeling, and any other ways you visually communicate information. Some designers add sketches of projects in other areas of interests they have not had the opportunity to fully explore.

## Words and Type

Because it doesn't occur to most recent graduates that one day they might be interviewed in a room where eight people will be sitting around a conference table, they are still making 8 ½ x 11-inch or smaller hard copy portfolios. And because they do not understand that many of the people who will be involved in the decision to hire them are over 40, they are using 8-point type on resumes and websites, in laptop presentations and portfolios. This is a health hazard. Many clutter their presentations with graphic elements that are simply a distraction. Judicious editing to the most relevant bullet points is more appropriate than lots of text, as no one has time to do much reading when looking through a portfolio.

Select a typeface or two to use consistently and develop a standard labeling and explanation protocol. Keep words to a minimum when putting words together with visuals, keep it simple and design for readability. A typical beginner's error is to stack a block of type with too many words, justified left and right, no indentation for paragraphs and no space between the lines rendering it unreadable. Of course use spell and grammar check and ask another person to proofread every word in it.

Use a layout or sequencing method that allows you to make changes easily, like Post-it notes or the digital equivalent.

When sending 5-10 PDFs or JPGs or a PowerPoint presentation as a preview to headhunters or potential employers, simple written explanations under each image may be helpful. The same is true with online portfolios posted on job sites.

## Content

For new grads, about five months before graduation is time enough to create the portfolio to help get you your first "real job." This is where your archive comes in. Go through the most recent folders (real or digital) first. Your latest work is usually best, but you need to dig deeper. Select diverse projects ranging from the simple to the complex. While looking through the folders and deciding which projects you want to include in the portfolio, make notes about what additions or revisions are needed for each project. Set aside time on your calendar over the following weeks to make the changes. Improving schoolwork using feedback from critiques in class and your latest more mature thinking and technical skills to make some of the projects memorable is permitted.

New graduates do not need to use expensive materials, printing methods or the latest digital tools to develop or display content for their portfolio. In fact, being able to tell a design story with modest means is an advantage.

Experienced designers can select content from the archive of work designed or directed on the job. Some will already be in your portfolio. If you have the time and inclination, starting from a blank slate is a good idea. Divide the potential content into a core presentation – a big picture overview of your experience, and projects you can insert when it is necessary to customize the portfolio.

For the particular interview you are preparing for, select samples to put into your portfolio that match or closely approximate what that prospective employer is looking for. Show projects that met or exceeded objectives and talk about that; show projects representing

breakthroughs as well as those that made incremental improvements. Show before-and afters, and, if you are so inclined, put in some conceptual or aspirational work in sketch form. You can also show solutions you proposed to what was selected by your employer at the time or the client organization.

No matter what format is used, the core presentation should include at least three major projects or programs. Each should have the simplest short, clear description of the opportunity or problem, the success criteria, the research methodology, the actionable findings, the strategy to meet the needs discovered, and the design process – ideation, iteration, modeling, prototyping –refining, shown through sketches and photos; the relationship of the final design to the larger context, and whether or not it was successful. There are many ways to do this, and you have to decide how much to show for each project or program based on how it feels when the portfolio is finished. When showing the portfolio, you want to talk about your knowledge of relevant tools and standards, drafting and detailing where appropriate.

Information, data and/or diagrams can be shown digitally along with final models, a video or animation of a manufactured product or system of products in use, or a walk-through of a designed environment. Individual brochures can communicate findings of projects entailing user research that was product centered, culture centered and/or activity centered, with or without an integrated digital presentation.

## Container

The selection of a container depends on the core projects you plan to put inside. If using a binder with acetate leaves, an attaché case or a digital presentation, the show needs a beginning, middle and end, like a book. If choosing a plastic or leather binder, with or without a zipper, containing a spine that opens and closes to accept perforated acetate sleeves, 11 inches by 14 inches should be the minimum size. Choreograph what you take out of an attaché case and when (individual project binders or brochures plus mounted individual or sequenced visuals), and how they synchronize with a laptop presentation. Videos inserted appropriately are very effective. Use a layout or sequencing method that makes changing easy, like Post-it notes or the digital equivalent.

Every so often an experienced designer shows up with a battered briefcase from which work samples are extracted or a binder with worn edges, containing torn and scratched acetate sleeves. This is a misplaced Humphrey Bogart-type of nonchalance that doesn't work. The thought that will run through the head of a prospective employer is, "Is this how this person would make a presentation to a client?"

New graduates can include personal projects like photos of activity during a summer spent in rural Indonesia building community centers. Evidence of experiencing other cultures and unfamiliar behaviors is an advantage. Leave out fine arts projects unless the examples are magnificent. Figure drawings or photos of fully or partially undressed significant others are inappropriate.

When you finish the layout, ask yourself:

- Have I shown my thinking process?
- How I do and use research?
- Opportunities I have discovered?
- How I visualize concepts and begin to explore them?
- How I select a concept, do multiple iterations and refine one to finish?
- My understanding of materials and manufacturing?
- Model making?
- Drafting?
- If hard copy, is everything spotless?

- If digital, is each image easy to see and understand?

### **Safety**

A hard-copy portfolio contains precious and vulnerable cargo. Design it to be safe from the wear and tear of normal use, weather, coffee spills and greasy fingers. It should travel well and fit into an overhead compartment or under an airplane seat. Never trust it to the baggage department. Before you travel with it or leave it behind, copy it with a digital camera. Copy the digital files to a CD/DVD to keep at a friend's place, in a safety deposit box or park it on the web. Do whatever is necessary so that you can recreate it in case of fire or theft. Do the same with precious documents in your archive folders.

### **Writing Samples**

If you write well, bring examples of proposals, contact reports, articles and presentations you've written to leave behind after an interview for reading at another time (vetted of course, if confidential). If you find yourself continually asked at interviews for certain types of materials, make sure you provide them at the next interview.

### **Get Feedback**

You will know soon enough if the portfolio helps or hinders your ability to get the job you want. If it doesn't help, keep working on it until it does.