

The Unofficial

Design Portfolio

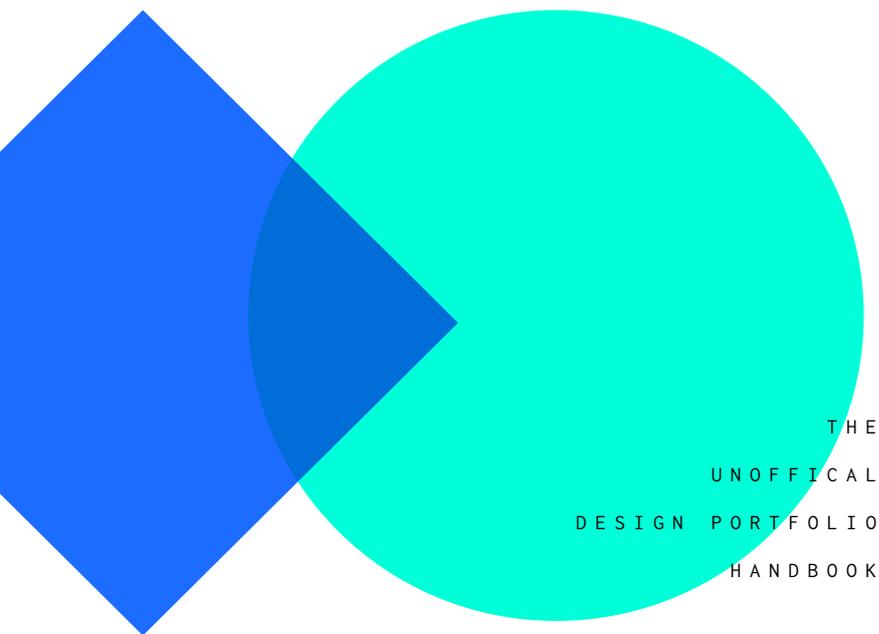
Handbook

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THE
UNOFFICIAL
DESIGN PORTFOLIO
HANDBOOK

Why should I have a portfolio?

As a creative you are often asked to show your work. Having a portfolio enables you to demonstrate your skills to anyone who is interested. It's essential if you want to attract clients or get hired.

Perhaps more impactful, your portfolio can help you to build relationships with people in your industry, eventually leading to your own network of followers.

Getting portfolio visitors might be easy, but getting followers is much harder. It requires a long term mindset in which you consistently give your visitors a reason to return. A weekly article, daily inspiration or free design resources, you need to repeatedly provide visitors value to convert them into followers.

Fundamental to this strategy is that you start seeing your visitors as people. Stop staring at your analytics. If they are just numbers to you, you are just a number to them.

Producing content takes a lot of time, but your hard work will pay off eventually. Loyal followers will do anything for you to pay you back. They are willing to use their own network to increase your career opportunities.

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How should I start with building my portfolio?

The most common pitfall is to start your portfolio process by working on the design. You will easily get overwhelmed by the amount of options that you have, causing you to procrastinate.

I think you shouldn't be worried about your portfolio's design if you haven't yet finished its content. Firstly, because you cannot make informed design decisions without the content. There is no way you can settle for a design that fits your content before you know what that content is.

Secondly, because if you do settle for a design, it will dictate your content. You will become a slave of your own design. You will write meaningless testimonials, just because your theme has space for it.

Instead of starting with your design, I would suggest a content-first approach. Write your case studies, collect your project's photos and design your mockups. I think that Medium is an excellent platform to quickly get started with your portfolio. It not just encourages a content-first approach, it even enables you to publish your portfolio to an audience right away.

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What are the most important things to include in my portfolio?

You can have amazing projects, a great portfolio design or even millions of visitors, it only pays off if visitors can connect with you. That's why first and foremost you should include a Contact page that enables people to contact you through the medium that they prefer.

More than anything, your portfolio is about you. Your uniqueness is the most valuable value proposition you have. It is what sets you apart from the competition. Enable people to get to know you through a compelling About page that tells your story. Share your viewpoint on the world, your industry and even on your own work.

Finally your portfolio is an excellent place to demonstrate your skills. Include case studies that cover the why, how and what of each project. You don't demonstrate your skills by telling that you are skilled, you do by showing you are. Make your work speak for itself.

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Should I design my portfolio for web or for print?

Here is my short answer. You should design for web. In most cases at least. Design for web unless the tactile experience of a printed portfolio is important in your craft, for example if you are a graphic designer.

I think you should design for web because the web maximizes your reach. You are not limited to the amount of printouts you can afford or whether you know the receiver's address. Your audience is on the web, that's why you should be there too.

Please don't fool yourself by putting your PDF online. Have you ever enjoyed viewing a PDF online? PDF files are created with the tools to design for print, not for web. Putting a PDF online is a bad idea, for the same reason printing your website is.

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Should I build a portfolio theme from scratch or just buy one?

Truth to be told, most of your visitors won't notice whether you spent 50 hours designing and developing a theme from scratch or 5 minutes installing a free theme.

The small group of people who do notice your custom theme, will definitely appreciate your effort. It's great to impress them, because they are often the ones in positions to hire others.

However, building your own theme is not easy. You should only consider it if you can achieve a similar design quality as the free themes. If you can't, the people with free themes will overtake you. Unfortunately.

If you do have the skills to design your own theme, do whatever makes you feel comfortable. If you are comfortable with using someone else's work, go for it. However, don't forget that your theme says more about you than you think.

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Which CMS should I use for my portfolio?

When it comes down to choosing your Content Management System, there isn't one platform that rules them all. Which CMS is best for you depends on your personal skills and your portfolio's goal. I do think that the best CMS enables you to focus on what you already do best. Whether that is designing, developing, both designing and developing or neither of the two. I think for beginners, Medium is a great option.

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How many projects should I include in my portfolio?

I know it can be tempting to show all of your projects. There is always a risk of deleting something that someone might have found interesting.

I strongly believe that having fewer portfolio projects is better. For a couple of reasons. Firstly, it enables you to go into depth. I think that more than your level of breadth, your level of depth reveals your skills, your passion, and your potential.

Secondly, having fewer projects enables you to control your visitor's experience. The fewer projects you have, the more certain you are that your visitor looks at all of your projects. This will help you to stay consistent in your quality and in your positioning.

Thirdly, having too many projects points to a lack of confidence. Your visitors will spot this. Finally, you want people to wish for more, so they will contact you and you can start building a relationship.

Given this, I personally think the optimal number of portfolio projects is between 3 and 5, depending how detailed you describe your projects.

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How can I decide which projects to include in my portfolio?

Don't start by looking at your projects. You have an emotional connection with your projects which prevents you from making a rational project selection.

Instead I would suggest you to think about the type of work that you want to be doing more of. Make sure your project selection represents the person that you want to become, not the person you were.

As a result, you might have to delete your best project, you might even have to hide a project you love. Quite often, your most relevant project for your visitors is actually your most recent one.

On the bright side, you will get more type of work that you actually want to be doing, at that very moment. It will make you happier on the long term.

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How should I structure my case studies?

I think that every effective case study covers three essential parts:

Why did you do the project.

How did you do the project.

What was your end result.

Preferably in that order. Assuming that you cover these three elements, how you actually decide to structure your case studies is entirely up to you. You may end up with a structure that is similar to a diary or one that's like a scientific paper. What you will settle with communicates a lot about what you value as a designer. That's powerful.

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How should I present school projects on my portfolio?

The one thing I often notice in school projects is students avoiding responsibility. It is very easy to hide behind the design brief given by your school. It is very easy to blame your team for bad results. It is easy to say you have ran out of time to do user testing.

It's also easy to fake the truth. Often students pretend like their project went according to the books but in reality it didn't.

I think that if you want to convince your visitors of your design skills you should start by taking responsibility. Be honest about what went wrong and show what you have learned from it. As a student it doesn't matter if your project isn't great, as long as you show the attitude to become better.

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How can I show NDA protected work on my portfolio?

As obvious as it may sound, the first thing to do is to understand your agreement. Not every NDA contract is the same. Some agreements are very restrictive, whereas others aren't. Understanding your agreement enables you to make the most out of it.

Now ask yourself the following. In case your work wasn't NDA protected, what specific function would this piece have on your portfolio? Would it demonstrate a particular skill? Show people that you worked for a famous client? Convince your visitors you can work in teams? Or maybe show people what you are truly passionate about?

If you understand what you are missing out, you can start to look for alternative ways to achieve a somewhat similar result. Your solution might be as simple as a different photo or be as hard as a side project. Don't just blur your NDA protected material.

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How to make sure that I actually launch my portfolio?

To most people, the hardest thing about building a portfolio is getting to the point where they can finally launch. A portfolio seems like a black hole, sucking up all energy and time. A never ending project.

I think the main reason that prevents you from launching your portfolio, is how you look at the launch. You look at the launch as the finish line. You consider a launched portfolio as something definite, something that cannot be changed. As a result, you aim too high. You set yourself unrealistic standards because you feel that you can't go back once you launch.

When you think that you are close to the finish line you will pull off a sprint. However in reality, the finish line is always further than you imagine it to be. If you pull off a final sprint, but won't make it till the end, you are in trouble.

So what can you do about this? The true answer is quite simple actually. Stop seeing your launch as the end. Get used to frequently launching smaller parts, such as one page at the time.

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How to make my portfolio stand out?

You stand out by being unique. Sounds hard? Here is a little secret. You are unique. In fact, everybody is. So in order to make your portfolio stand out, you have to highlight this uniqueness.

I think that the trick to making your portfolio stand out is to make it very personal. People should be able to get to know you just by visiting your portfolio.

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How to make sure that my visitors remember my portfolio?

I think the most common mistake that people make is not deciding what they want to be remembered for. They show an inconsistent, confusing version of themselves which visitors cannot process.

If you don't decide and communicate how you want to be remembered, you will either be forgotten or remembered for the wrong things. If you are not clear about what you stand for, the internet will make it up for you. The internet gets it wrong 99 out of 100 times.

If you want people to remember you, you need to be deliberate in how you want to be remembered. Describe yourself in one sentence. Keep it short, understandable, personal and make sure it aligns with the rest of your portfolio.

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How can I take the most out of portfolio review sessions?

Feedback will really improve your portfolio. It's a designer's oxygen.

Many reviewers try to avoid conflict by only being overly positive. Knowing what you do well is not going to help you improve your weaknesses. It is only going to make you feel good.

I think to take the most out of your reviews you need to make sure that your portfolio represents the very best you can do. Find a person who is part of your portfolio's target audience and ask him (or her) for some time. Meet him in person, sit next to him, start your audio recording and instruct him to speak his mind. Take notes but don't speak until the 10 minute timer rings. This is how you create a realistic setting that increases your understanding of how your visitors behave.

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How can I take the most out of portfolio review sessions?

Most designers launch their portfolio without have a clear picture of their target audience. They might end up with a portfolio that aims to land new clients but only appeals to designers.

Designing for your audience starts with defining who your audience actually is. Do you want to attract recruiters to land a job? Do you want to convince clients that your services will make them more money? Do you want to be appreciated by the design community?

After defining your audience you can connect with people that fall into this category. Whenever possible, chat with your audience in person. Alternatively, make them review your portfolio. Try to understand their motivations, behaviours and knowledge as a foundation to design.

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AFTER YOU LAUNCH

How to keep my portfolio relevant if I don't have any new projects to show?

There can be many reasons which prevent you from adding new projects. I think that even if you don't have new projects, you can still create new and relevant content for your visitors.

Your project might be under a Non Disclosure Agreement, but that doesn't mean you cannot write about it. You can still write about your experiences and your learnings. You can still provide value to your visitors.

Neither should you wait with sharing your project until you have finalized it. You can begin sharing your project from the moment you start working on it.

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AFTER YOU LAUNCH

Should I create a company-specific portfolio when applying for a job?

I think that the intention to put in extra hours to land your dream job is great. Nevertheless I would still to discourage you to create a company-specific portfolio. I think there is a huge risk that you think that you know what the company is looking for. You will try to be the perfect candidate, but based on a false idea of what this actually is. You won't show your true self, but a person you think they want.

Instead I would try to grab the companies' attention in a different way. Write an article about the company you are applying for. Solve one of their problems. Leave a thoughtful comment on their YouTube videos. Approach their designers to grab coffee with you.

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AFTER YOU LAUNCH

How can my portfolio impact my career?

Your portfolio won't impact your career. People impact your career. Your career rests on the shoulder of other people. People give you opportunities.

If you want people to impact your career you need to provide them value. Your portfolio is an excellent place to do that. On your portfolio you can inspire people, you can share solutions and you can give away resources. If you are loyal to your followers, they will become loyal to you. At one point, they would be happy to pay you back by increasing your career opportunities.

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About this Handbook

The Unofficial Design Portfolio Handbook is an initiative of Martijn van den Broeck. Martijn is an UX Design intern at Google, previously at IDEO.

A good design portfolio can greatly impact your career, but building one is very hard. I've personally struggled for years before my design portfolio brought me the results that I wanted. To help you, I decided to share everything I know in this Handbook. It's not complete, it's not perfect but it's a start.

This unofficial guide summarizes 36 articles which originally appeared in my mail list.

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