

Steff Geissbuhler* stood in the lobby of the Marketing and Promotion Department of J.R. Geigy Pharmaceutical Corporation, in Basel, Switzerland. He was awaiting the arrival of Max Schmid, the head of the then famous design department. The receptionist had told Stephen that Mr. Schmid would be down momentarily by elevator to pick him up.

Steff nervously clutched the handles of his homemade, oversized portfolio, made out of large DIN 01 boards and glued canvas spine, corners and handles. It contained all his original drawings, posters, photographs, booklets, and other schoolwork. It was his first personal interview after receiving his diploma from the Basel School of Design.

The elevator doors opened, Max Schmid came towards Steff and Steff started to walk towards him when suddenly the bottom of his portfolio came unglued and everything fell to the ground, sailing slowly—for what seemed forever—in all directions along the polished surface. His large drawings and boards took off across the floor like curling stones, going and going.

Steff turned bright red and bent down to gather everything in a hurry. But Max stopped him. He suggested that the two of them should just walk through the work and discuss the pieces where they had landed. Letting the chips fall where they may, or the Swiss equivalent to that.

As other people arrived in the lobby, some commented on Steff's work, while he and Max walked through the accidental exhibit. Max had turned Steff's most embarrassing moment into a humorous and interesting display, making it clear with his spontaneous reaction that it was the work he was interested in, not just the packaging.

As a bonus, he also got the job.

Presentation is Everything

Steff's story holds several important lessons for the creative professional. First, presentation is everything. Steff was lucky to have found an easygoing and inventive boss who was willing to put up with such an incident. Many people would not have been so lucky, and instead would have found themselves being berated for their lack of effort at a carefully assembled portfolio presentation.

Second, the portfolio is a crucial part of the hiring process. It may not only get you an interview, but it also may clinch a job offer. Whether you are a graphic designer, illustrator, photographer, fine artist or computer artist it will be important for you to have an effective way to show your work.

A portfolio should demonstrate creative ability, technical proficiency, and an abundance of ideas. It should be a systematic package of your visual solutions to real or practice assignments. The overall appearance and content of your portfolio leaves a lasting impression about your unique style, talent and expertise.

The Best Portfolio

- Neatness and careful organization are essential no matter how you present your work
- The samples should be of high quality
- Do not include everything you have ever done in your portfolio. Choose only your very best work and select pieces that are relevant to the employer or gallery you are approaching
- Demonstrate consistency in style and skill
- You may want to include a sample of work in different stages to show your progression of ideas and how you solved design problems
- Include alternate solutions to demonstrate creative versatility

Developing Your Portfolio

- Research the potential employer or market — slant your portfolio's contents to solutions developed with these customers in mind
- Review, assemble examples, and develop a sequence for your work. Start with your strongest and most favorite work
- If properly organized, your portfolio will demonstrate to clients how your skills will meet their needs and how they can profit from you
- Each piece must represent your interests and philosophy
- Do not have pieces facing in different directions — the viewer should be able to examine your portfolio without turning it around
- Remove empty pages
- Create an introduction and a list of contents
- Evaluate what you have done and get feedback from faculty or designers on content and presentation
- Rehearse presenting your portfolio
- Once you have developed an effective portfolio, it should take little effort to update or customize it

Portfolio Format

Traditionally the contents of a portfolio have been presented using 35mm slides, color prints, transparencies, or examples of publications (tear sheets). Most experts agree that the portfolio should have between 10 - 20 diverse pieces. All pieces should be of excellent quality and securely packaged.

The most common type is the simulated leather, multi-ring portfolio with pages that allow inclusion of loose samples. This has the advantage of keeping your work in sequence and well protected. Avoid large, "student" size books which are too big to fit on an art director's desk. Most artists choose 11x14" or 18 x 24".

Other types of portfolios include an attaché case or executive style case, which gives you the advantage of including 3-D works. Clients can easily make copies of your work without removing it from a sleeve. One more option is a plain colored box, which can easily accommodate loose pieces and 3-D works and has a more modern look to it. If you are a fine artist and your work is too large for a portfolio, bring slides and a few small samples.

There is always the option of creating a unique portfolio book or case that matches your style. One photography student, after taking a bookbinding class, made a hardcover portfolio book and slipcover from scratch matching the look of her photography style, letterhead, business card, and website.

More and more artists and designers are turning to technology to showcase their work on CD-ROMS, laptops, or through Web sites. For example, your work can be burned on a CD at very little cost and mailed to prospective clients. As a way to protect your work, consider copying sample work on your CD at a lower resolution. A computer monitor's screen is typically limited to 75 dpi anyway, so the highest resolution is not necessary. Let employers know you would be happy to provide high quality work upon request.

More and more designers are developing solid Web design skills, so creating a site that showcases your work is yet another option. As with any portfolio, only include work on your site that you would want a client to see. It is wise to check to see what an employer's preference and capabilities are in terms of viewing a disk or an interactive version of your portfolio.

Content

Obviously, if you are a graphic designer your portfolio will differ from a fine artist's. The following are some guidelines you can use to determine the kind of skills you should highlight. Always keep your audience in mind and select work that is similar to the work a firm is producing or a gallery is representing.

Print Design - catalog, magazine and book design; logos and symbols; design pieces with integrated type; storyboards; creative use of color, images and photographs; advertising; packaging and labels; collateral materials; posters or other publicity.

Web or Multimedia Design - include at least two complete, live Web sites or CD-ROM's with some of the following: splash page (professional, fast-loading, no errors), audio/music, navigation, rollovers, text, image maps, animation, easy-to-follow site structure and hierarchy.

Showing Your Portfolio

Your initial contact may be with a resume and some samples, but after a potential employer or buyer sees them they may want to see more of your work. Some firms have a drop off policy or set up appointments to see your work. Because things can get lost, it may be prudent to include only duplicates that can be replaced if you are not present for the review and show originals when you can be there. Label your portfolio with your name, address and phone number.

When presenting your portfolio, allow your work to speak for itself. There's no need to explain each work as the interviewer goes through it. Be prepared to answer questions about your work. Feel free to take notes along so you can easily answer questions about budget, time frame and any problems you faced and solved. If you are a fine artist, you might talk about the evolution of a concept or how one piece relates to other pieces.

Do not depart without leaving a resume, business card, and a sample for them to remember you by. "Leave-behinds" should complement the work in your portfolio and be interesting or functional enough so that the client will keep them or display them and not file them away. Be creative when you prepare these. Your only limit is your imagination, and your imagination is your most important asset as a creative professional.

Your portfolio is probably the most important marketing piece you will create. Take the necessary time and effort to develop one that represents your creative talent, abilities and potential.

For Additional Information

Artist's & Graphic Designer's Market, Writer's Digest Books

Portfolio Power: The New Way to Showcase All Your Job Skills and Experiences, by Martin Kimeldorf

Fresh Ideas in Promotion, edited by Lynn Haller

Creative Self-Promotion on a Limited Budget, by Sally Prince Davis

Becoming a Graphic Designer, by Steven Heller & Teresa Fernandes

* *Introductory story provided courtesy of Steff Geissbuhler at http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm?Alias=portfolio_advice.*

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